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Introduction

> Ismailism has survived because it has always been fluid. Rigidity is contrary to our whole way of life and outlook. There have really been no cut-and-dried rules, even the set of rules known as Holy Laws are directions as to method and procedure and not detailed orders about results to be obtained. In some countries—India and Africa for example—the Ismailis have a council system, under which their local councillors are charged with all internal administrative responsibility, and report to me as to [sic] their doings. In Syria, Central Asia, and Iran, leadership… is vested in either hereditary or recommended leaders and chiefs, who are the Imam's representatives and who look after the administration of the various Jamats or congregations.
>
> From all parts of the Ismaili world with which regular contact is politically possible a constant flow of communications and reports comes to me. Attending to these, answering them, giving my solutions of [sic] specific problems presented to me, discharging my duties as hereditary Imam of this far-scattered religious community and association—such is my working life, and so it has been since I was a boy.[1]
>
> Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III, 1954

This book explores the history of development of a Shia Ismaili identity in colonial South Asia. What follows in the pages below, in this introductory chapter, is an outline of the key arguments that I develop in the course of five subsequent chapters and the analytical tools and conceptual categories I employ to explore the history of Ismailism that the above longish quote from the memoirs of the community's forty-eighth Imam encapsulates. However, I would like to outline my choice of diction at the very outset. My occasional use of the expression 'sect' with reference to the Shia Muslims should not be seen in the light of any core-periphery or the Church-deviance paradigm. Also, this expression is invoked quite regularly, if also somewhat loosely in its usages, by Aga Khan III himself, and certainly eschewed of its pejorative slant.[2] On a related note, I use 'denomination' to refer to the Ismailis as a short-hand and by divesting the term of its Christian traits. Before we proceed any further, a word or two about working definitions of the Ismailis and Ismailism in line with contemporary understanding, and the way we in the present book understand them, will be in order. The underlying

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idea to sketch a concise overview of the contemporary notions and only thereafter proceeding on to engage with the key aspects of the historical process is an endeavour to invite readers to participate in a dialogic exercise with contemporary categories in the light of their historical and/or recorded past(s). This, in the present context, in effect means an engagement with the changing nature of certain epistemological concerns that had been pivotal in larger identitarian questions in South Asia since, at least, about the middle of the nineteenth century.

The conventional contemporary understanding of the Ismailis thus is as a minority among the Shia Muslims divided broadly into those still believing in a line of living Imam (the Imami Ismailis), and those who hold that the Imam is hidden and is represented by the Imam's vicegerent, *dai al mutlaq* (the Mustali Ismailis, or the Bohras in South Asia, East Africa etc. further split up into several sub-groups). I am concerned in this study with the former group, i.e., the Imami Ismailis, also called the Nizaris (referred to as the Khojas in South Asia and East Africa where there had been sizeable migrations of Ismailis for the better part of early modern and modern history). Unless otherwise qualified, throughout the present work, 'Khoja', 'Khoja Ismaili', 'Khoja Imami Ismaili' – with the latter in particular hinting at the followers of the Hazir Imam (Imam of the time), the Aga Khans – are all used to indicate the Nizari Ismailis of South Asian origin, while the terminology 'Ismaili' or 'Nizari Ismaili' refers more generally to those followers of the Hazir Imam hailing from other parts of the world, such as Central Asia.[3] The community is led by the Aga Khans, presently Shah Karim Aga Khan IV (1936; Imam since 1957), residing in Europe but frequently travelling across the world reaching out to his followers. His immediate predecessor as Imam – the forty-eighth in line who is also quoted above – was his grandfather Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (1877–1957), who first shifted his residence from India to Europe while also setting a pattern of frequent travels to connect to his Ismaili followers across the globe. The very establishment of the Aga Khans as the leaders of the Ismailis was orchestrated through a prolonged legal process since the times of Aga Khan I (1800–81) in the latter part of nineteenth century Bombay that marked a dynamics of religio-legal forces and not least wider discourses of public good.[4] This language of public good was ensconced in a vision of modernity that, not unlike developments in other metropolitan centres in the colonial world, characterized the cosmopolitan nodal port-city of Bombay. It came to be invoked by the city's vanguard Khoja reformers who went on to pillory Aga Khan I for subverting their modernist projects while impelling in the process the Aga Khan's establishment to respond in accordance with this grammar of modernity.

In more general terms, Sudipta Kaviraj points to the divaricating notions of modernity so that in South Asia the idea, somewhat differently from its counterpart in the western political thought, emerged more than anything else as a matter of rational truth contra untruth or error.[5] While Kaviraj has in mind the 'structure of nationalist

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discourse', as announced in the title of his essay, one can hardly afford to overlook the larger socio-cultural meanings, and even anticipations, of the expression and the uses to which they were put in the sites of various forms of identitarian polemics. As we shall see, this is what our self-styled Bombay Khoja reformers in question precisely illustrate, by their invocation of idioms of 'reformation' and 'liberty', a rationally propelled progress, vis-à-vis medieval barbarism embedded in the occult, and indeed, in the form of the response they provoked from the Aga Khan's camp in the process. The ground that the South Asian variant of modernity, then, still shares in common with the western version is a crucial idea of newness of the future, whereby the modern future becomes intelligible only with reference to a rupture from its present and past, marking no simple replication with some variations of past or present events but anticipating something unprecedented. Crucial to this reconceptualization of the relation between the past, present and the future within the discursive rubric of 'modernity' is an emphasis on the knowledge of historical 'processes' as opposed to 'events'. Kaviraj here takes a cue from Reinhart Koselleck. Koselleck's narrative of an epistemic shift from the early modern (*Früher Neuzeit*) to the modern (*Moderne*), located in the so-called *Sattelzeit* (a transitional phase straddling roughly the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries when the new grammar of modernity was worked out), foregrounds the changing contours of temporal consciousness.[6] My efforts to understand this history of the Ismailis, then, is also informed by the idea of a larger framework, one characterized by historical *processes*, often contested, and balancing religio-cultural particularities with perceived universal values and ethics. The processes also involved both internalization as well as celebration of human intellect and activism at the level of the individual, and institutional articulations through the creation of new spaces of communication at the level of the collective. While the project of reading the rational as crucial component of the religio-cultural complex of Islam in modern Ismaili history has to be seen in part as a response to overwhelming appeal of the enlightenment-propelled notion of rationality, its association in particular with the Shia Ismaili strand of Islam needs to be problematized with reference to the denomination's engagement with ideas of both universality and specificities mediated by its Imamate since especially the times of Aga Khan III.

Much of this question about universal values and ethics also informed religious change and introspections in Islamic and Muslim societies, and indeed such developments in other religious communities, in late colonial South Asia. In as much as we locate the history of modern Ismailism since the latter part of the nineteenth century at the intersection of this quest for universality – which in itself was no uncontested terrain – and defence of denominational specificities, we shall also endeavour to understand some relatively less-explored aspects of socio-political change in Islam in modern South Asia. Of particular importance in this context will be the crucial role that Aga Khan III played

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in South Asia's Muslim politics, with increasingly transregional-global aspirations. In other words, the dynamics of these forces, since especially the Imamate of Aga Khan III, defined the contours of Ismaili history in the modern times and their relation with the larger Islamic world in general. While the religio-legal experimentation in Bombay during the times of Aga Khan I provides a general backdrop to the history of the community in modern times (see chapters 1 and 2 below), we shall see in the subsequent chapters that much of the complexities that characterize the globally-spread community along religio-political and socio-intellectual planes becomes intelligible in the context of the Imamate of Aga Khan III, and the crucial shifts and breaks it brought about.

The postnational, the denationalized and the cosmopolitan

The early phase of Ismaili identity formation since the latter part of the nineteenth century drew upon the dynamics of a range of forces at socio-religious, legal, and political planes in the immediate context of colonial Bombay. However, the process also bore significant transregional and, increasingly, global ramifications in the subsequent times. It involved the development of a distinctive Shia Ismaili identity – with South Asia's Khojas at the vanguard under the messianic and charismatic leadership of the Aga Khans (especially Aga Khan III and since the late 1950s, Aga Khan IV) – drawing upon wider pan-Islamic aspirations and postnational sensibilities. My idea of the postnational, I should point out, is informed by a line of scholarship that underscores the importance in the development of the 'self' in the colonial context of the urge to transcend the barriers of the national, questioning in the process the totalizing and homogenizing idea of nationalism. Such quest for the self, as has been pointed out, does not necessarily signal 'the disintegration of any sense of collective polity', but rather indicates resistance to 'the oppressive potential of collective nationalist identities'.[7]

Our invocation of the notion of the postnational, then, must not be seen as an autarkic enterprise positing a discursive formation cordoned off from the numerous ramifications that the ideas of nation and state imply or entail.[8] While the Ismaili Imamate's idea to both transcend and render redundant the boundaries set by the western model nation ensconced in the idea of territory becomes better intelligible within the conceptual rubric of the postnational, such engagements scarcely mean an outright denial of the very ideas of nation and state. Rather, they characterize an endeavour to critically engage with – and depending on the historical specificities, defy – the kindred conceptual cluster of the nation, state, and territoriality. While I am trying to suggest at one level that the question of defiance must not be seen as a denial to engage with ideas of the nation, or the state, or territorial boundedness, at another level the notion of the postnational then emerges as a far more leavening category than

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a hollow transcendental aspiration. In this, I am in effect echoing a critical inflection that recent scholarship on the idea of the postnational has persuasively argued. I have in mind a line of intervention that seeks to iterate the relevance of location in the face of global flows, fluidity, and translatability at a conceptual stratosphere of the 'global civil society'. As has been pointed out, 'the term *location* does not imply *indigeneity* or *authenticity*', but rather 'the *materiality* of spatial and temporal coordinates that inevitably suffuse *all* theorising' (emphases in original).[9] It is this intellection around the idea of the postnational, situated at the universality/particularity intersection that we strive to understand in this book.

The present study demonstrates that the form in which the ideas of the individual and the community, with all their corollaries, existed in Aga Khan III's discursive realm, elicits a pressing need to go beyond the contemporaneous modular notion of nation-state. We then also see how such critical engagements spurred creative possibilities, thanks to his enduring attempts at reworking, and selectively appropriating at times, such ideas. Aga Khan III's engagement with this conceptual constellation thus entailed, in effect, their virtual reconceptualization leading to significant implications for both his deterritorialized and depoliticized global Ismaili community as well as his discourse of a Muslim ecumenism. This is where the notion of 'denationalized', as a cognate conceptual framework to understand changes in ideas of self, citizenship and rights becomes apparent, especially in the context of more recent developments under the Imamate of Aga Khan IV. The notion of the denationalized occasions engagement with these categories within the confines of the nation even as the very idea of the nation also changes in the process, a development that becomes visible than ever before in its contemporary manifestations of the Ismaili Imamate's institutions. To be sure, the postnational and the denationalized so conceptualized are not entirely mutually exclusive either.[10] Aga Khan III's critical engagements with these conceptual categories, then, are among his most enduring legacies.

Within this larger framework we see that the Ismaili experience involved, furthermore, the activation of a cluster of socio-political idioms feeding into a religiously inflected political culture that had important implications for political ecumenism among South Asia's Muslims. The vocabulary of the political, however, was tempered with qualifications along two axes: first, Aga Khan III's invocation of the rhetoric of pan-Islamism brought with it an emphatic depoliticization of the notion marking a shift towards the spiritual and/or cultural lineaments; second, even as the language of political ecumenism was foregrounded in the context of early twentieth century South Asia, it never really meant an erosion of the Ismaili denominational particularities, which emanate first and foremost from the pivotal and apex location of the Imamate in the community. The complexity of the Ismaili case reminds one of two crucial aspects of the question of ecumenism among South Asia's Muslims that

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have been underscored especially in recent years. There are, thus, on the one hand scepticisms in scholarship about any linear and monolithic view of ecumenism of Muslim societies in colonial South Asia, which in effect render any argument of a harmonized pan-Islamism somewhat difficult to sustain.[11] On the other hand, scholars have also brought to attention a depoliticized model of Muslim society shored up with appeals to Shia sensibilities and, interestingly, propelled by several key Sunni Muslim thinkers in colonial India.[12] This book reiterates this notion of ecumenism with significant qualifications. It shows, in other words, that in Aga Khan III's thought about Muslim political ecumenism in the context of the subcontinent, his notions of denominational distinctiveness, as well as spiritual pan-Islamism were not incommensurable categories. They formed the very bases of his thesis of plurality in Islam.[13]

As well, the Ismaili community since especially the times of Aga Khan III also witnessed a pronounced emphasis on a range of normative and ethical questions, particularly on the idioms of social service, even as the latter, by late twentieth century, came to be couched in the state-of-art language of 'sustainable development'. The emergence of a universalizing aspirational language of sustainable development underpinned with avowed Ismaili religious ethics – with its own denominational particularities – becomes intelligible against the larger backdrop of a certain 'liberal Islam'.[14] The process, in other words, has to be seen as one developing over a *longue durée* with particular reference to the role of the Ismaili Imamate, and its tryst with the critical components that recent scholarship tends to situate within the analytical rubric of 'liberal Islam'. I emphasize here the need to see the universalizing idioms of progress and development not only in conjunction with an underpinning idea of an avowed Ismaili ethical system, but also the dynamic dialogic process that connected the universals to the specifics and the modalities that translated such projects. It is this dynamics, I suggest, that gives the Ismailis' tryst with modernity its salient character: one that invoked key aspects of colonial modernity, i.e., questions of identity, community development, social service, and progress and yet strips them of the coercive nature that the colonial venture entailed.[15] In doing so, it virtually re-inscribed the history of the Ismailis within a larger discourse of Islamic pluralism, critiquing especially the constraints that the western model of territorial nationalism imposed. Indeed, in their more recent articulations in the form of non-state actors under the aegis of the Imamate, the Ismaili institutions celebrate in no ambiguous terms the plural ethos of Islam and the need at the same time for the Imamate's mediation. This wedding of larger universalizing features to the ethical idioms entrenched in a distinctive religio-cultural, or even sectarian, matrix with its characteristic historical feature(s) is a reminder, in more general terms, of the idea that modern history could be better appreciated 'as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms',[16] or a 'diversity of universals' as noted at the turn of the twenty-first century.[17]

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This is the larger framework within which I endeavour to situate the history of the Ismailis in the modern times, pointing at the same time to the more recent implications with reference to the lineaments of the 'liberal' in 'liberal Islam'. But allow me to pause here and elaborate on some further aspects of the notion of, and arguments for, a nuanced Ismaili universalism on which this book is premised, especially the more practical aspects of the modalities of bringing the universal and the specificities in dialogue that I am alluding to. The nuances of the Ismaili universalism, as foregrounded by the Imamate, can be located at a number of planes. Aga Khan III's understanding of a religion drawing at once upon reason, belief, and ethics was part of a sweeping historical process. The emphasis on a correlated nature of reason, belief, and ethics defined his understanding of a certain universality that, he argued, characterized both Islam and Ismailism. Also, his emphasis on fluidity of Ismailism facilitated, for one, the remoulding of inherited traditions and structures with crucial implications. The same language of pliability, moreover, enabled religious inspiration enter a dialogic exercise with cultural and civilizational discourses, eliciting at once re-appraisal of ideas of accommodation, assimilation, and community membership. The notion of universality, then, both subsumed and drew strength from a plurality of forces, different interpretive possibilities, intellectual traditions, and a re-invigorated quest to rehabilitate the individual in any interpretive exercise. This idea of plurality in turn also enabled an accommodation, and even a repositioning, of the Ismaili denomination within the wider Islamic world with its own set of beliefs and practices, most notably the belief in a living Imam. The universal thus conceptualized was far from any closed 'given'; rather it underscores the need to take note of the plurality of historical possibilities, and to the unfinished nature of the Ismaili enterprise in contemporary times.

The notion of 'universalism with a difference', located in the family of vernacular and rooted cosmopolitanism, albeit 'diverging in subtle points of emphasis', addresses some of these issues.[18] Posing a riposte to the Eurocentric idea of cosmopolitanism as a legacy of Enlightenment metanarrative – labelled as 'colorless cosmopolitanism' operating typically at the level philosophical abstraction – this model looks for an antidote in the shape of 'colorful cosmopolitanism' that not only takes note of the 'inherited traditions' of the non-West but also underscores 'the dynamic process of creating and recreating traditions as well as flows between cultures and the fluidity of cultural boundaries'.[19] As indicated, our engagement in the following pages with the protean nature of the Ismaili universalism, with all its nuances and cosmopolitan allusions, is premised, first and foremost, on an axiom of certain pliability: viz. of its inherited traditions, institutions and structures, as expatiated on by Aga Khan III in the epigraph provided at the head of the present chapter. In our efforts to understand the history of the Ismailis and their universalizing aspirations in modern times with particular reference to the Imamate, rather than moving along any abstract stratospheric

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plane we emphasize their historical rootedness and contingent nature.[20] In the upshot, I hope, we are able to unpack their universalizing project as 'forms of power in their own right, which rest on their own politics of truth and enable forms of inclusion and exclusion'.[21] We do so moreover with reference to the complexities that have characterized the community since the latter part of the nineteenth century from a historical perspective.

Religious internationals and cosmopolitanism: The religious, the secular and Ismaili subjectivity

The emergence of a distinctive Shia Ismaili identity is a history that originated in Bombay with the Aga Khan Case of 1866. Also known as the Great Khoja Case, it signalled in certain respects a critical rupture with the Perso-centrism that Aga Khan I had until then symbolized. Located at the intersection of religio-legal experimentation and political and administrative imperatives of the colonial establishment, it brought to the forefront a new set of indices to determine community membership, and re-defined in the process the very bases of religious/spiritual authority of the community embodied in the Aga Khans. Supplanted gradually by colonial epistemic props, this Perso-centrism found itself in an alternative space, viz., in a subtle celebration of the Persian traditions with all its cultural paraphernalia that later flavoured part of Aga Khan III's cultural proclivities even as he welcomed modernist experiments, especially in social and political spheres, along western lines.[22] In the process, community institutions such as the *jamaat* (assembly/ congregation) too were restructured and remoulded. The process, it seems, was not insular. In particular, certain parallels in institutional formations can be gauged from the *panchayat* (a traditional form of community governance) and *anjuman* (community assemblies) systems of the Parsis, and the shifts they witnessed over the nineteenth century, due in large part to changing perceptions of religious authority amid colonial religio-judicial experimentations.[23] Under especially Aga Khan III the *jamaat* underwent significant changes in conjunction, as well as in consonance, with a new-found constitutionalism. The recurrent invocation of idioms of voluntarism and community development since the Imamate of Aga Khan III marks a throwback to the vocabulary of public good that emerged in the course of the 1866 law case. Thus, the Aga Khan Case marks a crucial moment of realization, albeit not uncontested as we shall see, for the Ismaili community, viz., the growing importance of the Imam of the time, i.e., the Aga Khan, in not only the realm of the sacred and spiritual but also in the domain of the temporal. The idiom of public good, then, came to provide an intricate balance between the universal and the specific. A crucial point of reference for the posterity, the 1866 law case anticipated a language of ethical community that under Aga Khan III would later graduate into a coherent discourse,

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cutting across boundaries of ethnicity and nationality, while remaining responsive to the transregional-global locations of the Ismailis.

The universal message of public good voiced through the Ismaili vocabularies of morality and ethics, mediated by the pivotally located Imamate through community protocols and *farmans* (edicts) that came into force from the early 1900s, served a two-pronged purpose. It came to provide the bases for both criteria of community membership as well as a complex equipoise of rights and responsibilities. It meant on the one hand a reconfiguration of the boundaries of the community in terms of the language of socio-religious ethics. On the other hand, the centrality of the Imamate in this socio-religious fabric provided a specific Ismaili imprint, even as recasting the Imamate in increasingly secularized nomenclature. A dynamics of these forces conditioned the development of a distinctive Ismaili ethics as alluded to above, i.e., one that gravitated around an Imamate, drawing upon an understanding of Islam celebrating plurality, human intellect and interpretive possibilities while also wedding them to the universalizing language of human progress, improvement and, more recently, 'sustainable development'. I should note, in passing for now and will elaborate on its larger ramifications later in the course of the book, that the idea of secularism that underlies the present study is one that sees its distinctiveness in the fact that it 'presupposes new concepts of "religion", "ethics" and politics and new imperatives associated with them'.[24] In the process, we argue, the dynamics between the secular vis-à-vis the religious result in the projection of new meanings of each of these categories.

In the course of what follows below we shall also see how the protean Ismaili universalism manifested itself through a language of cultural and civilizational mission extolling the role of the Indians, and more specifically Ismaili Muslims, in large parts of Africa.[25] Lest readers translate this as a thinly garbed language of a somewhat crude internal colonialism underpinned with a nationalistic fervour, I should add, that crucial to Aga Khan III was also a stress on cultural assimilation, occasionally *voluntary* religious conversion and,[26] as already indicated, efforts to both critique and rework existing models of nation and state. Part of the Aga Khan's endeavour to relate South Asia and Africa through a transoceanic grid has to be seen in the light of a line of thought that emphasized the transcolonial interactions since especially the late nineteenth century. Scholars have thus suggested a re-examination of India's locus in this re-conceptualized imperial web, one in which India appears to have acquired a central and pivotal role, from which 'peoples, ideas, goods, and institutions … radiated outward', spurring in the process new ideas of being Indian, and indeed imperial citizen.[27] While part of this larger politico-intellectual circle, we shall see in the following pages, the Aga Khan however also foreshadowed significant innovations in his engagement with ideas of citizenship. Moreover, his very reconceptualization of India as an epitome of Asiatic cultural/civilizational forces – categories he largely used interchangeably – and located

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at the heart of an imagined entity that he called the 'South Asiatic Federation', marked a crucial commentary on the very idea of India. In the upshot, Aga Khan III was in effect evoking a language of defiance, if not denial, of the very existence of an array of cognate notions in the nation-state family: of territoriality, territorial nationalism, and ethnicity, hallmarks of modernity and typically sacrosanct to the hegemonic European line of political thought.

In this defiance of indices of the nation and territoriality, I do not read evasive efforts to repose the colonized self in the 'inner' domain as opposed to the 'outer'. Rather, I see in the Aga Khan's conceptualization of a cultural and civilizational project of Islam accompanied with a selective emulation of western-inspired modernity, an ambitious endeavour to envision certain spiritual pan-Islamism. I see in this venture efforts towards intellection of an alternative language of religio-cultural community with its own variations as well as cultural and civilizational claims beyond the confines of the nation.[28] And yet, interestingly, in spite of the promise of the postnational, several trappings of the state – rules and regulations, constitution, flag, and anthem – were, and still are, also sought to be imbibed by the Imam's establishment that lends them to a sublime semiotic exercise at the hands of the Imamate. This is part and parcel of a process whereby the Ismaili Imamate had been striving since the times of Aga Khan III to reformulate its vocabularies of community governance. This, then, is a process marked by oppositional forces. On the one hand, the Ismailis see themselves as part of historical developments brought about by the forces of globality, cosmopolitanism and decolonization in larger parts of Asia and Africa, although not necessarily with the same results or homogenized religio-cultural metanarratives. On the other hand, it also stoked efforts to rise above the logic of capital and idioms of territoriality and territorial nationalism, recasting in the process new languages of community membership based on a protean understanding of Ismailism.

In my endeavour to shed light on the cosmopolitan vision that the Imamate especially since the times of Aga Khan III sought to promote, I also seek to problematize the production of the Ismaili subject. As hinted at in the foregoing pages, the very idea of the Ismaili subjectivity as professed by the Imamate has to be situated at the intersection of the larger historical forces spiralling originally from colonial Bombay. As also mentioned, they had momentous implications for the community's identitarian quest since the mid-nineteenth century entailing crucial institutional articulations. My concern to problematize the Ismaili individual vis-à-vis at one level, the Ismaili collective and, at another, the institutional articulations, echoes to some extent scholarly efforts to locate the meanings of individual's actions in transcendent projects and/or temporal structures. As Talal Asad argues:

> The medieval Christian monk who learns to make the abbot's will into his own learns thereby to desire God's purposes. In an important

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