

Sainthood in Fragile States

Date: 12th - 15th April 2010

Venue: Danish Institute in Damascus, Syria

Organisers: *Andreas Bandak*, PhD fellow and *Mikkel Bille*, assistant professor (PhD), Centre for Comparative Cultural Studies, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen.

Keynotes: Lisa Wedeen, professor and chair of the Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, and Glenn Bowman, associate professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology, Canterbury University.

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Call for papers: This seminar discusses the creation, adaptation, or denunciations of claims to sainthood in local, regional and national discourses in the Middle East. Within recent decades the question of sainthood, in various meanings of the term, has emerged as a powerful theme in negotiating identities. The legitimacy of sainthood is increasingly contested, yet often nation states make use of claims to holiness as consolidating figures, while simultaneously maintaining an ambivalent position toward the legitimacy of individual claims to sainthood. From Christians performing miracles, to Islamic denunciation of saint pilgrimages, to insistence on venerating local saints, to national discourse rooted in venerated figures, sainthood “matters” in that it is not clearly discernable to all parties what makes the specific saint exceptional or to what degree sainthood is embodied. Recognition of sainthood relies on a complex negotiation of the relationship between the visible, the forces of the unseen, authority, and creation of alternative realities. The qualities of sainthood can thus best be conceptualized as both pertaining to existential and structural dimensions, as fragile states, where mixed motivations emphasize the possibilities and dangers in the life of the individual as well as the nation. This seminar aims at discussing how such relationships and claims are accepted, contested, or existing in parallel, and thereby has a bearing on social and political life in the Middle East. We hereby aim to challenge the way both politics and theologies are being conceptualized for contemporary Middle East, in that Modernity and religious awakening both make way for disenchantment and re-enchantment. These can be seen as coterminous or opening zones of indeterminacy in which many aspects takes place at the same time, with varying social outcome.

Questions that could be addressed:

- What makes a saint, or what qualities of sainthood apply across social, political and religious contexts?
- How is “sainthood” used in negotiating identities at various levels of society?
- How is evidence of efficacy negotiated?

- What evidence is applied to substantiate relationships between the seen and the unseen, or revelation and concealment?
- How is the relationship between politics and theology, the “political theologies” negotiated around figures of sainthood or sanctity?

Deadline: Abstracts (approx. 300 words) are to be submitted by **January 12th 2010** to bandak@hum.ku.dk. Participants will arrange for their own transportation. The airfare is approximately DKK 3.500 from Denmark, but cheaper fares may be available at early booking. The seminar will pay Visa, accommodations and food, from the evening of the 12th to the evening of the 15th.

Form: The seminar will bring together senior and upcoming Danish and international scholars for a joint investigation of issues of sainthood in contemporary Middle East. We encourage perspectives from all disciplines. Keynote speakers will give 45 minutes presentations, and PhD students are invited to give 30 minutes presentations. All papers are followed by joint discussion. The seminar takes place in Damascus, Syria. Presenting at the seminar is rewarded with 3,8 ECTS. Our aim is to publish the proceedings from the seminar.

Suggested Readings:

Asad, Talal, 2003, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford. Stanford University Press

Bowman, Glenn (1993) Nationalizing the Sacred: Shrines and Shifting Identities in the Israeli-Occupied Territories *Man*, New Series, Vol. 28(3), pp. 431-460.

Gilsenan, Michael, 2000. Signs of Truth: Enchantment, Modernity and the Dreams of Peasant Women. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6, pp. 597-615.

Meltzer, Francois & Jas’ Elsner (editors), 2009. Faith without Borders: The Curious Category of the Saint. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35 (3).

Meyer, Birgit & Peter Pels (editors), 2003. *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Osella, Fillipo & Benjamin Soares (Guest editors), 2009. Islam, Politics, Anthropology. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 15 (s1).

de Vries, Hent, 2006. Introduction: Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political, in Hent de Vries & Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.) *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 1-88.