The Complexity of Naive Acceptance of Socially Manipulated Beliefs

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Every society has traditions and routines that define its realities. Its members hold these **values** with high esteem and pass them down to the following generation. The recipients, in turn, become hesitant to embrace major changes to those norms that they consider defining the very essence of who they are. Each generation therefore derives its principals and beliefs from the one that preceded it. It follows, then, that the influences the children in these societies obtain are social in nature.

I moved to the United States several years ago laden with my own share of **beliefs** and traditions that were handed to me by my Somalian society. Needless to say I was at complete odds with the American culture, tradition, and beliefs. **Ethnocentricity** ran wild both in me and the Americans I interacted with. They too were responding to the influential social **norms** and realities that were constructed to fit their lifestyles. The western **social structure** was at work in me, diluting the nonwestern social structure that had until then shaped my identity. These **conflicting** realities created a need in me to search for who I was becoming, or who I initially was before being transformed into this stranger who wasn't sure of what was happening to her. Confusion set in after an initial period of confidence achieved by ridiculing the strange **culture** that I got exposed to.

A notable crisis in me occurred when I started to question the social manipulation of religious teachings or principals that were previously passed down as a matter of fact. The more questions my mind created, the more I believed I was damned and doomed. Never had thoughts of that nature occurred to me back when I happily lived among my society. I even considered leaving the United States at one time and going back to my familiar routine and beliefs. All that which the scholars decreed were firmly curved out of stone.

Plato's metaphor of the three men in the cave comes to mind to illustrate how closed-minded I was. The metaphor is about three people who were tied to their seats in a cave. There was a light source (fire) behind them such that shadows of what was paraded in front of the fire and behind them reflected on the front wall they were facing. These people had never left the cave since they were born and could not even turn around to see the fire. One of them was finally grabbed and dragged out of the cave while he was kicking and screaming. Finally when he was brought out of the cave and into the real world, he was completely torn apart. His realities were of shadows and images, but came to discover the moon, the sun, and the stars, rivers and birds of different feathers, and lush gardens of flowers and fruits. His reality completely changed and when time came to be put back in to the cave, he resisted and was dragged back while kicking and screaming. Finally when he was tied to his seat, the others questioned him about the shadows that were being reflected on the wall. Since in this cave community, one received more status by how well one interpreted the shadows, the others were terrified that they too might one day be dragged out and come back in an idiotic state like

their friend. Little did they know that the friend was no longer interested in the shadows:

> Plato can hardly have meant that the ordinary man can not distinguish between shadows and real things. But he does seem to be saying, with a touch of caricature (we must not take him too solemnly), that the ordinary man is often very uncritical in his beliefs, which are little more than a "careless" acceptance of appearance. (Lee 1978:256)

As a Muslim, and coming from a country that is 100% Muslims, I noticed that Christians too had as much a conviction in their faith as I did in mine. They went to church, like I went to the Mosque. They prayed to their God with as much humility as I did. They strongly believed that Christianity was the only true religion as much as I believed that Islam was. They would try to save me from eternal hell fire by preaching to me, as much as I did try to save them.

Apparently the longer I stayed and studied in the U.S. the more I came to realize that the same conviction is held not only by Muslims and Christians, but by any other faith as well, across the world. *"How different was I from the rest?" "Did the scholars and the Imams not teach me that Islam was the only acceptable religion?—that if one died before accepting Islam as one's religion, then one goes to hell?" "So what if the others believed so about their faiths too?"* This reminded me of the lady at work who said that Jesus was God and that if I died before accepting Jesus Christ as my savior then I will go hell. *"God! How could she believe that? Can't she see she is wrong?" "How much of the Bible does she personally know other than what was preached to her?" "And how much do* I *know about the Quran?"* By now, I had formed a **habit** of having a part of me acting as the devil's advocate while the other threatened the first

and warned it of the dire consequences that will face this soul by corrupting it with blasphemous thoughts.

Underlying all this was my newfound knowledge of sociology, especially **Symbolic Interactionism,** which emphasized the interactions humans have with each other and how we don't just respond to one another's actions, but rather define or interpret these actions in terms of the meanings they hold for the actors involved. The responses we make are not directly related to the actions of one another but instead are based on the meaning which we attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, interpretations, or simply by determining the meaning of one another's actions. For instance, culture and religion in my case set the conditions for my actions, but culture and religion do not determine my actions. I did not or society does not act toward these social systems but rather we act toward situations. According to George Herbert **Mead**, as described by Wallace and Wolf (1999),

> ... individuals act on their own environment, and in doing so they create the objects that people it. He distinguishes between "things," or stimuli that exist prior to and independent of the individuals, and the "objects," which exist only in relation to acts. "Things" are converted to "objects" through the acts of individuals. (198)

Despite this, my righteous **self** would not barge from its deeply held norms and beliefs. This newly found knowledge of sociology provided me with an experience which is similar to what Peter **Berger** would refer to as **Secondary socialization**—i.e., "any subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society" (Wallace and Wolf 1999:281).

This was a period of hardship for me. I

was looking hard at myself and what I was becoming. The same question kept on popping in my head: *"How was I different from the millions of the faithful of different religions?"* In short, everything that could be said about my feeling toward my religion was true with theirs. It even occurred to me that if I were born in the United States to Christian parents, then I would have been a Christian by faith. The devil's advocate self in me kept on shouting, *"It follows from this logic then that I am a Muslim because I was born to a Muslim family and society."*

Although I was having these thoughts, never did I think of becoming a Christian or a Jew or a Hindu or anything. I was simply being torn apart by the similarities all people of faith exhibited, and the irony with which each faith believed they were the true and undisputed legitimate entity. Like Neo in the movie *The Matrix,* I wanted to know how deep the rabbit hole went. I was questioning what **reality** was. The need for me to know was so overwhelming that I became a little braver and realized that searching for the truth or reality itself was a noble cause to pursue.

True, in Islam there is a saying that "All new born babies are born with the inclination of knowing who their true God is, and it is only their parents that either make them Christians or Jews" or Hindu or any other faith for that matter. But this did not negate the fact that all I knew about Islam was based on **derivative beliefs**. I had never set on a course to verify beyond doubt that what I was taught was in true accordance with actual Islam as was revealed to the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In further evaluation of my situation I could not help but come to the same conclusion that I was not well educated about my faith that is Islam.

I was simply (like many people today) programmed to follow a set of rules that were not open to discussion. Unlike others, I did not have any flexibility. In her essay "Religion in an Individualistic Soci-ety"(2003) Jillian Sloan acknowledged the flexibility of her beliefs and their societal construct:

> Lutherans are not very strict or formal in their practice. In my experience I have had every opportunity to develop my own beliefs, both by my Church and my mother. (73)

I admire the way people profess what they believe in. For instance, the movie *Billy Elliot* illustrates how Billy goes against what the class and gender norms were in his community by following his heart and becoming a ballet dancer as opposed to a boxer, which is the "masculine" thing to do, as his father shouted "lads do boxing, football, and wrestling—not *ballet.*" Not only does Billy remain true to himself and to his mother's wish but he also breaks the **stereotypes** that society tries to impose on him.

The Iranian Muslim scholar and philosopher Imam Ghazali (1058-1111), in his article *"From That Which Delivers From Error"* expresses his understanding of religion relative to the different ideological norms prevalent at the time, particularly the view of philosophy in relation to Islamic thoughts. He writes:

> I therefore said within myself: 'To begin with, what I am looking for is knowledge of what things really are, so I must undoubtedly try to find what knowledge really is.' Thus, I know that ten is more than three. Let us suppose that someone says to me: 'No, three is more than ten, and in proof of that I shall change this rod into a serpent'; and let us suppose that he actually changes the rod into a serpent and that I witness him doing so. No doubts about what I know are raised in me because of this. The only result is that I wonder precise-

ly how he is able to produce this change. Of doubt about my knowledge there is no trace. (McNeil 1973:209-210)

Although I have not reached a conclusion about what the "knowledge" of religion really is (as Ghazali says), I could not talk about this inner conflict and evaluation for a long time for the erroneous fear that my fellow Muslims would shun me and label me names. These conflicts that I had are somewhat similar to what M. Goltry writes about in her essay "Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgements" (2003). According to Goltry the need for social approval engenders group conformity. In my case I was conditioned by the will of those around me and was eager to get along with them and not create a conflict. I did not want to lose my **status** within the community or as Emile **Durkheim** and later **Functionalists** would have had it, I did not want to break off from our commonly held **value system**.

However, and right after September 11, 2001, I became extremely scrutinized by weary eyes of the masses of which some thought Islam to be evil. I was readily identifiable because of my head coverings. I once traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, for a wedding and I was isolated from the others to be given a thorough exam to make sure I was not hiding anything in my hair that would jeopardize the safety of the passengers.

I became increasingly self-aware and felt **alienated** at those times and I found myself even leaning to the view that these ethnic or religious profilers were right. Again, here I was trying to fit in and accept the judgement passed down by the masses. I have realized that in the Christian world, particularly in the U.S., little is known about Islam. Most Americans I have met and discussed religion with didn't know much about Islam. My *hijaab (*head covering) would often bewilder them, and they would wonder why I had it on. The *hijaab* I

wear has in recent years stood out like a sore thumb particularly since in the media Islam has become synonymous with terrorism.

Society has a funny way of making individuals **conform** to certain norms and cultural beliefs. Richard E. Rubenstein in his book, *Aristotle's Children. How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated The Dark Ages,* talks about modernity and cultural bias. He writes:

> We continue to tell the story of modernism as if it began with the 16th century Renaissance, and with scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton. Why? One reason involves the myth of cultural authenticity: the notion, common to many cultures, that a particular civilization developed on its own from original sources rather than being borrowed from or imposed by outsiders. 'Our' culture is authentically native, the partisans of every nation insist, while 'theirs' is merely derivative or imitative. (Rubenstein 2003:6)

In the movie *Twelve Angry Men* the character played by Henry Fonda was constantly encouraging others to put themselves in the convict's shoes. That is how we should conduct ourselves in today's world. I could easily see why some of my friends in the U.S. always think of my *hijaab* as a form of **oppression** for women. But why is it that they can't see that Pakistan (a Muslim country) had a woman president who still wore a *hijaab*—or Khaleda Zia who was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, or Megawati Sukarnoputri President of Indonesia which has the largest Muslim population in the world? How could that be a form of oppression? And when was the last time United States had a woman president, anyway? I would encourage people to

practice a **phenomenological** attitude towards their everyday life—that is, not to take learned notions and traditions for granted but to question them and view societies and cultures from the point of view of their actors and how they have been socially and historically constructed. I understand how hard that might be, for I personally tried it and encountered tremendous objections and restrictions that were unsaid but yet present in the form of societal disapproval.

Although it took me several years to analyze the predicament I was in—for I could not ask anyone for fear that they would spread a rumor that I was questioning my faith—I can now speak out without any fear and with confidence that unless one can personally know oneself one can not understand how what they feel—as far as personal conflict is concerned—is not just an experience limited to oneself but is a universal experience that crouches up on each individual within all societies worldwide, and across all cultures and faiths.

Now, after gaining some insight into who I am, I am capable of critically setting aside others desire to intimidate me in the name of a **communal tradition.** In fact, I have noticed that the more you take a firm stand on an issue that is collectively ruled upon, the more you will be shunned initially and respected later. This contradiction, I believe, stems from the fact that others are initially scared to be rejected and they prefer not to make their beliefs public and hence join the common voice of the society. Later when they become capable of analyzing the situation sincerely, they respect you for making a choice they would have probably made but were too scared to do so. In his essay "Defying the Sweatshop, Sociologically Speaking" (2003), Steve Sacco clearly demonstrated how through what he called "Commercial Disobedience," he intended to make a difference by boycotting companies that use sweatshop labor. I on the other hand intend to use "Intellectual Disobedience," by refusing to submit to these derived beliefs and instead opt to do a serious learning of what I believe in and accept no second hand information or interpretations. I understand that for this end, I have a long way to go.

I am concerned that the blind following of a few scholars (few relative to the masses) that dictate the entirety of what any religion is all about will have a major social impact on communities throughout the world. Killings in the name of religion were and are still rampant. "My God is better than yours" is said through many different religious actions. I believe **fanaticism** in any religion is caused by the fact that people are extremely eager to rely on others' explanations and interpretations of the very religion they profess to be part of but do little to study and understand it. Since when have humans been so flawless that the accuracy of their interpretations is to be considered divine?

The beliefs that we each have are a product of the societies we lived in. That is why we have different realities more so in this global society than ever. For instance if I was to borrow Emile **Durkheim's** premise—that the needs and self interests of humans are shaped by **social facts** external to the individual, among which he included the **collective conscience**, i.e., the shared moral norms and values in a society—one will see that the **global society** we live in is far from the harmonious picture of "**organic solidarity**" that Durkheim promised for the modern life. The movie *The Big One*, directed by Michael Moore, clearly illustrates the nature of capitalism in this so-called modern society where corporations like Nike are getting richer and richer at the expense of their foreign and underpaid workers thereby reproducing the antagonistic **working** and **bourgeoisie** classes **Karl Marx** wrote about, or the oppressor and the oppressed classes as **Paulo Freire** would put it. The PBS documentary *Affluenza* clearly establishes how this idea of

"collective conscience" is a far cry from what we have been reduced to as a society where materialism and consumerism is becoming a poor substitute for common social values while (what **Simmel** would call) **blasé attitudes** take root in deep recesses of our minds towards poverty and neglect of the have-nots.

Ironically we each believe that our set of realities are firmly grounded on the absolute truths that exist universally. Little do we understand that most of us are operating on purely derivative belief that originated from our parents and society at large. Only those of us who set their biased selves aside and try to investigate the social reality will arrive at an independent understanding free of blind dilution from societal influences and manipulations.

For instance, if one were to pick those beliefs that were imprinted on their psyche as infallible truths, exposed them to logical and factual knowledge, and realized that those principles or beliefs did not hold water, then one should become dissatisfied with explanations based solely on alleged declarations by a saint or a religious authority. If such explanations go against the grain of one's knowledge and understanding, one should easily, without guilt, refute such notions.

In essence—using Christianity and then Islam as examples—both Catholicism and Protestantism can not be right. Only one of them must be right with regards to the teachings of the Bible. Similarly, only one of either Shia or Sunni sects must be true with regards to the teachings of the Quran. Similar considerations will have to be made across the mentioned religions as well, i.e., between the holy Bible and the holy Quran. Some might claim that it is not that one of them has a firmer handle on the truth than the other but both are telling different aspects of the truth. But we all know that is not the belief of those who profess these faiths. For them, the belief that each professes is the only truth.

Another useful way of looking at the issue at hand is by analyzing the complexity of how the subconscious mind works, especially with regards to the hypnotic effect of religious beliefs. Regarding the subconscious mind, my inquiry has deepened to include far-reaching effects that religion plays in our minds. More so, religion (which exist in multiple and different forms) has in some ways caused, consciously and subconsciously, rifts both among diverse religious groups *and* those who simply view religion as spiritual nonsense.

When analyzing the conscious disparity between individuals in matters relating to religion as a whole or in part, it is inevitable that one will see two distinct groups—those that find something inherently wrong with religious devotion (in whichever form it may be practiced, i.e., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.), and those who have been conditioned by religious hypnotism to such a degree that in some cases medication are shunned in favor of the healing power of prayers. A good example here is (and to just pick one among the numerous examples available from each faith) the Jehovah Witnesses who refuse blood transfusion even when it means a matter of life or death. Even then it is a fallacy to consider that religious devotion is senseless spirituality. An equal erroneous belief would be when one would see it wrong to substitute medication for the healing power of prayer or any other form of unconscionable and unduly oppressive custom that limits the freedom of one being a fully critical and reflective being that preserves life.

The wrestler later turned governor of Minnesota, Ventura, once said that religion is for people with weak minds. I don't think he is alone (at least in the U.S.) in coming to this conclusion. Religion is seen as something that thoughtful individuals would be better off staying away from. Stephen L. Carter, in his book *The Culture of Disbelief* re-

fers to a book written by two therapists who argued that anyone who puts aside the needs of his or her family in order to serve his or her religion was suffering from an illness the authors called "toxic faith." Carter continues to wonder how those therapists would have judged the toxicity levels of faith in say people like Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed. Carter seems to be saying this in a tongue-in-cheek fashion alluding to the reader that these therapists are far from making any logical statements. I disagree with his statement and I am using this example to simply illustrate the opposite "conscious" positions in the spectrum these two different groups of people hold as I previously stated. Carter's comparison lies in gauging the levels of faith between say an unknown regular person trying to be faithful in extreme ways and faith levels of prophets such as Moses or Jesus or Mohammed, (peace be upon them). But the actual issue at hand is whether putting aside the needs of one's family in order to serve one's religion is right or wrong. In as far as Mohammed's teachings are concerned, it is wrong to put aside the needs of one's family and pursue serving one's religion only. (Proving this point is not the focus of my paper and I am using this example just to show the rhetoric used to discredit ones opponents).

In chapter two of his book *The Culture of Disbelief* Carter accurately posits that a good way to "end a conversation or start an argument" among a group of "well educated professionals" is to say that your religious belief and the will of "God" forbids you to see issues like pornography or abortion as been right! He is of the view that in the unlikely event that anyone hangs around you, if there are any, then you will be accused of "imposing your religious beliefs on others." Whether "toxic faith" is present or not, or whether you will be accused of imposing "religious belief on others," we see the gap in thought between those who believe in religion and those

who at least see it as a fad. The above paragraphs are a summary of the extreme and opposite positions held by those who, at least consciously, are either for or against religion—however strange their words or actions might be.

Complicating the issue of the differences in positions held at the conscious level, however, is the significance of seeing how people on both sides of the argument are in many ways acting on **subconscious** impulses. Not delving any further, look even at me writing this essay as the best example. I started this inquiry by questioning what I call "socially manipulated beliefs" and now I can not help but admit that I and most of us are also subconsciously influenced by social forces. A constructive criticism I received while writing this paper read, "Notice how even in the midst of your argument you used religious symbols and phrases, interaction, and rituals that reinforce one or another belief whether or not you question "manipulation" at the conscious level."

Sociologists like Emile **Durkheim** have gone to the extent of suggesting that society is an entity of its own. Society, in his view, is a phenomenon that exists independently of individuals who conform to its needs. Only when one resists the **social facts** or forces does one become aware of their presence, and the constraints they impose in the course of socialization:

> This unremitting pressure to which the child is subjected [is] the very pressure of the social milieu which tends to fashion him in its own image, and of which parents and teachers are merely the representatives and intermediaries. (Farganis 1999:61)

Since social pressures have become second nature to us (allegedly, as Durkheim suggests) then one sees the complexity of not only submitting to (let alone resisting)

social manipulation, but recognizing the "manipulation" in the first place. In his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim goes to the extent of suggesting that "Society" and "God" are one and the same thing. That 'God' is a social construct and that society, since it has its own needs, permeates the human mind and controls it to responds to its liking:

> Since it [society] has a nature which is peculiar to itself and different from our individual nature, it pursues ends which are likewise special to it, but as it cannot attain them except through our intermediacy, it imperiously demands our aid. (Farganis 1999: 74)

Tamdgidi**,** in his paper "Freire Meets Gurdjieff and Rumi" (2004) interprets **Freire's** view of world history as a process of humanization in which "unfinished humanity" seeks becoming "fully human." For Freire here, "fully human" means becoming a being of praxis, as Tamdgidi explains—that is to say "an integrated being of critical reflection and practical action." This in essence (the interplay of critical reflection and practical action) is what I am seeking. But as I found out, the density of ideas involved in analyzing the **oppressed self** and how this self is catapulted into becoming the **oppressor self**, not to mention the collective societal requirement to educate one another on eliminating oppression, is far reaching and complex. The context in which oppression was used in Freire's a writings according to Tamdgidi's comparative study, is one in which oppression is seen as a form of manipulation resulting from social forces that mold or shape one's thoughts and actions according to social requirements and not in accordance with what an individual sees as right.

Some, a majority, are prevented

from developing their critical-reflective powers and thereby reduced to beings of isolated and alienated unreflective and mechanical action, anesthetized into living as things and objects serving to perpetuate and reproduce their oppressive social structures. ... dehumanized and alienated "beings for another", and not "beings for themselves ... (Tamdgidi 2004:6)

The point here is that when we as individuals accept and not question beliefs that were simply taught to us by scholars, teachers, ministers, priests, or imams, then we are in essence "beings for another." Therefore, in order for one to become fully critical and reflective one has to engage in educating oneself to eradicate or break the shackles of oppression.

G. I. **Gurdjieff's** ideas, as discussed by Tamdgidi in the same paper, were eye openers in my analysis of 'social manipulation.' Gurdjieff's idea of the nature of oppression is focused internally on the individual. This was apparent in his analogy of the carriage, the horse and the driver all constituting the individual, i.e. the three centers (emotional, physical and intellectual) which need to communicate with each other so as to make possible an integrated self. Gurdjieff argues that if the centers are alienated from each other, we don't learn the proper way of using our intellect and this separation influences us to conform to oppressive social forces. It is this fragmentation of the centers and selves that prevents us from being fully human.

What necessitates the urge to believe in any faith is the fear of damnation, be it in this world or the hereafter. Given that this is an issue that really matters to most people of faith, I have tried in this paper to take steps in better knowing myself and acquiring a base on which I can conduct my life not based on what society dictates but in accordance with what I personally prove to

be true—free of bias, superstitious beliefs, or erroneous claims that have been passed down from our forefathers.

I will not be perfect, or perhaps there are no absolute truths or realities that humans can touch or experience. However, this should not prevent me from at least making an effort to investigate, learn, and search for that which is right in accordance to my achieved intellect. This will in turn tell others in society that I am an independent person making efforts to free myself of manipulation or oppression by others and, through previous social conditioning, by myself. In other words, each of us require a a declaration of independence in words and deeds, which alone can set the conditions for changing the inherited social mold.

Few among us indulge in independent verification of their derived beliefs.

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