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Storytelling, Sincerity, and Islamic Televangelism in Egypt

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In 2001, the first episode of what was to become a hit show – *Kalam min al-Qalb* (*Words from the Heart*) – aired on a privately owned Egyptian satellite channel. Amr Khaled, at the time a relatively unknown *da'iyya* ('caller to Islam', pl. *duah*) who was also a practising accountant, was the host of the show. Interweaving Qur'anic stories of the prophets with the personal stories of ordinary Muslims struggling to be more pious, the show inaugurated what has since become an extraordinarily popular genre of Islamic television programming. Indeed, Amr Khaled's fame soared as the show attracted an increasingly vocal viewership. Thousands of young people began attending his Friday mosque sermons in one of Cairo's new satellite suburbs and his website received more than 3 million hits per month, making it one of the most visited sites in the nation by the end of 2001. As 2002 drew to a close, however, the Mubarak regime banned Khaled from preaching in public, leading the *da'iyya* to leave the country.¹

Khaled has embarked on numerous and diverse projects in the decade since *Words from the Heart* aired. However, the preaching style Khaled first developed on this show – since copied with equal success by other young *du'ah* – continues to define the phenomenon known as *al-duah al-gudud* (the new preachers)² – an easy-going yet energetic performance that is in colloquial Egyptian, the linguistic register of everyday life and conversation, and that makes frequent rhetorical use of allusions to popular culture and contemporary issues among youth, utilizing a format that is part US evangelical show, part US therapeutic talk show.

In this chapter, I will analyse the Islamic television programmes produced by *al-duah al-gudud*. My aim in doing so is to explore larger questions related to the constitution of religious authorities in Muslim societies. In his seminal study *Recognizing Islam*, Michael Gilsenan (2000,

p. 28) submits for our consideration 'a vital question that is always below the surface' of Muslim societies: 'which persons would possess the authority to certify as legitimately Islamic a given office, institution, or action, and on what basis would they do so?' he asks. As this question indicates, conceptions of the basis of authority for those claiming an Islamic referent are never far from questions pertaining to who is or, more to the point, who *should* be the proper agent of such claims. Indeed, normative ideas of how knowledge is produced are intimately tied to wider conceptualizations of the place and role of persons within the social sphere (Messick 1993, p. 121). Thus, I will explore questions related to religious authority in Egypt through ethnographically investigating the diverse ideas about the place and role of Islamic televangelism held by televangelists themselves, the Islamic media workers who produce their shows, their fans/viewers as well as their opponents (both secular and Islamist). I will do so by focusing on one particular aspect of Islamic televangelist performances – storytelling.

Since the appearance of Amr Khaled on Arab satellite television more than a decade ago, Islamic televangelism has garnered much media attention in Western countries. While this international media coverage has largely been supportive and welcoming of the 'sheikhs-in-suits' and their perceived project of 'reconciling' Islam with modernity (see e.g. Kovach 2002; Shapiro 2006; Wright 2007), the reception of *al-duah al-gudud* (as the Islamic televangelists Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, and Mustafa Hosni are collectively known in Arabic)³ has been fraught with controversy within Egypt itself. Indeed, their legitimacy to speak on Islam is contested by the Egyptian state (under Mubarak's regime), the Islamic institution Al-Azhar, secular intellectuals, ordinary Muslims as well as other media preachers. As the quote from Gilsenan reminds us, these contestations revolve round larger debates about what constitutes legitimate religious authority and knowledge, and who is properly qualified to partake in both.

It is perhaps now commonplace to argue that the use of new media technologies such as satellite television and the internet for religious purposes has led to a 'fragmentation' of religious authority in Muslim societies (Eickelman and Andersen 2003). This fragmentation is engendered as new media technologies work to create a 'new Muslim public sphere' marked by individual and group participation, a plurality of equally authorized voices and horizontal relations between producers and consumers of knowledge. In its strongest formulation, this framework holds that media technologies have 'democratized' (Eickelman 2002) and 'individualized' Islam (Echchaibi 2008), with

religious authority now no longer residing in orthodox institutions, but rather in a Muslim's own individual belief. This has led to a 'new religious subjectivity... that looks to reinvent tradition rather than preserve it intact' (Echchaibi 2008, p. 202). Thus, Islamic actors who make new media technologies central to the dissemination of their message are often understood to be acting in contradistinction to traditionally trained authorities.⁴

It is tempting to understand Islamic televangelists such as *al-duah al-gudud* – with their youth-oriented discourse, participatory preformative styles and lack of 'Islamic' scholarly credentials – within such a frame. However, a close examination of both the on-screen discourse of Islamic televangelists and the off-screen conversations that take place between the media workers who produce their shows reveals that Islamic televangelists do not see themselves as operating against traditional modes of authority, but rather within them. Indeed, far from negating 'traditional' forms of religious authority, Islamic televangelists actively support them. This does not mean, however, that they claim such authority for themselves. Islamic televangelists go to great lengths to ensure that their viewers know that they are not *ulama* (scholars) or *fuqaha* (jurists) and are hence unqualified for *ifta* (issuing binding religious opinions), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), or *tashri'* (formulating Islamic laws) – all activities that have been the historical province of Islamic scholars.⁵ For example, Mustafa Hosni's production team continually attempts to ensure that Hosni is not publically addressed by his viewers as someone with the authority to issue *fatawa*, or binding religious opinions. When Hosni does a show that features live viewer calls, one of the programme's producers prescreens the calls to determine which ones will be connected to Hosni. When I asked her what sort of criteria she was using to make this selection, she explained that her main purpose is to ensure that calls aired won't be from viewers who have a *fiqhi* (jurisprudential) or *shariah*-related question. She told me that some viewers don't realize that Hosni is not qualified to answer these types of questions; 'They see a sheikh on TV,' she explained, 'and they think he is also a *faqih* [jurist]. But when Mr Mustafa gets a question that requires *iftaa*, he always refers people to Al-Azhar.' Overhearing our conversation, another member of Hosni's production team added: 'There is a difference between calling people to God and giving *fatawa*. Anyone can call people to God, not just sheikhs. Even I can be a *da'iya* – as long as I don't give *fatawa* (*mabifteesh*), nobody can say I am doing anything wrong.'

This exchange makes clear that it would be incorrect to view Islamic televangelists as representing a 'challenge' to traditional authority as

some have argued (Rock 2010). Rather, televangelist discourses represent a new mediation of such authority that works precisely through, on the one hand, holding it up as the standard by which all authority should be judged, and, on the other hand, disclaiming it for oneself. I argue that the denial of such authority works to refashion a new kind of authorizing legitimacy for televangelists, one rooted, as we shall see, in the depth of the *da'iya's* own conscience as a sincere believer. To understand the specific contours of this legitimacy, we have to examine the repertoires of reasoning called forth by Islamic televangelists. This involves not only thinking about *what* Islamic televangelists reason (the substantive content), but furthermore *how* they reason, towards what ends, under what conditions, and with what implications. This leads us to storytelling. Instead of being authorized to provide *iftaa*, or binding religious opinions, Islamic televangelists see themselves as providing *irshaad*, or moral guidance. The vehicle for such guidance is not the *fatwa*, but rather the *qisa*, the story.

In what follows, I will focus on the storytelling aspect of televangelist programming in order to show how such a focus may lead us away from authority to sincerity as the key legitimating frame for understanding the efficacy of televangelist discourses and performances for Muslim viewers. Sincerity involves a self-positioning on the part of a *da'iya* as an ordinary Muslim who struggles to lead an Islamically correct life in a world where it is manifestly difficult to do so. Sincerity involves not a distancing from the young Muslim viewers of televangelical shows, but an active identification with them. Thus, televangelists, I argue, become authorized Islamic spokespersons not because they are different from the audience they preach to, but because they are just like them.

As I discovered in my fieldwork with Iman,⁶ the Arab world's first Islamic satellite channel, Islamic media producers strive to create programmes that they think will appeal to their imagined audience of young Muslims who are just beginning to learn more about their faith. As producers working for Iman continually reiterated to me, the channel is for 'ordinary people' as opposed to those well versed in Islamic knowledge, with one producer characterizing most of its programming as 'Islam-lite' for 'people who don't know much about religion.' To accomplish this aim of reaching out to 'ordinary people' as potential viewers this channel has relied predominantly (although not exclusively) on young *duah* rather than traditionally trained authorities and on the new genre of Islamic programming produced by these *duah*, as exemplified in *Words from the Heart*. I show how such televangelical performances draw on traditional Islamic forms of storytelling such as *qisas al-anbiya'* (tales

of the prophets) as well as on the confessional modes of storytelling that animate secular Western media genres such as talk shows. For many viewers of televangelists programmes that I spoke with, the fusion of these two distinct narrative forms is what accounts for not only the efficacy of televangelist discourses in moving them to lead more pious lives, but also the pleasure they derive from hearing such tales.

Qur'anic storytelling

The most publicized shows on Iman are programmes about the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Such shows are perceived to be the most in-demand by audiences and are, as one employee put it to me, 'the bread and butter' of the Islamic satellite sector, airing mostly during the prime programming season of Ramadan.⁷ Indeed, when an Islamic South Asian channel recently approached Iman to buy some of its programmes, 17 of the 34 shows that Iman opted to include in their marketing brochure (which I was asked to translate into English from the original Arabic) were Qur'anic and prophetic storytelling ones. Examples of such programmes include Amr Khaled's *Wa Nalqi Al-Ahiba (Beloved Companions)*, 'Ala Khuta Al-Habib (*Following in Our Beloved Prophet's Footsteps*), *Bi Isimk Nahya (By Your Name, O God, We Live)*; Mustafa Hosni's *Law Qana Ya'laumuun: Qisas min Al-Qur'an (If Only They Knew: Stories from the Qur'an)*, *Al-Kenz Al-Mafqood (The Lost Treasure)*, and *Madrasat Al-Hub (The Prophet's School of Love)*; and Moez Masoud's *Parables in the Qur'an*.

These shows have at their centre an ethical discourse that draws upon traditionally Islamic forms of speech, such as exhortatory and exegetical modes of address, that are at the same time located within Western-style talk show or documentary-film genres. Islamic media workers who produce these shows operate on the assumption that viewers who tune in possess an intense interest in, and desire for, religious knowledge.⁸ At the same time, Islamic media producers feel that to attract and retain the attention of such viewers, they have to broadcast programmes that can compete with 'secular' media in both production quality and entertainment value. A key aspect of their work involves strategizing how to meet both the values of entertainment and edification in a single programme. The story – as a narrative mode – is seen as exemplifying both of these values.

One afternoon at a production meeting, Iman's Cairo manager explained to a newly hired producer the importance of 'telling a story' in developing content for a programme hosted by Mustafa Hosni. 'A viewer

can watch a two-hour programme,' he explains, 'but the only thing they are going to retain and remember is the story [*qisa*]. The story distils all the information and makes the moral lesson clearer. The story enters the mind [*bitidkhul al-aql*] right away because we all love stories.' For this Islamic media producer, the timeless exemplar of storytelling at its most powerful and compelling is the Qur'an itself.

Indeed, given that stories of the prophets make up a quarter of the Qur'an's content (Tottoli 2006, p. 469), there exists a voluminous body of literature in Arabic that examines the story in the Qur'an (see e.g. Bazzaz 1989; Tantawi 1995; Mutawi 2006).⁹ On the whole, this literature is not concerned with the content of the Qur'anic story, but rather with the imagined *effects* these stories have on the hearers. In tying these effects to the specific aims and narrative strategies utilized by the Qur'an in telling its stories, this literature presents an indigenous, Islamic, theory of media and mediation. For example, in his 2001 work *Al-qisa fi al-qur'an: maqasid al-din wa qiyem al-fann* (*The Story in the Qur'an: The Objectives of Religion and the Ideals of Art*), Egyptian Islamic thinker Mohamed Qutb argues that it is important to study the story in the Qur'an because it is a 'springboard for da'wah [religious mission] to enter and move hearts'. While pleasurable to listen to, Qutb continues, the main aim of the Qur'anic stories is *tarbiyaa*, or moral upbringing (2001, p. 155). Indeed, although man-made stories present humans as they are, the Qur'anic stories present humans as they *should* be (ibid., p. 25). Thus, 'the Qur'anic story plays a powerful role in shaping the Muslim person within an Islamic formation' (ibid., p. 154). For Qutb, this formation is accomplished through the unique, 'magical' (ibid., p. 156) quality the storytelling genre possesses to interpellate listeners as 'participants' in an unfolding narrative (ibid., p. 157).

Televangelists at times explicitly articulate a very similar view of the aims and effects of the Qur'anic stories they retell on their programmes. In an episode of *Parables in the Qur'an*, an English-language programme hosted by the young *da'iya* Moez Masoud on Iman in 2004, Masoud discusses with his studio guests – eight young men and women – the meaning of verse 4 of Surah Yusuf: 'And We will tell you the best of stories'.

Masoud: So what is this whole story thing? Why does Allah tell us stories? (*turning to his guests on the couch next to him*) Do you like stories? What about stories?

Guest 1: I am a teacher, and the best way to teach a kid is through a story. It's interesting, it's thrilling and [the kids] are like, yes, and

then what happened? I think stories are amazing, we get to learn a lot from them and it's really interesting.

Guest 2: Yes it is a very indirect way – I mean its not like you are sitting someone down and saying don't this or that ... you are telling a story ... and I believe that God is – I mean, I don't know if I can say this – but He is the best teacher of all, He made us, and He knows what the best way to reach us is, and what we will listen to and what will get our attention, so He uses stories.

Masoud: People are sometimes surprised, asking 'Is Allah versatile enough to use the tools that He knows will touch our hearts?' He could have easily just said pray, fast, [pray] five times a day, all that stuff we are trying to get to. But He uses stories. When Yusuf in the story makes a *duah* or invocation, that's an indirect way of telling us that if we pray, God will respond to us – that's why some scholars have said that stories in the Qur'an are a way of teaching or an *isloob lil ta'aleem*, as Lina put it ... they are also a *da'wah lil 'itibaar*, a invitation to learn a moral from the story, a lesson to be applied.

As this exchange makes clear, the genre of the story is viewed by televangelists and their interlocutors as the best medium to 'to learn a moral' because it concretizes abstract principles for Muslims today. Within this understanding, the role – and indeed the skill – of the televangelist is to make such stories speak to the current circumstances and moral dilemmas of their viewers.¹⁰ A prime example of this is Amr Khaled's second season of *Stories of the Qur'an*, which aired in Ramadan 2009.¹¹ Through 30 episodes, Khaled tells the story of Moses as it is narrated in the Qur'an, utilizing visual re-enactments as a major dramatic tool in making the story come to life. For example, in an episode telling the story of how Moses' mother cast him into the Nile as an infant, Khaled is filmed knee deep in water on the banks of the Nile, gently letting go of a straw basket carrying an imaginary infant Moses as he voices what Moses' mother must have felt in this difficult moment. But more importantly, in each episode Khaled makes explicit the *qeema* or 'moral value' the story exemplifies – in this instance, the value is *al-tawakul 'ala Allah* or putting one's fate in God's hands.¹² At other times, Khaled invites viewers themselves to derive which *qeema* a Qur'anic story is meant to highlight. For example, in the episode telling the story of the golden calf and the Israelites, Khaled says that there are multiple moral values to be learned from this story, and he asks his viewers to visit his website and vote for which value best characterizes this part of Moses

story. In this way, viewers become co-participants in the retelling of the story as they shape for themselves the moral meaning of the narrative.

Audiences are also constructed as participants in another, less explicit, manner. As the brief transcript I gave above of an episode of *Parables in the Qur'an* indicates, Masoud creates a participatory atmosphere by asking his guests about their own 'personal relationship' to the Qur'an and its stories.¹³ This personal relationship revolves round how they were affected by either reading the Qur'an or hearing it recited. As Galal (2009, p. 163) argues in relation to 'new Muslim media stars' such as Masoud, 'it is not the *interpretation* of the text that is important; it is rather the *effect* of the text on the audience'. Indeed, Masoud himself notes that 'the aim of this show is simply to make you [viewers at home] fall in love the Qur'an'. The following exchange between Masoud and a third guest on the same episode of *Parables in the Qur'an* highlights this emphasis on the personal:

Guest: The other day I was reading the Qur'an and there is this verse that says that when the believers look at the skies, they say 'glory be to you O God, you wouldn't have created this without purpose.'

I have never looked at the sky and thought that – but this morning

I was on my way to work and I looked at the sky and thought that.

Masoud: You could feel that this universe cannot be purposeless.

Guest: Not just that, but I was relating to the Qur'an on a personal level, and in a personal experience in my daily life.

Masoud misinterprets his guest's response to suggest that, for the first time, she comprehended the *meaning* of the verse. Her correction clarifies that what moved her is not so much what the Qur'an says, but rather that she *involuntarily* recalled what the Qur'an says in the seemingly prosaic act of looking at the sky as she commuted to work. Mahmood shows in her ethnography of the women's *da'wah* movement in Egypt that the forms of discipline enacted within this movement (of which Islamic televangelism is an important subset) aims to render habitual and unconscious a set of dispositions that define a 'proper Muslim subjectivity' (Mahmood 2005, p. 133). When Masoud's guest unintentionally thought of God's words when looking at the sky – when the Qur'an *personally* spoke to her – she became a better believer, a better Muslim. At the same time, it is important to note here that the burden of persuasion lies not on the Qur'an itself but rather on its receivers. As Hirschkind argues, for pious Muslims 'when humans fail to be convinced by the [Qur'anic] message, the fault lies not in the words but

in the organ of reception, the human heart. The message itself has been articulated in the most perfect of possible forms, the Qur'an' (Hirschkind 2006, p. 34).

Far from being a novel innovation, televangelist storytelling of the kind I discuss above is located within an established historical tradition. Since the Middle Ages there:

existed a popular storytelling tradition of prophetic legends that was instructional and moralistic as much as it was entertaining. It appertained to the *qussas* ('narrators'), freelance preachers and popular theologians whose audience were the illiterate masses within the mosques and without, and from it was developed the popular literary genre of *qisas al-anbiya* (tales of the prophets).

(Stowasser 1994, pp. 16–17)

As a historian of medieval Islam notes, 'the role of stories was perhaps especially central to and identified with the tradition of exhortatory preaching' (Berkey 2001, p. 6). Furthermore, this storytelling tradition, as practised by *qussas* in medieval Egypt,¹⁴ constituted an important, although contested, mode of Qur'anic exegesis, of *tafsir* (Berkey 2001). This historical overlap between *tafsir* and Qur'anic storytelling continues in contemporary Islamic televangelist programmes, where the *da'iya* simultaneously interprets the meaning of specific Qur'anic verses as he narrates the larger story they tell. By engaging in *tafsir*, the *da'iya* participates in the production of authoritative Islamic knowledge. For Islamic scholars historically, this participation represents an implicit challenge to their authority as the key transmitters of such knowledge (cf. Kramer and Schmidtke 2006). Scholars (*ulama*) at the time attempted to discredit the *qussas* by accusing them of departing from the Qur'anic text in some of their narrations. In addition, these *ulama* feared that these tales would be taken only as amusing crowd pleasers, although there was in any case a 'certain degree of overlap between such genres of entertainment, on the one hand, and the recitation of tales for didactic purpose and as a form of exhortation, on the other' (Berkey 2001, p. 15). This elite scholarly disdain for such storytelling traditions continues in some important ways in the contemporary era. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Islamic scholar living in Qatar since 1961 after serving time in Nasser's political prisons, said while Khaled's choice of homiletic topoi – popular stories from early Islamic history involving the companions of the Prophet – accounts for his popularity, in the end this only makes him a teller of pious tales – a laudable endeavour that brings people

closer to God, but nonetheless one that does not come with any authority. Indeed, popularity should not be confused with authority, warns al-Qaradawi, who hosts a popular Islamic programme of his own on Al-Jazeera (one of the Arab world's leading television networks): 'Amr Khaled does not hold any qualifications to preach. He is a business school graduate who acquired what he knows from reading and who got his start by way of conversations with friends about things that do not really involve any particular thought or judgment' (Schliefer 2004).¹⁵ While Qaradawi, unlike medieval Islamic scholars, does not question the authenticity of the stories televangelists tell, like his historical *ulama* predecessors he questions their authority to tell them.¹⁶ Indeed, Qaradawi's anxieties about what he calls 'self-appointed missionaries' (Galal 2009, p. 162) echo the medieval debate in that 'the polemic over preachers and storytellers was ultimately a question of knowledge. The *qussas* ... served the role of transmitting basic religious knowledge and instruction to the common people; the controversy that their activities engendered was in the final analysis about how the common people were to understand Islam' (Berkey 2001, p. 21).

How ordinary Muslims are to understand their religion continues to be contested in contemporary Egypt by a variety of players, including the Egyptian state, Al-Azhar, Sufi orders, and other Islamic actors in the *da'wah* movement, as various ethnographies have amply shown (Starrett 1998; Abu-Lughod 2004; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Mittermaier 2010). For viewers of Islamic televangelism, however, the lack of Azharite credentials is immaterial to the credibility of televangelists as Islamic actors. Rather, part of the credibility of *duah* such as Amr Khaled comes from their ability to retell Qur'anic stories in a manner that appeals to, as well as educates, ordinary Muslims who may not have a high degree of familiarity with the Qur'an. Engy, a medical doctor in her early 30s who has been an avid follower of Amr Khaled since her university days, explained to me that:

'The Qur'an sometimes requires a lot of effort to understand ... none of the prophets' stories are told [continuously] in a single chapter, except the story of Yusuf. For a Muslim who is new to Islam or doesn't know much about religion like the people Amr Khaled was addressing originally, [watching these programmes] is very interesting for them.

Indeed, Mona, an 18-year-old freshman at the American University in Cairo who also regularly watches Amr Khaled's programmes, recounted to me how listening to Khaled's narration of the story of Yusuf helped

her to accomplish two goals she had set for herself – to memorize the Qur'an and better understand its moral lessons:

My mom bought me the story of Sayidna Yusuf on tape, and I would listen to it more than once before I fell asleep. I really enjoyed it because Amr Khaled tells it in a great way – he made it into a *hadouta* [a little tale]. And as he read the Qur'anic verses telling the story, I found that I memorized this chapter just from listening to the story. He would recite the verse and then explain it like a story, so that made me understand what is going on... I began to anticipate what is coming next, because it's like a *hadouta*. But he also brings out that the '*ibra*', the moral we can benefit from, so it's not just a story, but it is also lesson.

For Engy and Mona, viewing and listening to Qur'anic stories as told by televangelists helps them to become at once more familiar with the Qur'an and more attuned to the vision of morality and ethics that it presents. In short, televangelist renditions of Qur'anic storytelling helps to shape them into 'proper' Muslim subjects. As Gaffney in his ethnography of Islamic preaching in Egypt argues, 'The preacher gives form and direction to the multiplicity of expectations and bewilderments that are born of the believer's resolve to submit to God's law' (Gaffney 1994, p. 185). In giving such form and direction, the *duah* come to enjoy a specific kind of legitimacy with their audience, one that is not tied to traditional Islamic credentials, but is contingent on the individual televangelist's skill in telling a story. In the next section, I examine another genre of televangelist storytelling that buttresses this legitimacy in important ways.

Heart-felt stories, televangelical testimonies

I met Hania, a 20-something Cairo University graduate, at a *nadwa* (seminar) by Moez Masoud in Saqiat Al-Sawy, a well-known cultural centre in Zamalek. From our conversation that evening and in subsequent interviews, I learned that Hania has spent much time thinking about – and judging – the different Islamic actors who inhabit her (media) worlds. While Hania was brought up in what she describes as 'pious family' (*usra mutadyina*), she told me her own piety is the result of a gradual personal transformation. Indeed, when her father ordered Hana to wear *hijab* (a headscarf) once she reached puberty at the age of 14, she was upset that this decision was forced upon her – 'I should have worn it out of

conviction [*'ann iqtinaa*] she explains. A few years later, she encountered Amr Khaled's lesson on the *hijab* in cassette form. She had been previously been listening to a well-known Salafi preacher, also on cassette, but as soon as she heard Amr Khaled 'I felt my heart lean towards him right away.' What impressed Hania most about Khaled's *hijab* lesson was his ability to 'enter the minds' of unveiled girls and voice their various reasons for not veiling – and then convincingly counter them, but in a way that was marked by *taghreeb*, rather than *takhweef*.¹⁷ Throughout our conversations, Hania continually contrasted what she calls the 'severity' (*tashadud*) of the Salafi preachers popular in her working-class neighbourhood of Shubra to the 'moderation' (*'itidaal*) of *al-duah al-gudud*, evidenced for her in their styles of dress, the topics they address, and the ways in which they address them.

When I asked Hania what she thought of the prevalent critique of Amr Khaled as devoid of any religious authority, she replied that:

Al-duah al-gudud don't tell people what to do or not do – unlike Salafi preachers. Amr Khaled doesn't give religious opinions [*mish biyiftee*] because he doesn't have the *marjaiyya* [authoritative background] for this ... so I am not going to take my religion from Amr Khaled with all due respect to him. But because I love him, I will listen to him – he has a *sulta shu'uriya*.

[emotional authority]

In her response, Hania doesn't claim for the *duah* a religious authority that their critics deny them – instead, she locates their legitimacy for her on a different plane altogether, a plane that is constituted by affect (*sulta shu'uriya*) but also by a personal judgment about the moral character of the da'iya himself. Hania says that while she first encountered Amr Khaled on cassette, when she saw him on television, 'I felt I now had a different relationship to him. Now I can see his reactions, his body language, all this makes me closer to him and his credibility goes up. I believe him more because I can see that he is *sadiq*, that he is not acting.'

I would like to, very briefly, highlight Hania's description of Amr Khaled as being *sadiq*. It is this quality of being *sadiq*, of having *sidq*, that I have rendered here as sincerity. *Sidq* is perhaps more accurately translated as truthfulness, with *ikhlaas* being the proper Arabic counterpart for sincerity.¹⁸ However, the quality of *sidq* as colloquially used by my informants comes closer to the English sincerity than truthfulness in that it is used to describe a perceived interior state, rather than the act

of telling a truth. Indeed, sincerity is not tied to objective truth – you can sincerely believe in an error. Rather, to be sincere is to exteriorize – through words or gestures – a personal interiority. As will become clear, for my informants the opposite of sincerity is ‘acting’. Crucially, sincerity hinges on outside recognition as it is ‘a kind of public accountability for others of one’s words with reference to one’s self’ (Keane 2002). In other words, to be sincere, it is not enough to say what you feel – it is also necessary for others to acknowledge that you are saying what you feel. In this facet at least, sincerity is like authority in that it depends on others to recognize it as such for ‘it is the willingness of *others* to credit any given person, group or institution with religious authority that ultimately renders it effective’ (Kramer and Schmidtke 2006, p. 2). In his study of Christian charismatic preaching in Ghana, Shipley shows how within this tradition ‘immediacy, sincerity and directness’ become ‘meta-codes for moral authority’ (2009, p. 534). Sincerity also functions as an authorizing moral meta-code for Islamic televangelists in Egypt. Indeed, when *duah* defend themselves against attack, they invoke not an alternative conception of authority, but rather their sincerity.¹⁹ As I show below, for many viewers it is the sincerity of televangelist discourses that accounts for their successful performativity, or for their success at creating of new realities (Austin 1962) within viewers that leads to greater *ilitizaam*, or religious commitment.

For many of the viewers I interviewed, televangelists like Moez are appealing because they are able to at once articulate and convincingly counter the ‘incorrect’ beliefs and practices of many young Muslims in Egypt. For their fans, that they are able to do so is a testament to their special ‘insider’ knowledge of how such youth think. Traditional religious scholars seem to agree that this felt affinity between the likes of Khaled and Masoud on the one hand, and young Westernized Muslims on the other, is the reason behind their success, with Yusuf al-Qaradawi saying in an interview that what makes Khaled ‘attractive to youth is that he is young like them, clean shaven, in regular Western attire, and he speaks in simple language’ (Schliefer 2004). However, popularity shouldn’t be confused with authority, warns Qaradawi. But as I discussed in the previous section, Qaradawi’s argument that Khaled and other televangelists lack the requisite authority to preach on Islam may be missing the point. It is not authority that the *duah* claim to possess, but sincerity. The discursive mode of reasoning through which this sincerity is at once created and conveyed centres around confessional storytelling not unlike the secular human dramas of US daytime talk shows. This storytelling has at its centre a narration of how various Muslims came to

repent their previously lax ways and lead a more Islamically correct life. It is here where imaginations of who the Islamic televangelist audience is become important.

Producers working for Iman regularly discuss their target viewers and how to best attract these viewers to the channel. One of the most important audiences Iman producers want to reach is Muslim youth who might not necessarily be drawn to religious discourse and might take as unproblematic secularized or Westernized imaginings of what it means to be 'modern' in today's world. To present an attractive alternative to this discourse, producers have hit on what has, so far, been a highly successful media strategy if we take viewership rates as an indicator of success – they showcase televangelists who were also previously secular and Westernized (or at least perceived as such) and have them narrate their own journey from laxity to piety.²⁰

Moez Masoud is an excellent case in point. Masoud debuted as a televangelist on Iman by hosting two English-language programmes for the channel.²¹ He rose to prominence among Egyptian youth, however, with the airing of Iman's Arabic-language series *Al-Tariq Al-Sah* (*The Right Path*) in Ramadan of 2007. Like Amr Khaled, Masoud has studied and lived abroad. He hails from an affluent background, at home in private US schools and open-bar parties, taking regular trips abroad, and enjoying Hollywood-generated entertainment. Also like Khaled, he found himself in a preaching career almost haphazardly, after experiencing a personal crisis when three of his close friends died, one due to a drink-driving incident. Masoud makes much of the fact that prior to becoming a more observant Muslim, he did not even know how to pronounce the Qur'an's classical Arabic correctly, relying on an English translation for understanding. He often stresses that if he can accomplish this feat, then anyone can – with this logic, piety is an ordinary condition of human life, not an extraordinary state open to a select few.²² The mode of reasoning employed here is a persuasive one rooted in the personal experience of the *da'iya*. Indeed, in an interview Masoud stresses that he does not aim to persuade people through 'preaching', but simply through telling the story of his own and others' paths to persuasion. Eickelman and Andersen (2003), in their important edited volume on new Muslim media, speak about the 'fragmentation' of religious authority engendered by such media through the creation of alternative sites of religious discourse beyond the traditional commentaries and *manābir* (pulpits). When it comes to Islamic televangelism this fragmentation results, however, not in the negation of the idea of authority, but its relocation – the legitimacy to narrate is now derived not from

one's mastery of the religious sciences but through one's own personal experience and journey to a more virtuous life (cf. Galal 2009, p. 163).

Various episodes of Masoud's *Al-Tariq Al-Sah* illustrate this point well. In one, he is standing in the main square of Covent Garden in London, a leisure destination popular with both locals and tourists that has many outdoor drinking spots and restaurants. He says that this is a familiar scene for him, but he is looking at it through a new lens – not one of desire, but of pity. 'I used to love traveling abroad so I [could] come to places like this, and get away from all those constraints we have [in Egypt]. I lived this life before, I know it very well.' The latter is a line that continually reappears throughout the series whenever Masoud wants to make a point about his pre-pious self, a self that was 'Westernized' in all the wrong ways from an Islamic viewpoint: 'I am talking about myself long ago; this is the life I lived before; I myself went through this situation.'

In yet another episode, Masoud recounts for his viewers an anecdote in which he is driving his car one night, with a friend in the back getting high on marijuana while he was in the front 'getting high' on a certain Qur'anic chapter playing in the tape deck. He recites verses from this chapter for the camera with a technical virtuosity, stopping every few lines to tell the viewer exactly what he felt when he first heard those words and how those words moved him to change his dissolute lifestyle.

Masoud's self-transformation into a pious Muslim is narrated in a deeply personal way. What makes Masoud's narratives both so moving and so memorable is that he speaks colloquial Egyptian dialect, rather than classical Arabic. Indeed, the use of colloquial Egyptian has become a hallmark of contemporary Islamic televangelists of all orientations. The linguistic registers of the *du'ah* serves to frame their programmes as 'coming from the heart'. As Armbrust notes (1996) in his discussion of Egyptian mass culture, there is a 'functional diglossia' in Egypt between classical Arabic – used for 'high-culture', intellectual production and tightly associated with a religious domain (cf. Haeri 2003) – and colloquial Egyptian – the language of everyday life that is also the language of all popular media, from songs to serials to cinema to advertising and even some novels. Armbrust argues (1996, p. 10) that the fact that colloquial Arabic has become the linguistic vehicle for such 'artistic mediums' does not work to break down the old dichotomy with the classical register, but rather reinforces it. Thus, by speaking in colloquial Arabic – and especially in its youthful, slangy register – about Islam, the *du'ah* re-situate religious belief and practice as a rich site of creativity, play, and pleasure. In doing so, they also make them quite 'ordinary',

something anyone can partake in – all it takes is a sincere commitment to be a better Muslim.

An aura of sincerity is of course created not just by televangelist registers of address, but furthermore by the very topics they address. In almost all my conversations and interviews with viewers of Islamic televangelist programmes, they stressed that they find televangelists appealing because they talk about ‘real problems’ (*mashakil haqiqia*), problems that they encounter and negotiate in their daily lives.²³ Mona, student of the American University in Cairo, who loved listening to Amr Khaled’s rendition of prophet Yusuf’s story, told me that what she likes about televangelists is that they recognize that youth share a set of common problems, and create programmes which specifically set out to solve these problems. She contrasts this to ‘traditional’ preachers:

who make programmes about esoteric matters. Who is going to watch this stuff? They talk about problems that maybe only 1 per cent of people face. If a Muslim has a special problem like that, he should approach a sheikh individually and get it solved, not have the sheikh base the whole program around it. It’s very annoying when this happens, and I would never tune into a program like that, because it’s a waste of my time.

For Mona, the focus of *al-duah al-gudud* on ‘real’ problems is not only an indicator of their superior communicative skills (compared with other television preachers), but is also a testament to their sincere desire to help the Muslim youth they preach to.²⁴ In turn, such youth often are called upon to testify to their new-found sense of piety on televangelist programmes (cf. Wise 2003).

For example, Amr Khaled’s first show *Kalam min al-Qalb*²⁵ featured former actresses who had realized the error of their past ways and repented (symbolized visually by their donning of a headscarf) after various life-changing encounters either with a Qur’anic message or a pious Muslim. As the title itself implied, this show can be construed as much as an avenue for self-expression as for religious education. In one episode of *Words from the Heart*, Ayah, a young wife and mother, relays to viewers in a segment recorded at her home why she decided to wear the veil. She says she made the decision suddenly, after experiencing a spiritual epiphany while reciting the Qur’an; she realized that all the things she had previously held dear – shopping, dressing fashionably, socializing with her friends – were keeping her from enjoying a closer relationship to God. As she tells her story, the camera zooms in on several faces in

the studio audience, showing at one point a young woman crying as she listens to Ayah. Once the pre-recorded segment is over, the lights go back on in the studio and Khaled says that Ayah's testimony has profoundly moved him. He then asks Ayah, who is present in the audience along with her husband, 'What were your personal feelings (*ihasasik el-shaakhsi*) after taking this step?' Ayah replies that she felt like she had 'tasted something sweet'. Khaled explains that there is a verse in the Qur'an that uses precisely those words to describe the state of attaining piety, and goes on to relay a relevant prophetic story about the sweetness of faith. This constant movement between personal testimony, Qur'anic verses and prophetic anecdotes is an important part of the persuasive apparatus of the *da'iyah's* performance. But what I want to highlight here is the theory of piety implicitly embedded in this mode of reasoning. Within this understanding, piety is a state individual Muslims have to *work* to cultivate and acquire as Saba Mahmood (2005) has compellingly argued, and the role of the televangelist is to be an empathic and sincere guide in each stage of this journey.

This construction of piety as a *process* with different 'stages' is what accounts for the success of televangelists like Mustafa Hosni, explained to me two members of his production team at Iman. Salafis, they argued, don't understand this and subsequently employ modes of reasoning that are unattractive to Muslim youth. As one of these producers put it to me:

Salafis deal with others based on their own relationship to God. That's a mistake – you can't chastise a Muslim for smoking cigarettes when this Muslim doesn't even pray. You should be talking to him about praying first. But the Salafis don't do this – they ask people to adhere to a high standard of religiosity, when these people are just starting to become religious. The Salafi style is for people who are already religious, whereas the *duah* want to attract people who are not religious and make them so.

As I hope I have convincingly shown, this involves a self-presentation on the part of televangelists as men who were previously not religious, but then became so. Within this frame, televangelists' moral legitimacy as Islamic spokespeople derives not from a mastery of the authoritative textual canon of the Islamic tradition and its attendant disciplinary practices of study, reflection, and deliberation, but rather from their projected status as 'ordinary Muslims' who struggle to lead an Islamically correct life in a world where it is manifestly difficult to do so. They have legitimacy not because they are different from the audience they preach to, but because they are one of them. This leads viewers to relate to *al-duah al-gudud* in specific ways – as people open to critique and liable

to error. Engy the medical doctor who felt Amr Khaled made her closer to God, told me how her view on Khaled has shifted over the years:

In the beginning I was really annoyed by his voice and way of talking and sometimes he had perspectives which I didn't like, so I was so sharp in saying I didn't like this view or this episode wasn't so good... and then there was a period when whatever Amr Khaled said *I took as gospel* [English], that was the top of the curve. Now I am at the point where he may say things I don't agree with, but it is okay. He is not a god, he is not infallible. He is a person and opinion is just an opinion. He has a right to have an opinion and I have a right not to like it. This has nothing to do with the fact that he is speaking on religion, it shouldn't be different with religion.

As we can see, Engy's relationship to Khaled is dynamic and contingent. It is predicated on a recognition of Khaled as a sincere believer, but one who may make mistakes and does not enjoy an authority that would make an ordinary Muslim like Engy – a woman who is not trained in any Islamic sciences and who has not had a systematic Islamic education – feel unable to critique him. At the same time, Engy credits Amr Khaled with making her 'closer to God'. 'After watching his series *Bi ismik nahya*, I loved God,' she tells me. 'I loved God. I loved God because of the way Amr Khaled spoke about him. You know when you are talking to someone dear to you and call him "*ya habibi*" – I wanted to call God "*habibi*" (my love). Watching this program, I felt that God is so *helw* [nice].' Khaled's success at making Engy 'love God' derives not from his scholarly credentials, but from his own perceived sincerity. He is seen by his viewers as someone who himself truly loves God and the Prophet.

Indeed, for Engy and other viewers I spoke with, it is the ability of televangelists to move them, the spectators, on a visceral, bodily level that is a testament to the sincerity and authenticity of the televised performance. For example, several informants spontaneously mentioned to me an episode of Moez Masoud's programme *Al-Tariq Al-Sah* as an example of his *sidq*. In this episode, Masoud breaks down and cries on camera, saying, 'Forgive me Lord, I should have come to you long ago, crying with regret...' One viewer told me that she herself cried while watching this scene and repeated Masoud's words to herself. This scene and viewers' reaction to underline, in Hala's phrasing, the *sulta shu'uriya* that *duah* enjoy. To understand what is at stake in this affective authority and the ways in which it exercises its power, we have to, I would

submit, shift our attention from how *duah* may or may not challenge 'traditional' forms of Islamic authority to, following Hirschkind (2006), 'the visceral, embodied and affective aspects of public modes of reasoning' within the *da'wah* movement in Egypt. Such a shift in analytical focus promises to shed better light on the cultural politics animating contemporary Islam.

Conclusion

The Egyptian revolution of 25 January 2011 had a dramatic impact on Islamic televangelist discourse. Appearing on state television after the fall of Mubarak for the first time in his career, Amr Khaled told the programme host that he 'saw God in Tahrir'. Along with other televangelists, he framed Tahrir Square as an exemplar of a 'New Egypt', a utopian space of tolerant faith and positive action. Following the success of the revolution, televangelists, again utilizing a diverse array of media platforms, called on youth to 'build Egypt' (*ibniy masr*) with the ethos of Tahrir as a template. So far, such calls have not acquired a specifically Islamic content, but rather revolve round nationalist notions of good citizenship and neoliberal notions of economic productivity. At the same time, the call to 'build Egypt' articulates with the televangelical stress over the past decade on Muslim youth as agents of societal change (*taghyeer igtimia'ii*) and positive energy (*taqaa mugeeba*), characteristics enjoined, according to Islamic televangelists, by an Islam 'correctly understood'. While Islamic televangelist invoked such characteristics prior to the revolution towards 'apolitical' goals, they are now harnessed towards radical political change.

Stories continue to be central to televangelist discourse in the post-revolutionary period. Televangelists carry on telling stories from the Qur'an and from their personal lives, except that now such stories are brought to bear on the events of the 18-day uprising. Other, new, stories enter the fray – stories of Muslim–Christian unity in Tahrir, stories of martyrdom and sacrifice, stories of divine intervention. Such stories will persist in hailing televangelist viewers as participants in an unfolding moral drama and in doing so they will speak to the televangelist's own sincerity as believers – and now citizens – of a new Egypt.

Acknowledgments

Research for this article was made possible by funding from the Fulbright-Hays, Social Science Research Council, Wenner-Gren

Foundation and the National Science Foundation. Versions of this chapter were presented at the Enchanting Arab Audiences workshop at the University of Copenhagen in May 2011 and the Ifta on Screens workshop at the Faculty for Islamic Studies in Qatar in June 2011. I thank the participants of both for their critical feedback.

Notes

1. Amr Khaled was banned from preaching by the Mubarak regime in 2002, leading him to go into voluntary exile in Lebanon and Great Britain, returning in 2007. Since the fall of the Mubarak regime, Amr Khaled has made numerous appearances on state television and as of May 2011 has been hosting his own programme on Egyptian television called *Bokra Ahla* (*Tomorrow Will Be Better*). The disclosed aim of the programme is to act as a catalyst for 'building Egypt' in a post-revolutionary context.
2. The Egyptian journalist Wael Lutfi popularized this term in his 2005 book *Dhahirat al-Duah Al-Gudud*, Cairo: Al-Ayn Publishing House.
3. The Egyptian journalist Wael Lutfi popularized this term in his 2005 book *Dharet al-Duah al-Gudud*. I insist on calling al-duah al-gudud "televangelists" in English because I view televangelism as a performative mode that is taken up by diverse religious actors from within different religious traditions, including non-Christian ones. Islamic media producers explicitly reference American Christian televangelism as an inspiration for their own work.
4. The three televangelists of this trend have had three very different careers as media preachers. However, they all debuted as televangelists on Iman, and both Moez Masoud and Mustafa Hosni consider themselves to be 'students' of Amr Khaled.
5. A problematic (from an empirical point of view) assumption within this discourse is that 'traditional authorities' do not make use of new media technologies, or at least regard them with suspicion.
6. Iman is a pseudonym.
7. It is important to note that historically, there existed different types of Islamic preachers: the *khatib* (sermon-giver, often appointed by the ruler), the *wa'iz* (admonisher), the *mudkhakkir* (reminder), and the *qass* (storyteller). The latter three were called 'free preachers' as they were not affiliated with a mosque like the *khatib* (Antoun 1989, p. 69). In contemporary Egypt, however, the *da'iya* has become a catch-all term that subsumes these historical distinctions – the *da'iya* gives the Friday sermon, admonishes, reminds, and tells stories.
8. A testament to their popularity with viewers, televangelist shows are increasingly being broadcast on non-Islamic satellite channels such as Mehwar, a privately owned Egyptian channel.
9. This desire is met by Iman not only through the actual programmes, but also through a constant ticker-tape of *fatwas* (religious opinions) on various questions running through all programmes – 'Is the stockmarket *halal* or *haram*? Is it *haram* for women to take part in religious chants? Is it permissible to watch soccer matches on TV? Is it permissible to play chess? ...' The stream of questions and responses is literally unending.

10. Interestingly, Tottoli (2006, p. 471) shows how the oldest surviving compendiums of *qisas al-anbiya* include stories of pre-Islamic prophets that the Qur'an does not mention.
11. There exists a varied literature in Arabic that aims to instruct *duah* in how to use Qur'anic stories to maximum effect in their *da'wah*. See, for example, Abdel Kareem Zaydan's two-volume work *Al-mustafaad min qisas al-qur'an: lil dawa wa al-duah*, Beirut: Al-Resalah Publishing House, 1997.
12. Although the first season on this series was an Iman production, the second season aired on Mehwar.
13. Mahmood (2005) argues that in analysing the *da'wah* movement in Egypt, a distinction should be made between ethics and morals. She defines ethics as 'practices, techniques and discourses through which a subject transforms herself to achieve a particular state of being, happiness or truth'. Morals, on the other hand, are more akin to 'values, norms or injunctions'. For Mahmood, the distinction is important as she argues that the importance of ethical practices 'does not reside in the meaning they signify to their practitioners, but in the work they do in constituting the individual' (2005, p. 29). In the Islamic televangelist programmes I am analysing, however, ethical practices work precisely through (and because) their endowment with moral meaning by televangelists.
14. As Galal argues, the materiality of the television setting is crucial, with the 'sofa, as in an imagined living room, strengthening the feeling of intimacy and the possibility for the viewer to identify' (2009, p. 156).
15. It is important to note that, historically, there existed different types of Islamic preachers: the *khatib* (sermon-giver, often appointed by the ruler), the *wa'iz* (admonisher), the *mudkhakkir* (reminder), and the *qass* (storyteller). The latter three were called 'free preachers' as they were not affiliated with a mosque like the *khatib* (Antoun 1989, p. 69). In contemporary Egypt, however, the *da'iya* has become a catch-all term that subsumes these historical distinctions – the *da'iya* gives the Friday sermon, admonishes, reminds and tells stories.
16. There was a public confrontation between Qaradawi and Khaled involving differences on how to best respond to the Danish cartoon incident involving what most Muslims felt to be offensive caricatures of Prophet Muhammed. Khaled and Masoud had flown together to Denmark in 2006 to set up a series of workshops aimed at 'inter-faith dialogue' and 'reconciliation', which Qaradawi criticized for being insensitive to Muslim feelings of hurt over the offensive cartoons. In the international media, Qaradawi was characterized as a 'hard-liner', while Khaled emerged as a 'moderate Muslim'. For a discussion of this incident and more on Qaradawi, see Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen (2009).
17. While any practising *da'iya* in Egypt must obtain a certification from the Da'wah Institute, he is not required to have advanced degrees from Islamic institutions such as Al-Azhar. In fact, *duah* such as Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud have chosen to pursue doctoral studies in the University of Wales and Cambridge University, respectively. In a recent interview on Al-Jazeera English, Riz Khan asked Amr Khaled how he has countered charges that he lacks the requisite knowledge to be a preacher. Khaled replied that he has done this by getting a PhD in 'Islamic shariah and co-existence' from the University of Wales.

18. The two major rhetorical styles of the *da'wah* movement are *takhwif* and *targhib* (see Mahmood 2005 for a discussion). *Al-duah al-gudud* have become mostly associated with the latter style, which works through the evocation of love for God in listeners. *Takhwif* (or striking fear) has been associated with the Salafi dawah in Egypt.
19. Within the Islamic discursive tradition (at least its Sunni orthodox incarnations), *ikhlaas* is to perform acts of worship with the sole intention of pleasing God alone. *Sidq* is viewed as the highest form of *ikhlaas*, although al-Ghazali in his *Ihya* specifies five forms of *sidq*.
20. In defending themselves against Salafi attacks, *al-duah al-gudud* often invoke their sincerity. For example, an episode Mustafa Hosni had done on *bid'a* (unlawful innovation, a concept that is often invoked in Salafi discourse) led to a sustained attack on him by several influential Salafi sheikhs. In his rebuttal of these attacks, Hosni stresses that what he found most painful about these attacks is their questioning of his sincerity: 'They said I was fed poison to say these words ... that I was a puppet being manipulated by unseen hands,' Hosni complained. His self-defence hinged not on the authority of his arguments, but rather on their sincerity.
21. This strategy is heavily indebted to US Christian televangelism, with the producer of Amr Khaled's first show saying that's where the initial inspiration to develop this type of programming came from. At the same time, such stories are found outside of the worlds of media. In her ethnography of Islamic women's activism, Hafez notes the centrality of stories of '*hidaya*' or repentance in the self-narratives of these women. Like the televangelist stories I analyse, the stories of these women 'represented their original [selves] as motivated by secular, modern and materialistic desires that they reified as the binary opposite of their newly acquired religious self' (Hafez 2011, p. 92).
22. Masoud currently appears on a weekly basis with Moataz al-Demerdash, a popular talk show host on the private Egyptian channel Mehwar.
23. At face value, there seems to be much similarity between these Egyptian televisual *duah* and the Turkish religious media celebrity Ozturk whom Oncu (2006, p. 246) describes as a 'sermonizer in tune with the spirit of the times – a happy blending of Islamic theology, aerobics, the internet, English and a modern (uncovered) wife'. However, Oncu (2006, p. 239) argues that Ozturk's 'claim to authority and self-framing is that of a 'man of scientific learning' as distinct from a 'man of religion' – given the mystique of science, he is thus far from being ordinary. Also, Ozturk apparently 'dismisses questions about the morality of everyday practices [swimming at the beach, etc.] as trivial' (2006, p. 242) while for Egyptian *duah* it is precisely these daily practices which matter most. Finally, while Ozturk puts forward a definition of 'secular Muslim' as the 'real Islam', the Egyptian *da'wah* movement strives to counter that definition. See Mahmood (2005).
24. Compare this with Al-Qaradawi's statement that, 'We [Islamic scholars] have discussed the small things long enough' (Galal 2009, p. 158).
25. For an extended, cogent, discussion of this show and the 'Amr Khaled phenomenon' in general, see Wise (2003).

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