

I want to be committed

Short-lived trajectories of Salafi activism in Egypt

ABSTRACT

Why is it difficult to be committed? Difficulty is definitely not the impression that transpires from the sermons of revivalist preachers who emphasise the ease and simplicity of Islam as a comprehensive guideline of life. Much of the attraction of the revivalist turn to textual knowledge and moral perfection in general, and Salafi Islam in particular, lies in its apparent simplicity and straightforwardness, typically expressed in ritual and moral rigour, a quest to leave no gray areas in a world neatly divided into the permitted and the prohibited. And yet most of those who sympathise with the idea of commitment do not try to turn it into reality. And many of those who do try (and increasingly many do as Salafi preachers have been gaining more ground as the representatives of correct, standard Islam), eventually find their activist drive inexplicably receding, face problems in living a committed life, and discover more and more contradictions in the teachings and teachers they follow. When people try to be perfect, there is trouble involved. This article tells their story.

Keywords: commitment, Salafism, Egypt, Islam, biography, activism.

Within a few months' time in 2009, three friends of mine told me independently of each other that they "want to be committed" (*'ayizl'ayza altazim*) but find it surprisingly difficult and frustrating. They all share an experience that in the first decade of the 21st century had become a paradigmatic case of intensive spiritual and moral dedication: Salafi activism. Of the various movements and currents that characterise the Islamic revival, Salafism emerged in the first decade of the 21st century as one of the most powerful in setting the tone of what it means to be truly religious. And "commitment" (*iltizam*) has become a very compelling keyword to discuss and describe what it means to be a good Muslim.

Why is it difficult to be committed? Difficulty is definitely not the impression that transpires from the sermons of preachers who emphasise the ease and simplicity of Islam as a comprehensive guideline of life. Much of the attraction of the revivalist turn to textual knowledge and moral perfection in general, and Salafi Islam in particular, lies in its apparent simplicity and

straightforwardness, typically expressed in ritual and moral rigour, a quest to leave no gray areas in a world neatly divided into the permitted and the prohibited. And yet most of those who sympathise with the idea of commitment do not try to turn it into reality. And many of those who do try (and increasingly many do as Salafi preachers have been gaining more ground as the representatives of correct, standard Islam), eventually find their activist drive inexplicably receding, face problems in living a committed life, and discover more and more contradictions in the teachings and teachers they follow. When people try to be perfect, there is trouble involved.

This article tells their story, and shows that in order to understand a specific path of commitment and dedication, it is necessary to pay attention to existential pursuits, historical conditions and unexpected consequences. The strive for perfection is a paradoxical path in a life in the future tense that may fail to accomplish a pious formation of the self, and yet it always transforms those who give it a try – only it does so in unpredictable ways.

In circumstances where all promises of good life are in some ways troubled, religion has a powerful promise of hope, happiness and clarity. This probably has always been so, and for most of the young men and women I know, religion is an important part of their lives and imaginations, a source and an element of a good life. For them, religion is a framework of subjectivity and action that is neither exclusive nor exhaustive and that, precisely because of the flexibility it has in practice, can maintain its perfection in theory (see also SIMON 2009, SCHIELKE and DEBEVEC 2012). But for various reasons, some of the people I know have come to a point where they have wanted to go further, to turn the idea of perfection into a perfect life. And yet their activist commitment has been troubled in different ways. The outcomes of their attempts to overcome the disturbing ambiguity of everyday life have been ambiguous most of the time, and tragic at times.

Wanting to be committed is by no means something Muslims have always wanted. There is no doubt that deep and consistent religious devotion has a long history in Egypt and elsewhere. But the specific way of being religious involved in “commitment” is distinctively modern – even the word *iltizam* itself is borrowed from nationalist discourse where it originally was used to translate the French literary-political notion of *engagement* (KLEMM 2000; SARTRE 1947). There is a characteristically factual and systemic sense to *iltizam* that distinguishes it from earlier notions of piety: its focus is less on tradition, communal belonging, and personal devotion to the prophet and Muslim saints, and more on the meticulous work on oneself through a constant comparison of one’s actions and feelings with normative texts.

Embracing a Salafi understanding of religiosity and morality is not necessarily the same thing as becoming a committed Salafi, however. In the words of the Egyptian journalist Husam Tamam, Salafism in Egypt is less about strictly following a Salafi path and more about cultivating a Salafi “mood” (*mazag*), a way to think about the power of God in daily life that embraces the creed but not necessarily the con-

sequent path of perfection (TAMAM and KREIL 2010; PETERSON 2012). Within this mood, there is much space for different paths, from unveiled young women listening to Salafi sermons to men with long beards citing love poetry. But it is also a mood that opens a particularly compelling path of dedication to those who for various reasons search for a more comprehensive certainty, a more certain sense of purpose, a more unambiguous way to tell right from wrong.

To summarise, commitment as the ideal of a religious life is intertwined with the pursuit of knowing Islam as a foundation of moral practice and being. At the same time, the Salafi path of commitment is rather different from the “Salafi mood” of a life guided by a textual positivist ideal of religiosity. The latter is about living a complex life in the guidance of moments of firm hold, while the first is about overcoming complexity for the sake of a single, exclusive sense of purpose.

This is why I insist on using the notion of commitment (*iltizam*) that is current in Egypt rather than the notion of piety that has become so popular in the anthropology of Islam lately. Looking at the emotional, spiritual and societal grounds and consequences of religious commitment, I argue that trajectories of commitment may be more telling about the nature of activist dedication than they are about piety in general. Taking into account the specific character of given activist movements as well as the personal idiosyncrasies and comparative moments of activist dedication, we will be able to understand Salafi commitment better, both in its specific shape and in its relation to more general human pursuits.

The question, then, is why Salafi commitment is so compelling, and what kind of an experience, what kind of emotional and practical consequences are involved in it. This is a question that requires a biographic approach that can account for the emergence and changes of people’s pursuits in life. While I have met and interviewed many more who are or have been involved in the pursuit of Salafi commitment, this article focusses on the stories of three people whom I have known over a long time: Mus-

tafa whom I met in early 2006 when he was in his mid-twenties and who joined a rural Salafi group in search for a solid moral ground amidst of a personal crisis; Fu'ad, whom I know since 1998 and who during his thirties went through several short periods of intensive *iltizam* but has generally kept a distance to Salafi organizations; and Nagat, a woman whom I know since 2003 and whose spiritual search lead her to a short-lived experiment with Salafism in her mid-twenties.

Solving a crisis

When I first met Mustafa in early 2006 in his native village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, he had just gone through very difficult times. His father with whom he had been very close had died three years earlier. This had left him seriously disoriented, and to make things worse he had become the senior male in his family, loaded with responsibilities but lacking experience to handle them. In this situation he got into what he describes as bad company and started smoking hashish on a regular basis and getting into various kinds of trouble. His habit of smoking hashish ended up costing him a sizeable part of the inheritance his father had left him until his mother and uncle intervened. In this period, also a love relationship that he was engaged in came to an unhappy end. After a while he gave up his consumption of hashish and started to look for a principle to tell right from wrong, a principle that he found in Salafi piety. He started praying in a Salafi mosque, grew his beard long, shortened the hems of his trousers in the Salafi manner and tried to stop smoking cigarettes (Salafis hold that smoking is *haram*). He demanded his mother (who until then dressed in a colourful combination of long gown and headscarf common in the countryside) to wear the the full face veil *niqab*, which she refused, and they settled for a single-colour *khimar* that is more plain than the standard dress but does not cover the face. He removed all pictures from his home, except for the photograph of his late father which he did not have the heart to remove. Months of intensive piety and worship

followed, a period that he describes as a very happy time in his life. But bit by bit, practical problems came up: he was compelled to shave his beard when he was about to be conscripted, felt the drive of piety slowing down, started smoking cigarettes again and became less dedicated in his observance of ritual obligations. Still holding to Salafi ideas of piety but not finding the energy to enact them, he began to suffer from feelings of guilt and failure.

This was the state he was in when I met him again in the autumn of 2006. In a matter of few months he had gained the reputation of being an enthusiastic Salafi proselytiser, and although he no longer sported a Salafi habitus, young men continued to ask him for Salafi literature which he got from his sheikh. And yet he was deeply shattered. He was troubled by his quite inexplicable inability to maintain the rigorous ritual schedule of Salafism which, additionally to the obligatory five daily prayers, contains an extensive programme of voluntary prayers and lectures. He felt that he had found the correct, true Islam but that he failed to live it out. He had been happy, but now he was troubled.

His friend Tawfiq who has not gone through such intense crises as Mustafa did, described Mustafa's move to religious commitment as a sudden and surprising transformation and suggested that those who have gone seriously astray in their lives are the ones who become very strict when religious. He argued that Mustafa may have gone too far and put himself under so much strain that he now was suffering a backlash.

Like Mustafa, Tawfiq adheres to notions of ritual practice close to the Salafi movement. He does not, for example, pray in the main mosque of the village because it was built next to the tomb of the local Muslim saint. But Tawfiq has never been attracted by the idea of becoming *multazim* in a religious sense. He has been following other compelling pursuits (such as migration and revolution) with great determination, but his religiosity meets the bare minimum by conventional standards. While Tawfiq and Mustafa thus share a similar religious doctrine, their paths of religious practice have been

very different. Both give the same answer to the question as to what motivated Mustafa's Salafi turn: an urgent personal crisis experienced as a moral vacuum. In Mustafa's words, it was a matter of urgently wanting to be able to "know right from wrong".

By late 2006, it looked like Mustafa's attempt to find a moral ground of certainty had failed and taken him from one crisis to another. But he had little time to dwell in this situation. He had to go to the army. In Egypt military service is usually associated with extreme physical and emotional hardship: bad food, lack of sleep, and continuous humiliation. According to Mustafa, few soldiers keep their prayers, and even fewer fast during Ramadan. In the hardship of the army, all other considerations come second to the crucial issues of friendship and material conditions that allow one to stay healthy and sane. As I met Mustafa during holidays, he would still occasionally discuss his trouble with *iltizam*, but it bothered him less. The military service kept him busy, and in a peculiar fashion it offered him something of the same thing he had been searching in Salafism. During a holiday shortly before his release from the army in 2008, he told:

Meanwhile I feel relaxed/at peace (*mirtah*) in the army. Since a few months, although it's difficult and there is a lot of humiliation and trouble (*bah-dala*), I feel at peace because everything has a clear structure, you don't have to think for yourself -- I take care of my things, see that my stuff is OK in case of inspection so that I don't get punished, and everything follows a clear routine.

After his release he again told me that despite having had a tough time in the beginning, he eventually found the military service the best time in his life. Military service gave him discipline and order – very similar, he said, to what he was looking for among the Salafis. It was this sense of a clear schedule and structure that he felt he had been lacking, and which he now was beginning to gain bit by bit. He appeared less anxious, and although he did occasionally smoke a joint again, he did not return to the intensive consumption pattern that had messed

up his life in the past. He was pursuing various plans to find work, and he eventually found a reasonable if not perfect work as a salesman for an import-export company.

Although Mustafa has since then faced new troubles and tragedies in his life, he has not been drawn to Salafi commitment again. When I met him in Alexandria in spring 2010, months after his brother was killed in a car accident, he was still recovering from the shock and sorrow of the accident, but he did not express a sense of a loss of direction. On the contrary, he said that this sudden tragedy had made him acutely aware of his obligations towards his mother.

In the course of our discussion, Mustafa asked me where I stand with my research, and this turned the talk back to his Salafi experiment four years earlier. I started by telling that I have been looking at the way people hold perfectionist ideas, not just about religion but also about love and material welfare, without it having to mean that their lives look like that. Instead, I explained, I thought that they search for a firm hold in perfectionist ideas in order to find a way in life. Mustafa agreed and related this idea to his own experience of commitment: He described his trajectory as a path curving left and right from "the straight path" (*as-sirat al-mustaqim*), but approximately following its course. He drew this with his finger on the table: a straight line, and a curving line following it.

Mustafa: "I still sometimes feel that I want to be committed (*'ayiz altazim*), but I find myself unable to return to it. When I pray, I may manage the noon prayer but I forget the afternoon prayer and lose the rhythm again".

I suggested that the reason may be that he became a committed Salafi because he was experiencing a personal crisis which he urgently wanted to solve and which gave him the drive, desperately searching as he was for a way to tell right from wrong. But when his crisis was solved, he bit by bit came to stand on his feet through a long process in which the Salafi period and the time in the army were key experiences. Standing on his feet and being again able to instinctively tell right from wrong, knowing

which way to go, he no longer has the need nor the urge for *iltizam*, I suggested.

Mustafa: “That is true, although I find it difficult to admit it to myself. But when I hear it from someone else, it is absolutely true. But the beliefs I took on then have become rooted in me. They stick also when I do not follow them. Praying, for example. I know I should do it even if I find it difficult to keep up with it. Or *sadaqa* (voluntary alms). Sometimes I give a generous alm to a beggar willingly and with ease. But at other times I think about the bills to pay and the economical pressure I’m in and I reluctantly give fifty piastres”.

Developing this thought, Mustafa again drew the straight path and the curving path with his finger on the table.

For Mustafa, his Salafi activism has done two kinds of an emotional work: for one thing, it was part of his own troubled search for a firm ground. Salafism did not actually provide an answer to this search, it was not the solution he was looking for, else his period of commitment would have been longer. But just like the army, it helped him find clues through which he eventually has found the moral ground he was looking for. Part of this ground is the Islamic notion of the straight path (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) which he acquired during his Salafi period. Another part was his recognition of his need for structure and discipline which he acquired during his military service. This acquiring of notions that in combination could become constituents of a moral ground was the second kind of emotional work involved in his activist period. And yet although he continues to adhere to Salafi notions of good ritual and moral life, his vision of the straight path is quite different from the Salafi ideal of whole-hearted and uncompromising commitment, just like it is quite different from military discipline. In Islamic eschatological tradition, from where the notion of the straight path has been developed into a principle of righteous life, *al-sirat al-mustaqim* is a bridge as narrow as a knife’s blade which people must pass in order to enter Paradise. Those misguided fall to hell, those rightly guided enter Paradise. There is no space for detours. Mustafa, howev-

er, borrows from common wisdom the idea of approximation, of a life drifting at times to the left and at times to the right but more or less maintaining the right direction. It is also worth noting that the kind of religious values Mustafa entertains are coloured by his personal preferences. Prayer and charity are what concerns him most. In regard to gender relations he is more ambiguous. And although he did vote for the Salafi Nur Party in the 2011 elections (because he considered the Salafis as the only political force capable of restoring law and order), he generally holds little of Islamist politics.

Unsolved struggles

What made the pursuit of Salafism so attractive to Mustafa, and why did he stop? This was a question which Mustafa, Fu’ad and I were pondering on while having a walk in the fields during a holiday from the military service in autumn 2007. Speaking out of his own experience with short periods of *iltizam*, Fu’ad offered a basically psychological explanation:

The search for *iltizam* is a way to give oneself peace: to concentrate on worship and to thank God for whatever the circumstances are. That makes it a way to handle the pressures and troubles, but they will later appear again, and people’s commitment will recede, and that causes often even greater pressure than one experienced before the period of commitment. One misses the feeling of being included in God’s mercy and the happiness about being committed, and at the same time one has developed a more intense feeling of guilt (*zamb*) for anything sinful.

In Fu’ad’s interpretation there emerges a contrast between the ideal and the actual motivations and experience of pious commitment. Determined, all-encompassing pious commitment remains for him the real, ideal way of being a good Muslim. In his view, *iltizam* is something that Muslims should strive for at all times, and what really counts is developing a profound, even if not visible, religious character. But at the same time he argues that actually the psychological reason for pious commitment is that

one wants to find peace. Only afterwards is one actually confronted with the details of obligations involved in a committed Salafi life. Mustafa confirmed this from his own experience: “I was first asking: how can I find peace (*artab*), the rest followed”.

Fu’ad’s psychological interpretation about the consequences of *iltizam* is not a consistent one either. It contains two parallel, partly contradicting versions. In one version, you become *multazim* in an attempt to escape your inner conflicts and problems, but they will still follow you, which is why the pursuit of pious commitment motivated by personal trouble is likely to be unsuccessful. In another version, Fu’ad points out that Mustafa who was a real trouble-maker before, did profit from his period of commitment by becoming a calmer and more responsible person. In one version, Salafi style religiosity is an escape from one’s inner struggles, and not a real solution because it does not solve one’s inner struggles. In another, Salafi style religiosity as a period in one’s life can help to break a personal crisis or a life of deviance and lead to a more balanced life.

In both Fu’ad’s and Mustafa’s accounts, a vision of commitment as the true, proper sense of being Muslim is intertwined with psychological and moral urgencies. When Fu’ad speaks about commitment as an ideal way of being Muslim he sounds very much like the sermons and religious slogans that present commitment as a cumulative path of perfection, and also like some of the ethnographies that develop a theory of Islamic ethics and piety as an aspirational project of self-formation. And yet when he speaks about the actual experience of commitment, it appears as a much more fragile and troubled business. This is immediately related to his own experience as a committed Salafi-style Muslim.

Fu’ad has gone through at least four periods of Salafi-style commitment, one in his youth and three in his adult age, the last of them in 2010. These periods have been short, possibly because the very perfectionism of being committed stands in too stark a contrast to his playful and willingly ambiguous character. By 2011, he turned quite radically against Salafism and

became involved in revolutionary politics and liberal hermeneutics, which gives his trajectory a particular twist.

Since his marriage in 2003, Fu’ad has become generally more religious than he was before, but at the same time he has also enthusiastically pursued artistic and literary pursuits and visions of life and society that he describes as leftist. He never tried to reconcile these pursuits with his religious trajectory which in Egyptian parlance would best be described as non-movement (*ghayr haraki*) Salafism, focussed on the pursuit of *iltizam* but not aligned with any particular group or leader. He willingly admits to being “a person of extraordinary contradictions”. (This may also be why he is likely to articulate a psychological explanation of his and others’ trajectories.) But at times, the contradictions and pressures of life have become too much for him. His periods of Salafi commitment appear as an attempt to get into terms with some especially troubling pressures and contradictions in his life by trying to make one principle prevail over all others – an attempt that he recognises as an agonistic one: “It’s as if there were two of me, each trying to kill the other”. Being “committed” for him has been related to being mentally in a bad shape, and becoming “moderate” again has been part of a general improvement in his emotional situation.

In this sense, there is a tragic moment in Fu’ad’s strive for commitment. Unlike with Mustafa for whom the end of his Salafi period was a painful but eventually fruitful experience, Fu’ad’s relation with *iltizam* has been often agonistic as he has been repeatedly trying to overcome feelings of guilt and conflict in ways that have actually increased his sense of guilt and his moments of conflict – and he is the first one to admit it. The promise of happiness through perfection became a measure-stick that provided him with impossible demands and troubling, even destructive solutions. Most of the time between 2003 and 2010, he did not pursue these solutions, and the perfectionist demands to which he adhered did offer him a sense of spiritual and moral trust. But in moments when he did pursue the path of perfection, the results were ambiguous.

If Fu'ad's trajectory with *iltizam* was marked by antagonism and impulsiveness, so was also its end in January 2011. A long-standing opponent of the Mubarak regime, Fu'ad participated in demonstrations against the government in Alexandria almost daily in January and February 2011. In this time, he became enraged about the support of the regime by Salafi organisations that in Alexandria distributed leaflets telling that demonstrating against the government is forbidden to Muslims. On one occasion, he witnessed how the sheikh of a Salafi mosque he knew locked the doors on demonstrators who tried to take a seriously wounded person to the mosque. He became founding member of a left-wing political activist circle in the village in the spring of 2011 and a regular demonstrator against the military government, and later the Muslim Brotherhood. After 2011, Fu'ad has become not only a fervent supporter of the revolution but also a sharp critic of Salafi sheikhs and organisations. He has also turned away from the textual hermeneutics of facts and has instead appropriated a humanistic or Sufi vision of Islam that circle around the idea of a loving God and reading of holy texts as a creative act. But while he has turned from *iltizam* and the struggle with himself towards a struggle with society, antagonism remains a key trait of his life – but the thrust and scope of the struggle has shifted.

Searching for perfection

It would be mistaken, however, to claim that the turn to Salafi commitment is generally motivated by personal crises and struggles. The search for peace through clarity and rigorous perfection does emerge as a core motivation for religious commitment, and so does a discomfort with ambiguity. But this search can be grounded in quite different life experiences and expectations. This has been the case in the spiritual search of Nagat, an unmarried woman in her mid-twenties (at the time of her experiment in Salafi commitment) from a village in the central Delta province of Sharqiyya.

Nagat comes from a devout Sufi (Islamic mystic) family. Her late father was the sheikh

of a small Sufi group, and since her childhood she has been travelling with her family to several *mulids* (Muslim saints-day festivals, see Schielke 2012) around the country where they organise a service of free food and a celebration with a religious singer at night. Through her socialisation in the culture of *mulids* she knows a considerably wider range of people, points of view and ways of life than most of her female age-mates in her village.

As long as I have known Nagat she has been very religious by any standards. She fasts two days a week, prays regularly, and shows great interest in religious matters. However, Nagat's religious interests have developed in a way that has made her look beyond the devout but un-intellectual traditions of spirituality in her family. In the course of this process, she became increasingly interested in the scripturalist ideals of normative religious behaviour that gained currency in Egypt in the past decades. In 2006 she shifted her style of clothing from a colourful combination of headscarf, blouse and skirt to a long black *khimar* that reveals only her face. In 2008 she started attending Qur'an classes in a neighbouring village. These classes, like so many others around the country, were organised by a Salafi group. Nagat became quickly more and more drawn to the teachings of her sheikh, a schoolteacher in his late twenties who provided her with books by Nasir al-Din al-Albani, Muhammad ibn Baz and other modern Salafi or Wahhabi authorities. By the end of 2008 she had stopped travelling to *mulids* with her family, following the Salafi view of Muslim saints veneration as idolatry. She stopped watching soap operas, films and video clips, and instead had the television set turned on religious programming except when her brother insisted on watching a movie. She also wanted to start wearing the full face veil (*niqab*) but this was refused by her family. As I discussed her Salafi turn with her during this time she was very enthusiastic about it but insisted that she was not following the Salafi teachings but quite generic Islamic views. In her family, this predictably caused conflicts, and especially her older brother was very upset but unable to make her change her mind.

Yet when I returned to Egypt in the autumn of 2009, she asked me to join her family to a *mulid*. Her Salafi turn was over and she was back to the Sufi devotion of her family. She was also back to watching soap operas, films and game shows on television. I may have not been entirely uninvolved in this because I had sent with her brother a selection of books representing contemporary Islamic discourses ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood over Sufism to liberal Islamic thought. As we met again she thanked me for the books, especially for one by Gamal al-Banna, an influential thinker of a liberal current in the Islamist milieu which others have called “post-Islamism” (ROY 1999). But more important than the books, it seems, were her own experiences in the Salafi milieu that had compelled her to go on with her spiritual search:

I want to be committed (*‘ayza akun multazima*) and I search for perfection. But wherever I look for it, in the end I find contradictions. The sheikh whose Qur’an course I attended last winter, turned out to act contrary to his own teachings. He was teaching that the mixing of sexes is strictly forbidden (*haram*), but he was teaching women! And he was telling that music and television are *haram*, but he was having a song as a ringtone on his phone and watching movies. In the beginning, I completely adored the sheikh and his teachings, but in the end, he fell completely. After that I followed for some time the preachers on television. I called them on the phone many times but found that also they contradicted themselves.

What troubles Nagat most in Salafism is the way Salafi men relate to women. She describes them as having a tense, unnatural relationship to the opposite sex:

In the village quite a few young men have recently let their beards grow and go to pray in a mosque in al-Mahalla al-Kubra (industrial city in the central Delta region). They have become very strict and committed, and keep saying “it is not allowed in Islamic Law” (*la yaguz shar’an*) to everything although just shortly before they were ordinary youths who would flirt with girls. But now they make a big curve around women and look away as if we were something filthy.

A friend of mine has a cousin who joined the Sala-

fis and let his beard grow long. When he met her again he started to admonish her. He told her that she must wear a face-veil (*niqab*) and that she will be going to hell. The poor girl got so upset that started crying and finally shouted at him: “What’s the matter with you? Wasn’t it you who used to be looking at me through the window and sending me love letters!?”

The image of the love-letter writing young man suddenly turning into a preaching and admonishing sheikh emerges as the central moment of Nagat’s critique of the perfectionism of committed Salafis. For her, there is something insincere and suspect in the young men’s sudden zeal for gender segregation. And she also sees it as unfair towards women. For Nagat the Salafi pursuit of perfection discredited itself through its inherent contradictions – which women feel more severely than men.

After leaving behind both the village Salafi group and the Salafi preachers on television Nagat identified herself with the Sufi devotion of her family again. But she continued searching. In spring 2009 she told me that her path of perfection continues to attract her, but the closer she looks, the more she is puzzled by the answers, so for example regarding the difference of the Sunna and Shia branches of Islam. Having taken a look at both, she came to the conclusion that they both have a point of view which is logical in itself and confirms its own rightness. How can she tell which one of them is right?

Telling this to me, she expressed her puzzlement: How come is the pursuit of perfection so contradictory? How come is it so difficult to be committed? As she asked me for my opinion, I answered that in my personal view, in order to be a good person one needs to listen to one’s heart and to give space for the different movements and moments in oneself. She recognised herself in my point of view, and said that she tries to be perfect but at the same time she does things every day which she decides not to do again and then does them again the next day.

Writing about Dutch Salafis, Martijn de Koning (2009) has shown that contradictions are inherent to the search for moral clarity and perfection, but that they do not necessar-

ily compromise the project of activist commitment. Rather, the repeated experience of imperfection is actually a major motivation for the further pursuit of perfection (see also BEEKERS 2015). Navida Khan working on Pakistan points out that there is a search for perfection grounded in the specific history of Pakistan as a Muslim nation. It is an open-ended striving perfection, however, that has no end nor finite state of accomplishment. Instead, it gives rise to spiritual experimentation and striving, a “doing and re-doing of known forms” (KHAN 2012: 7).

There is an ambiguity between perfection as a concrete promise and as an open-ended quest, and this ambiguity can be motivating as well as troubling. Different people draw different conclusions from the experience of that ambiguity, depending on their social and intellectual resources, families and friendships, and personal temperament.

While Nagat was disappointed about the reality of Salafi activism, she remained more than a little ambivalent about the issue of perfection. In one moment she held the idea of perfection high, lamenting the Salafi sheikhs not for their teachings but for their own weakness when it comes to living as they teach. In another moment she distanced herself from the very pursuit of perfection and commented that people keep wanting to see everything as black and white, and that she thinks that there must also be something in the middle.

Unlike Mustafa who for a long time saw the end of his Salafi period as a failure, Nagat could see her return from the Salafi path of commitment largely as an accomplishment. It endowed her with a significantly increased trust in her own judgement, which she has since then demonstrated in articulating and insisting on her point of view when discussing with her family her plans for marriage. Importantly, this emphasis on one’s own judgement and moral agency is not simply as a consequence of her break with Salafism, but was already part of her embracing it, moral agency being ingrained to the very project of commitment, with often contradictory outcomes (ABU-LUGHOD 1996; KARLSSON MINGANTI 2008; SCHULZ 2011; ABENANTE in

this issue). This does not mean that she would have started to pursue feminist notions of gender equality, however. She searches for a space of action, mastery over her life and capacity to speak out her feelings within a conservative and pious framework.

Through her serious engagement with the idea of perfection Nagat displays a much stronger sensibility and dislike for contradictions than was displayed by Mustafa and Fu’ad. At the same time, there is less sense of an existential crisis in her account. Nagat’s Salafi experiment was motivated by a more long-lasting spiritual search where serious and whole-hearted dedication plays a key role. While Nagat has become critical about the perfectionist, black and white ideal of commitment, her short-lived period of Salafi activist commitment did not give way to non-commitment as was the case with Mustafa. Instead, it was followed by a new, in a way much more radical commitment. She became a Shiite.

One of the paradoxical consequences of the spread of Salafi Islam is that by demonizing other traditions of Muslim piety, most importantly Sufism, and polemically associating them with Shia Islam – which in Salafi view is not Islam at all – Salafis have compelled many Egyptian Muslims to develop an increased interest in Shiism, among them Nagat and her brother. In a matter of few years, a small but thriving community of indigenous Egyptian Shia Muslims has come into existence. It is a very precarious existence because following Shia Islam is de facto illegal in Egypt, and people have been convicted to prison sentences for publicly identifying themselves as Shia Muslims.

For Nagat, joining the Shia branch of Islam was a way to link her Sufi devotion with a strongly mediated movement and a powerful religious doctrine where devotion for the family of the Prophet Muhammad had a central place. But it was also a clear gesture of opposition towards Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood, and since 2011 her embracing Shiism also has gone hand in hand with a firm political opposition against the Muslim Brotherhood, which she expresses and communicates with like-

minded people mainly by the means of social media and internet forums. Perhaps because Shiism in Egypt is by default minoritarian and oppositional, she does not experience it as contradicting her search for a space of independent action and expression the way Salafism did, nor does she search for perfection in purity the way she did as a Salafi – for example, she has no problem combining her Shiite devotion with her love for Turkish telenovelas.

Nagat is a person for whom it is important to do something right and good, and if possible do it hundred percent. Unlike for Fu'ad and Mustafa who became committed not only to be better Muslims but also to solve problems they suffered from, for Nagat commitment is something she pursues for the sake of being committed. With this temperament of hers, she might probably be drawn to some sort of activist commitment regardless of the circumstances. This raises the question as to what degree the power of Salafi commitment lies in the tradition of piety evoked by Salafi preachers and teachers, and to which degree it is related to more general (and also more idiosyncratic) human pursuits. How can we understand the appeal and the consequences of Salafism as a model of and for dedication and activist commitment in more general terms and in a historical moment when a reflective struggle with the self is a powerful paradigm of doing the right thing?

The grounds of dedication

Ethnographies about the religious lives of Muslims commonly focus on mosque communities, activist groups and institutions of religious education as sites of research. In consequence, they have also privileged people who consciously state themselves as pious, committed Muslims as their interlocutors (for an overview, see SOARES and OSELLA 2009). I am critical of this tendency because it involves the risk of taking their declared aims as paradigmatic cases of religiosity rather than considering the specific motivations, dynamics and outcomes of activist dedication. Accounting for the ways Mustafa, Fu'ad and Nagat reflect about their

own experience as committed activists I have tried to take the issue of pious commitment into a different direction.

Elsewhere (SCHIELKE 2009), I have argued that we should take seriously the ambiguous coexistence of different aims that characterises people's moral, religious and aspirational lives. I have made that argument primarily in relation to a vast majority of people who are not committed activists. But committed activists are not a different species of people, and just like they should not be made paradigmatic representatives of religious and other experience, they should not be excluded from it either. The question, then, is how to account for the specificity of activist commitment while recognising its embeddedness in more complex life trajectories, general societal sensibilities, and historical constellations. If not only the everyday lives of people who are not very committed but also the experience of people who do want to be committed are characterised by ambivalence and trouble, then it is not sufficient to expand our vision of religiosity from dedicated activists to include the not so dedicated majority. We need an approach that helps us to look at the existential grounds and consequences involved in following an activist trajectory.

This is, in fact, an issue that has been taken up in a number of recent studies on Muslim religious activism that instead of taking the activist paths for granted, specifically enquire about the underlying concerns, complex paths, and consequences of activist trajectories in a way that is open to their specificity as well as their connectedness to wider social experience (DE KONING 2009; HAFEZ 2011; SCHULZ 2011; GAUVAIN 2012; JANSON 2013; ABENANTE in this issue; BEEKERS 2015). From my part, I build on this body of work but want to specifically add two dimensions to the inquiry. One is the importance of looking at the trajectories of people whose activist commitment is either short (as with Mustafa) or shifting (as with Fu'ad and Nagat). The other is a theoretical approach that takes as its starting point the primacy of existential concerns and pragmatic considerations of living a life, the attempts by people to have power over one's own

condition – along with their often unpredictable and contradictory consequences (JACKSON 2005; ORSI 2005).

In the end, this is more than a theoretical problem: it is a matter of an emotional commitment to anthropology as a dialogue and an encounter. This is why I have tried to build this article on the reflection I have undertaken together with my interlocutors more than on current theoretical models. But this does not mean that I would advocate an ethnographic isolationism and refuse a comparative theoretical perspective. On the contrary, I believe that taking seriously the existential concerns and individual idiosyncracies of activist commitment helps us also to better understand both the specific appeal of Salafi Islam as well as the general pursuit of dedication.

The first step of an activist path is preceded and directed by a mood (*mazag*, see TAMAM and KREIL 2010), a diffuse structure of feeling (WILLIAMS 1977), a set of powerful pressures, anxieties, promises and hopes, and it is here that we must search for the particular appeal and dynamics of Salafi commitment. Contrary to some other researchers in the field (e.g., MAHMOOD 2005; HIRSCHKIND 2006a; CAEIRO 2006; ANJUM 2007), I do not think that this diffuse mood is best approached in the framework of a discursive tradition of Islam. Explaining the grounds and shapes of the contemporary transformations of Islamic religiosity in general and activist commitment in particular through a more or less given discursive tradition involves the risk of taking the emotional dynamics of a global wave of economical and religious transformation for granted instead of enquiring what exactly is going on. Muslims do not simply want to be good Muslims. They face a dynamic historical process in which some aims emerge as especially compelling, and in which pursuing these aims in turn has consequences that change the ways in which people view themselves, the world in which they live, and the future they expect.

The appeal of being committed has specific grounds and motivations. In my encounters with Mustafa, Fu'ad and Nagat, three motivations feature centrally. One is the search for an

immediate solution for an acute personal crisis; another is an ongoing struggle with conflicting pressures and pursuits; and a third is the desire to find something truly important to pursue in a way that gives one's life a clear and permanent purpose. All appear to be quite general human pursuits, but they are also specific to their life situations, their temperaments, and the promises and pressures that prevail in the world they are located in.

Some of the questions that arise from these three encounters, are: What makes a specific direction of activism attractive in a specific situation? What are the anxieties people try to overcome and what the promises they are offered? How does their actual work of dedication look like? What consequences does it have? How do the experiments of activist dedication, which are often temporary, become a part of people's biographies?

To pursue these questions it is important to be open to both the generally human, as well as the historically and culturally specific, as well as the individually idiosyncratic (while recognising that one can seldom if ever clearly distinguish one from the others). For the sake of illustration, I return to Mustafa's account once more. To understand his trajectory it is first of all necessary – but not sufficient – to look at the success of Salafi Islam in gaining a near hegemonic position as the most powerful religious voice in many parts of Egypt. According to Mustafa, he faced three choices in his search for a base to know right and wrong: The Sufis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Salafis. Having been socialised with a vague reformist sense of Islam like many from among his generation, the Sufis were already disqualified for him. The Islamist political activism of the Muslim brothers did not attract him. The Salafis, with their intense and detailed programme of personal commitment appeared to him as the right choice.

Mustafa explicitly phrases his turn to the Salafi path as a choice. This is not obvious – choice has not always been important in the society he was born into, but it has become increasingly so, resonating with the paradigmatic role choice has for capitalist consump-

tion and for (neo)liberal visions of agency that have become increasingly influential in Egypt in the course of the reintroduction of capitalism. (SAAD 2009; PAHWA 2010; ABENANTE in this issue) And yet it is clear that his choice was extremely limited from the start. None of the many other currents of Islamic piety and practice were on his list of options. More importantly, all the options were explicitly Islamic. Again, this is not obvious. There is a much wider variety of forms of social and moral engagement that might have also provided a way to know right from wrong. And yet in the first decade of the 21st century, under the conditions of a depoliticisation of social life during the Mubarak regime along with the rise of the revivalist ideal of piety to hegemonic power, religious paths of dedication became extremely compelling to the degree of marginalising other paths.

In a time during which religion understood as a system of facts emerged as the most dynamic albeit by no means the only source of moral and existential trust, and during which most political paths to gaining some power over one's situation had become very difficult and frustrating to pursue, some few paths of dedication thus became extremely compelling. In most cases and definitely so in rural contexts, there is much choice regarding to whether and to what degree one may pursue such highly compelling pursuits, but much less choice between different pursuits. The attraction of Salafi Islam as a path of perfection is thus twofold. On one level, it presents a promise of clarity, happiness and hope through rigid perfection which is very compelling in itself in a world that is experienced as chaotic and troubling. On another level, however, the gradual success of Salafism and other movements in turning the counter-discourse of the Islamic revival into a social hegemony also means that the Salafi path of perfection has become more and more compelling simply by virtue of its strong presence, of the normality of committed religiosity as the ideal type of moral integrity. This hegemony is associated with a paradoxical sense of increasing moral chaos so that regardless of the increasing degree of religiosity, social life is depicted as

more sinful than ever. From the background of this perpetual sense of moral crisis, a determined and complete turn to religious commitment appears as a very compelling solution. Whoever was searching for a path of determined dedication in Egypt before 2011, would thus find Salafism a very likely path, and the number of those taking the path of commitment has been on the rise for many years.

Under these circumstances, Salafi commitment was the obvious answer for Mustafa's search for a way to know right from wrong. From there, Mustafa's dedication took a specific direction with emphasis on gender segregation, male control over women, abstinence from alcohol, drugs and cigarettes, and viewing life as the systematic application of divine Law. This had very specific consequences for the way he dealt, for example, with his mother and some of his friends. It continues to have consequences for the way he understands worship and moral action, and the way he thinks about what it means to be a good person. In this sense, Mustafa's activist path as a Salafi had a specific shape and specific consequences, quite different from, for example, what would have been involved in becoming the follower of a Sufi sheikh, which was a likely thing to do in similar circumstances in the Middle East for centuries until quite recently (see GILSENAN 2000 [1982]), or in joining a political or social movement that does not articulate its concerns in primarily religious terms, which was a major option in his village just two decades earlier, and became so again in 2011.

And yet the emotional work involved in Mustafa's Salafi experiment was also of a more general nature: Mustafa at different times has compared it with an interesting work and with his time in the army. To understand his account we therefore also need to take seriously his idiosyncratic experience, his family history and the characteristic way he sometimes marches and sometimes stumbles through life. And considering this idiosyncratic level also helps to make intelligible some more generally human features of his quest.

Take, for the sake of comparison, the way Mustafa describes his motivations to become a

Salafi and the way John Steinbeck (1961 [1936]) lets the literary figure of Jim Nolan describe his decision to join the Communist Party in his novel *In Dubious Battle*.

Nilson touched the desk here and there with his fingertips. "Even the people you're trying to help will hate you most of the time. Do you know that?"

"Yes."

"Well, why do you want to join, then?"

Jim's eyes half closed in perplexity. At last he said, "In the Jail there were some Party men, They talked to me. Everything's been a mess, all my life. Their lives weren't messes. They were working toward something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again." (STEINBECK 1961 [1936]: 6)

In the time when I started to get back to myself I had lost many things. I started to search. Where is the right way? [...] I didn't have a basic method that I could follow to solve my problems and to face the world. I had no principle to follow. I had no law that I could apply and that would allow me to tell right from wrong. [...]

I took to asking about everything in my life: Is it *halal* or *haram*? Even if I didn't have awareness about it, no clear textual proof. But my feeling was: If I could only know whether this is *haram* or *halal*? [...] For a while I lived a better life like I hadn't lived it since the death of my father. It was even better. I got to know a lot of people, and I felt that the life I live is good. (MUSTAFA, interview in 2006)

Would Mustafa have been attracted to communism instead of Salafism if he had lived in a different time? The question is not as unlikely as it may sound. Mustafa's father left him a copy of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx in Arabic translation. Until the 1980s, socialism and communism were big in many parts of Egypt, and some middle-aged men in Nazlat al-Rayyis still know their Marx and Lenin inside out. And in 2011, following the political shockwave of the January 25 Revolution, a number of young men in the village who until then had sported vague left-wing sympathies became politically active and linked socialist ideas and symbols with a commitment to revolutionary struggle against "the system" –

among them Mustafa's good friend Tawfiq and his brother Salah.

But as comes to Mustafa, the answer is probably no. Communism and pre-revolutionary Salafism are different solutions, not because they would stand on different sides of a secular-Islamic divide, but because they appeal to slightly different kinds of sensibility. Both the real person Mustafa and the literary figure Jim Nolan search for a way to feel alive, to do something meaningful, to have a basis and direction of life. But while the communist creed that provides the sense of existential hope on the pages of *In Dubious Battle* is oriented at a struggle against someone, a search for meaningful existence through collective action, the Salafi creed that provided Mustafa a temporary firm hold in a time of crisis was heavily focussed on individual discipline and salvation.

Today, that Salafi creed has transformed into something else. When I wrote the first version of this article in 2010, I thought of Salafism as inherently prioritising a concern with the self, and communism as inherently collective-political. Since 2011, various Salafi groups are heavily involved in post-revolutionary politics and the project of purity now also involves the laws and institutions of the state. The Salafism to which Mustafa, Fu'ad and Nagat were drawn to between 2006 and 2010 was part of the the privatisation of the political in the late Mubarak years. In those days, Salafism was about radical purist transformation of one's intimate and family life partly because Salafi organisations were obliged to stay out of politics (in the narrow sense of contestation for state power) to be allowed to act. Today, the aim of purifying one's intimate life has become linked with the aim of purifying the whole society, by persuasion if possible and by force if necessary. At the same time, the heritage of communism has been revived by left-wing revolutionaries, among them Fu'ad and Tawfiq, who aim to transform state and society, but in actual fact are changing themselves more than anything else. The historical conditions of activist paths have shifted, and in this sense, the Salafism of the late Mubarak years no longer exists after 2011. In 2006, Mustafa was in search

of something to fix his self, and Salafism offered exactly that. Now that the path of Salafism has become an openly political one and a there is a different choice of paths of commitment, it would be very difficult to guess which way Mustafa would go now, because the choice he faced would pose itself in a different way.

An existential view of commitment that looks at its motivating grounds, available paths and consequences should not be mistaken for a functionalist explanation. A path of commitment can have different grounds of urgency, and its outcomes are unpredictable, unlikely to fit into a simple functional explanation of ends and means. It should also not be mistaken for a story of false consciousness. People who enter a path of commitment tend to know quite well what they are doing even if they cannot anticipate the consequences.

Transience and transformation

In her work on the women's piety movement in Egypt Saba Mahmood (2005) points out that the intense work of learning, prayer, and weeping undertaken by the female piety activists is understood by them as an ethical project of developing a submissive, willingly God-fearing character through pious practice. My exploration of the motivations and experience of commitment offer a somewhat different picture. While the formation of a committed self certainly is something many Muslims aim for, the experience of activist religiosity appears to be different from that aim.

The very brevity of the periods of Salafi commitment by Mustafa, Fu'ad and Nagat indicate that something more complex than ethical formation is going on. Of course not all experiments with Salafi (or other) commitment are transient. Many people join the movement and stay lifelong, and there are Salafi families keen to pass the tradition of activist rigour from generation to generation, with varying success. And giving up the dedication of an activist life does not yet mean giving up the Salafi creed. But the outcomes are not obvious.

The experience of commitment, even if rela-

tively brief, leaves a lasting trace on one, often in the form of beliefs and sensibilities that "become deeply rooted" to borrow Mustafa's words. In some ways, activist commitment thus appears to very formative indeed. At the same time, the particular emotional state of commitment, like the sense of immediate purpose and spiritual purity that is so central to Salafi activism, is often very transient, like Mustafa's euphoric sense of happiness associated with intensive worship which left him and never returned. The reason for this difference of lasting and transient effects lies in the difference of two forms of cultivation: the cultivation of specific affects and attitudes, and the cultivation of a complete, unambiguous sense of purpose-driven personality. The first is something that is probably involved in all forms of education and socialisation all the time. The second is characteristic of activist commitment and is more suggestive than formative in character. It is also a feature of a life in the future tense that resonates with a capitalist process process of constant expansion, growth, and pressure.

Key religious practices, notably ritual prayer and sermons, have a strongly suggestive character. By their repetitive and often cathartic nature they over and again temporarily establish clear hierarchies, clarity and certainty. It is no coincidence that the careful observance of not only the obligatory prayers but also a number of voluntary prayers (*sunna* and *nawafil*) is central to Salafi piety. A constant schedule of ritual work directs one's attention toward God and, when successful, offers a fulfilling spiritual experience. This is not specific to either Salafism in particular or Muslim rituals in general. Other religious practices as well as many forms of political and social activism often have a similar character, providing a fulfilling and full schedule that allows one to constantly re-focus oneself, to overcome doubts and to feel that things are meaningful and right.

But if the drive of ritual work recedes, the entire sense of commitment is in danger. This was made explicit by Mustafa in autumn 2006 when he, longing back to his earlier almost euphoric sense of piety and commitment, was troubled by the state of his heart:

Yesterday I heard a sermon on the computer that made me think about my priorities. You have to be self-vigilant and repent every day to our Sublime and Exalted Lord, and renew your promises to our Lord. I felt a state of lethargy. When I heard the same tape earlier I cried. So why didn't I cry yesterday? Because my heart is black. Why am I like this? I remember an example Sheikh Salah told me: Let's assume that next to the chimney of an oven there is a freshly painted wall. What will happen to that wall? On the first day it blackens a little. On the next day it blackens more. On the third day it blackens more, and so on. The same thing in the heart, which stays polished and clean with the obedience to Sublime and Exalted God. When you give up worship (*'ibadat*) the heart keeps being blackened by dirt.

In this account pious commitment emerges as a fragile form of continuous self-suggestion rather than as cumulative self-perfection. It is fundamentally transient, only lasting when actively maintained. This is not to deny the crucial role of habit for moral and religious practice – the embodied sense of ease and embarrassment that guides so many everyday moral practices such as greetings, movement in gendered spaces, prayer, and offering and accepting hospitality are strong cases for the formative power of habit. But we must distinguish between the formation of specific dispositions and senses of proper behaviour and between the enactment of a complete personality ruled by one overarching principle. The latter, unlike the first, takes place in competition and conflict with other elements of one's personality in a way that is inherently unstable because it includes the attempt to impose on oneself a way of being that stands in contradiction with the way human personality and subjectivity actually work: as a dialogue of “a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions” (VAN MEIJL 2007: 929). Human experience cannot simply be melded to a shape postulated by a normative ideal – especially if this ideal aims a harmonious unity and clarity that, in practice, is opposite to the ambivalent character of human experience. To keep up this normative ideal, what may be aimed to be sustainable self-formation in practice takes the form of fragile and transient self-suggestion.

The stories of Salafi Muslim activists may therefore tell more about the nature of activist dedication in a specific historical moment than they tell about the nature of Muslim religiosity. When we look at Salafi – or any other – activism, it is important not to stick to the easy and likely level of a particular activist movement and its claims to an authoritative tradition. The study of activist lives must be sensitive also to the idiosyncratic and the comparative levels. It must be grounded in an understanding of the existential grounds of dedication as well as its shifting historical conditions and complex outcomes. And it must account for the diffuse common sense about what dedication is like that is shared by people involved. Activist commitment addresses quite fundamental and generic problems of human condition, but at the same time, the urgency of specific problems, the ways of addressing them, the solutions offered, and the consequences involved, are historically unique and dynamic.

One of the most interesting questions regarding that dynamic is what happens when people give up a particular sense of commitment. The turn to revivalist religiosity in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s was importantly influenced by former socialists and communists who had grown disillusioned with the promise of socialist progress (AISHIMA and SALVATORE 2009). What could be the role of former Salafis in future Egypt?

As I have tried to show above, the actual experience of commitment can be full of contradictions and requires a constant work of suggestion and dedication. That work of dedication may not be formative in the sense of establishing a stable pious personhood, but it is transformative, however often in ways not originally intended. Such unintended transformation is evidently most pronounced among those for whom Salafi commitment is a period in their lives and not a lasting condition. The work of dedication has helped Mustafa to become a more responsible person, although it also subjected him to a long period of troubling uncertainty after the transient experience of happiness. Part of her longer trajectory of religious

dedication and spiritual search, Nagat's period of Salafi commitment has motivated her to see herself increasingly as the active agent of her life. It also provided directions for the further course of her spiritual search. The work of dedication at least temporarily sharpened the agonistic traits of Fu'ad's struggle with himself, but it has compelled him to enter into struggles of a different kind. As a part-time Salafi, Fu'ad was torn between the pious and the creative parts of himself. As a revolutionary, he is less at war with himself but involved in equally troubling conflicts with the social world around him.

In this sense, looking at Salafi activism not only as an activist period in a not so activist life, but also as a particular moment in a longer and more complex career of commitments (a perspective that is justified with Fu'ad and Nagat but not with Mustafa), the work of suggestion and dedication, although fragile and transient, has a permanence in people's lives insofar it marks significant turning points in their biographies, moments of rethinking, changing one's perspective, feeling about the world in a different way. They may not directly produce what they promise – Salafism may not actually deliver peace of mind, just like a revolution may not actually deliver freedom and dignity (or to be more precise, they may only deliver for a short while) – but they do produce something more complicated: a “parallactic shift” to borrow Slavoj Žižek's terminology (ŽIŽEK 2006), a change in the way of understanding one's condition in the world whereby the questions about peace of mind and about freedom and dignity arise in a different way than they would have before.

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