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Embodiment, Materiality, and Power. *A Review Essay*

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The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics, by Vincent Goossaert (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter, by Webb Keane (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, by Saba Mahmood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China, by David A. Palmer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Theories of agency are central to any form of explanation or interpretation of human action in the social and behavioral sciences, including the study of history. In studies of religion, they appear to require even more reflection than usual, because of secular skepticism of religious understandings of agency, involving divine intervention or supra-human powers. The major problem with theories of agency is their immense range and complexity. They involve fundamental notions of emotions and intentions, of habits and social practice, of desire and passion, of passions and interests, of resistance and power, of freedom and un-freedom, of the distinction between subject and object, of interiority and exteriority. As such, they have complicated genealogies in different religious and philosophical traditions. Western philosophical traditions are among the many traditions that have wide-ranging theories about the self and agency and express them in a universalistic language.[1] These universalistic claims are perhaps common, but the history of European expansion has implied a universalization of Western thought, so that despite its provincial origin Western thought informs both the understanding and the self-understanding of other societies. From the start, one of the tasks of anthropology and history has therefore been to critique universalistic assumptions about, for

[1] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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instance, agency, by examining other ways of life and traditions. Not only is universalism as such being questioned; the universalization of ideas is being critically analyzed.

Agency in secular theory is related to the concepts of freedom and empowerment as well as responsibility. As such, it is crucial to institutions of the modern state, such as education, that enhance our capacity to act freely, and institutions, such as the judicial system, that hold us accountable and mete out punishment. It belongs to a social field that offers competing theories of agency, as well as a set of constraints and possibilities to act. The study of agency thus implies the study of the distribution of power in distinctive movements and institutions. Agency cannot be studied entirely at the level of discourse or entirely at the level of the political economy of social movements and institutions, but instead has to be studied by combining theory and practice.

Of the four books discussed in this article, two—one on Egyptian Islam by Saba Mahmood and one on Indonesian Christianity by Webb Keane—focus on agency and discourse, while the two on Chinese religion—one on Taoism by Vincent Goossaert and one on Qigong by David Palmer—focus on institutional power. All four, however, deal with complex religious traditions and their relation to secular modernity, especially science, with the changing relation between clergy and laity, and with disciplines of the body.

In her sophisticated book on the politics of a Muslim women's piety movement in Cairo, Saba Mahmood foregrounds religious ideas and philosophical questions. She wants to make her ethnography speak to Western arguments about freedom and agency, especially in feminist writings, in relation to Islamic tradition and women's religious practices. Her work follows closely what Talal Asad has been arguing about agency, power, and pain, namely that besides the secular tradition in which agency is understood as self-empowerment, resistance, and utopian history making, there are other discursive traditions that understand agency in other ways.[2] Mahmood's argument is that if we accept that the notion of agency receives its meaning within culturally and historically specific contexts, we have to abandon its reduction to a universal, secular meaning and must begin an inquiry into the specificity of agency within such a context. Mahmood does not want to pose cultural essences that are inhabited by the women she discusses, but proposes to read closely the ways in which they debate their discursive traditions. Like many other anthropologists, Mahmood is critical of the binary terms of resistance and subordination that dominate much of the discussion on agency. Her understanding of agency is deeply influenced by Foucault's discussion of the subject and of subjectivization, especially the notion that there is not a subject that precedes power. However, the philosopher she engages most explicitly is the

[2] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 67–100.

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feminist Judith Butler, who argues in her understanding of gender that the gendered subject is performed through the reiterative power of discourse. Butler's emphasis is less on institutions and social disciplines than on language and on interiority. The claim Butler makes is that instability is inherent in the reiteration of social norms and that therefore change and agency are created.

Mahmood launches a convincing critique of liberal understandings of agency and religion by examining closely the notion of virtue and the performance of virtue in the mosque movement. Her discussion of "embodiment," which shows the extent to which, for instance, the performance of certain practices of modesty produce the modest person, could be used to critique Butler's emphasis on discursive analysis and on systems of signification, but Mahmood stops short of such a critique. Her fine exposition of both Western and Islamic theories of agency seems much more indebted to Foucault and Asad than to Butler, but Butler receives a rhetorical prominence in her book. The reason for this seems to be that Mahmood is at great pains to declare that she is a feminist and wants to contribute to feminist theory. The subtitle of her book is "The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject," but she does not make clear whether she considers the women of the piety movement as feminist subjects or whether they consider themselves feminists, or to what extent "feminist" is in Egypt conceived to be a secularist term. Feminism, as a social and political movement, has been dependent on notions of agency and autonomy and freedom, but Butler's philosophy may function here to create a possibility to remain a feminist while critiquing notions of agency that seem fundamental to feminism. While Mahmood's interpretation may help Western feminists to understand better the agency of Muslim women involved in the piety movement, it is not entirely clear to what extent this improved understanding will further or undermine feminism as an emancipatory movement.

Mahmood discusses the women's mosque movement in six mosques in Cairo. The women's groups in these mosques all worry about the secularization and Westernization of Egyptian society, but are otherwise distinct in terms of the class backgrounds of the participants. They oppose also the reduction of Islam to national folklore, by emphasizing the scriptural tradition. This is, in itself, very significant, and receives scant attention from Mahmood. The opposition to popular festivals, such as *mawlid* (veneration of saints) and other Sufi practices is carried over to a rejection of mass celebrations that are tied into a culture of consumption. In this case, these pious women are not only against secularism, but also against well-established Islamic traditions that are supported by movements that cannot be accused of Westernization, but represent a notion of "the popular" that has come under threat thanks to mass education and literacy. In their rejection of such popular traditions, Islamists and secularists share common ground that makes one wonder about the secularity of piety. The pious women's movement belongs to a more general current in Islam, *da'wa*, focused on summoning other Muslims to do their religious duty. This

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is a kind of evangelical preaching that women, too, can engage with. Central to it is the pious life, entailing the correct performance of religious duties such as daily prayer. The preachers not only summon their audience to right performance, but also answer queries from their audience.

Students of Islam have argued for quite a while now that the secular spread of literacy and mass education as well as mass media has made Muslim laity much more critical of religious specialists, such as *'ulama*, and has enhanced their ability to participate in discursive traditions on their own accord.[3] This in fact has been a condition of possibility for the lay piety movement to emerge. Mahmood shows that there is a huge increase in women's enrollment in universities as well as in the piety movement. However, her focus on the micro-practices inside the mosque seems to prevent her from looking at the micro-practices outside the mosque, since she does not follow the women she studies through all their various encounters with education and media. This narrative strategy allows Mahmood to just mention class differentiation without following this through by relating religious practices to the social fabric of Cairo. Her ethnography shows eloquently the theological sophistication of these pious women, she connects their oratory to the textual tradition in erudite fashion, and her exposition is of an exemplary clarity. And yet, one wonders whether piety defines the entirety of these women's lives.

While Mahmood's ethnography is excellent in her detailed commentary on Islamic discourse, it is less informative in situating the piety movement in the wider arena of Cairene politics. She presents the state and its various institutions, as well as political economy, as marginal to the material at hand. That can be done only by a very deliberate elision of the ways in which, for instance, the battles between various groups of secularists and Islamists take place in contemporary Cairo. This choice has great advantages for the in-depth analysis of discourse, but also some disadvantages in weighing the significance of the movement in the political arena. It is clear that Mahmood acknowledges that piety is a form of politics, but she has replaced the macro-politics of political science by the micro-politics of anthropology. She is certainly right in arguing that the piety movement is not centered on questions of recognition and political representation, and that one should have a different notion of politics to be able to see that. But she may pay insufficient attention to the fact that the piety movement exists actively in a political field in which recognition and political representation, as well as national identity, do play important roles.

Philosophical problems of agency and freedom are also central to Webb Keane's important collection of essays on conversion to Christian modernity in Sumba, Indonesia. Like Mahmood, Keane focuses on practices like praying and debates about, for example, whether one should pray from

[3] Dale Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," *American Ethnologist* 19, 4 (1992): 643–55.

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within with one's eyes shut like Protestants or pray with eyes open to read the prayer book and to look at images like Catholics. Central to Keane's problematic is Bruno Latour's concept of purification, the urge to draw a boundary between humans and nonhumans, between agency and natural determination. For Latour this is part of our continuous and unfinished quest for modernity. Keane shows that these epistemological claims have moral implications, such as the opposition of mastery over nature to being enslaved by things. The Protestant missionary project is thus, like feminism, an instance of an emancipatory project of modernity. Keane approaches this project through an analysis of semiotic ideology within a representational economy in which words and things in various domains of life are linked or de-linked. He gives the example of the concept of sincerity to show that this concept links words to inner thoughts, but de-links gifts at marriage from economic value. Importantly, within the context of Protestantism, semiotic ideology is also a reflection on the materiality of semiotic form, such as the printed text.

Protestantism, of course, has always been seen as an important historical site of thinking about the reflexive subject, about unmediated access, and about agency. In Protestant conversion, missionaries are concerned with the purification of improper forms of agency, a purification that they see as liberation from false understandings of nature. As in Mahmood's discussion of Islam, we find in Keane's discussion of Christianity an emphasis on theological debate, in this case of the Calvinist variety. He shows beautifully how Calvinist notions of sincerity, interiority, and agency in full consciousness are paradigmatic of a wider Western, and ultimately global discourse of the modern self from Locke to Foucault, in which disciplinary self-inspection and the reform of desire by an evaluating self are crucial. Conversion of the Sumbanese Anakalang to Christianity can thus be interpreted as a conversion to global modernity, but Keane points out immediately that with such a formulation one may lose sight of the contradictions and multiplicity of modernity. The debates both between and within various Protestant groups are framed by the larger stories of colonialism and nationalism as well as secularism, and cannot be reduced to a single modernity. These debates do not only take place among theologians, but have also deeply influenced anthropologists, and the hybrid species, missionary anthropologists. For instance, as Talal Asad has pointed out in his essay on Clifford Geertz's definition of religion, such universalist definitions are part of the historical development of Christianity and cannot be applied to either the study of Christian traditions or to that of other traditions.[4] In the missionary process of conversion, the debate about culture and religion takes place in the context of colonial efforts to codify local customary law as well as missionary efforts to change religion, while preserving local

[4] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), ch. 1.

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culture. These projects make secularist assumptions about the difference between culture and religion. For the Dutch missionaries Keane discusses, the biggest challenge was the dematerialization of religion, making religion a matter of private belief and cognition, without completely disrupting the social fabric of Anakalang society. However, in my view, this cannot be understood entirely in terms of the missionary encounter, but has to engage the larger imperial encounter in which the colonial state staged interventions in the social fabric of societies. This larger picture of state interventions, colonial and postcolonial, despite their clear significance in terms of political and economic power, is not Keane's topic. That rapid conversion to recognized religions (among which were Protestantism and Catholicism) occurred in the Suharto regime as a citizenship requirement and as part of an anti-communist campaign is mentioned, but Keane does not discuss its implications for the conceptual issues of sincerity and agency that are at the core of his argument.

Conversion to another religion or to a different form of the same religion (as in the Muslim *da'wa* movements), or to secularism, requires some thought and action about the past, about social memory, and in many places like Sumba about ancestors and spirits.[5] This theme of loss, nostalgia, repression, and recuperation is central to the story of conversion. It is here that the missionaries' attempts to separate culture and religion fail in the eyes of both the converted and those who refuse to be converted. Keane shows eloquently how what in the context of conversion counts as 'continuity' depends on semiotic ideology, on an effort to separate words from things. The ethnographer has to watch closely how ritual speech functions, and how agency is attributed in it. The missionary act of translation involves an attention to the semiotic ideology embedded in the language of the to-be-converted. For example, the crucial term "praying" cannot be translated easily into Anakalangese since the word that could be used for that is also used in oracles to speak to chickens. If put like this, it seems an impossible task to translate the creed in Anakalangese, a problem observed by anthropologists in the wake of missionaries.[6] Nevertheless, this is in fact not entirely the case: the creed is translated, people are converted, and the more important issue might be how misunderstandings are solved and how bodily disciplines beyond the spoken word are formed. This is the world of mispronunciations, misunderstandings, failed performances, inadequate disciplines, and inappropriate desires, which one cannot find in ethnographic accounts that privilege well-argued theology over the ambiguities of daily life.

Islam and Christianity are discursive traditions that are often compared for reasons of textuality; they are "religions of the book," of theology, and they

[5] Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[6] Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

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are religions of revelation and messianic expectation, of historical expansion—they are missionary religions. The juxtaposition of books on Islam and books on Christianity may produce the false assumption that the problematic addressed in them is intrinsic to these so-called Abrahamic traditions. However, it is not Islam and Christianity that unite Mahmood's and Keane's work, but rather the way both of their theoretical approaches privilege discursive analysis. The problematic of agency, freedom, and fetishism addressed in these two books could just as well be explored in traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, or Taoism. When one studies Taoist discursive traditions and disciplines of the body, one can hardly escape the problematic raised by Mahmood and Keane, but one certainly must also engage the problematic of secular state power and the ideological emphasis on science and progress. Two very important contributions to our understanding of Taoism and the bodily discipline of Qigong in China take a theoretical angle that emphasizes the important influence of state apparatuses on the development of religious beliefs and practices.

Vincent Goossaert has explored the social history of Peking Taoists in the period from 1800 to 1949, the year when the Communists came to power in China. He focuses on the ordinary life of a modern urban clergy in Peking. The Peking Taoists operated in the context of a rich religious life with a variety of cults and Buddhist monasteries. The clergy depended on a laity that was organized at least partly into devotional congregations. The local state administered this entire edifice of monasteries and congregations, but in a rather limited fashion as befitting a pre-modern regime. A major shift in the management of Chinese religion occurred with the new religious policies from the late 1890s until 1949. This involved not only a sharp distinction made between five recognized religions (similar to what happens in Indonesia) and superstitions that became unlawful, but the state also intervened with much more force through census operations and other modern techniques. Despite the official recognition of Taoism, the reigning anticlericalism made it possible to destroy several hundred thousand temples and to dissolve supporting lay associations. In short, a scientific secularism launched an outright attack on the structure of Chinese religion, and Taoism, deeply entwined with "local forms of worship" and thus with "superstition," came close to extinction. Taoist clergy tried to defend themselves by forming an association and by claiming that Taoism as China's ancient indigenous religion was to be the national religion, but given the loose lineage structure of Taoism, they did not enjoy much success.

Taoist traditions have been an important site for the study of disciplines of the body, but Goossaert wants to produce a social history of the clergy while paying little attention to either doctrine or ritual.[7] Nevertheless, it is doctrine

[7] Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

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and monastic discipline that make monks into monks. One can illustrate this point by looking at the formation of clerical lineages, an important element in the social history of the clergy and wonderfully explored by Goossaert. Lineages were founded by charismatic leaders who were seen to have the effective power to act on the world, on people (alive or dead), and on gods in particular, a power intimately linked to spiritual force and efficacious virtue. These theories of agency held by Taoists, involving mastery of doctrines of alchemy and bodily disciplines, are at the heart of what Goossaert calls "charisma," and they make the foundation and social history of lineages possible.

The most important textual resource for Taoist doctrine in this period was the *Daozang*, but Goossaert shows beautifully that it was treated more as a precious object than as an object for doctrinal study. In fact, it seems the Taoist clergy used only some basic liturgical texts for the performance of rituals. This is similar to what we know about the performance of temple rituals by Brahman priests in South India, and it legitimates Goossaert's lack of interest in doctrinal history.[8] That said, textuality is nonetheless central to Taoist traditions and Goossaert gives us the social history of its transformation in the nineteenth century: firstly, in the production of self-cultivation literature by Taoist charitable groups or private publishers, and secondly, in the lay-drive to produce modern editions of the Taoist textual tradition. Both developments amount to a laicization and secularization of discursive traditions that one can see also in Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. Besides the promulgation of self-cultivation traditions through books, the direct example of Taoist clerical masters continued to be important. Gradually, however, we find laicization to the extent that some of the most important Taoist masters were not monks but married laymen who led a secular life. These intellectuals had a growing interest in combining Western science and Taoism, while retaining the idea that Taoism was spiritually superior to Western materialism. The techniques taught ranged from techniques of the body that ensured health to spiritual techniques of transformation leading to immortality. For the Taoist masters, these two were intricately connected, but the main interest for many lay people was health and well-being. Within the structure of Chinese religion Taoist clerical religion was marginalized, whereas lay communities became central. Important heirs to the Taoist tradition were redemptive societies that sometimes had a millenarian aspect, and they were brutally repressed in the beginning of the Communist take-over. Other important heirs were lay groups practicing martial arts (especially "inner boxing," *taiji quan*), and what was called Qigong. Qigong became particularly important, and is the subject of David Palmer's extraordinarily informed and detailed study.

[8] C. J. Fuller, *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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Palmer shows that Qigong is an invented tradition, although partly based on Taoist self-cultivation techniques that, as Goossaert tells us, were laicized from the late nineteenth century. Cadres created it during the beginning of Communist rule. They separated these body techniques from their "feudal and religious origins," and put them into the service of the health of the masses. *Qi* is "cosmic breath" and *gong* is "exercise," so breathing techniques are basic to Qigong. Besides acupuncture and herbal medicine, Qigong became part of the complex of Chinese traditional medicine promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. Palmer shows in great detail the patronage given to Qigong institutions and practitioners by major Party leaders, but also how internal struggles in the leadership resulted sometimes in the decline of Qigong or the persecution of targeted practitioners. The main obstacle for its spread was opposition by materialist scientists who did not accept Qigong's scientific claims. The claim that *qi* was a measurable physical substance gave strong support to the idea that Qigong was a science rather than a religion—atheism and scientism being the core ideology of the Communists—but also made it vulnerable to scientific skepticism. Research into the paranormal effects of Qigong practice was enthusiastically supported by leading scientists like Qian Xuesen, the father of China's nuclear program, but it was vehemently attacked by some Marxist philosophers and scientists. These debates were, as Palmer shows, directly related to power struggles in the Party leadership. During the Cultural Revolution the Qigong movement was strongly repressed, but in the 1980s it began once again to receive party patronage.

From the mid-1980s, Qigong grew into a mass movement, a "Qigong fever" with tens of millions of practitioners. The state made vigorous attempts to channel and institutionalize this movement by creating Qigong associations under Party control. This also happened with what would become the biggest challenge of the Communist Party in the 1990s, the Falungong, a movement that stressed Buddhist rather than Daoist origins but was in its basics one of the many available Qigong movements. While the Falungong founder, Li Hongzhi, was in the beginning very careful to establish good relations with the state bureaucracy, from the mid-1990s he began to develop a tighter organization and a messianic as well as apocalyptic message, all tied to his personal charisma. The immense success of the Falungong became a direct threat to the hegemony of the Communist Party in a period of economic liberalization. At the end of the 1990s, the Falungong openly clashed with the government, which brutally suppressed it, and Li Hongzhi fled to the United States. This repression has brought the entire Qigong phenomenon under surveillance and state pressure, while the state has also begun to promote other health exercises, even opening a growing space for body techniques from elsewhere, such as yoga.

Palmer is very good at tracing the ways in which the Communist Party and the state were central to the rise and fall of Qigong. He also presents an

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excellent account of the complex relation between materialist science and a spirituality that claims material effects. What remains less clear, however, is how we can connect this political history to Chinese theories of power and agency. The background to the invented tradition of Qigong is the very effective destruction of the infrastructure (clergy, temples, lay communities) of Chinese religion by the Communist Party. The same party, however, produces its own invented tradition that is both rooted in religion and uprooted from it within the context of a utopian socialism. One is left wondering how Qigong practitioners interpret the powers they gain through their bodily practice, how they interpret the power of the Party, and what theories of agency enable such interpretations for the participants. The ways in which state power permeates society through a variety of bodily disciplines, both secular and non-secular, is crucial to our understanding of Qigong's rise and fall. Secular Maoist mass mobilization campaigns and a phenomenon like Qigong fever bear a relation that is simultaneously obvious and elusive. It requires an analysis that pays close attention to the discourse of the participants.

The methods of anthropology and history involve the researcher in a field of power that extends far beyond the philosophical discussion of ideas. Ethnography and archival study require a sharp awareness of the problem of translation and of the mobility of the researcher versus the restrictions of those researched—in short, awareness that the inequality that governs the relation between researcher and researched is in many ways central to the form of knowledge that is created. This, obviously, implies a close attention to the analysis of discourse, but with the added dimension of bringing ideas in relation to everyday life. The examination of the embodiment of ideas and of the disciplinary practices that ensue from discursive traditions, but also of the social forces that produce the constraints and possibilities through which people live their lives, are all related aspects of inquiry.

Anthropological and historical studies of religion take place in an extremely sensitive social field of power, in which state interventions in Egypt, Indonesia, and China shape, to large extent, the possibilities for people to live their lives according to their intentions and beliefs. Historical processes of laicization, the spread of literacy, mass education, and marginalization of the clergy have transformed the conditions in which people in all these places practice their religions. Sufis, Taoists, and followers of Sumbanese *marapu* religion are all pushed into a corner, while new practices and discourses of female evangelism, nationalized Protestantism, and embodied spirituality have risen. Religious theories of agency, materiality, and spirituality are part of this changing landscape in which both the secular and the religious are produced in ways that cannot be captured by theories of secularization. The books under review show wonderfully to what extent secular theories and secular power are part of the object of study, but also of the very possibilities of doing the study.

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