The Hijab, the Passover Seder, and Religion as a Shame-Consuming Dignity Machine—How We Can Learn to Understand, and Empathize with, the Traditional Religious Expressions of Others

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הלוכ השרפה לכ רומגיש דע ,יבא דבוא ימראמ שרודו ,חבשב סייסמו תונגב ליחתמ

He [the leader of the Passover *Seder*] begins with shame and ends in praise. And he expounds from "my father was a wandering Aramean" until the end of the section.[1]

—Mishnah Pesachim 10:4

I thought it was like the human body's appendix—the way my immigrant grandfather would lead the Passover Seder in his Brooklyn apartment. It was boring, beyond boring, the way he would insist on reading every word of the Hebrew text none of us understood. There was no discussion of the great themes around the experiences of shame, enslavement, and, finally, freedom and redemption that are embedded in the Exodus story. Surely, I thought, this kind of Judaism—Orthodox Judaism—was something that, while it had perhaps once had meaning and function, no longer had meaning and would thus just shrivel away with time. Religion, to the extent it would continue to exist at all, would be more liberal, more humanistic, more full of meaning.

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We all know that's not how things have turned out. Whether it's in the realm of culture, religion, or politics—Trump in the United States, Brexit in England, or Modi's Hindu nationalism in India—conservative expressions have shown a force that few of us who were liberally minded in the second half of the twentieth century would have expected. The growing polarization has left those of us who were called into ministry from liberal, humanistic motivations—especially those of us called into chaplaincy—with a deep dilemma. The ethics of our profession forbid us from walling ourselves off from conservative people, even if we feel a deep revulsion at the words—words we might hear as racist, homophobic, or anti-feminist—they speak. If a person comes into the realm of our ministry, whether it's in the hospital or elsewhere, we are called to care for them.

It would, of course, be easy to just deny there is a dilemma here. We can say to ourselves, *Well, it's not about me. I'm just here to serve the person in need. My values and beliefs have nothing to do with it.* But how can we really serve the person before us if we're not willing and able to bring our full self to the ministry encounter? How can we summon the Holy into the room if we're shutting down the part of our heart—our love of justice and the beauty of human diversity—that has called so many of us into ministry in the first place?

The claim of this essay is that we need new tools and new theological lenses to help us be able to be true to our full selves while we engage also in the task of seeking genuine understanding and empathy for the more traditionally religious persons-in-need before us. I ask—drawing especially on the groundbreaking work of a scholar of women in Islam—how liberal, Western biases affect how we understand the role of dignity and shame in the way people use, and refrain from using, their bodies to express their religious lives. I also seek to complicate liberal, Western assumptions by employing a recent move in the humanities, called affect studies, to better understand how shame and dignity interact with body-centric religious practices like wearing the veil in Islam or refraining from eating certain foods in Judaism.

We will see ways that these body-centric practices can be something quite different, perhaps more powerful, than mere symbolic representations of a belief held by an individual. This examination of dignity, shame, and ideas about community and freedom will lead to a discussion of pastoral theology that complicates Carrie Doehring's influential approach and ex-

poses some of its assumptions based in liberal, Protestant Christianity. I begin by introducing you to the extraordinary life and work of the scholar of Islam Saba Mahmood, who began her intellectual life as a staunch secularist in her native Pakistan but came to be an influential critic of secularism's impact on cross-cultural understanding.

The *puzzle* of secularism and Islam

Mahmood, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, who passed away tragically at age fifty-seven from pancreatic cancer in 2018, begins her seminal work on an Egyptian women's mosque movement with a description of a complex set of personal "puzzles." She describes how she came to political consciousness in the '70s and '80s as a secularist for whom "the twin ideologies of critical Marxism and feminism" held the promise for human thriving and liberation.[2] But then she spent years seeing the source of that secularism, the West, support the deeply oppressive Zia regime[3] in her native country. And, so, after she also saw that Islam was not fading away any more than was the Orthodox Judaism of my grandfather, this secular person came to be deeply curious about what it was about Islam that lead people, including women, to believe its language and practices captured their aspirations and deepest yearnings for human thriving.

Her curiosity about these puzzles led her to her research studying a women's mosque movement in Egypt. She went in thinking that Muslim women who engage in acts of piety like veiling and studying Islamic texts "are conservative and haven't given much thought to what they are doing." But that's not what she found: "I was just amazed at how conscious they were and what they were struggling with."[4] Her work led her to see secularism as a repository of fundamentally Western worldviews and values that transforms even religion itself into something we can think of as secular. Secularism, she writes, is not simply "the doctrinal separation of the church and the state but the rearticulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance."[5]

One element of this secularist worldview that constitutes so much of what we call religion in the West is to presuppose a semiotic ideology in which signifiers are linked to concepts—that is, to assume that the purpose of a symbol, such as an element of a religious ritual, is to *represent* some idea

or belief, a thing of the mind, not the body. This representational approach is the kind of theology that I perhaps hungered for at my grandfather's Seder table. I wanted some meaning to be assigned to the elements on the Seder plate and in the ritual. I must not have been the only one who had this desire for explicit meaning as by the time I was a young adult the denomination I was a part of would publish a text for the Seder that explained clearly, for example, what the *karpas*—green herbs—on the Seder plate represents.[6]

But when I think back to what makes Seder meaningful in my memory, even my—liberal, Western—mind recalls not the meaning-focused explanations I thought I wanted but, rather, the bodily, sensory experiences of my grandfather's (seemingly) meaning*less* Seder. The smells, the tastes. Even the sound of his Hebrew.

Thus, my experience of Seder hints at least at some of the issues raised by Mahmood's work, the questions of how ritual acts of piety can function for their adherents, especially outside of liberal, Western traditions. Mahmood suggests that the representation-centric type of approach to understanding religious acts is an impoverished way to understand the lived experience of images, icons, and signs in nonsecular religions as it "fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign—a relation founded not only on representation but also on what I will call attachment and cohabitation."[7]

For her informants—Egyptian women who had broken with tradition to begin meeting and studying Islam in traditionally male spaces—"outward markers of religiosity [such as] ritual practices, styles of comporting oneself, dress, and so on" were meant to bring about an ethical transformation of the bodies that repeatedly carried them out," a transformation expected to bring them closer to "the exemplary conduct of the Prophet and his Companions" through cultivating durable virtues. Mahmood found this ethical transformation to be in no way similar to a Western self-improvement aimed "at discovering one's 'true' desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but [rather] at honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self."[8]

Thus, we start to see just how fundamentally different the kind of piety practice carried out by Mahmood's informants might be compared to a liberal, Protestant one. In seeking to understand a person adhering to a traditional practice, we must ask some serious questions, such as, What if

the acts and practices of this person before us are not merely symbolic representations of some universal idea but rather are something more like an extension of the very body of the person carrying them out? What if, then, an attack on what looks like the presentation of a mere symbol to us, such as a pictorial representation of Muhammed, is experienced by the believer as something more like a physical assault on their own body, a profound shame-inducing insult that comes on the heels of the centuries of shame-inducing insults stemming from the sins of colonialism imposed on the Muslim world?[9]

In his recent revisiting of Mahmood's work, affect theorist Donovan S. Schaefer highlights the role of this shame from being humiliated by the West and allies of the West and discusses how religion can act as a powerful antidote yielding dignity. He cites psychologist Silvan Tomkins work on the power of shame:

> As Tomkins writes, "Shame is an affect of relatively high toxicity. . . . It strikes deepest into the heart of man. . . . It is felt as a sickness of the soul which leaves man naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity." . . . [I]t [dignity] is psychological oxygen. Bodies will fight to build *affective economies* that nurture and sustain dignity and expel shame. Religion seems to be especially well-suited to play this part.[10]

Below, I will discuss in greater detail what Schaefer means by an affective economy, but first I want to discuss some of the possibilities for complicating our most common understandings of shame and seeing its potential to be a productive resource, partly as a means to understand some of the polarizing contexts in which we find ourselves seeking to practice ministry

Complicating shame

We have become used to thinking of shame as something that is always bad, something that is always counter to the goal of building up the self-esteem—the dignity—of a person. Brené Brown's distinction between shame and guilt typifies this view:

> [T]here is a profound difference between shame and guilt. I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.
>
> I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—

> something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.
>
> I don't believe shame is helpful or productive. In fact, I think shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure.[11]

But, one of the founding forces in both affect and queer studies, Eve Sedgwick, suggests another possibility that she roots in Silvan Tomkins's work on shame, which is that shame—as painful as it can be to experience—may be a productive emotion that helps a person define who they are.

To explain what she means by shame, she begins her essay on it by citing her experience of an event that transformed the way so many, including myself,[12] look at the world and experience their own identity—September 11, 2001:

> In the couple of weeks after the World Trade Center was destroyed in September 2001, I had a daily repetition of an odd experience. . . . Turning from a street onto Fifth Avenue, even if I was heading north, I would feel compelled first to look south in the direction of the World Trade Center, now gone. This inexplicably furtive glance was associated with a conscious wish: that my southward vista would again be blocked by the familiar sight of the pre-September 11 twin towers, somehow come back to loom over us in all their complacent ugliness. But, of course, the towers were always still gone. Turning away, shame was what I would feel.[13]

This process of looking to see something, expecting it to be there and finding it not there—whether one is an infant offering a smile to a mother in hope of a returned glance or one is an adult being refused a view by a destroyed building—is the fundamental experience of shame in the Tomkins-esque framework Sedgwick builds upon. It is an experience of a kind of rejection "where the question of identity arises most originarily and most relationally."[14] That is, in Sedgwick's view, experiences of shame shape us relationally in profound and permanent ways. Shame, then, cannot be cured; to try and remove a person's shame would be, to provide an extreme image, like using a lobotomy to try and cure a mental illness—it might calm a person, but it would also destroy them. Shame cannot be removed, but it can be used:

> The forms taken by shame are not distinct "toxic" parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised. . . . [Instead, t]hey are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation.[15]

Why, then, is the possibility of reframing or transforming shame so important to us as spiritual caregivers—or simply as people hoping for a more just world as a whole? I think it is because it opens up to us possibilities for profound personal or societal change that do not involve the perhaps impossible task of changing their beliefs. More profoundly, it starts to open up the possibility that beliefs are not of paramount importance at all but rather that affective experiences—of things like shame—are. Thus, perhaps when I come across a Trump supporter wearing a Make America Great Again hat I might be able to avoid automatically assuming that the hat indicates its wearer subscribes to certain, perhaps racist, beliefs, and instead at least entertain the possibility that it represents an embodied attempt to find dignity in a world that they experience as shaming.[16] And that change in perspective might allow me as a spiritual caregiver to find paths to empathy and caring with my full self that would have been closed to me otherwise.

Paths to dignity—affective economies

Above, I mentioned that Schaefer seeks to build upon Mahmood's work by reading it through the lens of an affective economy, which he borrows from the work of Sara Ahmed.[17] Ahmed uses the language of economy to express her claim that affects can be understood as behaving in ways that money behaves. It circulates. It accumulates. It can be acquired.

Emotions also, Ahmed says, have the power to "align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space."[18] But this economic acquisition process is not a matter of mere thinking. Schaefer writes, "We become religious (or secular) through the pulses of an affective economy; we do not coolly select affects in order to become religious."[19] That is, we do not necessarily think our way to a set of religious beliefs or practices—we *feel* our way there. Or, perhaps even the feelings, the affective economy, impact on bodies in a way that leads bodies to engage in practices. Shame, then—perhaps the shame yielded by being subjected to a modern secularist state, whether it's in Pakistan or Idaho—causes bodies to hunger for dignity, which the bodies find through pious practices. Writes Schaefer of Mahmood's informants:

> The retrieval of a set of religious lifeways that distinguished politically disenfranchised women from a stiflingly aloof ruling class and reconstituted them as religious bodies set apart from the world offered a strategy for affirming dignity in the face of everyday degradation. It articulated their bodies to a set of cultural formations suffused with confidence, maj-

> esty, and glory. It seems likely that this interlocked with a felt resistance to the global Euro-American hegemony propping up the Egyptian dictator. . . . The return to Islamism is, in part, an expression of defiance, an embodied gesture in a global affective economy that develops the dignity of the religious bodies involved.
>
> Religion often serves this function of a *perpetual dignity machine*. The doctrinal and moral content of religion operates as a set of struts for building up an embodied sense of dignity.[20]

Complicating freedom—the role of group identity

> [H]ow does this history make us rethink the politics of tolerance and pluralism beyond the confines of individualism to include the rights of plural social groupings? Or, for that matter, to ask whether the liberal meaning of tolerance is the best or the most desirable one; what does this understanding preclude, under what kinds of presuppositions, and for whom?
>
> —Saba Mahmood[21]

The above quote, from an anthology on Islam and democracy, reflects Mahmood's effort to argue that the Western conception of ethics and human thriving, so focused on the rights, agency, and self-actualization of the individual, is not the only possible path forward as so many of us steeped in the liberalism of the West assume. Especially when we are with people who are first-generation immigrants to the West, we must consider the depth of how different their values may be than our own.

Even when it comes to values that we might think are uniquely Western, such as pluralism, Mahmood maintains that there are alternatives. "Different conceptions of religious and communal coexistence, for example, informed the social and political life of the diverse communities that lived under the Ottoman Empire," writes Mahmood. This system "enabled different social groups living under a shared political structure to practice distinct ways of life" with their own social institutions.[22] Mahmood does not maintain that this system was superior or that it made "non-Muslims the social or legal equals of Muslims, but it did grant them a certain autonomy to practice and develop their traditions."[23] As spiritual caregivers, we should be aware of the loss, and possible shame, that attends losing those communal institutions. More importantly, we should be working to uncover our Western, liberal biases that block us from seeing not only that shame but

also the embodied practices that might help people move beyond shame to dignity.

Complicating deliberative theology

Our discussion of Mahmood's work and of Schaefer's effort to use affect studies theory to deepen it provides an opportunity to ask about the biases we find in established Western pastoral care approaches. Here, I briefly discuss Doehring's pastoral theology framework of embedded versus deliberative theologies and consider alternatives in the light of our discussion above.

Embedded theologies, Doehring says, are usually instilled in childhood and tend to be simple and straightforward; they function well for people until they come to a trauma, like becoming ill or losing of a loved one to cancer, that challenges elements of ideas like "the good and faithful will prosper" or "a personal angel watches over me." Writes Doehring:

> People may not even be aware of their embedded theology until they experience an existential crisis or decentering experience that disrupts their world, pushing deep layers of sometimes unconscious beliefs, values, and practices to the surface. Such moments provide opportunities to excavate these beliefs, values, and habitual ways of coping and decide whether such embedded theologies are still relevant and meaningful, especially in terms of helping people connect with a sense of the sacred and make sense of what is happening.[24]

The *excavation* Doehring refers to is a process of deliberation, an exercise in what she calls deliberative theology, which is "the understanding of faith that emerges from a process of carefully reflecting on embedded theological convictions."[25] Spiritual caregivers can help guide a person through this process of becoming aware of their embedded theologies and then examining whether these beliefs—and how they affect how the person feels and acts in the world—are life-giving or life-limiting.

We can see this deliberative approach to theology as the opposite of an economy of dignity approach—as coolly selecting beliefs and affects to form our individual spiritual system rather than forming our religiosity or spiritual system based on the pulses of an affective economy. That is, this is an approach that is fundamentally cognitive and focused on the individual

as opposed to one that is focused on either the affective realm or on a collective identity.

But what if the real spiritual need of the person in a hospital bed, for example, is the restoration of dignity? And what if the changes in context related to illness, trauma, or loss is causing affects to circulate in a way that actually gives traditional religious practices—like wearing the hijab or religious refraining practices like the Christian practice of Lent or the Jewish practices of keeping Shabbat or obeying the eating laws of *kashrut*—more value as a means to acquire such a restoration?

If so, the spiritual caregiver might be better guided by an approach more like the one imagined here. There are implications, especially for the task of assessing the spiritual needs of a care-seeker. It may not be enough to base that assessment on the past spiritual practices and life of the person. Even someone who has not been affiliated with religion for a long time, like a growing number of Jews and other Americans,[26] may find themselves wanting to embrace religious symbols, texts, and practices they had previously rejected.

Caregiving in a polarized age

Worldwide, we live in an age of polarization that seems to get worse with every day. For most people, it is possible to shelter yourself from people on 'the other side' by limiting our friend and acquaintance networks, whether on social media or in the 'flesh-and-blood' world. But chaplains have no such luxury.

A fearless uncovering and examining of our own biases is essential if we want to be able to be able to offer ourselves fully to the people we care for. Affect studies theory and the other body-centric ways of thought explored here make it possible to move beyond liberal, Western assumptions that individual beliefs are the most important elements of the spiritual lives of the people we meet. By focusing on the same affects raised by the Exodus story commemorated in the Passover Seder—shame and dignity—we can see new possibilities across faiths for engaging in both spiritual assessment and caregiving. We can come to see religion as a perpetual dignity machine.

Further study is needed to confirm and further explore the possibilities touched on in this essay. We need ways of understanding what it is that happens between a body and its encounter with a religious practice. We

need theoretical models that have explanatory power for understanding the complex relationship of contexts and feelings. An economic affective model may help with this and with moving us beyond a neoliberal conception that gives us only binary ways of understanding the relationship between the secular and the religious.

NOTES

1 The "section" is Deuteronomy 26:5–8, the last line of which is understood traditionally as referring to the ten plagues, which is why the ritual of spilling one drop of wine for each plague is located at that part of the Seder.

2 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), xxi.

3 For a recent striking description of the terror of this time, see chapter 6 of Kim Ghattas's *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020).

4 "Interview: Saba Mahmood, Anthropology and Author of "The Politics of Piety," Light in Her Eyes, accessed Feb. 20, 2020, http://thelightinhereyesmovie.com/resources/interview-saba-mahmood/.

5 Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (Summer 2009), 387.

6 "Green and fresh, it *represents* the seasonal rebirth of the earth that takes place in the spring, the month of Pesaḥ. It also *represents* the renewal of our hope for redemption." Rachel Anne Rabinowicz and Dan Reisinger, *Passover Haggadah: The Feast of Freedom [Hagadah shel Pesaḥ]* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1982), 18, emphasis added. *Haggadah* is the name used for the Jewish text that sets forth the order of the Seder. It is commonly printed in pamphlet form and distributed to all Seder participants.

7 Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," 841–42.

8 Mahmood, "Politics of Piety," 31.

9 Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect."

10 Silvan Tomkins, as quoted in Donovan O. Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 61, emphasis added.

11 Brené Brown, "Shame v. Guilt," Jan. 14, 2013, Brené Brown [blog], accessed Feb. 24, 2020, https://brenebrown.com/blog/2013/01/14/shame-v-guilt/.

12 I worked on the twenty-seventh floor of Tower 2 for ten years.

13 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 35.

14 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

15 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.

16 See Fintan O'Toole's *Heroic Failure* for a recent effort to understand one nonliberal movement, the movement for Brexit, as an expression of shame (which the author describes as "self-pity" at the loss of the leadership position of being an empire). Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019).

17 Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39.

18 Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 119.

19 Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 61.

20 Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 60, emphasis added.

21 Saba Mahmood, "Is Liberalism Islam's Only Answer?," 76. In Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*, ed. Deborah Chasman and Joshua Cohen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

22 Vestiges of this system still exist today in countries like Israel, where divorce and marriage law, for example, is administered separately by the religious authorities in the Muslim, Jewish, and other religious communities recognized by the state.

23 Mahmood, "Is Liberalism Islam's Only Answer?," 75–76.

24 Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), Kindle locs. 775–79.

25 Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 16, as quoted in Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, Kindle loc. 835.

26 The Pew Research Center, for example, has extensively chronicled this phenomenon. See, "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," Aug. 8, 2018, Pew Research Center, accessed Feb. 20, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/.