Religious Media, Devotional Islam, and the Morality of Ethnic Pluralism in Mauritius

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Summary. — Pluralism in Mauritius illustrates the special role religious traditions can play for dynamics of ethnicity. They do so in constituting moralities of coexistence that cannot be easily subsumed under the role of religion as an ethnic marker. To illustrate this point, this paper focuses on the circulation of religious media and their emphasis on religiously grounded notions of the common good, and addresses the importance of a media-sustained public sphere for the modalities of ethnic pluralism in Mauritius. The media-driven dynamics of ethnic and religious pluralism also highlight performatively constituted morality comprising both affective and meaningful dimensions of the public sphere, as they are evident in Mauritian engagements with religious media.
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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I examine the question of Mauritian ethnic pluralism as a moral problem negotiated in the public sphere. I pay attention to two particular aspects of this issue, on one hand the religious sources and inflections, and on the other hand the media dimensions of moralities of pluralism. More generally, I explore how religious traditions and their internal debates shape ethnicity and questions of ethnic pluralism and coexistence. In Mauritius the links between ethnicity and religious traditions and identities are strongly institutionalized. In fact religious boundaries to a large degree encompass ethnicity in Mauritius, because ethnic categories tend to overlap with religious identity or constitute smaller sub-categories within larger religious blocs. It is rare for ethnicity to transcend religious boundaries in Mauritius.[1] But the close interaction of religion and ethnicity in Mauritius is also instructive for moving the discussion about ethnicity beyond issues of identity and the construction of boundaries between people who perceive each other as culturally different, and shifts the perspective toward the moral dimensions of ethnicity and ethnic pluralism.

"Classical" approaches to ethnicity and ethnic conflict such as Barth (1969) and Horowitz (1985) have analyzed religious traditions mainly in their role as ethnic markers, and specifically in the case of ethnic conflict have been above all focused on "the extent to which religion sustains ethnic boundaries" (Enloe, 1996 [1980], p. 199). More recent overviews of the topic have largely stuck to this perspective (Banks, 1996; Eriksen, 1993, p. 160). Even studies of ethnicity that give more consideration to the cultural "content" of ethnicity while explicitly examining the potential religious sources of ethnic conflict such as Richard Jenkins' analysis of the North Ireland conflict (Jenkins, 1997, pp. 107–123) largely reduce religion to its role in creating opposing groups. More recently, however, a range of studies have appeared that examine how religious practices and performances, specifically its ritual dimensions shape ethnic conflict (for an overview see Brubaker, 2004, pp. 112–114). Nevertheless, also in this body of work the emphasis remains on boundary production and maintenance, while the crucial moral dimensions of religion are often sidelined. In order to understand the dynamics of ethnicity, religious traditions also need to be taken seriously as moral traditions that underlie the everyday practices of coexistence.

Despite the salience of religion for Mauritian ethnic pluralism, approaches to religion in pervious work on nationalism and ethnicity in Mauritius have also rarely gone beyond its role as an ethnic marker. Thomas Eriksen, for example, has argued that Mauritian ethnic pluralism is viable because of certain "common denominators," such as a willingness for political compromise, integration into a capitalist wage economy, shared patterns of consumption, dress and food, and above all Mauritian Creole as a shared vernacular language, all of which transcend ethnic boundaries (Eriksen, 1998). Religion, however, decidedly does not fall under this range of commonalities among Mauritians of different ethnic backgrounds, and should thus be kept to a minimum in national politics and the public sphere in order for Mauritian pluralism to be viable (Eriksen, 1998, pp. 96, 97). But a liberal banishing of religion from the public sphere, while problematic almost everywhere, is especially illusory in Mauritius. This is all the more the case because of the legacy of a colonial history of political mobilization through religious networks among Indo-Mauritians, and because of government policies strongly promoting and privileging the public celebration of "ancestral cultures" and ancestral languages very closely linked to separate religious traditions. Most importantly, it also hinders an understanding of the religious foundations of ethnic pluralism in Mauritius,

and presupposes an Enlightenment perspective on religion according to which non-privatized religion has an essentially negative influence on reasonable and peaceful coexistence. In contrast to previous analyses of ethnicity in Mauritius where "religion tends to be subsumed under the more encompassing heading of ethnicity" (Eriksen, 1998, p. 97), the role of religious traditions and practices in Mauritian ethnic pluralism cannot be reduced to one among several dimensions of ethnic dynamics. Religion does of course play a key role in the imagination of communities, the marking of boundaries of identification, or the distribution of scarce resources in situations of competition, but its significance for Mauritian pluralism goes beyond these well-established domains of ethnicity.

As I will argue, Mauritian pluralism involves to an important extent the mobilization of moral values chiefly drawn from religious traditions. The mobilization of religious traditions for the sake of non-violent coexistence constitutes an approach to ethnic and religious diversity that is by no means limited to Mauritius, and to underline this point I will briefly explore the close connections between Indian and Mauritian approaches to secularism and religious pluralism.[2] The Mauritian example highlights religion as a problem in the study of ethnicity and ethnic conflict more generally, and suggests that to fully grasp the significance of religious traditions for ethnic pluralism requires paying attention to pluralism as a moral domain that is rarely separate from religious traditions and practices.[3] In this paper I address the circulation of religious media as one key means of constituting such moral domains of pluralism. In approaching ethnic pluralism as a moral problem, I also stress that the problem of ethnic and religious pluralism goes beyond the deliberative dimension of public spheres and moral reasoning, as its affective dimensions also deserve attention. In this, I emphasize the crucial role of the everyday dimensions of ethnicity (Brubaker, 2004, p. 2), which has already begun to draw attention among students of nationalism and its ethnic dimensions. Several scholars of nationalism have discovered pedagogical techniques and the routines of state schooling, political rallies and ritual as well as musical performance as one of the chief generating mechanisms of the nation, which at the same time inculcate emotional dispositions that make themselves deeply felt in people's everyday lives (Askew, 2002; Benei, 2008; Billig, 1995). Focusing on the routine, everyday aspects of morality that are sustained by the circulation of new religious media, in this paper I highlight such everyday dimensions of ethnic and religious pluralism. In what follows I particularly focus on the links between religious affect and the morality of ethnic and religious pluralism among Mauritian Muslims.

2. MEDIA, MUSLIM PUBLICS, AND PIETY

Recent comparative work on Muslim publics has emphasized the significance of new media in shaping public spheres. The main stress has been on a democratization and fragmentation of such publics engendered through the capacity of new media to undercut the dominance of established powerful players, such as the state and the 'ulema. Eickelman and Anderson, for example, claim that the rise of a new class of "interpreters of Islam" throughout the Muslim world has gone hand in hand with the spread of new information technologies, such as audiocassettes, audio-CDs, satellite television, and the internet Eickelman & Anderson, 1999; Eickelman, 2005). These new participants in public debates about Islam and the common good (Salvatore & Eickelman, 2004) often lack traditional or other formal credentials as interpreters of Islam

in exchanges about public morality. Because such media circulate discourse and images in different ways, they create new media producers and audiences and therefore have a fundamentally transforming impact on the shape of the public and its limits.

A second, primarily anthropological focus on new media in Muslim publics is the intersection between media practices and personal piety. Here the emphasis is on how uses of electronic media become part of regimes of pious discipline (Hirschkind, 2006). Electronically mediated sound and images have recently been described as playing an increasingly important role in the production of religious sensibilities and sentiments within the context of turning embodied listeners and viewers into religious subjects. Highlighting the visceral dimensions of religious experience, this strand of research asks how uses of electronic media have shaped or have even become constitutive of these aspects of religious practice and belonging. Coinciding with a growing interest in sensory experience in media studies, the intersection of electronic media with everyday embodied religious practices has therefore emerged as a second site in which media practices articulate both with the making of Muslim subjects and debates about the common good.

My aim in this paper is to draw these fields of inquiry on piety and conceptions of the common good together. Recent work on Muslim publics above all poses the question of how uses of electronic media impact Islam as a religious tradition and Muslim notions of personal piety. However, I argue that such processes also have important consequences for the dynamics of ethnicity in plural societies, especially where there is a strong correlation between religious and ethnic identities. In Mauritius the morality of ethnic and religious pluralism often converge in notions of peaceful coexistence. The latter is seen as a supreme common good, which many Mauritians in turn associate with moral conduct conforming to religious values.

Moral values and sensibilities influence how subjects participate in publics, thus shaping the very sense and limits of the public sphere (LeVine & Salvatore, 2005). Moreover, the reproduction of pious dispositions in the contemporary world depends to a considerable degree on the public circulation of discourse and images. Electronic media practices intervening in this interrelationship between pious subjectivities and public spheres concerned with notions of the common good are therefore highly significant for questions of ethnic and religious pluralism.

My analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I stress how the shaping of pious citizens is one of the central themes in a public discourse of tolerant coexistence as the key common good in Mauritius. The importance of moral values and dispositions for this particular notion of the common good emerges from a postcolonial Mauritian politics of promoting official ethnic "ancestral cultures" that are in turn centered on religious traditions. The cultivation of religious traditions embedded in different "ancestral cultures" is a particular way of managing religious pluralism centered on a distinction between "true" religiosity and destructive religious "communalism." From this Gandhian perspective, pious practitioners of presumably authentic "ancestral cultures" are believed to be most capable of the task of tolerant coexistence, since they are guided by what some believe to be "true" religiosity and moral rectitude. Thus, the internal debates and social processes among people following a particular tradition are of particular importance in this regime of religious pluralism.

Following this observation, my second point addresses the importance of electronic media practices for such presumably benign religiosity among Mauritian Muslims. Here I also