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Islamic Televangelism: The Salafi Window to Their Paradise

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The Window to Paradise is not just the name of one of the most popular programmes in Salafi Islamic televangelism, it is also a successful channel for the mediation of religious fundamentalism that has attracted viewers from around the Arab world. In spite of the wide range of countries, languages, religions, and cultures in the region, Salafi television channels have consistently projected a shared common interest in scrutinizing 'otherness' in thought, ideology, and religion. Hence, it is not surprising that the list includes Christians, Jews, 'Westerners', and even proponents of moderate Islam. These channels have claimed the authority to speak for Islam. They operate in a region where there is collective frustration over economic disparities and a loss of faith in political systems. This situation has favoured the making of a public space for fundamentalist groups to use these collective anxieties as a pretext for mobilizing members, developing bureaucratic organizations, and formulating policy alternatives (Entelis 1999). Salafis believe that Islam, founded by the Prophet Muhammad, and propagated by his companions for three generations after the passing of the Prophet, is pure and unalloyed, and therefore the only source of authority in Islam. Salafi television tends to replicate this view and is supported by a variety of Islamic sheikhs and their followers. Salafi televangelists privilege the eternal validity of the written text and, as such, do not encourage interrogation of these texts. Salafism's origins are from Saudi Arabia and the terms Salafism and Wahhabism are often used interchangeably. Wahhabism is the basis for global Islamic mission or *da'wah*.

Religious pluralism has always been a problematic issue in the Arab world, given the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the media have exacerbated these tensions. Concurrently, there have also been rifts, disjunctures, and dissonances among the media, the public,

and the government, resulting in what can be considered the loss of any shared interest or hope (Saleh 2009). This unsettled environment has been exploited by radical Islamic groups who have turned this to their advantage through redefining Islamic identity for Islamic society or '*Umma*' (Bellin 1994). Radical Islamists have used this social, political, and economic flux to create a new niche market founded on the belief that the present wrongs in the Arab world are a consequence of colonization that can be resisted by going back to basics. These groups believe that the decline of Arab and Muslim identity is a direct consequence of Western hegemonic ideas.

It is clear that their agenda for reform is to re-Islamicize society and rid it of the corrupting influences of secularism and the West (Toth 2003). The majority of those who can be called traditional Islamic televangelists use the media to propagate narrow, sectarian messages and so it is not altogether surprising that they connect to like-minded audiences. They have used specific types of religious symbolism and rituals to heighten emotional outrage, while strengthening a shared sense of identity through disseminating a discourse that exhorts audiences to make it their personal duty to take action as soldiers in a war to protect their own vision of the ideal Muslim community.

There is also a new generation of televangelists, who have built their popularity based on a style that is far removed from traditional clerics on television, with their distinctive beards, robes, and sermons and who extol the demands of Islam and the threat of damnation and hellfire. These new, openly apolitical televangelists in their stylish suits, privilege God's mercy in their mediation of a new, softer message and image of Salafism and Wahhabism. This new approach attempts to reach out to the educated and elite through the repackaging of traditional content in more contemporary formats, while retaining its chauvinism and radical perception of the ideal Islamic society.

Liberal and secular scholars have accused the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) of using these Islamic channels to cultivate Salafism. For example, the Egyptian novelist and cultural commentator Alaa Aswany has articulated the view on several occasions that the political 'quietism' of the Salafis and their injunctions to always obey the ruler (head of state) explains the correspondences between police states in the Arab world and these channels, given the key role that they have played in taming political activism and reinforcing the rule of law through the army and religion (Schemm 2008). Despite the uprising in February 2011, the so-called 'Arab Spring', scepticism about the politicization of Islam remains in Egypt and in Tunisia.

The origins and expressions of Salafism and Wahhabism

These new spaces for reform have predominantly been taken over by radical religious groups mainly affiliated with Salafism or Wahhabism. Other moderate groups, while present, have had much less impact. These two religious groups, the Salafis and Wahhabis, had different target audiences, the former focused on attracting the support of the poor and the less educated classes, while the latter approached the educated rich and upper classes. One can argue that the mediated ministries of these two groups were the forerunners of, and contributed to, the rise of Islamic televangelism. Wahhabism started as a reform movement within Islamic theology, aimed at connecting people (*da'wah*) with the 'real' meaning of *tawhid* (the oneness of God, or monotheism) while de-legitimizing 'traditional' disciplines and practices that evolved in Islamic history, theology, and jurisprudence, and 'popular' practices such as the tradition of visiting tombs and shrines of venerable individuals. Such disciplines and practices are classified as *shirk* (polytheism), *kufr* (unbelief in God), *ridda* (apostasy), and *bida* (innovations).

Its founder was Muhammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792). He forced people to adhere to a very strict and literal interpretation of 'monotheism'. His followers called themselves *al-muwahhidin* (the monotheists – as if others, especially Muslims, are not). Wahhabi theology only acknowledges the Islamic teaching of the Qur'an and *hadith* as fundamental texts as understood by *al-salaf al-salih* (pious ancestors) and Bin Abd al-Wahhab. As such, the Wahhabis differentiate themselves from orthodox Sunnis and only venerate the Muslim Prophet's companions (*sahaba*), the companions' followers (*tabi'in*), and the follower's followers (*tabi'i al-tabi'in*), *Al-salaf al-salih* as the sole models that all Muslims should emulate (Moussalli 2009).

Wahhabism is thus a severely puritanical form of Islam. It emerged as the Ottoman Empire fell into decline and was embraced by the House of Saud to legitimize itself as the guardian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Control over this ideology has helped Saudis maintain their imperial claim over oil wealth. Salafism is a diverse and complex ideology and religiously inspired trend. As a rule, all Wahhabis are Salafists, but not all Salafists are Wahhabis. In essence, Salafism is a project meant to 'purify' Muslims from their present realities, histories, theologies, jurisprudence, and contexts, and take them to a higher level of religious, moral, social, and political consciousness (Moussalli 2009, pp. 8–15).

One can argue that in light of continuous attempts by religious groups, mainly of a radical nature, to manipulate religious texts and

ideas in order to privilege understandings in the name of 'Allah' (God) and Islam (Saleh 2006), that Arabs have become vulnerable to such manipulations. In this context, the lexicon of 'the Arab' has become a derogatory label, implying wastefulness, incompetence, and subservience, torn as Arabs are between their internal subjection to dictatorial governments on the one hand, and their perceived disjuncture from the world on the other.

While cassette tapes were used extensively in the early days to serve the cause of radical Islam, television has now taken centre stage and caters especially to the disadvantaged poor (Saleh 2009a). Television is the most widespread medium in the Middle East and is the key to public performances and cultures. Thus it is not surprising that religious programmes have become popular. In earlier years however, the focus was on the recitation of prayers and readings from the Qur'an. Today, four decades after the advent of television, this region is home to specialized religious television channels and to specific articulations of the religious media messages of *da'wah*. These messages are inflected both by the way in which their audiences are imagined as Muslims in need of religious education, and with the new uses of 'ethos/pathos/logos' as the narrative means used by these new preachers to describe their own journeys from laxity to what they consider to be piety and to a new appreciation of God (Abou el Magd 2009).

As mentioned in the media report entitled: 'Religious broadcasting in the Middle East: Religious Islamic, Christian, and Jewish channels: Programmes and discourses', certain 'TV Shaykhs' (preachers) had become powerful figures in setting social norms, especially by using the device of the '*fatwa*' (ruling) as an instrument to (de)legitimize certain social, cultural and political practices. There have been occasions when these radical views projected through Islamic channels have exhorted the faithful to enact a cleansing through killing and sacrificing others from different religions, a step on the path of the faithful to '*Al-Ganah*' (paradise) – mentioned by one of the new Islamic televangelists on the '*Al-Nas*' television channel (Cambridge Media Report 2011, pp. 39–45).

In a context characterized by Islamization, it should not come as any surprise that there is a close relationship between these religious television channels and the distribution of power in Arab society. It is important that we understand this power in the context of illiteracy rates among audiences, which is in the region of 45 per cent in some countries (Cambridge Arab Media Report 2011, pp. 39–45). It is not coincidental that illiteracy was a factor in the Muslim Brotherhood's

capture of one-fifth of the seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt (Field and Hamam 2009).

This study attempts to analyse the rise of popular preachers on television and, in particular, their use of televangelism as a base from which to challenge the leadership of political and religious elites. This chapter focuses on popular Islamic televangelism, particularly channels that advocate Salafism and Wahhabism and address Arab-speaking audiences in Arabic. The aim is to try to understand and explain the reasons behind its top-down popularity, and the change in its discourse and narrative that have transformed this mediated space into what can be considered a dark age.¹ The careers of a number of televangelists have been forged in the intersection of politics and popular culture. Their skilful manipulation of a variety of communication tools throughout the Arab world have increased their following among the young, the desperate and the radical.

Conceptual understanding of Islamic televangelism

In this section, I attempt to explain how the model of Islamic televangelism has succeeded in keeping up with the challenges associated with media globalization and has built up close connections with a range of people in different parts of the region. The primary markers of identity in this region are religion and culture, and both markers have left their imprint on the media.

There are, of course, many different theoretical traditions that can be used to analyse the growing phenomenon of Islamic televangelism, although it would be impossible to fully summarize this literature. Broadly speaking, the critical/cultural studies approach conceptualizes media phenomena as sites of struggle over social, economic, symbolic, and political power, as well as struggles over control of, and access to, the media themselves. The 'uses and gratifications' approach privileges the active and conscious attempts by viewers to meet their personal and social needs and desires, and 'medium theory' advocates specific interactional possibilities while discouraging others.

There is a need, in the context of 'medium theory' (Meyrowitz 2008) and media ecology (Strate 2006) to analyse Islamic televangelism through the lens of how media content is identified with the public at different ages and levels of literacy, particularly in terms of Innis and McLuhan's definition of 'secondary orality' (Ong 1982). The notion of 'soft determinism', which entails the interplay between the information presented and human decision and planning that shape its use and

impact (Levinson 1997), can also be used to understand the reception of Islamic televangelism.

Similarly, the notion of 'ecological holism' (Deibert 1997), which shifts the focus from the 'inherent effects' of media to understanding how pre-existing social forces and trends help shape the message and channel certain ideas and movements from the margins of society to the centre, can be used to understand the ideologies of Salafism and Wahhabism. Both these ideologies have developed their own hegemonic frameworks that have narrowed the range of what the right Islamic vision of the world should be. To its followers, this process legitimizes what appears to be 'natural', 'inevitable', and taken for granted about this social order (Hall 1992, p. 291).

One could say in reference to the above ideas that Islamic televangelism has used the ideologies of Salafism and Wahhabism to knit together a hybrid collective identity submerged into media narratives, as a means of giving these disparate communities a sense of coherence, support, and social agency. This mechanism has also been used as the means to project certain exclusive values thus enabling the separation of the followers of these channels from countless others with whom they do not identify (Weeks 2003). This might also explain the relevance of 'secondary orality' given the investments in representation schemes that are typically couched in the imagery of stereotypes that serve the function of reproducing existing power relations so that people both know and often accept their place in a given situation or society.

Islamic televangelism is thus all about establishing Salafism and Wahhabism as a hegemonic identity that is involved in turning mediation into opportunities for creating the 'real Muslim' self at the expense of others (non-Muslims or even Muslims who do not conform to Salafism) through the construction of binary oppositions, of sameness and difference. They have used the notion of 'ecological holism' to attract, position, and maintain the popularity of these programmes, and have often manipulated audiences by highlighting the consequences of the breaking down of Islam by 'others', along with its attendant socio-political and economic hardships.

One of the unique dimensions of Islamic televangelism is that this media business operates within specific regulatory frameworks, economic settings, and political environments, as does the audience. It is worth noting in this context, that all the Arab states share similar laws and legislations restricting freedom of expression and diffusion of ideas (Bassiouni 2007). In 1981, at the 'Second Conference of Arab Ministers of Justice' in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, the 'Sana'a Strategy'

unified domestic legislation through a series of integrated codes (Saleh 2009). This happened during a period when Salafism and Wahhabism had started to play a key role in message-making, often by blurring the distinction between mainstream and alternative media, and the role of television to educate and help despairing audiences albeit within a consumerist culture. This has made the media not just a space and place for hegemonic power struggles over ideas, but also a terrain where producers of Islamic media find themselves in continuous competition in order to maintain their viewers and compete with other producers over the same market share.

In the context of struggles over socio-political, economic, and political hegemony, Islamic televangelism has tamed the interpretation of Islam to offer what the producers want. These producers are mostly of Saudi origin (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) with clear Wahhabi and Salafi agendas and credentials. Their influence has resulted in the chauvinism of patriarchal media discourses that has taken the shape of symbolic formations arranged around persuasive, conservative, political ideals (Peet 2000).

It is also imperative to highlight the 'cultural economy' that sees economic rationalities, including the motives, methods, and ethics of production, as a departure point for interpretations of these regional experiences. The idea of 'spiritual economies' (Rudnycky 2009) refers to the ways in which religion and media products are brought together to create a new ethical orientation towards oneself, one's life, and one's public sphere, and establish a convergence between self and 'the global religious revival' (Asad 2007). In other words, a convergence between religious resurgence on one hand, and the neoliberal transformation of media with all its related structures and functionalities on the other.

This approach to Islamic televangelism also provides a framework to understand the phenomenon of mass mediatized religion in many other parts of the world today, through highlighting the enduring affinities between certain religious practices and agendas within what Weber has described as the 'the spirit of capitalism'. A key objective of such forms of television is to turn the spirituality of disadvantaged people into a kind of 'group think' (Turner & Pratkanis 1998) – a psychological phenomenon that occurs as a result of a group's attempt to minimize conflict and reach a consensus without a critical evaluation of alternative ideas or viewpoints.

Islamic televangelism is thus used to connect, scope, enlarge, and strengthen Wahhabi and Salafi ideology among viewers through the hegemonic discourse of a 'group think' via the media narrative of

becoming better members of a pietistic community. To serve this end, the idea of 'spiritual economies' has fed into the production of television programmes, eliciting forms of practice (Callon 1998) that help realize the *Umma* (Islamic nation) at large (Michel 2005). These spaces of mediation have helped inculcate mobilizing norms that have enabled the majority of illiterate, poor, and discontented viewers to engage with mediated religious discourses as a form of worship, that are guaranteed to ensure otherworldly salvation.

Islamic televangelism: From the mosque to satellite television

In this section I examine in more general terms some aspects related to the social power of these media channels, their power and influence over audiences within the broader frameworks of social, cultural, political, and economic power structures in Arab society. It is quite pertinent here to sketch the manner in which Islamic televangelism has successfully transformed itself from the interpersonal sphere into the public sphere, and from the mosque to satellite stations.

It is important to emphasize that investing in media is almost a losing business, though a prestigious one for rich oil countries such as Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates that attempted to position themselves in the global scene or used media to promote their cultural and religious views. It is thus not surprising that these channels maintained their financial leverage during an era in which the media and the entire political economy experienced the negative impact associated with the contraction of the Euro zone in Greece, in Spain, and in many other countries, given that investing in Arab satellite television has never been profitable and has always been a high-risk, volatile business. Some of these businessmen claimed that they are willing to keep investing in spite of all the challenges and obviously losses, motivated by the desire to rebuild faith in Islam in the aftermath of the West's violent encroachment of the Muslim world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that shattered local institutions and economies and disrupted any natural evolution of Islamic society. These societies did not have the wherewithal to modernize the Muslim faith and, as a result, an entire region and civilization were left to function with the help of ideas that were neither organic nor on the basis of a dialogue with contemporary discourses.

Perhaps these changes in the socio-religious and media landscape that gave rise to 'Islamicization' were the result of the public's self

perception as the victim of two forms of colonialism – successive repressive governments and the continuous sense of social distance and victimhood, especially after September 11. Through mediations of these polarized discourses, frustrations were shared, ideas discussed, slogans agreed to and solutions put forward to appeal to the youth, who have experienced extraordinary material deprivation, despair, alienation, elite corruption, and oppression throughout their entire lives (Chaaban 2009). It is thus not surprising that the target of these religious groups throughout the years has remained focused on youth. The population of youth in the Arab world exceeds 66 million, of which 33.8 million are male and 32.4 million are female (Chaaban 2009, pp. 6–7). These ideas were first disseminated within the relatively open space of universities and the leadership of student organizations, before moving on to satellite television channels that offered a new virtual space for communication, an arena that enabled the voicing of the aspirations, frustrations and dreams of the youth who were otherwise marginalized in Arab society.

In this context, the idea that has been widely subscribed to is that religion remains the only refuge for people and identities under siege from the state's encroachment, brutal enforcement of censorship, and assiduous self-censorship. Mainstream media too have projected this feeling, through a combination of oversimplified reasoning and an empty rhetoric that merely pays lip service to freedom of expression and the need for information diffusion. These channels have provided a space for the articulation of underground voices of dissent belonging to radical Islamist movements and in particular movements supportive of Wahhabism and Salafism.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood rooted in the Hanbali school of Islamic thought have also helped to serve the larger cause of radical Islam (Munson 2001). Indeed, this school of thought is the most conservative of the four major '*madhab*' traditions (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) involved in the understanding and interpretation of Islamic law. It insists on a literal reading of the Qur'an and other texts.

There is a specific relationship that ties the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood to its organizational structure, group activities and to the beliefs and practices of ordinary people in the Arab world. This relationship offers a key to understanding its tremendous popular support and to the success of the idea of Islamic televangelism. Its main narratives

expressed in mosques and externally through different media have focused on the loss of Islamic identity as a result of a triple syndrome – namely the influence of Western values, the poverty of the people, and declining morality in the Arab states and in the lives of individuals. They have played on people's fears and mobilized people to embrace a conservative interpretation of Islamic teachings and an understanding that all Muslims comprise a single cohesive community that must work together to resist the encroachment of corrupt Western influences. Marc Lynch, a US professor of Arab politics, believes that the difference between Salafis and the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) is a matter of degree rather than a sharp divide (Field & Hamam 2009).

In this regard, it is seen as the most influential religious movement in Egypt, one that is focused on carving out Islamic spaces in society through extending opportunities for the deep participation of citizens. This idea of Islamization is also supported in various degrees by clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and intellectuals and television personalities such as Fahmy Howedi, Tariq al-Bishri, and Amr Khalid who may disagree over details but generally follow the same strategy of encouraging deep engagements in society.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood often describe themselves as adherents to *wasatiyyah*, a term popularized in the 1980s by Qaradawi to describe an Islamic centrism positively distinguished from more conservative Islamists and violent groups like al-Qaeda. For generations, many of the Arab leaders, most dictator, considered the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations as their enemies so they have been either operating under severe conditions or in some cases as in Egypt were officially banned but unofficially tolerated, in part because of the Muslim Brotherhood strategizing techniques to avoid direct confrontations, by following cautious approach to criticizing or challenging oppressive regimes (Saleh 2009a). This fluctuating cycle of push and pull relations between the religious organizations on one hand and the Arab dictators on the other hand remained volatile and conflicting all through from Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s to their current tactful partnership with the military government that vilifies it. The former-Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser conducted high-profile crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood and imprisoned many of them. He also increased spending on mosques and religiously sponsored schools whose purpose was to train professional staff for these mosques. This institutional expansion was later complemented by an increase in the quantity of religious programming on state-controlled radio and television (Saleh 2009b).

President Anwar Sadat was no different from Nasser although he relaxed the strict laws that controlled religious groups and released imprisoned members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hosni Mubarak too was no different from his predecessors as he attempted to reconcile with those elements of the Islamist movements who were willing to accept participation in an expanded multi-party democratic system in exchange for a rejection of violence and open anti-regime activities (Saleh 2012).

Today the Salafi Islamic media is at the forefront, and their success can be attributed to their involvement in implementing effective and successful socio-economic projects on the ground. The communication paradigm developed by the Muslim Brotherhood is operationalized through their servicing of populations ignored by the state and this credibility is, in turn, used to gain political legitimacy.

The Muslim Brotherhood used the mosque at first, and later religious television channels as spaces for promoting its ideologies in ways that clearly appealed to an angry and frustrated public in an approach that seems similar to that adopted by Christian missionaries in the early twentieth century (Anderson 1983). The group has used a range of contemporary methods and persuasive tools to serve up radical ideas, many of which have been accepted without question (Brown 2006). Its discourses do not allow for pluralism even among Muslim believers² nor does it recognize diversity within Islam (Brown 2010).

The journey of radical Islamic propaganda to Islamic televangelism or the movement from the mosque to satellite television can also be seen as a movement from 'orality' towards a form of 'secondary orality'. There has also been a move away from a tradition that used to be exclusively reserved for Islam's top clerics orating from the Qur'an in their flowing robes and preaching about the afterlife, to a more sophisticated discourse from preachers who are young and savvy and who privilege 'a sweet orthodoxy' instead of 'unthinking rage'.

Islamic televangelism: the Salafi window to their paradise

Salafi Islamic televangelism discourses claim to focus on teaching their viewers how to be 'true' Muslims by advocating creedal principles that can be used to deal with all problems facing the Islamic community. The main claim of these channels is that they help Muslims get to paradise, by purifying their beliefs and practices from the infiltration of reprehensible innovations (*bid'a*) and unbelief (*kufr*) (Jerichow 1997, pp. 144–146). These Salafi television channels censor other alternative

arguments because they are deemed fallacious. This study argues that the Salafi Islamic media have followed the path of global ecumenism (Kobia 2006)³ instead of developing a more inclusive discourse that embraces diversity and acknowledges 'difference'.

The history of Islamic televangelism in Egypt begins on 21 October 1998 when the first Islamic channel 'Iqraa' (Read) started broadcasting. It was presented as the only channel of its kind involved in redefining an Islamic identity for Arab viewers. Five years later, the channel 'Alrisala' (The Message) was launched on March 2003. This was followed in January 2006 by a third religious channel from Egypt – 'Al-Nas' (The People) that was to eventually become the most popular Salafi television station in the Arab world. 'Al-Nas' originally featured an eclectic collection of shows with a variety of themes such as music, dance, and weddings, although the channel gradually restructured its content and embraced strict religious programming, inviting some of the most popular Salafi leaders (including militants) to host its programmes. It is important to note here that a common dominator of these channels is that they have all been financed by Saudi businessmen who knew little about the role of the media beyond the propagation of their religious agenda (Abu Haiba 2011). However, these channels were also complemented with a variety of free-to-air (FTA) channels that began to offer Islamic programmes. The availability of such fare also led to the emergence of a new group of religious figures including Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, and Ahmed Al-Shukairy, who have redefined Islamic televangelism.

Though the literature related to this topic remains scant (Rock 2010), Lindsay Wise's unpublished Oxford University MPhil thesis entitled *Words from the Heart: New Forms of Islamic Preaching in Egypt* provides an important study of the content of Amr Khaled's teachings. Similarly, Patrick Gaffney's *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* documents the shift of power away from the official religious establishment and towards popular representatives such as Khaled. Additionally, Charles Hirschkind's *The Ethical Soundscape* provides an important analysis of preaching techniques used by Egyptian preachers. Amr Khaled represented a break with older forms of Islamic televangelism via his first prime-time programme, *Sunaa' al-Hayah* (*Makers of Life*), which was available on satellite television and the internet. His approach was to intentionally expand and widen his audience by transcending national and ethnic divisions via his new approaches to '*da'wah*'. Khaled, at one point in time, was the image of this form of Islamic televangelism and a real transnational religious leader, facing off publicly with other

traditional figures, such as Sheikh Qaradawi, in their attempt to maintain audiences in the Arab world. It is notable that, early in his career, he did not have a religious degree from an Islamic seminary.

In an attempt to understand the modes of production and representation of Islamic televangelism on 'Islamic talk shows' hosted by young *du'ah* (preachers) such as Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, and Mustafa Hosni, Yasmin Moll (2010) has suggested the idea of a 'visual *da'wah*' whereby a Muslim, through his very bodily and sartorial appearance, can come to call others to a more faithful adherence to faith, an inward disposition not accessible to external knowledge except through its visual embodiment (Moll 2010, pp. 3–8). Islamic media producers are highly conscious of embodied communication, tightly controlling what is allowed to appear on their screens and what cannot. It might explain why many of these Islamic media productions are not produced in public places because they simply cannot control what might appear in the background, specifically women not conforming to the station's interpretation of what constitutes acceptable Islamic attire.

There are two main discourses that are associated with the Islamic media environment today (Abu Haiba 2011) that clearly appeal to different types of audiences and demographics, although they both share a general contradiction between their mission statements and their actual programmes and directions. First, there are the Salafi channels that are primarily focused on rituals and spirituality, where women and music are virtually non-existent, accompanied by a surprisingly low-key political discourse. Second, there are the moderate, or middle-ground Islamic channels that attempt to expand and widen their interests into social and developmental matters, by dealing with matters that go beyond Islamic laws and spirituality.⁴ These two discourses reflect contemporary, bipolar, Islamic media that clearly replaced the old 1990s polarity between Islam versus secularism with a more contemporary one of Salafism versus middle-ground Islam. A study by Hosam Tammam made an assessment of how these channels develop their discourses to reinforce a retrospective religious vision for the Islamic community by setting standards for what is believed to be the 'correct' practice of 'pure' Islam (Tammam 2011). This study also suggests that these channels are not interested in the social milieu of the communities, but rather on mobilizing viewers to become one with age old 'Salaf' religious practices.

The most prominent example of a conservative Salafi televangelist is that of Abboud al-Zumur, who, on being released from life imprisonment for his involvement in a plot to assassinate late President Anwar Sadat on 6 October 1981, discussed the minority tax (*jizya*) on camera

and also suggested the need to exclude non-Muslims from military service (Moussa 2011). He also accused the Coptic Church of allegiance to the West, and openly questioned its patriotism, while demanding that the church come under close state supervision.

It is also crucial to understand how and why these channels were established (Cambridge Arab Media Report, 2011). In the case of 'Al-Majd' (The Glory), the channel had originated in the Wahhabi movement, and was driven by a religious nationalist movement with a strong local identity. This explains why the channel eagerly invested in maintaining hierarchies and power relations in society (Kimmel 2000). 'Al-Majd' promoted certain gender roles, by urging that women should not appear on television. 'Al-Nas' broadcasts from Egypt, although it is owned by a Saudi businessman. The Cambridge Arab Media Report (2011, p. 39) says that the channel was established in 2006 as an entertainment channel, but in a bid to ensure profitability it transformed itself into a religious broadcasting channel in 2007 with 'a screen that would take you to Paradise'. The channel's discourse focuses on the salvation of the individual rather than social participation, and on religious appearance and duties such as wearing a beard, regular prayer and fasting. Tolerance is presented only as an issue for Sunni Muslims. The Salafi influence is evident in its position on gender roles. Female announcers are not permitted, even wearing the '*niqab*' (face-veil) although there were female announcers when the channel was first established. Many of the presenters argue that only men are entitled to knowledge, and harshly criticized religious channels that have permitted female presenters.

Hosam adds that these channels reproduce a Salafi vision of the world that only embraces *Alfiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) and other religious practices, while creating an imaginary public space within which audiences engage sheikhs in general discussions via conversations that have a 'private' feel to them (Brooke 2009). One of the characteristics of these stations is their sparse production and sets, along with an absence of artistic input from technical staff, all contributing to an ambience of puritanism. These channels are also characterized by their usage of '*Fusha*' (classical Arabic), and have always remained committed to the predominant usage of religious texts over intellectual expositions and treatises. Hence, the programming, for the most part, follows the genre of talking heads who are involved in commenting and explaining the interpretation and explanations of written script. Stations such as 'Al-Nas' and 'Al-Majd Group', as well as channels such as 'Al-Rahma' (The Mercy) and 'Al-Hafiz' (The Protector) follow this model.

Within this new media landscape, young and media-oriented religious figures, known in Arabic as '*Al-Du'al-Gudud*' (the new preachers), exploit the demand for such programming and have achieved considerable popularity, drawing audiences from all classes and walks of life. The culture of this new brand of televangelist has transformed this genre, although one can argue that all they offer is a conservatism expressed in the idioms and language of popular culture and that appeal to the lifestyles of upwardly mobile populations in the country. This new generation of televangelists, whether they belong to Salafim or moderate Islam, are brands in themselves. They sell multiple products, lifestyle choices and many of these channels include in their programme schedules a wide range of lifestyle programmes that offer instructions to so-called 'true muslims' on how to cook, how to eat, how to dress and even how to live. Another distinguishing feature of the majority of these new preachers is their use of new technology to reach large audiences, such as e-mail and chat rooms for online prayer and religious instruction. Many have shifted their efforts from a focus on religious instruction and related television programmes to the sale of product lines and profitable television appearances on networks such as 'Dream' and 'LBC', as well as the religion-oriented channels 'al-Resalah', 'Al-Nas', and 'al-Hekma' (The Wisdom). Some of these '*Al-Du'a_Gudud*' have developed their own Islamic cassette companies. Amr Khaled collections, for example, have been the top-selling item at the Cairo International Book Fair. Amr Khaled has, for example, earned the equivalent of US \$9000 a month for his programme, a handsome sum in a country where the per capita annual income is barely the equivalent of US \$1350 (Ziad 2011). This business success is also reflected in the rhetoric, that mimics the prosperity gospel favoured by some neo-Pentecostal televangelists, and that praises wealth as a sign of God's blessing, even arguing that multiplying one's wealth is a sign of getting closer to God!

Discussion and conclusion

To understand the root causes and possible outcomes of Salafi Islamic televangelism, it must be kept in mind that this mediatized phenomenon is viewed not only as a resistance to the undemocratic, exploitative face of globalization but also as a response to long standing socio-political and economic grievances and injustices in society. For those frustrated audiences, resentment has not only become a response to political-economic domination, it is also an outcome of racial cultural subjugation and humiliation. Denial, blame, and projection are typical

forms of explanation for the popularity of Salafi Islamic televangelism in societies such as Egypt, characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and scientific backwardness.

Since the mid-1990s, the influence of satellite television broadcasting in the Arab world has become central to shaping public attitudes in the region and beyond. This chapter attempted to understand the role and impact of these Islamic televangelist channels and whether they constituted a historical shift in the way religious discourse is communicated. The study has also highlighted reasons for the growing popularity of these channels, especially the Salafi ones, their audiences, discourses, intellectual opponents, and preferred theology.

The chapter also emphasizes the potential fallout from Salafi channels in the Arab world especially if they continue communicating a narrow agenda. Although one cannot generalize, and given the limited literature, this study indicates that despite the presence and popularity of Salafi television among Arabs, especially in Egypt, that conservatism in religious beliefs is contested, as are Arab governments' cultivation of Salafism. This study also indicates the existence of correlations between the success of these Salafi channels and the discourse on re-establishing an Islamic identity and sense of belonging. However, it is clear that in order to get a fuller picture of the ecology of Islamic televangelism more studies need to be carried out on its audiences and variations within and across countries. This can only be done on the basis of a thorough knowledge of local cultures, languages and circumstances. This study also indicates that the success of these channels is, in some measure, related to the vulnerability of the Arab people, in particular, the disadvantaged majorities who, because of circumstances, tend to be victims of this 'secondary orality' by accepting the literal meaning of the discourses presented.

In conclusion, there is the need for counter-narrative efforts focused on deconstructing religious extremist propaganda in the media, in particular the emotive and ideological aspects of audio-visual texts. This can be done by analysing the context of religious sources used in popular productions, and replacing extremist interpretations with moderate perspectives.

There are a number of new television channels that were launched to fight 'extremist' Salafi channels and regain the stature of Al-Azhar.⁵ Mention, in particular, must be made of the 'Azhari' channel that aims to revive the role of Al-Azhar. At the end of the day, the only practical way to curb the expansion of Salafi Islamic televangelism is to move the focus back to a more pluralized society. The starting point is to develop

media discourses that stimulate public engagement and deliberation. This study strongly recommends further research on diaspora media targeting Muslim audiences in non-Arab-speaking cultures, because the threats are more salient among people who do not understand the original text of the Qur'an, and who tend to use interpretations that have been 'lost in translation', in particular with regard to radical ideas of Salafism and Wahhabism.

Notes

1. "Salafism can be considered more widespread and less "tainted" (as they would see it) by State power. They tend to regard the Wahhabis as being "tainted" in this way, as having prioritised the interests of their own nation states over the interests of global Islam. Thus, while they are in broad agreement with the puritanical ethos of Wahhabism, they blame the latter for such perceived outrages as allowing American (non-Muslim) troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia, near the Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Furthermore, one of the key aims of the Salafis is the restoration of the Caliphate – a kind of politico-religious authority that would encompass the whole Muslim world – and the identification of Wahhabism with particular nation states and even particular dynasties is seen as inimical to this aim. Much of the terrorist activity and other acts of violence that we in the West often associate with the Muslim world is carried out by groups who are inspired by the principles of Salafism, or at least backed financially and/or militarily by such groups' (Brown, 2010).
2. Islamic fundamentalism (Choueiri 1997) should be defined as a specific synthesis of liberal Islam and traditionalist Islam, which valorizes and uses *ijtiha'd* (Diligence). The consequences of an *a priori* negative evaluation can be epistemologically serious. As this article has shown, this epistemological error can also have serious consequences in people's lives.
3. Ecumenism (Kobia 2006) is a movement within Christianity towards the recovery of unity among all Christians.
4. The moderate channels feature women as anchors, guests and among the general public presenting media stories. These stations include 'Iqraa' and 'Alrisala' and the Islamic art channels, such as the 'channel 4shaabab,' (channel for the youth). These channels attempt in an inconsistent way to produce and broadcast intellectual shows focused on personal debates and justifications. In addition, the channels address many controversial social and cultural issues because they are keen on extending their appeal to the more educated and informed public. They do this by providing discourses that seem more stimulating, more open to dialogue, and that intellectually engage with critical issues.
5. Al-Azhar University (pronounced 'Az-har', Arabic: *Game'at Al-Azhar al-Šarif*, 'the Noble Azhar University') is an educational institute in Cairo, Egypt. Founded in 970–972 as a *madrasa*, it is the chief centre of Arabic literature and Islamic learning in the world. It is the oldest degree-granting university in Egypt. In 1961 non-religious subjects were added to its curriculum (Farid 2006).

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