Talking the talk
Debating debate in northern Afghanistan

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Fig. 1. Picnic day in northern Afghanistan. Picnics held in open areas of land and on the banks of rivers, which see a hundred or more guests consume kebabs and plates of pulao provided by a wealthy host, form an important dimension of male social life in northern Afghanistan during the spring months. Despite the considerable show of arms present at this picnic I attended in March 2008, it was also one of the settings in which the modes of debate and discussion I explore below were enacted and performed.

Having watched the political history of Afghanistan unfold from the verdant villages of Chitral, northern Pakistan, in 2005 I made the first of the five fieldwork visits to Afghanistan on which this article is based. In Chitral I spent much time chatting to Dari-speaking Afghan refugees, many of whom had lived in Chitral since the start of violent conflict in Afghanistan in 1979. My fieldwork in Chitral focused on the complexity of local conceptions of Muslim virtuosity, and the centrality to these of the display of critical intellect. My Khowar-speaking Chitrali friends took great pleasure in hotly debating ideas with one another – lively discussion ensured that village life did not stagnate but, rather, was made intellectually stimulating; being a skilled participant in such exchanges was also held to be a marker of great personal prestige, a sign of the accomplishment of ‘fully realised humanity’ (purā insaniyat) (Marsden 2005).

In this article I also seek to document the rich insights that ethnographic considerations of local practices of debate offer into understanding everyday life in Muslim-majority societies in the politically different, although geographically connected, locale of northern Afghanistan. The search for worldly and non-worldly knowledge is a critical and widely documented dimension of the Islamic tradition which shapes local understandings of being Muslim in both rural and urban settings, and in culturally and politically diverse contexts (see, e.g., Eickelman 1985, Bowen 1993). Mass education and the electronic media, moreover, are known to have stimulated increasing levels of public debate amongst Muslims concerning Islam and its relationship to modern forms of political and social life (Eickelman and Anderson 1999).

There are fewer ethnographic considerations, however, of the varying attitudes that Muslims living in particular contexts hold towards debate. Furthermore, in the midst of intense scholarly discussion of diverse forms of ‘Muslim agency’, the content and form of debates involving ‘Muslims’ but argued from personal or collective positions that do not inevitably evoke Islam, but also draw on other moral and ethical standpoints, including conceptions of ‘full humanity’, have also received little attention.

A comparative study of the place of debate in the sociality of Muslim-majority societies is today of critical importance. Not only do global stereotypes increasingly depict Muslims as being unable to think rationally or ironically, but anthropologists have also increasingly focused on the importance of the embodied experience of submission to Muslim selfhood and agency. These studies argue that Western modes of subjectivity, which associate agency ‘exclusively with an inner ego, constituted as thought and desire as independent of the body, nature, society and other intrinsic conditions’ (Waggoner 2005: 248), do not merely reflect powerful ‘Euro-American’ assumptions; rather, the expectation that humans should think critically is central to the inculcation of liberal forms of secular citizenship (Hirschkind 2006, Henkel 2007, Mahmood 2004).

Critical thought is not absent from the lives of ‘piety-minded’ Muslims who embody Islamic ethical dispositions, notably the ability to experience freely the pleasure of total submission to God. Yet, Mahmood suggests, anthropologists must distinguish between the different values that people attach to critical thinking. ‘Piety-minded’ Muslims do think critically about their own lives, but above all else, with the aim of ‘securing God’s approval and pleasure’ (Mahmood 2001: 835).

These studies have illuminated the ways in which piety-minded Muslims inculcate Islamic ethical norms, and they have unearthed the premises on which Western models of agency are based. Yet many of the Muslims with whom I work – some of whom were active members of Afghanistan’s Islamist resistance movements and none of whom could be simplistically defined as ‘secular liberals’ – see a person’s capacity to recognize the ways in which their lives are shaped by particular sets of circumstances as being a marker not merely of ‘Muslimness’, but, equally, of their humanity. Ethnographic material documenting Afghan Muslims who claim that critical reflection is central to the achievement of ‘full humanity’ not only challenges
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The shrine of Ali in Mazar-e Sharif is visited during a journey to a province in the northeast of Afghanistan. Here, along with a young friend of mine and his mother’s brother – a man widely known for his joking and sharp wit – we take a break during a journey to a province in the northeast of Afghanistan.

A great deal of my time in Afghanistan is spent journeying between the various cities and towns in which my friends and their families live. Here, along with a young friend of mine and his mother’s brother – a man widely known for his joking and sharp wit – we take a break during a journey to a province in the northeast of Afghanistan.

The pressures of such work are great, casualties not infrequent. As the current government has become more unpopular among ‘the people of the north’, so too criticism of fathers who allow, compel or encourage their sons to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad; to work for NATO has grown. One man, for instance, lost a son to a remote-controlled bomb in the city of Jalalabad.

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Shrines and celebrating events other than one of the two Islamic ceremonies – Eid-ul Adha, Eir-ul Fitr – contravene Islamic doctrine. Ahmed, who we meet below, for example, secured a job as a translator at a NATO base in northern Afghanistan. The day after he started work he asked for religious edicts or fatwas from his town’s most respected religious authorities concerning the permissibility of his job: the work was halal, they told him, so long as he did not put his fellow Afghans’ lives in danger. Only after securing four fatwas did he eventually ask me: ‘Would you agree that four is enough?’ Other young Panjshiri men just laughed when I told them of Ahmed’s search for religious legitimacy.

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Some have made significant money whilst serving for the Americans, however, and they have now turned to the world of ‘business’: the Kabul-Kunduz road is lined with petrol stations jointly owned by Panjshiri men. Others have established construction companies, which build foreign-financed projects in Afghanistan’s provinces: line drawings of a school for a province in the north sit alongside designs for prison surveillance towers for Kandahar in these men’s

Panjshiri Muslims, US Special Forces and ‘Newsnight’ Afghan-style

The men with whom I have been working refer to themselves as being ‘Panjshiri’, the name of a valley to the north of Kabul, widely known as the home of Afghanistan’s famous Islamic ‘resistance’ leader Ahmed Shah Massoud (d. 2001). None of them have lived permanently in the valley, however: the grandfathers of some left before the war to set up businesses in Afghan towns; others were brought up as refugees in Chitral. The refugees mostly returned to Afghanistan in 2003, often ‘occupying’ the land of the mountainous perimeters of Kabul where they built new homes. ‘Return’ has been difficult – land prices in Afghan cities are high, and they are constantly faced with the threat of eviction by ‘the state’, which claims their settlements are illegal. Conflicts with the Kabul police have ensued, shots have been fired, and men killed; they have been told they can stay put for now, but many have brought arms from their villages just in case.

Employment and money are a ceaseless source of worry. One relatively ‘easy’ option is to take work with NATO military forces, mostly as translators (tarjuman), a job that requires much more than the name suggests: ‘translators’ are often armed and sometimes actively involved in military action. I say ‘easy’ because many of these men learned English at schools in Pakistan, not because the choice to participate is made without continually reassessed moral reflection. Some men say they are even keen to find such work because they will do anything for good money, upon which, they tell me, ‘the good life’ depends.

For others, the religious permissibility or otherwise of such work is paramount in their decision-making processes. Ahmed, who we meet below, for example, secured a job as a translator at a NATO base in northern Afghanistan. The day after he started work he asked for religious edicts or fatwas from his town’s most respected religious authorities concerning the permissibility of his job: the work was halal, they told him, so long as he did not put his fellow Afghans’ lives in danger. Only after securing four fatwas did he eventually ask me: ‘Would you agree that four is enough?’ Other young Panjshiri men just laughed when I told them of Ahmed’s search for religious legitimacy.

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Debates about debate

I have explored elsewhere the important moral and political risks associated with Chitrāl’s culture of debate: tempers sometimes frayed, men earned reputations for being donkey-like buffoons, and sectarian sensibilities between Sunni and Shi’a Ismai’li villages were all too easily wounded. Making decisions, in short, about who to include in both impromptu and planned debates was a focus of much everyday strategizing. The stakes of participating in such debates in Afghanistan are very different. My Afghan friends often tell me that their countrypeople’s long experience of war has had profound ramifications for their affective dispositions: informed discussion and debate are rendered impossible, they say, by the inability of people to hold their tempers: ‘have a debate here and it is likely to result in someone going to their house, picking up a Kalashnikov and shooting you in the head!’

On one evening in a northern city, for example, two friends and I were invited to a neighbour’s house for dinner. During the meal the conversation turned to matters religious: the brother of our host, Sultan, asked one of my formerly Chitrāl-based friends, Ghaffār, if he knew of Tahir-ul-Qadri, a widely known and politically influential Sufi authority from Pakistan. ‘The man you speak about,’ said Ghaffār, ‘is crazy’ (deevanist). Sultan replied: ‘You must be talking about a different man: the man of whom I talk is a respectable scholar of religion.’ ‘No, no,’ replied Ghaffār, for the time being clearly enjoying displaying his provocative wit, widely held as being necessary for a hot evening’s discussion, ‘I lived in Pakistan for 30 years, I know Qadri and he is the idiot I say.’ Sultan, now heated and visibly angry, continued: ‘It is not Tahir-ul-Qadri who is crazy; it must be you for saying such things! If you think that Tahir-ul-Qadri is an idiot, then tell me, which of the scholars of Islam do you prefer?’ ‘There are many scholars,
Fig. 5. Photos and posters of Ahmed Shah Massoud – often referred to by my informants as ‘amir sahib-e shahid’ (our martyred commander) – are a ubiquitous feature of urban landscapes across northern Afghanistan. Here Massoud’s protective and benevolent gaze overlooks the inhabitants of Talqan from the vantage point of the city’s cinema: Talqan was at the frontline of the war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban until it was captured by Taliban fighters in September 2000.


but to name one, Sheikh Qaradawi is worthy of our respect,’ replied Ghaffar, referring to Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), the influential Qatar-based reformist scholar whose religious edicts (fatwas) on the Islamic acceptability of issues and practices ranging from mortgages (Bowen 2004) to globalization (Zaman 2005) are known globally as a result of his use of the print and electronic media, especially the al-Jazeera satellite television channel. Sultan and Ghaffar now stood ready to fight; the host held them back. Ahmad, the other friend, in the meantime, was sitting beside me writing notes in English: Sultan was as ‘stupid as a cow’, and he’d warned me that under no circumstances should I write English: Sulton was as ‘stupid as a cow’, but to name one, Sheikh Qaradawi is worthy of our respect,’ replied Ghaffar, referring to Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), the influential Qatar-based reformist scholar whose religious edicts (fatwas) on the Islamic acceptability of issues and practices ranging from mortgages (Bowen 2004) to globalization (Zaman 2005) are known globally as a result of his use of the print and electronic media, especially the al-Jazeera satellite television channel. Sultan and Ghaffar now stood ready to fight; the host held them back. Ahmad, the other friend, in the meantime, was sitting beside me writing notes in English: Sultan was as ‘stupid as a cow’, and he’d warned me that under no circumstances should I ‘talk Sufism’.

Finally Sultan announced: ‘Now I’ve understood, if it’s Qaradawi you respect, then a Wahabi you are’, ‘Wahabi’ being a derogatory term widely used in Afghanistan as elsewhere to refer to Muslims associated with Arab-influenced forms of Islam. Importantly, both Ghaffar and Ahmad identify themselves as Panjshiris, supporters of Ahmad Shah Massoud, and thus as Muslims held to be anti-Wahabi. Sultan stormed out, the host apologised for his brother’s behaviour, and the men present agreed that debate (bhaus) should, ideally, be an important way of sharing knowledge, yet Afghan people, uneducated and corrupted by war, were unable to participate in debates without becoming angry and over-emotional.

At first sight this conversation appears to be yet another example of conflicts between Sufi and reformist Muslims. However, in the petrol station where we continued our discussion, and where the young men I know spend many an evening drinking tea, eating fruit, listening to their driver friend Binju Khan playing his banjo, and talking in an atmosphere free from the uninvited and the elders, very different themes emerged. Both Ahmad and Ghaffar agreed that Sultan was ‘crazy’. Both of them also enjoyed reading Persian translations of Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s books, often together in a small bookshop owned by their friend. Ahmad went on to tell Ghaffar that in his opinion the thinking of Sufis was illogical. ‘Why listen to irrational Sufis,’ he said, ‘when you can watch logical Islamic thought in action, as in the television programmes of the Indian Muslim preacher Dr Zakir Naik?’

But Ghaffar, Ahmad’s senior by some years, disagreed. ‘There are lots of special things in Sufism,’ he told Ahmad, ‘it is only the status attached to the pir (pirs being men of spiritual insight). Ghaffar, indeed, is the descendant of a known and widely respected pir family, who are also seyyids, or descendants of the Prophet. Ghaffar is given the honorific title Agha in Afghanistan and Chitral, where he was a refugee for 25 years. Ghaffar went on to quote a Chitrali proverb: ‘it is not the pirs who fly but the believers who make them fly’.

The problem, Ahmad, is that they have been calling us pirs for centuries. To be honest with you, I don’t know if I am a pir or a seyyid or what. But people say I am. What use would it be now if I just went to them and said: I’m not really a pir, so don’t call me Agha Sahib.

Thus the people with whom I work in Afghanistan frequently invoke their own theories about ways in which experiences of war, conflict and chaos have weakened the capacity of Afghans to ‘navigate’ (Reddy 2001) their emotions. Humane interactions between people holding different opinions are held to be more possible even in the conditions of refugee life in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier than in war-torn Afghanistan today. They also talk about the degradation of a much-valued tradition of everyday conversation as being of wider significance because active participation in the critical exchange of knowledge and ideas through debate is seen as being central to a person’s capacity to exert moral agency. Thus, what was at stake in this conversation was not simply a conflict between Sufis and Salafis, or the expression of different opinions concerning what it means to ‘be Muslim’, and what a person needs to do and know in order to achieve this. The interlocutors were also seeking to demonstrate themselves as self-aware contributors to debates about sensitive dimensions of their own lives, including ‘religious belief’.

Not all the people I know, however, are equally positive about the value of self-reflection and public debate to daily life. In certain contexts questions concerning the relationship of debate to ‘being Muslim’ are invoked. In these debates people are expected to argue their positions both in relation to the Islamic tradition and as Muslims. While in the examples cited above the outcomes of debates between persons holding differing religious positions might be read for the insights they offer into the human costs of war and conflict to Afghan society, I now explore how specific types of debate call forth ‘being Muslim’ as a matter for conscious consideration and deliberation.

One of Ahmad’s elder brothers often expresses anti-debate ideas. Khalil recently became an active member of Tablighi Jamaat, a global movement for Islamic reform and purification. The Tabligh is a relatively recent addition to Afghanistan’s religious landscape, partly because one of its key activities – preaching tours involving trips of between three days and four months that see men travelling, offering religious advice and staying in mosques – were impossible in Afghanistan until recently. Like other Tablighis, Khalil frequently embarks on these tours: he has participated in three-month tours in neighbouring Pakistan, and joined several shorter trips within Afghanistan.

Having returned to his home from three months preaching in Pakistan, Khalil started to talk to me about...
the aims of the Jamaat, before quickly also turning the discussion into an opportunity to perform dawat, or offer me an invitation to become Muslim. It was a long night of discussion, which eventually also saw Khalil invite the imam of a nearby mosque to offer me a place in paradise. During the several hours of discussion Khalil asked me what my purpose was in travelling to countries such as Afghanistan and finding out about Islam. ‘I’m an anthropologist’, I replied, ‘because I enjoy finding out about other people and places and sharing my own knowledge.’ ‘‘All these are good things’, replied Khalil, ‘but there must be some main target. The point of exchanging knowledge is to reach the truth. Some knowledge is more truthful and all discussion must seek to find the truth.’ ‘Debate is dangerous,’ Khalil finally remarked; ‘it destroys a person’s faith and leads them away from God’s orders.’ News of my sometimes fraught discussions with Khalil reached my other friends the next day: they had come to hear of some of Khalil’s more emotional remarks. Khalil was a ‘dead cow’ who had no right to subject me to six hours dawat: ‘if you become Muslim at the hands of Khalil’, they joked, ‘it would be better to be kafir. Moreover, we’d be laughed at by the whole world.’ ‘Anyway,’ they added, ‘how ridiculous it is that Khalil thinks he has the knowledge to convert you to Islam.’ They were particularly struck when I told them Khalil had said that debate weakened faith. ‘Is his faith so weak’, one man asked, ‘that he is unable to hear the viewpoints of others for fear of losing it?’ Thus in particular contexts there are important and emergent divisions between those who conceptualize critical intellectual exchange as central to the constitution of Muslim selfhood, and others who see it as having the potential to weaken a Muslim’s faith.

At one level, my conversations with Khalil and others have led me to conceptualize the forms of Muslim selfhood they promote and cultivate as being both significant and different because they appear to condemn intellectual argument and debate as something that Muslims should explicitly avoid. Yet these emergent distinctions are not best understood in terms of grand theories that contrast embodied forms of Islamic self-discipline or piety with those of liberal, secular or more traditional models of selfhood that privilege critical thought, reflection and exchange. As Englund has noted, such an attempt to categorize different types of Muslim subjectivity fail to attend to the fact that the social relationships of men such as Khalil are rarely if ever confined to persons with their own religious outlook (cf. Englund 2007). As a result, they risk assuming that distinctions between the Tablighi Jamaat and other Muslims are more important than differences within such movements.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have sought firstly to document diverse types of sociality and ways of being Muslim among Panjshiris living in Afghanistan today. In doing so, I have found Soares and Otayek’s recent overview of the study of Islam in Africa particularly helpful. These authors advance the concept of ‘islam mondaine’, by which they mean ‘ways of being Muslim that exist in secular societies and spheres, without necessarily being secular’ (2007: 17). These: might focus on self-improvement, the correct practice of Islam, and not just politics or the political […] this […] is a new kind of Muslim sociality that we can see in many places of the world where individual Muslims are often concerned […] with coping with economic decline and cutbacks in state services and considerably disenchanted with multiparty elections that often seem to re-elect governments elites and perpetuate existing neopatrimonial systems. (ibid.:18)

What Otayek and Soares capture with their use of the concept of islam mondain are the ways in which categories such as ‘Islamist’ or ‘piety-minded’ Muslim conceal the complex and highly individual role played by Islam in people’s personal and collective identities. This complexity is apparent in the form of ‘Muslim sociality’ amongst Panjshiris, where a focus on ethical self-improvement, correct religious practice and political Islam are all elements of people’s everyday lives.

Secondly, I have also come to recognize the ways in which these Muslims do not merely ‘cope’ with the conditions in which they live their daily lives – they also consider the capacity to reflect upon these conditions as central to their attempts to live as well as they can in Afghanistan today. Many young men, such as Ahmed, Ghaffar or Sulton do ‘ask themselves what it means to be a Muslim […] with moral convictions’ (Masquelier 2007: 244), and seek to become part of a ‘moral and moralizing Islam’ (Soares and Otayek 2007: 18). Some of the ways they seek to do so are by participating in transnational Sufi brotherhoods, joining collective movements of Islamic self-fashioning, or engaging in more individualistic acts of moral thinking and debate.

The ethnographic examples I have explored, of Muslims reflecting upon the ways in which their lives and those of others are shaped by cultural values, social relations and political circumstances, illustrate how a key dimension of everyday life for my friends and informants is the attempt to understand, interrogate and evaluate the world. On the basis of such thought processes, some have set themselves the task of perfectly embodying Islamic ethical values, others of living a life of constant moral evaluation.

However, it is important not to ignore the fact that some have reached very different conclusions. Those who laughed at Ahmed’s desire to receive religious sanction for working with NATO have also thought a great deal about the world in which they live. And as they sit in their offices and take pride in their line drawings of Kandahar prison watch towers, they say that there is no such thing as al-Qaeda in the world they inhabit, but only ‘the fucked’ and ‘the profiteers’ – a reminder of the degree to which debates about humanity, survival and self-respect amongst people of Muslim background are as deserving of anthropological attention as those about ‘being Muslim’.

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