

In Conversation with Sindre Bangstad
and Kristian Berg Harpviken About Lived
Islam in the Frontier Regions of Pakistan
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Magnus Marsden

Kristian: There are more questions than we could possibly address tonight arising from your work. But one of the things that fascinated me in your account [in *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*]¹ is how it was that you actually stumbled across a field work site that were to become your passion, it seems, for the next 15 years—and probably another fifteen, if not 30 or 45 years to come—when, in the early 1990s, you travelled to Chitral first as an English teacher, presumably not with a clear plan of becoming an anthropologist conducting extensive field work in the region. This is quite interesting. Chitral, in the north-eastern corner of Pakistan, a small locality, some 350,000 people; you established yourself, already then as an

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eighteen year old English teacher, I believe, in a small village which you now refer to as Rowshan, which may or may not be its proper name. This village has a population of some 7000, a mixed Sunni and Shi'a population; the Shi'as being Ismaili. So, I am curious about to what extent, really, this very deep embeddedness that you achieved, in the first instance not as an anthropologist, but as somebody who was just a curious traveller, a teenager in fact.... To what extent is that type of embeddedness, that totally open immersion into this community, a prerequisite to what it is that you have been able to do, when it comes to understanding and conveying a particular understanding of this community? Of course, we know, in anthropology there is always this sense that one should be careful of not 'going native'—and I don't want to indicate that you *have* 'gone native', I don't think you have—but it also has to do with the simpler issue of how close one should get to one's informants, how closely involved one should get in the community that one studies, what it is that does to one's findings and one's analysis. And it certainly seems that in your case, you have been going quite far in terms of becoming a member of this society, dishing out various favours, from commenting on people's Master's theses to discussing the overarching philosophies of individual lives with the people you meet. And of course, that is also a question: To what extent is the type of relationships you establish, the deep embeddedness that you have in these communities, also a challenge to your ability to take a step back and understand what it is that you study?

Magnus: Thank you very much, and thank you for inviting me. It's slightly overwhelming being here, not least because your guests last year were John L. and Jean Comaroff, who are far more fashionable than myself; I shall attempt to do justice to them. I think this is a very good question, indeed, concerning how my particular trajectory of life and experience in a particular place shapes what I have gone on to do and write about, and also concerning the limitations of that. Firstly, I would say that it's very difficult to draw a distinction between myself as a pre-anthropologist and myself as an anthropologist. Because whilst I was eighteen, when I first went there, it certainly wasn't my primary objective to go ahead and do a Ph.D. Nevertheless, I had already, by that point, applied to undergo a degree at Cambridge in anthropology. So I was sort of anthropologically aware, in a naïve manner, at that stage. So I suppose there was actually always a combination and interaction between those two different reasons for me of being there, on the

one hand to experience, and to teach English, and on the other hand to do some form of study of this particular society at some point. And then, in a more complex way than that, I think that the first experiences that I had in Chitral over the course of the year when I taught there—and then during the three summers during my undergraduate period when I went there both to do some more teaching, but also to do dissertations in anthropology as an undergraduate—those experiences again were critical in informing the underlying questions that I had of what I wanted to understand and what I wanted to do and write about. And those were put on me as a result of the discussions I had with people—that is—about the role played by Islam in their lives, about the problems that they had with certain expressions of Islam, and about how they thought that was changing the nature of people in this region and the nature of relationships between them. And also, of course, and perhaps most importantly, the extent that so much of the discussions that I had at those moments were about the philosophical or intellectual issues that I found very interesting, such that I was spending whole summers reading other people's Master's theses, commenting on them and being asked for advice. That really stimulated me to look at this thing called "the life of the mind" and the ways in which villagers have an intellectually and stimulating life as well, even if they are living on the peripheries of Pakistan and their lives are under considerable pressure from forces that we have tended to think of as being anti-intellectual, such as particularly the writings of the Islamic reform movements. So I would say that all of this prior experience leading up to my research on which that book [*Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*] is based were actually what led me to posing the questions that I had and to bringing dimensions of the thought and experiences of these people to light that perhaps hitherto hadn't been subject to such exploration. And then there are all these moral or ethical questions regarding how far one should become involved in a society or involved in a set of people. I think those are important things. What I can say there, is that for me, what was critical was that a lot of the things I were doing were involved in an exchange relationship, the exchange of knowledge, or the exchange of ideas that would seem to be... that were a critical part of local ideology, about how you should handle or manage relations with others, be it exchanging ideas through debate and discussion, or in a teaching capacity for the community which I studied. Which I would say was an important dimension of my field work. I did the interviews and I hung

around with families, I went off to musical performances, I went on trips with Jeeps, and I tried to spend as much time as I could with religious authorities. But at the same time I was also continually involved, in some way, in a teaching capacity. So there was a sort of exchange relationship in the basis of most of the things, actually, that I did. That was important to local people, because so much of their lives were concerned with the nature of exchange. The third dimension that you raised, was if this type of involvement prevents you from raising questions, or if you do need to stand back sometimes to be able to make a particular type of analysis. I think you do. I think it's absolutely a critical part of all anthropological endeavours, almost as critical as the field work, that at the end of it, one is able to get some time apart. That is often a quite complicated and confusing process, as you begin to look with distance upon something that you've been immersed within, which is absolutely crucial. In my case, what I found most complicated, was making the difficult decisions on what to write about and what not to write about, and who to take into considerations when making those decisions. Paul Dresch mentions in a very witty article—he is an anthropologist of the Middle East who always gets himself into trouble—that as a political scientist you can write about corruption or problematic regimes, and that rarely causes them any problems. But when an anthropologist decides to write about something like love marriage or kin relationships or the family, that is when the really sensitive matters come up, because so much of family or personal life is deeply political, for a variety of reasons. And so, having to make those decisions about what to exclude is always the most complicated thing to do, I think, especially if your relations were so close and embedded as some of mine became. But again, I think that is part of an anthropological training, that one learns how to make these types of situated judgments as one goes about field work and gives time to write about some things and less time to write about others.

Sindre: That probably provides me with an angle; let me remind the audience of the setting here. We have started now with Magnus Marsden's first anthropological monograph, *Living Islam*, which was published by Cambridge University Press in 2005. And that book is, I understand, based on your Ph.D. fieldwork in two locations in the north-western Pakistani province of Chitral, a province with around 350,000 people. These two locations which you referred to as Rowshan, which is a village of 7000 people, 30% Shi'a Ismaili and 70% Sunni

Muslim, and the larger town of Markaz, which has approximately 20,000 people. Now, one of the very interesting things that struck me upon first reading your monograph back in 2006, I think it was, was the extent to which the book emphasises what one for want of a better term might refer to as ‘village intellectualism’ or ‘local cosmopolitanism’. That is to say, intellectual discussions and public debates about life, love, poetry, music, knowledge and what being Muslim means and ought to mean in these parts of the world. It seems to go against a grain of much popular literature in the contemporary Western world, which tends to conceptualise Muslims first and foremost as concerned with issues of faith and as over-determined, if you like, by Islamic traditions. In other words, as the stereotypical *Homo Islamicus* found in the works of authors such as Bernhard Lewis on the more respectable side and popular ideologues such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali on the less respectable side. Now, can you tell us a little bit more about this culture of public and private debate as you experienced it during your field work in Chitral?

Magnus: Yes. Very few matters or very few topics of conversation take place in Chitral without some considerable and often relatively fiery, but very rarely aggressive, exchange of ideas. And the local term used to refer to this is *bhas* or “debate”, which is also the word often used in Farsi, as it is in Khwar. People go to great lengths to create not only such discussions, but the right type of context in which such discussions could take place. Very often, one is invited as a guest to someone’s house, and the pretext will be not necessarily for the meal, although that’s an important and not underestimated dimension of it, but will be for the evening of discussion that they hope to have. And often also choices of neutral invitations. Such gatherings are also often made on the basis of what people are able to contribute to discussion. And quite unlike, perhaps, the stereotypical idea of the English dinner party, you are likely to have people who are expected to hold radically different views about things, so you could have a member of an Islamist political party such as Jamaat-e-Islami, for example, invited at the same time as a Shi’a Ismaili known for having more liberal or moderate views. The whole idea, apparently, is to stimulate and have a good evening of discussion or *mashkulgei*, as the Chitrali term would be to refer to this. It’s not always organised in such a conscious manner. There are many *impromptu* arenas for people to debate, as well. Chitral is famous, as colleagues know, across Pakistan for the beauty of its orchards—apples and pears and what not—and in

spring, those are also considered a particular good place to sit around and discuss on broken, wired chairs, as we used to do. And also going on travels to different villages, with your friends, both with the aim of going to see a different type of place, but also to discuss and engage in conversation as you do so. So there are all these different types of contexts in which people seek to gather to discuss and share ideas. What I increasingly recognised, was how far many of these discussions raised very sensitive, problematic and quite dangerous issues. People would start to talk, for example, about the best way of conceptualising the prophet Muhammad in Islam, about how far he was an ordinary human being, of how far there was something more spiritual about him. And people would sometimes throw in ideas to these debates which many of them didn't really hold, but they felt the capacity there to be able to throw in an idea just to stimulate and excite debate. I thought that was very important and interesting, because it suggests a capacity or emphasis of people willingly seeking to comment on a religious perspective by distancing themselves from their just only being a Muslim, and to stand back from faith to allow you to discuss and debate it. Of course, there is a wide tendency to think of this type of attitude to religion as being a purely Western or even Enlightenment one, whereas most of my friends would have these types of discussions in relatively "traditional" settings, or in the context of musical gatherings, for example, where people play music and tell jokes and impersonate *mullahs*, for example. It seemed to me to be rather an embedded and local way of being Muslim that I thought needed to be given more recognition, in the face—as Sindre was saying—of these very simplistic stereotypes that always treat people of Muslim background as first and foremost inhabiting a sort of Muslim position. That is why I focused on this sort of lively and intellectual attitude towards what it meant to live a Muslim life which I found quite stimulating at the time.

Kristian: In the book *Living Islam*, you take a rather forceful position against what I presume you are seeing as essentialist analyses of the Islamic revivalism that goes on in many places. You write that you "seek to argue against simplistic formulations, treating local Islam as inherently vulnerable to global trends and forces in contemporary Islam."² This, of course, is a rather forceful critique of many of the mainstream positions—Sindre has been suggesting Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood³—which are seriously challenged by what you are after here.

But you also hold, when it comes to your informants, your Chitrali Muslims, that they, and I quote, “maintain intellectually engaged lives in the face of attempts made by Islamising Muslim reformers from Pakistan and beyond to homogenise and standardise religious thought and practice throughout the region”. You were working in areas that were often hosting some of the very Islamist and otherwise politically charged religious educational institutions, as well as more traditionalist Islamic educational institutions, which in fact in some cases were the very institutions from which the Taliban drew its recruits, both in the 1990s, and presumably also post-2001. No wonder, of course, that many of your informants were worried about this, perhaps particularly the Shi’a Ismaili informants. It would be interesting to hear how this very local context plays into your overarching critique of what you seem to suggest is a mainstream but nonetheless very problematic type of analysis that dominates current anthropology.

Magnus: Yes. I think there is a big paradox, which you also brought up, in on the one side emphasising how local ways of being Muslim interact with Islamist and reform-minded patterns of change within Muslim society in a way that suggests that the local way of being Muslim can be vibrant and agentive and make its own positions in the face of those arguing more reformist arguments with often quite considerable political force behind them. Whereas at the same time that position can perhaps over-simplify the nature of the arguments being made by the so-called Islamists, who—and this is important to emphasise: In a country like Pakistan, there is a very wide range of ways of being a so-called Islamist, with some people embracing forms of Muslim identity that really emphasise the importance of practice and devotion to rituals; with other groups and organisations seeing themselves as contributing to debates about what Muslim society is and what politics should be like in a Muslim society; with more intellectual modes of argument; and with other movements of Islamic reform emphasising the need to maintain a hold of traditional forms of Islamic authority, often, and most commonly of course, in terms of maintaining the importance of *madrasas* as a mode of transmitting religious knowledge. I think there is this tension in my arguments about that, trying to give a sense both of how people might contest a sort of Islamist position, whilst also giving a sense of recognition to the diversity of the nature of Islamist positions. And I suppose on that point, I think what interested me, was how far even Islamists of a more

robust variety, for want of a better word, might have been thought of by Chitralis as non-Chitrali or not particularly good for the nature and morals of Chitrali village life, and the type of things we want to do, because we think these things are important to who we are and our traditions and our attempts to live wisely and well as humans, and as Muslims. Whilst at the same time as keeping a distance from these people, also rather liking them, in a sense, because even these people who hold ideas about Islam that we don't like, nevertheless give us [as villagers] an opportunity to think and reflect and debate, which are all things that we like to do anyway. So there was always this complicated relationship with the reformist or the Islamiser, who might often be from the village and have gone to Peshawar to study in a madrasa and then come back, and be greeted with a sense of slight worry that this person is going to force us to stop having our music in the village and might start to stop us from drinking our home-bred wine, which are things that we quite like doing. But nevertheless quite looking forward to the moments, because that was always an opportunity to really get down and discuss and have a frank and open discussion, and those are things that we value anyway. So that is how I saw this situation, or came to see the situation in Chitral, and although it sounds like quite a simple idea, it took quite a way to get to that position. And then there *is* this question of how it relates to other regions and other places and other contexts. One the one hand, you could say: This has something to do with Chitral and its particular culture of debate. Or you could say: This has actually something to do with village Islam and rural areas, which for a variety of reasons—ranging from the educational backgrounds or the employment profiles of the people living in villages—are quite different from urban settings, and also for political reasons as well. Or you could say that it represents some broader trend or some broader dimension of the nature of these tussles and debates between different types of Muslims in a wider variety of settings. For me, that was always the big problem, and this question is one that sort of haunted me, since my Ph.D. days, about how to answer it. As an anthropologist, it would be nice to have to confidence to make a very general argument and say “I think that this is relevant in many more settings”. But as a quasi-empiricist, I find that quite difficult to do. And that was part of the reason why I set of following Afghans who had lived in Chitral and were going back to Afghanistan, with the hope of—through those people—trying to work out how far similar tensions and concerns were important

in Afghanistan as well.⁴ And I think that the point that I've come to, is that there *are* these tussles, and I think that in the wider region, in terms of one's conversation with people and their evaluations of their characters and yours, it does seem to me that valuing someone who is witty, intelligent, able to have an argument without losing control—and when they do lose control, doing so in a suitably humorous manner—is a strand of life that is valued by a lot of people. And the danger of being too heavy, and the danger of not being able to also look at things from different perspectives, is one that people are actually quite scared of. That's when you get people making judgements about different types of Islamists in different ways. For a person who is very keen on always staking a similar claim, and who says things in conversation like "I think that debate is actually bad for Muslims", is often held in dubious mode of repute, and that's evaluating what people are scared of. And so I would say that... I mean, even some elements of Taliban thinking.... These are people very many of whom, or at least some of whom, from particular backgrounds, also value this willingness to debate and discuss, and I don't think that that is something we understand about them very much.

Sindre: Now, Pakistan has seen an enormous amount of random sectarian violence between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims since the 1990s, and even before that. Yet your monograph *Living Islam* does seem to point to an underlying ethos among Chitrali Muslims of both Sunni and Shi'a Ismaili identification—in spite of this underlying ethos suffering from fractures at times—that they are all Muslims, even if Pakistan's Sunni Islamist militants would have people think otherwise. And even if you do admit—to a point—to a hardening of sectarian identities among Chitrali Muslims in the 1990s, how would you account for this?

Magnus: I would say that if I had gone somewhere else during the same period of time, I could have come away with a quite different understanding of sectarian relations in Pakistan, certainly in the Punjab. As many people know, this has been a region characterised in a sense by a growing violence of Sunni and Shi'a tension. Likewise, just very close to Chitrali lies Gilgit, which is sort of, at the time it was 12 h by Jeep, and now it is considerably closer thanks to new roads; that was also a place characterised by quite considerable sectarian violence. Whereas, on the whole, in Chitral there were outbreaks of violent conflict, although they

have not really extended beyond the particular dispute. And certainly, a lot of discussion when one was behind the walls of people's houses, was about how the Sunnis or how the Ismailis were, in one sense, 'bad'. But at the same time, one of those negative and complex dimensions of people's relations with others from different sects, were shattered by another thing, which was not only talk of us all being Muslims and all being Chitralis and therefore we shouldn't really worry about this Sunni/Ismaili thing, but also in terms of people's relations, actively seeking out Sunnis as friends if you were an Ismaili, or taking your closest friends to be your classmates regardless of their religious affiliation, and even some marriages across the Sunni/Ismaili divide. So explaining why is this the case, again, what is it about this distinctiveness of this particular place ... I think a very basic argument is in the political economy of the place in which you have a great deal of the people who now refer to themselves as Sunni and Ismaili, historically are from families who were from either group. There was a great deal of mixed marriages. Throughout the twentieth century, there had been considerable conversion. And so there was this past mixing which remained important. Secondly, and more in terms of political economy, this is an area with very little land, and what land there is, is not particularly valuable. So, there is less outright dispute over land. And when there are disputes over land and other types of resources, they are often held in the contemporary era as being rather unnecessary, and people would instead talk about to migrate and forge relations rather than to engage in sectarian conflicts. And then you combine that with the emphasis that people have of living a worldly and informed life. Maybe some of those factors put together explain why there has been relatively less sectarian conflict here than in other places. The other important thing to bear in mind: Chitralis would often joke that "we would all be killing ourselves if there were proper Shi'as [that is Twelver Shi'as] as well". But because there are Sunnis and Ismailis In other words, there was not the same level of politicisation among Chitrali Shi'as, Ismailis, than has been among Shi'a communities in the wider region.

Sindre: We should perhaps clarify a little bit about that statement, by saying that Twelver Shi'ism [*Ithna Ashari*]⁵ is prominent in Iran, and has since 1979 seemed quite more assertive politically, in terms of its interpretation of religion.⁶

Magnus: Yes.

Kristian: Well, I want to stay with Islam a little longer, and perhaps turn more to religious education. And of course, religious education in the Islamic sense, as we touched upon earlier, has been under heavy attack in recent years, not the least in the West but also within Muslim societies themselves. It is seen at the best as disseminator of hate propaganda, and at the worst even as training sites of terrorists and suicide activists. And along the lines which I mentioned earlier, where you criticise mainstream work on Islamic revivalism, you also criticise mainstream work on Islamic education. You refer, for example, to the work of Gilles Kepel, a French political scientist for his depiction of madrasas and the role they play. You write that these authors “takes as self-evident that the message emerging from madrasas are homogenous and that their reception is incontestable”. You also write that “madrasas are often assumed to be the focus of enthusiastic allegiance or even armed militancy”.⁷ And of course, you take issue with this sort of analysis. The madrasa issue has also, as we discussed a little earlier today, been contested in a Norwegian public setting, where the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs has engaged in a programme to support curricular reform in Pakistani madrasas, and this has in fact become so disputed in Norwegian debate that the current government, I think against its own convictions, has decided to discontinue its support for this type of programs. There has been quite a bit of work on this, and in fact I have been involved in some of that work myself with colleagues at my own institute, PRIO [The Peace Research Institute Oslo], where we seek to establish the enormous variety that exists within the Islamic educational sector. But what I think is very interesting in your work, is that you take this question one step further, and you also ask not only about the socialisation that takes place within the educational institutions themselves, you also ask what it is that happens when the male youth that come out of the various types of education centres, out of madrasas, come back and hit their communities, so to say? How are they received in their own communities, and what sort of debates is it that emerge when they return from what admittedly are rather strong socialising enterprises? So, it would be interesting to hear you expand a little bit on that thought, because I found your focus exactly on that discourse that emerges in the local communities to be a rather refreshing perspective on a debate that, in many ways, has been stalemated over the past few years.

Magnus: I suppose there are two lines of thought I might have on this issue now, having had more time to reflect on it. One is the thing that you mentioned, with the Norwegian government involved in reform of madrasas, maybe madrasa curriculum. Here, there is a very good book written by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, of course, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*,⁸ where he essentially makes the point, firstly, that madrasas are as much now a product of the modern world as they are of a traditional element of resistance to it, in that the South Asian madrasa cannot be understood without understanding the history of British colonialism and the emphasis that Muslim scholars in the subcontinents at the time, especially in the latter part of British colonialism, placed on the need for Muslims to learn the Islamic sciences in order to strengthen their faith, and to also carve out the basis of an autonomous Islamic intellectual work in a setting of British colonialism. And then, the works of the likes of Barbara Metcalf⁹ of course, also show how lots of the things that go on in a madrasa actually are quite similar to the average nineteenth century English public school, when you look at time tables, the ways in which the madrasa student is expected to behave in South Asia, how they teach in the class rooms, et cetera, et cetera. Going on from that argument, here you have got an institution which is a product of modernity in a way of engaging with it, but then [one] spins off to misunderstanding this institution as a kind of kickback against modernity. So trying to ‘reform’ it from an outside perspective, and make it ‘modern’ is in a sense a paradoxical project that can’t help but result in rather dire consequences. You’ve already got ‘ulama who are very interested in bringing their own computers and ... I mean, even in my time, in the early or mid-1990s, madrasa students would go off to study computers and go to internet cafés, and this was sort of seen as being a problem. So, to attempt to bring this in from the outside as a modernising impulse would seem to me to be more likely to result in high levels of suspicion—and high levels of attempt to guard the madrasa as “our own”—than it would be to facilitate what I really think probably needs to happen in these types of spaces, which is growing awareness both with madrasa people and those outside about the complexity of Islamic thought, about the ideas that they are engaging with. Rather than a sort of blunt attempt to ‘modernise’ it and give people modern skills for living, which they are quite capable of getting anyway. And this is something else I have picked up more particularly through working with Afghans who, when they were in Chitral, would also go to madrasas, as

I found out later. And when they went there, they had a very difficult time, because most of the Afghans I knew were from the Panshir or from Badakhshan, and many of the madrasas were probably Pashtun, and so the Badakhshis and the Panshiris would say “we are Chitrali”, and they managed to survive in that way, so they were showing themselves to be quite nimble actors, regardless. And then they did their madrasa education and they memorised the Qur’an, became *hafez* of the Qur’an, and well-trained scholars. And what are they doing today? Well, they are not like their Chitrali companions, who are now teaching Arabic in some village. They have gone back to Afghanistan, and as trained Islamic scholars they are engaged in business and trade, just as their relatives are. I mean, you can do these different things at the same time, and it does not really have to depend on whether or not the madrasa emphasises the role it plays in modernity. I don’t know if that made sense, but I hope so. And the other point is the importance of social embeddedness of the people that go to madrasas. It would seem to me that you get the problems when people go to madrasas and are taken out of kinship and other networks of the type that you yourself, Kristian, have written about.¹⁰ Because all the madrasa students of Chitral when they went off to the madrasa, or most of them, were subject to continual visits by their parents, and their mothers would send their brothers to go and see them, to make sure that the children in the madrasa weren’t becoming too radical or weren’t risking their lives by going off to some demonstration or another. So there is this continual emphasis during the education process, that these people constantly needed to be reminded of the fact that they have got families, they are from villages, they are part of these social networks and ties, and the emphasis that education and knowledge and abstract learning always had to be put in that social context as well, and they needed people to do it. Which again is not that much different from someone going off to Cambridge and studying philosophy and needing to be reminded by his parents that it’s not only about getting a first class degree, as it happens. So I think there are all these important social dimensions to the learning experience that are easily forgotten.

Sindre: In recent years, you have taken up fieldwork in the Afghan regions of Kunduz and Badakhshan, and Afghan trade networks. As I understand it, the kind of networks that you have mobilised, were [of] Afghans that you had first encountered in Chitral and then followed across the border. Could you tell us a little bit more about the practical

impediments you have faced during field work in a country that is very much still at war? And of what challenges of establishing trust with informants and friends living in such situations entail for an anthropologist committed to ethnographic field work?

Magnus: For a long time I had wanted to do work in Afghanistan, and so about 2003 a lot of the people that I knew who were Afghans living in Chitral started to return to Afghanistan. Although, for some of course, it wasn't to return, it was essentially the first time that they had ever been there. At that time, Afghanistan wasn't an overly sensitive context in which to visit, so I thought it would be a good idea to visit them and follow up their lives and see to what type of context they were moving into. Having done that, I discovered that a lot of them, at least the ones that I knew, were engaged as traders, and their lives would take them to other places beyond, especially Tajikistan, where they were involved in trade as well.¹¹ So from what I thought what be a relatively doable plan of going to a Badakhshani village to which people themselves were going back, it turned into this ever expanding web of networks and people moving to new places. So what I have tried to do, then, is to focus on people's experiences of mobility and the ways in which they as people are connecting different parts of this world through mobility and through their networks and responding to new circumstances as they do so. It has become increasingly complicated. I was fortunate in that the trust that I mentioned, in the relationships, which is so important, was partly there from the Chitral experience. That of course has been even more important as the lives of these people are affected by the type of work that they do, which might be supplying ISAF, or in some cases even working for ISAF, and they live in places that have been increasingly affected by the Taliban insurgency, especially since about 2009. I am often told that I can come, regardless of the situation, but I also had to be careful in not going if I think that it would be dangerous either for me or for my informants. But again, I would say that one of the principled ways in which I have built up trust is by trusting some of these people. Let me just take one example: A couple of years ago, I was going back and forward to Kunduz. I went to Kunduz quite frequently to visit some friends that I knew there from Panshir. What they would often do, was that either I would travel within their networks of other Panshiris living in Kunduz, back and forth. So there was a Panshiri taxi driver who had actually lived in Oslo in Norway for several years, and who was now driving a taxi between

Kunduz and Kabul. He had been persuaded by another of his friends, originally from a place called Baghlan—who was in Norway together with him—to go back to Afghanistan. The friend had said: How long can we hang around in Oslo and play snooker? We have got to go back to Afghanistan. So they went back. And now my Panshiri friend would take me to this other man and say: “Look, this is the one who brought me back, and what a terrible mistake I made! I tried to go and get the Norwegian ambassador to issue me a visa to get back to Norway, but he won’t give me one.” So I learned quite a lot about people’s ways of evaluating their mobile lives through that. So that was one way. The other thing that these Panshiris did, though, was to send me cars to pick me up, or to send someone from Kunduz to take me back, so they sent someone from Kunduz to Kabul. And on a number of occasions, it wasn’t a Panshiri they were sending to pick me up, it was a Pashtun or someone with whom they had a business partnership in a petrol pump. That was quite good for me, because it led me to see how important business relationships often cross what we often consider to be quite rigid ethnic backgrounds, and how complicated Kunduz sociality was in that respect. And then I gradually came to realise that the people that were picking me up, these Pashto speakers, were themselves actually somehow involved in the Taliban insurgency. So trust is not something that is particularly transparent, and one learns about it by realising the complicated engagements of trust in the lives of the people one is studying, and how they make calculated decisions, really, about who they think is a good person for you to be trustworthy of even if you don’t really know who that person is. I suppose, again, one learns who those people that founded these relationships of trust, and then let me into them, would be. You don’t plan any of it during the course of a field work, it happens, and one has to make decisions and one has to fit oneself into circumstances as they come along. Only very rarely, especially in a context like Afghanistan, as my colleagues will know, can you think “Well, on this trip I am going to achieve this” or “I am very trustworthy of this person, so it means I can definitely go about doing that”, because that person has moved somewhere else. Or on one occasion, I went to Tajikistan to meet some of these Afghans who had gone there to trade, and when I got to Tajikistan, they had left the same day back to Afghanistan, where I couldn’t go at that point because it was too dangerous. So then I had to find something else to do. So it’s about continually making little

decisions in context, I think. And again, a lot of it is embodied; you've got a sense of what is going on, rather than rationalising it.

Kristian: Yes, I notice you have a sense of good titles, *Talking the talk*, and here we have *The transparency of trust*, I think, as a layout for a new article. The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, of course, conducted field work in the Swat Valley, which is virtually only a stone-throw away from Chitral where you did your own field work. Barth's work was done predominantly in the mid-1950s. The text, though, is seen as a key to both transaction analysis and also the social ecology, ecology of identities, or whatever you want to call it. It seems to me, though, that your emphasis on meaning, morality, continuous processes of elaboration, even cosmopolitanism for that matter, lies fairly far from Barth's dominant mode of analysis and certainly Barth's dominant mode of analysis in his book on the Swat, *Political leadership Among Swath Pathans*.¹² It still is a question, though, what it is that we can learn from Barth today. And I am sure you are familiar with David B. Edwards' article, which asks that exact question.¹³ I am not sure, though, that your conclusions would be the same as Edwards' conclusions. One of Barth's basic claims, perhaps somewhat simplified, is that solidarity and identity to a large extent is shaped by external pressures. And if a particular group of people, say, in this case, the traditional Pashtuns who rule in southern Afghanistan, over time are exposed to the same pressures and threats, they will more strongly come to identify with each other. If you stay with this simple image of mobilisation, it seems to be part of what is happening, at least, with the growing popularity, if we may use such a term, of the Taliban in large parts of Afghanistan. The current ambition of the international military alliance in Afghanistan is to weaken the Taliban through an elimination of its mid-level commanders. The current head of the operation, General David Petraeus,¹⁴ says that this will make the leadership posts less attractive. Over time, it will then, goes the theory, 'soften' the Taliban, make them more ready for political compromise. Critics, on the other hand, would argue that the effect of this de-capacitation campaign, as it were, will be detrimental, that the current spate of alienations actually open up leadership posts going to a new generation that will be more radical, more irreconcilable, even less loyal to the Taliban leadership. In other words, the critique goes, you would get a Taliban that is both more militant and more fragmented, and hence much more difficult to hold accountable to anything that amounts to a

political treaty. I know that this is not your main topic, but with your insight into the local communities in Chitral, in northern Afghanistan, where the Taliban is also arguably picking up speed as we speak, how does this resonate with your observations?

Magnus: First on Fredrik Barth and the Swat Pathan book. Maybe I should say that I had a conference last year to which I invited Fredrik Barth, which was called “Rethinking the Swat Pathan”, and David B. Edwards came as well, and hopefully there will be a collection of essays from that conference coming at some point.¹⁵

At first sight my own work does look slightly different from the approach taken by Barth. But in many ways it actually builds on it, but takes it in a different direction. Of course, one of the things that Barth was interested in was how, in the context of Swat, through all of these varying acts of political decision making, alliance building and breaking, people went about constructing a system without necessarily having a model of that system in their minds. It was a cumulative event, a process of all of these different political acts and balances and what not, which were connected to underlying structures, but they were not formed by them. I suppose what I have partly done, with my interest in morality and also in emotion, is to also look at people’s strategies for living, but at levels that are not overtly political. The strategies and tactics that people use to live what they consider to be a good emotional life, in terms of marriage and elopement. You know, in Chitral, an elopement marriage is a relatively, normal thing that happens in the context of village society. And also [in terms of] migration and how you might leave your villages partly to escape what you consider to be the rather one-dimensional power relationships, with fathers or with local figures of authority or with mullahs within it. This focus on the individual as possessing of agency but nonetheless a very political type of one, enriched by emotions and moral concerns, is something that I maybe in a subconscious manner took from Barth, and then I developed it as I followed these people as individuals. And so I owe a great debt, I think, to Barth’s theories. And then, how all of this would relate to the Taliban When you are talking about the current strategies of how to ‘knock out’ particular layers or levels of Taliban leadership, and how that might lead to a ‘softening up’ and what not, in a willingness to engage in some type of a negotiation, I think one of the things that that ignores, actually, is in a way Barth’s insights of how people strategise for that type of scenario

and start to think very early on about what is going to go if this mid- or higher-level commander goes. And people have an ambition to make themselves relevant to their individual communities and their countries. So I don't really see why 'knocking' out individuals would do it And the notion of 'softening up' people to start a meaningful discussion—it's not an idea, if you are accustomed to sitting in Afghan guest houses, that would necessarily carry much traction with people. Today's commanders might be yesterday's body guards, there are lots of cases where that happens. So Afghans have an acute understanding of questions of loyalty, of what it means to be betrayed, of how to survive a betrayal or to go beyond a breaking of a loyalty. I think that people with this way of looking of the future Afghan political discussions and alliances would do well to read from Barth and to take some of the messages of how complex these people's understandings of future time and future power and future relations are.

Sindre: In *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* from 2010, the anthropologist Thomas Barfield, who was here at the University of Oslo last year, writes that "Afghanistan is one of those places in the world in which people who know the least make the most definite statements about it".¹⁶ We tend to see the Taliban as an ideologically driven movement of and by Islamic militants. The translated memoirs of the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My life with the Taliban* from 2010, which is the only inside account that we have of the Taliban in English,¹⁷ seems to suggest a rather heterogeneous movement inspired first and foremost by nationalistic as opposed to Islamist or Pushtun-specific causes. In an article excerpted in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen* yesterday,¹⁸ you recount a story of Ahmed, a Panshiri from Kunduz in Afghanistan, whom you first met in Chitral in 2000. Having worked for ISAF forces in Afghanistan, he was eventually killed by US special forces in Kunduz. He was by then a member of the Taliban; he was killed in December 2010. Can you please tell us a little bit more, and very briefly, about what Ahmed's story tells us about our own problems in imagining or conceptualising the Taliban?

Magnus: Yes. First, very briefly on this character Abdul Salam Zaeef. His is the biography of an important figure within the Taliban from the last time it was in power; not that I am saying that it necessarily is going to be another one. It's very interesting, of course, that he emphasises the

national dimension of what it means to be an Afghan, the importance of the Taliban as an Afghan movement and a national source of values. I actually think that these abstract discussions about how far the Taliban is inherently national or how far it's inherently Islamic, is partly the problem that we have. Because, and this is another insight of Barth: Ideology is important, but it is also perpetually open, and malleable, and people can present themselves and also believe that they are a particular type of active adherents to a particular type of ideology in one context, and then in another one it can be completely different thing. And it is not the case that these are hypocrites or these are people that are fond of telling lies, but the person's relationship to ideology and culture is a much more complex thing than we tend to imagine. So I actually think that attempts to say that now the Taliban has become more nationalistic or that it's not so much driven by particular types of Islam, is good in that they nuance the picture, but they need to be further nuanced by recognising that you can have a multiplicity of ideological things going on and informing a movement, and you can't always have ... I mean, when I was in Badakhshan, I spent an afternoon with someone who had been a Taliban and continued to profess some type of loyalty to the movement he had been part of. He had studied in Herat, and was a former communist and an Ismaili,¹⁹ but he had no problems saying that he looked back to the first period of Afghan Taliban governance with great romanticism and looked forward to another period of it. So people's relationship to ideology is complex, in short. And then what the story with Ahmed demonstrates If we were to understand what is going on and how people decide to join this movement and take part in the insurgency, we have to take a closer look at people's everyday lives and the problems that they are facing within them, be they generational conflicts with parents that are being fed by new desires created by Afghanistan's really quite sudden but very dramatic insertion into a world shaped increasingly by global popular cultures Now it's normal everywhere. Afghans even in the most remote places are sitting and watching soap operas in the evening, of Indian television, and of course this is changing people's ideas about family life and the frustrations that they have about it. I mean, most people who talk with frustration to me about what has happened in Afghanistan, talk about the lack of job opportunities, the lack of what they talk about as a real need for state-driven factories and stable sources of employment. And then finally, again coming to our own interests, is the moral underpinnings of what it means to become a Taliban. In

Ahmed's case, it certainly wasn't that he had some hatred of the West or even a particular vehement willingness to make Afghanistan into a new type of Islamic state. His biggest frustrations was on a moral and religious level, what he saw to be the moral corruption of people around him, the affect that war had had on their relationships with one another. What he often talked about was a lack of ability to find durable and stable friendships, and those with whom he became associated and were Taliban, were people he said were very good friends and, interestingly and importantly, people he thought he could have an open discussion with about matters of religion and other ideas. So I think it's difficult to make that relevant to a proper policy maker, I suppose, and it's certainly a problem that you can not, I mean, this is another thing, that you cannot solve these problems with one particular policy or by changing the political course of the country. But this is the complexity of what it means now to be a young person in Afghanistan, which is not only a post-conflict society but one that is still fully immersed in conflicts.

NOTES

1. See Marsden (2005).
2. See Marsden (2005: 9).
3. In a footnote 7 on p. 9 of *Living Islam*, Marsden makes reference to Hirschkind (2001) and Mahmood (2001) as espousing such a view.
4. See for example Marsden (2009) for this.
5. See Momen (1985) for a standard introductory text on Twelver Shi'ism.
6. See Dabashi (2011) for a detailed exploration of the shifts within Twelver Shi'ism in modern times.
7. See Marsden (2005: 159). Marsden here refers to Kepel's (2002) charge that madrasas 'brainwashes' students and provide them with 'retrograde' worldviews.
8. See Zaman (2007).
9. See Metcalf (1982) for this.
10. See Harpviken (2009).
11. See Marsden (2016).
12. See Barth (2004 [1959]).
13. See Edwards (1998).
14. US General David H. Petraeus (1952–) was the Commanding General of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) from June 2010 to June 2011. In June 2011, he was appointed Director-General of the CIA. He resigned from this post in November 2012, after it became known that the FBI had expressed concern over an extra-marital affair conducted during his service in Afghanistan.

15. See Marsden and Hopkins (2013).
16. See Barfield (2010).
17. See Zaef (2010).
18. See Marsden (2011).
19. Ismailis are Shias, whereas the Taliban was at the outset a Sunni movement dominated by Pashtuns. Whilst in power in Afghanistan from 1998 to 2001, the Taliban violently persecuted the Hazaras, a Shia minority estimated to make up 15% of Afghanistan's population. See Rashid (2000) for this.

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