

ASEF BAYAT

At times one is compelled to lay stress on what is obvious. And regrettably ours is such a time. Stating that matters in Islam and Muslim societies are much more complex than what presents itself might be obvious for some, but certainly not for the general perception that is informed by a black and white view of the world. The current preoccupation with the powerful images projected by, albeit, small-scale extremist and "Jihadi" streams, has precluded from sight an Islam practiced by the majority of Muslim humanity which cherishes life, beauty, as well as spirituality.

Looking beyond the official Islam of the state in Iran, scores of ordinary people gather in the evenings to share poetry, mysticism, and a spiritual journey. Every year millions of Egyptian Muslim men, women, and children join the Mawlid festivals to celebrate, often for days and nights with food and fair, the birth of revered saints (Schielke, p.6). In Syria, as happening elsewhere, Sufi orders, distant from the jingoism of political Islam and the incumbent regimes, are engaged in rituals that serve ethical enhancement and "moral reform of the self" (Pinto, p.14). Each week, al-Saha village in South Beirut brings together thousands of pious people who also yearn for distraction and the pleasures of daily life (Harb, p. 10). Indian lower and middle class Muslims generate a vast market for a unique popular art form- "religious posters in which Islamic themes derive liberally from the images and symbols of Hindu iconography"; an art form which redefines the very concepts of Islam's monotheism and iconoclasm (Saeed, p.8).

These rituals and practices, shared largely by ordinary Muslims, represent what one may term "popular piety." They signify a fusion of religious sensibilities and mass culture, the sacred and the everyday. As a cultural expression of piety, they embody a humanized, multi-faceted, pluralistic and a concrete religiosity. Popular piety is indeed the antithesis of what Olivier Roy, in reference to the construction of an often fundamentalist "pure" or abstract religion, called the "de-culturation" of faith. It is no surprise, then, that popular piety is often downplayed both by Islamist hardliners and secular modernists. The religious purists charge practices like mawlid festivals as signs of *bid'a*, idolatry, and moral vice, while modernists see in them elements of backwardness, traditionalism, ignorance, and superstition. But in truth, ordinary Muslims project an alternative set of religious sensibilities. They wish to exercise a religion of life, a spirituality of the subaltern whose plebian lives disturb the sensibilities of the elites, political, or religious, who aim to compel rigid structures to ensure social control. Popular piety defies rigid structures and questions the monopoly of divine truth.

This issue of the *ISIM Review*, unlike previous ones, was developed by an editorial team consisting of ISIM Chairs with Martijn de Koning acting as Assistant Editor. A new editor for the future issues will replace Dick Douwes who left ISIM as of 1 January 2006 (p.52). The *ISIM Review* remains committed to unraveling the complexities of current processes in Islamic landscapes, furnishing a forum for scholarly exchange, while retaining a format, language, and style accessible to lay audience.

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The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) conducts and promotes interdisciplinary research on social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities. ISIM was established in 1998 by the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University, Utrecht University, and Radboud University Nijmegen in response to a need for further research on contemporary developments of great social, political, and cultural importance in the Muslim world from social science and humanities perspectives. ISIM's research approaches are expressly interdisciplinary and comparative, covering a large geographic range which includes North Africa, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, South and South East Asia, and Muslim communities in the West. Broad in scope, ISIM brings together all areas of disciplinary expertise in anthropology, sociology, religious studies, political science, and cultural studies.