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De-centering the Human: Moroccan Islamists and Human Rights (abstract)

Ahmed Khanani
Earlham College

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

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Research Panel: Religion and Human Rights

Presenter: Ahmed Khanani, Indiana University

Title: De-centering the Human: Moroccan Islamists and Human Rights

Abstract: In a critical contribution to contemporary rights conversations, Blattberg argues that “human rights talk” is simply too “thin” (2009). In particular, he argues that a flaw in scholarly conversations is the move to abstraction: the human is insufficient because it is impersonal. Blattberg lodges this criticism against a host of liberal thinkers, including Nussbaum and Walzer, and contends that the move to abstraction hinders calls to justice insofar as it fails to invest actors in the plights of other people. Yet, even as Blattberg calls to personalize the people to be protected, he does not elaborate on *how* to flesh out the people onto whom rights should be mapped. Moreover, in suggesting that the abstract human needs personalization, Blattberg elides more radical rethinkings: why not replace the human in human rights altogether?

I draw on the language of Moroccan Islamists to contend that the abstract human that Blattberg interrogates is but one possible foundation for a rights-based discourse. Moroccan Islamists articulate a rights discourse that does away with both the abstract human and the empathetic person, instead centering God and God’s injunctions. Differently put: whereas “rights” emerge from the variously constructed human assumed by secular arguments, for Islamists “rights” are authorized and circumscribed by God’s Will as interpreted from the Qur’an and *hadith*. I analyze ordinary language interviews with over 100 Islamists from Morocco’s two most popular groups and argue that my interlocutors not only displace the human from “human rights,” but also, correspondingly, revise the meaning and practice of specifically instantiated human rights—e.g., what practices of religious freedom ought to look like. Finally, I submit that an Islamist vision of rights not only expands the Muslim tradition, but also should be read as a criticism of both the practical and abstract components of liberal articulations of rights.

Keywords: Morocco, Islamism, Human Rights

Biography: Dr. Ahmed Khanani is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Indiana University, where he is in the process of completing a book manuscript that explores how Moroccan Islamists articulate and embody democracy. Ahmed’s research in Morocco was funded by several grants, including a FLAS, a Fulbright, and a POMEPS travel grant.