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Conversations on Muslim Piety: Reflections from a Nordic Research Network

Essay

Since the turn of the millennium, a recurring debate in the academic study of Islam and Muslims has centred on how to analyse the status and significance of religious practice, together with the interrelated questions and the new kinds of empirical material that this analysis entails. Scholars have debated how to char-

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acterize Muslim piety, how much attention should be given to its different forms (without, as Samuli Schielke puts it, letting “too much Islam” dominate the study of Muslims), and how such practices connect to other, less obviously religious aspects of Muslim life. While anthropologists have often been referred to as the key voices in this conversation, many researchers in other academic fields and with varying regional expertise have also contributed to developing tools and ideas.

In an effort to broaden and extend the debate, but not get stuck in its dichotomies, the contributors to this essay have invited scholars to participate in the conversations on Muslim piety through three successive international workshops. To explore how the study of religions can contribute to these interdisciplinary discussions, we formed a Nordic network of researchers with broad interests in the study of Muslim piety from different academic disciplines. These workshops, explorative to their nature, have focused on a range of practices and contexts that often go beyond a simplistic distinction between “pious” and “secular” aspects of life. Such practices can include the most widely known forms of canonical Muslim practices such as prayers, celebration of festivals, performance of mandatory duties, and mediating various forms of religious knowledge. Also relevant are, for example, artistic practices, forms of communication, teaching and learning activities, and seemingly mundane activities like cleaning and cooking in a ritual context. Thus, we have been interested in thinking about Muslim piety in ways that do not presuppose any strict divide between various spheres of life.

A Nordic Research Network on Muslim Piety

Engaging in these discussions we took the opportunity to apply for a NOS-HS grant supporting Nordic networks. This funding requires the participation of at least three Nordic institutions of higher education, an element of exploration in the activities, and inclusion of both senior and early career colleagues. Before this application was granted, we received substantial funding from The Royal Swedish Academy of Arts and Letters for a workshop along the same thematic lines and from the Centre for Modern European Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen.

The series of workshops took place during 2022–2024 (see below for a list of participants and papers. In addition to the formal requirements from NOS-HS mentioned above, the workshops included a substantial number of international colleagues whose work had influenced our own approaches to research. The meetings provided a creative and explorative atmosphere, where we could engage in open-ended discussions based on presentations of work-in-progress. Crucially, this was not a research project, meaning that the funding came with no explicit expectation of joint publications, larger applications, or similar concrete dissemination. This essay sums up and reflects on key themes that have emerged and lingered on throughout our collaboration, what the workshops achieved, and how future research may develop from the experiences we have made. Synergies, establishing new contacts, and the concrete linking of research institutions in the Nordic countries are all important aspects of our efforts.

The network aimed to explore both the formal and informal legitimisation of performance and mediation of Islamic knowledge as well as practices that contribute to the development of local piety genres. When communicated in different ways, these practices can have a meaningful impact not only on local communities but also on a global stage. An important outcome of the workshops has been the sharing of empirical data from a variety of specific cases, which enabled comparative conversations. These studies provided valuable insights into the diverse ways piety practices are expressed and mediated across cultural settings, geographical locations and timelines. The presentations highlighted how agents – not always immediately visible – have grasped opportunities to reconsider and reformulate existing frames for analysing religious thought and practice. Sometimes this has very direct consequences for local and global community dynamics and power relations. By bringing together diverse perspectives and case studies, they facilitated a broader understanding of how contemporary Muslim piety is shaped and practiced in varying contexts.

The first workshop, “Practices, Aesthetics, and Entanglements in Contemporary Muslim Piety”, was funded by and convened at The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm, 31 August–1 September 2022. Already this initial

meeting had an explorative character with the aim to investigate how Muslim devotional practices, interpretive modes of mediation and artistic expressions are entangled, and with the aim to provide space for work in progress and open-ended questions. Both senior and junior scholars were invited, bringing empirical material from around the world and with an interest in a critical examination of analytical concepts in the study of Muslim practices. The workshop was divided into four sections:

Pious Communities
 Interpretive Domains, Teaching and Communication
 Expanding Fields of Expression. Music and the Arts
 Performance, Ritual and the Senses

The second workshop, “Islamic Piety: Reconsidering Concepts and Frameworks”, took place at The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 18–21 January 2023 after receiving NOS-HS funding. A shared point of departure for this workshop was the creative piety operations that often take place outside the dominating formal Islamic institutions. By studying bottom-up activities, interaction at different scales, transformation of space, the papers investigated the development of frameworks for possible analysis. Such investigations require comprehensive methodological considerations as well as ethical reflection, and hence also this meeting was explorative, including several excursions in Istanbul. The workshop was divided into four sections:

The Entangled Relations of Ritual Performance, Politics and Ethics
 Local Practice, Regional Conflicts and Global Communication
 Material and Aesthetic Aspects
 Conceptual Ambiguities

During the third workshop, “Space and Agency in Contemporary Muslim Piety”, held at Sigtunastiftelsen, 8–10 April 2024, the participants reconsidered how Islamic interpretive domains develop with attention to subjectivities, agency and spatiality. Furthermore, the reflexive presentations discussed how the study of local religion can take the initiatives of local actors and communities into perspectives of more large-scale and global developments. By engaging closely with selected case studies, the papers illuminated how different kinds of material can be combined in analyses on different scales.

The workshop was again divided into four sections:

- Social Media
- Taking Ritual Responsibility
- Muslim Piety
- Public Connections

The final workshop for the members of the network in Oslo 17–18 December 2024 was focused on how to transpose the ideas and experiences for future projects and cooperation.

During all workshops, participants addressed how various Muslim actors construct new interpretive domains, including how local actors navigate multiple religious expressions, as well as religious authorities' critical assessments of piety practices and the theological paradigms surrounding them. Efforts aiming to reformulate religious repertoires have previously been explored by scholars. The workshops showed that further research is needed on practices in small-scale and informal groups, including their impact on broader authority formations. The productive approaches and perspectives brought up in the workshops have pointed to a wide range of piety practices. By combining ethnographic, textual, aural and visual analysis to trace transformations in religious communication, we believe that the network workshops have offered fresh insights into Muslim piety communities and practices. Furthermore, they have contributed to the broader study of religion in the Nordic countries and beyond.

Reflections on Muslim Piety: Concepts, Comparisons, the Global and Material Dimensions

One of the issues addressed was, not surprisingly, how we can understand and use the term piety at all. Is it best employed as an analytical tool, or perhaps rather as a device to direct our attention towards certain kinds of religious engagements? As researchers, we can use “piety” as an umbrella term for practices and ideas that, by our interlocutors, will be called by many vernacular words with specific ascribed meanings. A reason for using this term in research is that it allows us to connect a range of diverse religious articulations that otherwise risk being seen as separate. As one of the workshop participants, Maximilian

Lasa, pointed out, it may be helpful to think of interlocutors' processes of "exploring piety" rather than them "being" pious or not. Moreover, Banu Şenay highlighted that an emphasis on a more rigid and limiting understanding of piety risks privileging certain factors over others in Muslim lives; not only social, political and everyday dimensions, but also cultural norms that locally may not necessarily be best characterised as religious. Hence, we propose that the term piety works best as a tool for singling out certain kinds of practices that, by the particular religious actors we are studying, are perceived to be especially valuable, full of blessing, or being of ultimate concern. This means that the term piety only becomes meaningful when used in relation to a specific – synchronic or diachronic – context. In the following, we identify four themes that could be productive to develop in future research.

1 Muslim piety in comparison

One feature of our research network that can be seen as a strength but also a flaw, is its exclusive focus on *Muslim* piety practices and frameworks. Certainly, gathering a group of experts on Muslim piety have fostered a deeper and more specialised analysis of how such activities can make sense in the lives of Muslims. One possible way to develop, and most likely strengthen, research on Muslim piety might be to treat them less as something unique and more as examples of religiosity in a wider sense. While the network's focus on Muslim piety provided invaluable insights into its unique practices and frameworks, a comparative approach will enrich future studies by highlighting both human experiences and distinctive religious expressions. Such comparisons will allow us to explore how different religious traditions address similar concerns expressed in, for example, devotion, moral guidance, and community dynamics. A comparative approach will further illuminate the cultural, historical, and theological factors that shape their unique trajectories. Engaging with academic specialists on piety within several religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism, might allow us to better pinpoint what is unique in various traditions as well as what is shared or similar.

2 *Piety and materiality*

Another important aspect to develop is the connection between piety and materiality. The workshops expanded the focus on the entanglements between material culture, faith, identity, and communal practices. We have discussed in what ways agents of piety are not only human: material objects, media technologies, ritual spaces, and textual traditions can operate as actants in the dynamics of piety. This points to another important angle to be developed, namely the connection between piety and materiality. An emerging body of work highlights how materiality shapes and is shaped by piety – whether through the use and making of devotional objects like prayer beads, relics, sacred texts, clothing, ritual spaces or virtual worlds. Several scholars within this field of research have participated in our workshops. By incorporating, for example, insights from ethnography, performance studies, and aesthetic analysis, this research offers a rich, more nuanced knowledge of how material objects and environments intersect with experiences of Muslim piety. This approach underscores the centrality of materiality when people articulate, transmit, and transform religious knowledge and piety through their creative engagement with religious traditions, whether through media, art, performance, or public discourse. Hereby, they contribute to the ongoing negotiation of what meanings piety can have in various contexts.

3 *Global piety and the impact of transnational communication*

The interconnected nature of today's world has significantly influenced expressions of piety, as transnational communication enables the flow of religious ideas, practices, and aesthetics across borders. Piety has never been firmly tied to a specific geographic, cultural, or institutional context but part of religious hybridity/hybrid conglomerations of thought and action. However, the increased speed and volume of digital communication and global movement of people, ideas and goods have facilitated the interaction of local piety practices with religious currents to a higher extent. This dynamic exchange fosters hybrid forms of devotion and reinterpretations of tradition, as individuals and communities draw inspiration from both their immediate surroundings and transnational influences. Moreover, transnational communication allows piety to take on fluid and adaptive

forms, enabling piety to exist beyond traditional local spaces of worship or centralized authority. Religious practices, performances, and interpretations now circulate globally, creating shared imaginaries while also amplifying diverse and marginalized voices. This process not only reshapes individual and communal expressions of piety but also highlights its evolving nature as it responds to contemporary challenges. By transcending physical and ideological boundaries, global piety reflects both continuity and transformation, forging connections between the local and the global in innovative ways.

4 Piety and its not always visible agents

Over the workshop series, we moved from an initial focus on lay activities and came to discuss, rather, how to identify groups and individuals who can be understood as piety agents. Discussions circled around questions regarding how particular spaces, media, and interpretive regimes shape what is possible and meaningful to analyse as pious. Moreover, what makes us name and frame particular agents, practices and spaces as pious? As outlined above, piety has functioned not as an analytical concept, but rather as a tool to empirically point to certain types of agents, frameworks and practices. We encountered a number of types of actors in the examples analysed in the workshops, not always immediately visible. Some of these have formal religious positions and titles, while many do not. Moreover, transnational mobility, social media, and changed attentiveness in academia on gender and generation have led to an increased diversification of piety actors. They both shape, transmit, and redefine piety practices and knowledge through their creative engagement with religious traditions, whether through media, art, performance, or public discourse. Hereby, they contribute to the ongoing negotiation of what piety means to them and how it is embodied. Our focus on materiality, as sketched above, has also made us attentive to the ways in which things, structures and other material factors affect, mediate and change piety practices. This development in the conceptualisation of agency has contributed to an expanding field of inquiry.

Ongoing and future work

In addition to these reflections and thoughts for future work, the network's activities over the past few years have spawned a number of concrete outcomes in our own work. For example, a collaborative research project titled "Pious Practices among Danish Muslims: Diversity, Devotion, Aesthetics", based at the University of Copenhagen and funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (DRF), will continue to analyse practices and imaginaries related to Muslim piety in a range of settings during the years 2024–2026. The project participants are Catharina Raudvere (PI), Petek Onur, Maria Lindebæk Schmidt Lyngsøe, and Simon Stjernholm. In June 2026 the project will host a conference with comparative perspectives on contemporary piety, and not only Muslim.

A second outcome is a collaboration on the theme of Islamic relics as objects of pious devotion and practice, where Ingvild Flaskerud and Susanne Olsson have initiated a series of conference panels inviting international scholars, where materiality and comparative perspectives are included.

A third outcome developed in connection to the network are two monographs. The first, by Simon Stjernholm, is titled *Sensing Islam: Engaging and Contesting the Senses in Muslim Religiosity* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025). It partly builds on analyses that have been presented in the workshop series and engages with the ground-breaking work of several of the other participants in the workshops. The second monograph, by Anders Ackfeldt, is *Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025). The book examines how Islam has been represented, negotiated, and reimagined within US hip-hop from the 1980s to the present. The book traces the influence of Muslim movements, and aesthetics on artists and their artistic works, showing how Islamic concepts and notions of piety circulate beyond formal religious adherence.

Together, these initiatives illustrate how the network has not only stimulated debate and reflection but also generated lasting scholarly collaborations and outputs. They provide a strong foundation for future research on piety, materiality, and the diverse ways religion continues to take shape in contemporary societies.

Participants and papers in the workshop series

- “Practices, Aesthetics, and Entanglements in Contemporary Muslim Piety”, The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, Stockholm, 31 August–1 September 2022.
- Anders Ackfeldt (The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul), “Leaving the Music Industry, Entering Islam”
- Marjo Buitelaar (University of Groningen), “Narrativizing the Hajj as a Sensational Form”
- Marta Dominguez Diaz (University of St Gallen), “The Performative Nature of Emotion in Sufism: Studying Islamic Mystical Feeling as Emotional Practices”
- Alessandro Gori (University of Copenhagen), “From Devotional Ritual to Devotional Pop-music: Recent Trends in the Ethiopian Islamic Expressions of Piety”
- Rachel Harris (School of Oriental and African Studies), “Remembering Sama’ in Exile”
- Joseph Hill (University of Alberta), “The Pious Sufi Gangster Rapper: Experimenting with Cosmopolitan Muslim Masculinity in Senegal”
- Joud al-Korani (Radboud University), “God at Work: Shaping Selves and Configuring Communities in Dubai”
- Maria Lindebæk Lyngsøe (University of Copenhagen), “Asking God for Help: Practices and Conceptions among Danish Muslim Women”
- Maria Luow (University of Copenhagen), “Spectral pious communities”
- Petek Onur (University of Copenhagen), “Building Ties, Shelters and Identities: Ottoman History and Culture in Turkish Islamist Women’s Journals”
- Catharina Raudvere (University of Copenhagen), “Obligations, Autonomy and Flexibility: A Women’s Pious Community in Bosnia”
- Karen Ruffle (University of Toronto), “Making Presence: Anthropomorphism and Agency in South Asian Shi’i Devotional Image-Objects”
- Simon Stjernholm (University of Copenhagen), “Preaching Matters: Sensory Perspectives on Muslim Oratory”
- Christian Suhr (Aarhus University) and Andreas Bandak (University of Copenhagen), “A Discussion of Experiences of Luminosity in Contemporary Egypt Based on the film *Light upon Light* (2022)”
- “Islamic Piety. Reconsidering Concepts and Frameworks”, The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 18–21 January 2023.
- Anders Ackfeldt (Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul), “Leaving the Music Industry, Entering Islam”
- Aslı Elitsoy (Copenhagen University), “Pro-Kurdish Mevlid Commemorations in Turkey: Contested Understandings of a Popular Islamic Practice among Rival Ethno-Political Actors”
- Ingvild Flaskerud (University of Oslo), “Following the Work: Methodological Reflections on Approaches to the Study of Muslim Lay Piety”
- Christiane Gruber (University of Michigan), “Mosques, Museums, and the Metaverse: Imaging Islam in a Virtual Reality”
- Helen Haas (University of Tartu), “Ideals and Reality: Perceptions of the Sacred and Sense of Spiritual Loss among Alevis in Izmir”
- Niloofer Haeri (Johns Hopkins University), “Why Do We Use ‘Vernacular,’ ‘Lived’ and ‘Popular’? Notes on how Religion is Imagined in Scholarship”
- Nada Al-Hudaib (Lund University), “In the Khidma service of Ahl al-Bayt: practicing piety through art among Shia in Kuwait and the UK”
- Max Lasa (University of Copenhagen), “Exploring Piety: German Muslims and Islamic Theology in Turkey”
- Maria Lindebæk Lyngsøe (University of Copenhagen), “Pious Bodies: Learning Qur’anic Recitation in Copenhagen”
- Sabrina Mervin (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), “The Sky Wept for Forty Days”
- Susanne Olsson (Stockholm University), “A Qur’an for Children: Reconstructing Traditional Islamic Knowledge in New Domains”
- Petek Onur (University of Copenhagen), “Circulating Symbols, Triggering Emotions: Ottoman Nostalgia Diffusing in Istanbul”
- Catharina Raudvere (University of Copenhagen), “Nourishment for the Soul, Rest for the Body: Conceptualising Piety Performances and Devotion”
- Banu Senay (Macquarie University), “Islam, Music and Multiple Ways of Being Pious in Istanbul”
- Yafa Shanneik (Lund University), “Aesthetic Transformations of Piety: Reconsidering Female Agency in Contemporary Islam”
- Simon Stjernholm (University of Copenhagen), “Approaching God: Muslim Prayer and the Senses”
- “Space and Agency in Contemporary Muslim Piety”, Sigstunastiftelsen, 8–10 April 2024.
- Anders Ackfeldt (Swedish Research

- Institute in Istanbul), "From Beats to Beliefs. Reinventing Identity on Social Media"
- Mirjam Künkler (University of London), "Between Emancipation and Bureaucratisation. Women's Religious Education in post-1979 Iran"
- Bart Barendregt (Leiden University), "Navigating Futures". AI, Islam, and Ethical Imaginaries in Southeast Asia"
- Markus Dressler (Leipzig University), "Charisma, Embodiment and Continuous Revelation. Broadening the Concept of Islam"
- Liza Dumovich (Leuven University), "The Senses of Belonging. Sensory Experiences and the Art of Sociability among Turkish Muslim Women in Exile"
- Johan Fischer (Roskilde University), "Muslim Piety as Economy. Markets, Meaning and Morality in Malaysia"
- Ingvild Flaskerud (Oslo University), "Pilgrims Creating Spaces of Affordance. Images in the Twelver Shia Cult of Ziyarat Pilgrimage"
- Christoph Günther (University of Erfurt) Normative Piety on #muslimtiktok
- Dženita Karić (University of Amsterdam), "Devotional Piety in Islam. A Case for the Norm-making"
- David Kloos (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies), "Women Islamic Celebrity Preachers and the Conundrums of Public Intimacy"
- Mirjam Künkler (University of London), "Between Emancipation and Bureaucratisation. Women's Religious Education in post-1979 Iran"
- Amna Mahmood (University of Oslo), "Muslim Feminism, Queerness and Religious Change in Islam. Two Cases from Norway"
- Susanne Olsson (Stockholm University), "The Formation of an Islamic Ideal of Piety"
- Catharina Raudvere (University of Copenhagen), "Experience and Transmission. Taking Ritual Responsibilities in a Bosnian Piety Community"
- Robert Rozehnal (Lehigh University), "Tracking Muslim Social Media. Lessons from American Cyber Sufism"
- Ricarda Stegmann (University of Freiburg), "Analysing Sufism from the Perspective of a Global History of Entanglements"
- Simon Stjernholm (University of Copenhagen), "Voicing Qur'anic Translation. Den Klare Koran as Audiobook"