

## Review of Charles Hirschkind's Ethical Soundscape

*The Ethical soundscape: cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics* Charles Hirschkind. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 270 pp. ISBN 0-231-13818-0

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Before publication of the present volume, English-language scholarship on contemporary Muslim homily was restricted to an eclectic array of articles and books, most significantly among them Robert Gaffney's *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (1994) and Richard Antoun's *The Muslim Preacher in the Modern World* (1989). Drawn from the author's field research in Cairo during the mid 1990s, *The Ethical Soundscape* provides a timely update to this important genre of Muslim expression. Hirschkind's contribution is especially valuable not only for investigating the ways preachers have used the audiocassette medium in recent decades, but for assembling a masterful and complex argument for re-assessing the significance of listening for Muslim reformers and for scholars of modern Islam in particular. If post-colonial studies of modernity have helped situate rationalism and secularism historically, within the West, as well as cross-culturally, Hirschkind generatively extends such work by exploring the novel genre of the 'cassette sermon' in relation to discourses of virtue, pious fear (*taqwa*), and ethical activism (*da'wa*) among 20th and 21st Century Muslim reformers.

The Introduction (serving as chapter one) outlines the author's broader theoretical goals, inviting readers to reconsider the significance of listening to studies of political discourse and modernity. According to Hirschkind's informants, audio-cassettes help strengthen the will of listeners by providing them with a user-friendly means to keep up with sermons and Qur'anic recitations by important preachers. Cassettes prove especially useful, however, insofar as they help inculcate techniques of disciplined ethical listening. The latter observation provides Hirschkind with a fertile launching point for exploring the emergence, through the 1980s, of a distinct genre of performance that he calls the 'cassette sermon.' Increasingly independent of

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mosque settings, the cassette sermon became a new signifying practice that has been oriented to the ethics and political community of the Islamic Revival. Central to the semiotics of this community is an ethics of therapeutic listening that can help Muslims attune themselves to the broader currents of a modern 'counter-public,' defined more by sensual attunement and reasoning than by the secular rationalism of states. The possibility for such an alternative, acoustic engagement with modernity is precluded, the author argues, by the 'ocularcentric epistemology' (p. 18) of Western discourses of modernity. Indebted to Enlightenment philosophy, such discourses privilege detached visual observation above hearing, and are regularly re-asserted in the popular Western media through images of bearded Muslim activists in chaotic Middle Eastern streets and mosques.

Chapter two, 'Islam, Nationalism, and Audition,' provides a fascinating range of insights into the institutionalization of public listening in Egypt during the 20th Century. Part of the institutional regimenting of listening techniques stems from state monitoring, as institutes for 'preaching and guidance' are founded, professional preachers are appointed with a new range of qualifications, and a pedagogical literature emerges on the art of sermon oratory and the importance of conveying new 'information' to audiences. Another set of institutional standards for listening are instrumented through civil society and technological reforms, as charitable associations organize practical homiletic training for more populist preachers (*da'iyas*) and the Muslim Brotherhood employs cassette technologies to mobilize political activism in the 1980s and afterwards. In detailing these transformations in an ethical 'soundscape,' Hirschkind delineates a set of observations on Islam's historical emphasis on listening more than speaking (an assertion that I explore critically below.) Hirschkind's focus on nationalism provides the principle template for charting the growing centrality of receptive aural disciplines over populist forms of oratory, with special attention given to the performance virtuosities of president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser and singer Umm Kulthum.

Chapter 3, 'The Ethics of Listening,' provides some of the book's finest insights into the ways informants use cassettes to cultivate a range of normative Muslim virtues. The attention given by many popular preachers to bodily practice, thanatology, and eschatology, in particular, proves instrumental for informants as they reflect on the virtues of fear (*khawf*), humility (*khushu'*), regret (*nadam*), repentance (*tawba*), and tranquility (*itmi'nan* or *sakina*). With ethnographic sensitivity, moreover, Hirschkind attends to the ways such virtues combine listening with bodily gestures, movements, and rhythms. For many listeners, cassette material is best considered through affective dispositions that allow one to move beyond the superficial responses of commercial 'entertainment' to a more discrete set of receptive competences that lie beyond the technology itself.

Chapter 4, 'Cassettes and Counterpublics,' seeks to identify the social content of such cassette-coordinated listening techniques. Challenging the assumption of political liberalism that one's identification with communal 'virtues' necessarily entails an abandonment of individual agency, Hirschkind argues that the cultivation of sensory Muslim virtues enables individual ethical activism precisely by contesting the totalizing intimations of rational public discourses that privilege elite forms of abstract reasoning. For cassette listeners, recordings of Qur'anic recitation played aloud from store-front speakers help condition one's exercise of reason, whether

employed in discussions about public affairs or in governing one's own daily conduct. Affective listening is itself a form of political action that begins locally and counteracts the doctrinal rigidity that Western analysts often associated with conservative Islamists. Captured best in the term 'ethical activism' (*da'wa*), Hirschkind writes: '*Da'wa*... does more than simply enforce a normative moral order. It makes that order dependent upon the activities of ordinary Muslim citizens acting within changing historical circumstances in such a way that mediates against claims to closure and certainty' (137). Throughout the chapter, Hirschkind's focus on the Muslim Brotherhood provides a compelling case study for elaborating the implications of this decidedly post-colonial approach to the experience of history for modern Cairene subalterns.

The final two chapters explore the expressive repertoires of preachers. Chapter 5, 'Rhetorics of the *Da'iyā*,' investigates the formal composition of Muslim sermons, treating readers to a survey of traditional discursive structures and themes, as well as to an assessment of how such elements have been adapted to broader cassette audiences in recent decades. Much appreciated is Hirschkind's attention to a single preacher, Shaikh 'Abd al-Hamid Kishk, whose use of cassettes helped him become a popular mouthpiece for the Islamic Revival during the 1980s and 1990s. With innovative flair, Hirschkind traces Kishk's penchant for cinemagraphic images to the influence of Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb, whose influence on modern reformers and revolutionaries has received much treatment in recent years. Despite slightly strained assertions about the 'radical departure' (p.161) of such imagery from conventions of Muslim discourse, his creative insights into the supple adaptability of traditional sermons, and especially into their responsiveness to modern media forms, provides for fascinating reading. Chapter six, 'The Acoustics of Death,' provides an elegant addendum to the book's overarching treatment of the somatic qualities of listening. Narratives of dying, funerals, and the afterlife frequently evoked by preachers provide what theologians call a 'taste' (*dhawq*) of the truth of one's mortal condition. Troubled with the ways Western analysts frequently seize upon Muslim narratives of death and martyrdom as evidence for a general antipathy toward life, Hirschkind explores how, according to informants, awareness of mortality can help recall the brevity of one's existence in the world and the need for cultivating one's higher ethical sentiments.

Finally, a short epilogue presents a general rebuttal to those who would hold religious traditionalism to be the primary impetus for counter-modernity and ethno-sectarian hatred, especially in the Muslim world.

If *The Ethical Soundscape* provides a compelling case for attending to the critical resourcefulness of listening for modern religious reformers, the book adopts several less convincing frameworks for analyzing historical modes of sensory perception and activism in Islam as well as in the West. Keying readers to the politics of listening in non-Western settings, Hirschkind makes a case in the Introduction for the West's 'ocularcentric epistemology' (p. 18), a mode of knowledge which, in contrast with Islam, holds listening to be an inferior sensory enterprise. Although such a position complements Timothy Mitchell's (1988) earlier study of visual spectacle in colonial and post-colonial Egypt, the normative equation of visible things with shared knowledge and ethical orientations is evident in a range of different societies, as documented by anthropologists in studies of Indo-European

linguistic communities (Tyler 1987), Buddhist phenomenology (Desjarlais 2003), non-market exchange practices across the world (Graeber 2001), and popular traditions of Islam (Gilsenan 1988; Aswad 2002). By Chapter 2, Hirschkind's commitment to identifying listening as Islam's paramount diacritical ethics leads him to a second misleading assertion. A concern for the civic function of speech, Hirschkind writes, 'was never rigorously pursued by Muslim scholars of language. Instead of elaborating formal rules of speaking, Muslim scholars gave priority to the task of listening...' (p. 34). A breadth of Muslim enquiry into the relation of language, theology, and Islamic law lends little credence to such a statement. *Salafi* thought generally holds special regard for the importance of speaking and civil communicative acts to building consensus about the meanings of transmitted ethical imperatives. Linguist Mohamed Ali, for example, notes historical contrasts between 'mentalist' and 'externalist' schools of Islamic thought about the relation of linguistic expression to ethical knowledge of the world; for the latter tendency (represented by such '*salafi*' scholars as Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya and 'Abd al-Rahman Suyuti), research into the speech of Arabs held special relevance for understanding revelation and *shari'a* (2000, p. 20). More germane to Hirschkind's thesis on sermons, Philip Halldén (2001) has challenged the opinion held by scholars of Islamic rhetoric (and reiterated by Hirschkind in a footnote on p. 219) that more popular traditions in a 'science of speaking' (*'ilm al-khataba*) exerted little influence on the art of the sermon. As Halldén argues, the influence of such a science on preachers has been underestimated because rules of practical oratory were inculcated by preachers through the study of Islamic law, especially ways of conveying traditional 'stipulations' and 'customs' to listeners, rather than through studies of the formal art of eloquence (*balagha*), the latter of which have received much treatment by Western and Arab scholars alike (Halldén, p. 23).

The net effects of these two assertions betray a larger problem with Hirschkind's thesis that pious Muslims are, according to Islam, better served by listening than by speaking or viewing. Such a position admittedly accords well with mainstream Muslim attitudes toward revelation and the credibility of established religious authorities, as well as with the perspective of preachers, esteemed guardians of the revealed word. Hirschkind's primary informant, preacher Muhammad Subhi, an employee of Egypt's Ministry of Religious Affairs, supplies many of the book's key quotations. While Subhi's contributions provide excellent insight into his own worldview, and serve centrally to support the book's larger arguments, Hirschkind struggles to situate his assertions in relation to the social and historical complexities of Muslim attitudes toward the ethics of communication and its pragmatic relation to revelation. For many reformers, the 'tongue' as well as visual observation have long been instrumental to ethical action and knowledge of divine imperatives. Attention to speaking, in particular, would seem especially germane to a study of audiocassettes, whose user-friendly recording capacities lend them to popular uptake in accordance with a range of vernacular discourses. Ultimately, a full account of Muslim modern 'publics' and 'counterpublics' would require deeper inquiry into the relation of listening to a broader and more populist range of modern communicative modes and their associated media.

Overall, however, *The Ethical Soundscape* supplies a valuable corrective to scholarship and popular writing that depict the Islamic Revival as inherently

authoritarian. With its ground-breaking approach to the practice of sermon listening as well as to a much overlooked technological medium, the book provides an engaging, creative, and carefully substantiated contribution to studies of Muslim ethical conventions, modernity, and contemporary religious reform movements.

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