



Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians¹

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Abstract

In contrast to a line of studies that inquire how Muslims try to solve the problem of living piously in a society dominated by materialist tendencies and secular rationality, in this article I turn the question around and problematize the will to live piously and the focus on self-discipline. In everyday lives of young men from the Nile Delta region, the Islamic revivalist project of creating comprehensive moral and civic virtues uneasily coexists with other less total aims and ideals, notably community and family bonds, romantic love, success and self-realization. I attempt to take these contradictions seriously and dwell on the ways people live them and their attempts to make sense of their lives. In particular, I look at the ways people employ the normative registers of religion, love and aspiration in their lives, the promises each of these ideals entail and the options that are available should any of these promises fail.

Keywords

Islam, Egypt, morality, love, aspiration, subjectivity

1. Sexual Harassment

For young men the Feast of Fast-Breaking (*'id al-fitr*) that marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadân is a preferred time to go out and let oneself go in celebrating the end of a period of fasting and exceptional piety. The same youths who prayed and fasted during Ramadân and searched for forgiveness for their sins now come together to celebrate in ways they would have considered inconceivable a few days earlier. The sales of cannabis skyrocket, cafes with satellite dishes start showing porn again, and youths gather in parks, promenades and public places to celebrate in an excited and tense atmosphere full of singing and laughter but also an unpleasant tone of latent aggression that often leads to outbreaks of sexual harassment.

In the night of the Feast in 2006, the situation got out of hand in downtown Cairo, where youths often gather to celebrate special events such as foot-

ball victories and the Feast. With the atmosphere becoming increasingly heated, some young men began to touch in an aggressive manner women passing by. Others followed, and soon veritable crowds of adolescent men were running after women who, in turn, were desperately attempting to leave the scene.

The events were recorded by bystanders and published on independent weblogs (Manal and Alaa's Bit Bucket [25 October 2006]; Malcolm X [25 October 2006]), and these accounts quickly spread to incite a heated public debate that was mainly carried out in independent newspapers. While it seems that spontaneous attacks of collective pinching and touching of women, mostly committed by adolescents, have been part of public festivals in Egypt for a long time—I have witnessed them twice on New Year's eve and the Feast of Fast-Breaking, and a newspaper article from 1929 refers to a similar event at a Muslim saints-day festival (Āmir 1929)—most commentators assumed that this kind of collective sexual harassment/grabbing (*mu'aksa*) was a new phenomenon.² Otherwise, they seriously disagreed with one another. One side in the debate considered the events a serious problem but located the blame with different causes: some saw economical pressures and sexual frustration as the main cause; others claimed that a lack of religious values was responsible; some argued that, on the contrary, a radicalized religious discourse unable to offer the youths realistic models of action was the problem. From another side, many people claimed that the women themselves were responsible for the attacks and, contrary to the reports by eyewitnesses, assumed that the women who were grabbed were wearing seductive clothing. Government authorities at first completely denied the events, then blamed an actress who had danced in front of a cinema for provoking them.

On a bus ride from Cairo to Disūq a few days later, I became involved in a discussion about the events with other passengers (all of them men). While some argued that women at least shared a responsibility for the events, others were more willing to see the young men themselves as the core of the problem. Not the illicit behavior of girls but the lack of discipline and manners among the boys, one of them argued, was the main problem: 'I would say that unfortunately 90 percent of Egyptian youths are guilty of *mu'aksât*. But those are the ones without sound, solid religious awareness—if you know the commandments of Islam, you will not harass girls—because religion prohibits that completely'. This is a clear and frank statement, and yet it attempts to conceal or overcome a deep ambiguity. When I asked Sabâh, a female student from Cairo, about her experiences, she replied: 'The strangest thing is that the same youths who grab/harass (*yi'aksû*) you at one time, come to your help at other times'. During the debate in the media, some few contributors pointed out

that it was, in fact, the same youths who fast and pray in Ramadân and derive their ideas on religion from religious programs on satellite television who also grabbed and harassed women in downtown Cairo:

The conservatives will attribute what happened to a distance from religion and the spread of music channels showing video clips that have been nicknamed “porno clips” and “nudity clips” that drive the youths to watch them, while those more liberal will confirm that what happened is a result of the siege upon the youths by the *fatwa* sheikhs proselytizing of a culture of tabooization. . . . But there is not one single explanation to understand and analyze what happened. The reasons are many and the solutions are not easy, but unfortunately we are a people addicted to easy solutions, which we consume like sedatives that kill the pain temporarily while the disease spreads in the limbs. . . . Neither of the two points of view can be taken to be true by itself. What is more logical, if we are to understand what happened, . . . is that the spread of music channels that give birth to a new female singer every minute, where the singers dance more than sing and female models of all colors and shapes move their bodies, on the one hand, and the spread of religious channels and the birth of a new preacher and sheikh and mufti every minute on their screens where they prohibit, permit, and judge everything as they please, on the other hand—both are responsible for what happened, and neither can be separated from the other. Half of television channels have become beards and the other half bikinis with a sharpness that no reasonable person can ignore. (Sultân 2006)

The author, writing in the arts and entertainment section of the independent weekly *ad-Dustûr*, goes on to assign responsibility to a sexual ideology mediated by both sermons and video clips that portray women primarily as objects of male sexuality, which certainly is a point well taken (see also Rogers 2008). But the subject is not settled yet. While the currently ubiquitous religious sermons with their ideology of self-discipline and strict morality certainly do share some significant notions about the relationship between men and women with the highly eroticized iconography of the contemporary Arabic video clip, the two media nevertheless represent very different views of life: one busy with prohibitions, permissions, discipline and vigilance, describing itself as the straight path that, if carefully followed, will lead to Paradise, while the other centers around the emotions of love, attraction, trust and treason, offering an escape to an imaginary better world of wealth, sex and romance.

The most striking thing is that both media have experienced a rapid increase in popularity during the past decade, and largely among the same people. A wave of religiosity has reached virtually all classes of society; the attendance of mosques especially during Ramadân has grown rapidly; the headscarf has become the standard dress of almost all Muslim women; Islamists present the most credible force of opposition, and a general sense prevails about the

importance of religion in both everyday practice and in the way state and society are run. At the same time, new forms of mixed-gendered socializing have emerged, at first among the upper middle class (de Koning 2005) and increasingly among other classes. Love and romance—emotions considered very dangerous outside the confines of marriage by the preachers of the Islamic revival—are not only continuously consumed as the subjects of poetry, love songs, and films, but also experienced in romantic affairs of various kinds that evolve in neighborhoods, institutes of education and, increasingly, on the Internet. The Internet and satellite television have also introduced pornography as a new and yet unpredictable model of sexual relations that runs counter to both the religious discourse of chastity and the romantic discourse of love. Last but not least, young people have high (but often unfulfilled and frustrated) aspirations to wealth, success and travel abroad. Inspired by the promises of global consumerism and crystallized in the dreams of migration, these aspirations entail ideals of self-realization and excitement but also pressures to succeed by whatever means necessary, which in many ways part from the religious ideal of a morally committed (*multazim*) *homo Islamicus* who in his economic and social interactions always puts religion first.

My intention is not to moralize about the hypocrisy these contradictions may be seen to represent, nor do I want to solve the contradictions by establishing a hierarchy of true or essential aims. Instead, I attempt to take these contradictions seriously, considering the ways people live them and their attempts to make sense of their lives. To work with idealized oppositions, such as revivalist piety vs. liberal secularism, is not helpful to understanding what is going on, because most of the young people in Egypt hold to something of both, to different degrees at different times. The young men who aggressively touched women on the street were definitely not acting piously at that moment. But that does not mean that they would not be pious at all—on the contrary, they belong to a generation widely and strongly influenced by Salafi revivalist notions of piety, morality and religion. But their knowledge and practice of such notions do not overcome the ambivalence of their moral ideals, actions and expectations for life. In this article I argue that this is a general feature of human subjectivity that any empirical account of religion and morality must take into account, but that it is intensified by the very aims of moral and pious commitment (*iltizâm*) and purity put forward by adherents of the Islamic revival.

2. The Presence of Religion

Religion—specifically Islam, Christianity being confined to a much more limited public presence due to its minority status—has become almost all-present in Egypt in the past three decades. This wave, often referred to as ‘(re-)Islamisation’ (*aslama*) or ‘Islamic revival’ (*as-sahwa al-islâmiya*) has inspired vast amounts of research that, after an earlier focus on the politics of Islamist movements, has increasingly turned to analyze the motivations, forms and effects of the religious revival in people’s everyday lives and the ways they imagine themselves, the community they live in and the practices, rights and obligations that make up the society (see, e.g., Henkel 2005; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006a, 2006b; van Nieuwkerk 2008; Jouili 2007). This is no doubt a welcome counterpoint to the tradition of political analysts who have focused on Islamism as a threat to secular states and legal orders, overlooking the degree to which their power to mobilize is based on their promise of clarity, happiness and closeness to God. But how well does this promise work?

In the following I take that promise of clarity and happiness under closer scrutiny. Contrary to those studies that inquire how Muslims try to solve the problem of living piously in a society dominated by materialist tendencies and secular rationality, I want to turn the question around and problematize the will to live piously. Why does pious discipline become a credible and pervasive trajectory in a society (allegedly) dominated by secular rationality? Why are restrictive, disciplining and literalist versions of piety so much more popular than the often much more lenient, mystical and open-ended versions that were prevalent in previous centuries? Rather than taking the will to be pious as given, we must ask what makes piety in its specific, purity-oriented and self-disciplining version currently so attractive and whether and how the project of piety is able to keep its promise. What is the position of religion as an ethical practice in peoples’ lives, and how does it relate to other ethical practices? What problems does piety promise to solve, and what problems does it create? Finally, to turn the question around once more, how do Muslims try to solve the problem of living an exciting and passionate life in a society dominated by demands of discipline, both pious and secular?

To dwell upon these questions I begin with a critical reading of the recent work of Michael Lambek (2000, 2002, 2007) and Charles Hirschkind (2006a, 2006b), both of whom offer very important new insights into the relationship of religion and morality but stop at points where I believe the anthropological study of religion and morality should proceed. Lambek and Hirschkind have, with different emphases, shown that the relationship of religion and morality is not simply one of obedience, but of practical judgement and deliberation

(see also Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). In a major step forward from the study of morality as a socially given set of rules and obligations toward the issues of subjectivity, consideration and conflict, Lambek highlights the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, practical judgement, as the key category of ethical action: 'Morality cannot be simply an act of commission or an acceptance of obligation but includes the reasoning behind choosing to do so and the reasoning that determines how to balance one's multiple and possibly conflicting commitments' (2000: 315). Hirschkind takes up this line of reasoning in his inspiring work on cassette tape sermons in contemporary Cairo. He shows that rather than either free liberal deliberation (which is an ideological construct in the first place) or authoritarian imposition of ideology, cassette sermons and the discussions they inspire present a field of public debate and deliberation framed and directed by the project of Islamic *da'wa*. Neither fully open and free nor merely a site of indoctrination, this public gains a dynamic quality that nevertheless remains problematic for secular liberals³ because of the normative premises and the aim to discipline people's intimate lives it is based on. Cassette ethics, Hirschkind argues, are conceived as a part of the moral reform of society, of creating Islamic ethical sensibilities and dispositions in more or less open competition with secular ideals and practices.

Hirschkind's analysis is convincing, but what is troubling is the way the project of moral reform appears at the same time to be dramatically successful in creating a presence of religion in everyday lives and a serious failure in turning this presence into the sustainable self-discipline of piety. What Hirschkind describes seems to be more what pious revivalist Muslims aim to reach. The events in downtown Cairo on the night of the Feast, however, compel us to look at the everyday dynamics and actual outcomes of the project of pious reform.

Here the concept of *phronesis* taken up by Lambek could be helpful in understanding how people deal with conflicting demands and expectations, but also how they may lead to contradictory outcomes. The problem, however, is that the *phronesis* comes along with an Aristotelian notion of personhood in which 'virtues are free of conflicting desires and hence of neurotic conflict. Since virtue is based on disposition, it cannot be a matter of acting against inclination' (Lambek 2000: 317).⁴ This observation highlights what in my view is the central blind spot of an anthropology of morality inspired by Aristotelian ethics: while it includes the possibility (and likelihood) of conflicts when lack of discipline stands in the way of the habituation of virtues, when circumstances make it difficult to live according to one's disposition or when two practices serving the same ethical end turn out to require opposite actions (see Mahmood 2005: 174-188; Jouili 2007), it nevertheless presumes

a fairly unified and clear disposition of the subject. Essentially, people are supposed to know what they want and to want a more or less coherent set of things. And even when they want different things, they are assumed to have a clear hierarchy of aims and ideals.

Such coherence and clear hierarchy are not, however, congruent with my experiences from fieldwork in Cairo and the northern Egyptian countryside—nor is it congruent with my personal experience, and I would be surprised to meet anyone who knows at all times so well what he or she wants. By taking a fairly unified concept of subjectivity as the starting point, the Aristotelian concept of virtues and practical reason, and with it the anthropology of Islamic revival, has a blind spot concerning the complex, inconsequent and often highly contradictory way ethical practice works in everyday life. This does not mean that we should abandon such useful notions as ethical formation and *phronesis*—only that we have to develop them in a way that accounts for the fact that there are always different parallel aims of being a good human being and different moral aims between which one must choose in a world where the Aristotelian option of a middle way is not available.

In the northern Egyptian village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, where I have conducted much of my fieldwork for this study, Salafi revivalist ideals of piety have, at least among the young men and women I know, largely marginalized the previously dominant ideologies of mystical Islam (Sufism) and Marxism during the past two decades. While there are few committed Salafis or Islamist activists in the village, and many are skeptical about the religious rigor of the Salafis and the political moralism of the Muslim Brotherhood, members of these groups nevertheless stand for most people as paradigmatic examples of what it means to be thoroughly religious. There is general agreement that the inhabitants of the village have become much more religious in the past decades, a change that people measure primarily by the growing degrees of mosque attendance and Ramadân fasting. Also in everyday discussions religion features in a central normative role, and debates about which mosques are suitable for prayer, the sermons and characters of the imams of the mosques and the proper conduct of business and family affairs are frequent.

When asking people about what religion should mean in the everyday, the answer is usually very simple: living according to 'the Book and the Sunna', that is, the Qur'ân and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. Few in the village publicly doubt this ideal, and there is no reason to question the sincerity of people's allegiance to it. And yet few try to live according to it in every detail, and those who do are often criticized for being narrow-minded (*mutazammit*) and extremist (*mutashaddid*). There is in fact considerable ambiguity about the role of religion in everyday conduct. With difficult economical con-

ditions, family and neighborhood conflicts and conflicting desires and ambitions, the promise of happiness and hope through piety remains unfulfilled. And paradoxically enough, much of its suggestive power seems to lie precisely in its being unfulfilled. Only as an ideal can it have the coherence and perfection that morality and piety, in Salafi revivalist discourse, ought to be characterized by. In other words, the faith in religion as a self-discipline leading to a harmonious disposition of trusting God and wishing and doing the right thing does not require the full enactment of this discipline. More than that, those who do pursue the path of full enactment, or, to follow contemporary Salafi jargon, commitment (*iltizâm*) to religion, run into serious conflicts both with themselves and others when their attempt to make religion the exclusive source of normative practice and volition crashes with conflicting expectations, aims and desires.

How can we account for the way people speak about different normative issues differently, and act inconsistently, without just discrediting them as hypocrites? Because in many cases (albeit not in all), they do sincerely pursue different paths, and either cannot find a middle path or do not look for one in the first place. My argument is that this is not simply an issue of people falling short of the ideals they hold to, of the project of *da'wa* getting stuck on the level of rational ideology and failing to become part of people's dispositions. Because revivalist piety exists in competition with other aims, it becomes the cause of contradictions, and because it is part of a complex life, it becomes an element of compromises and syntheses that depart from the declared aims of its proponents.

Along with Gary Gregg (2007), Catherine Ewing (1990) and Toon van Meijl (2006) I argue that to understand the complex nature of moral (and immoral) experience and practice we have to make use of a dialogical notion of identity and subjectivity. A person's identity, even if convincingly presented as complete and clear at a given moment (see Ewing 1990), is in practice dialogical, made up of different (internal and external) voices and experiences (Gregg 2007; van Meijl 2006). As a consequence, people commonly shift between different roles and identities. This implies not only different temporary answers to the question 'Who am I?' but also different, temporary or parallel, teleologies of the subject (Foucault 1984), that is, answers to the question 'How can I be a good human being?'

3. Troubles of Love

While the young people of Nazlat al-Rayyis with whom I have conducted much of my fieldwork in the past two years do study the Qur'ân, listen to

sermons (not so much on cassette tapes, however, as on television and in the mosque) and discuss the correct application of religion, they also read poetry (and less often novels), watch Egyptian, Indian and American films and listen to and comment upon the romantic love songs of their favorite singers. Especially women—spending more of their free time watching television than, men who have the option of sitting in cafes and strolling around—often have an encyclopedic knowledge of films and actors. In this popular culture imagination authors such as Nagib Mahfuz and Mahmud Darwish, pop singers such as Muhammad Munir and Nancy Ajram, actors such as Sean Connery and Adil Imam and football stars such as Zinedine Zidane and David Beckham become extensions of people's everyday experience, a source of citations, discussions and fantasies. They provide models for identities and styles and inspire discourses and imaginaries of love, excitement and success that, while seldom posited in an open opposition to religion,⁵ do constitute normative registers that are neither subjected to nor framed by religious normativity. They do, however, often clash with other registers, putting people into difficult situations when they not only are unable to realize their aims but also find that the aims they follow are opposed to each other.

Speaking of normative registers, that is, modalities of moral speech and action, I try to account for the way people can argue for very coherent and clear moral claims without systematically subscribing to or living according to a coherent system of values and aims. People often speak in very different tones and with very different arguments and styles about different topics. Critical and satirical talk about social values can suddenly turn serious and dogmatic when the subject of religion crops up. People can argue for conservative and strict standards of gender relations at one time but express rather liberal ideals of romantic love at other times. In short, morality is not a coherent system but an incoherent and unsystematic conglomerate of different moral registers that exist parallel to and often contradict each other.

There is no question, of course, about the fact that moral action commonly aims for coherence. But that coherence appears to be often of a more temporary, situational nature, while people's character, life experience and expectations remain complex and inconsistent. This is what Catherine Ewing (1990) has described as the 'illusion of wholeness', the ability of people to shift between contradictory sets of views without being troubled by them. With the notion of moral registers I try to account for that essential ambiguity of moral action and discourse, on one level offering a solid ground and clear framework for action, while on another level allowing for the coexistence of different moral, and to a certain degree amoral, aims—such as piety, respect, friendship, family, love and self-realization—which in a given situation may (but do not have to) have different consequences.

Speaking of registers rather than systems, discourses or dispositions highlights the performative, situational and playful (in a wider sense including strategic play) character of norms. A normative register is a way of speaking about a specific range of topics with specific styles of argumentation and acting in specific ways. It contains not only a set of arguments and premises, but also an implicit ontology of the subject matter: the kind of categories in which it can be described and the kind of actions that are possible. The same act, in the normative modality of different moral registers, can become a different issue. While in some cases specific subject matters are more clearly related to corresponding normative registers—the register of justice and rights, for example, is the clearly prevalent tone when fishermen of Nazlat al-Rayyis discuss the land-winning projects that threaten their fishing grounds—it is important to note that the choice of the register in which a subject is described and discussed is, in itself, a key form of normative debate. To declare an issue a religious matter is to insist on strict discipline of the passions and a clear regime of ‘facts’, while to discuss it in the registers of, say, romance, art or politics is to highlight the relativity of the situation and the primacy of individual choice.

In Nazlat al-Rayyis, key normative registers that I have encountered include *religion*, understood on one level as an objective set of rules, based on the Qur’ân and the Sunna (authoritative tradition of the Prophet Muhammad), that provide guidelines for a good life and the key to paradise, and at another level as an overarching metaphysical order that gives life and the world structure and significance; *respect* (*ihtirâm*), referring to one’s social standing in the community, good behavior, responsibility for one’s family and wealth; *good character* (*tîba, gada’âna*), describing a disposition based on the readiness to help friends, the avoidance of conflicts and a general sense of joviality, friendship and sympathy; *family*, describing the intimate relations of spouses, children and relatives and the recognition of patriarchal and maternal authorities; *social justice* and *rights*, dealing with the economic and power relationships among people and addressing (often with a strong socialist overtone) issues such as corruption, privatization of public sector enterprises, nepotism, authoritarian rule and the lack of opportunities. Last but not least come two registers that I will be dwelling on in some detail in the following: *love*, celebrating passion and emotional commitment and describing ‘pure love’ as an all-sacrificing obsession that disregards both self-interest and communal respect; and *success* and *self-realization* (*takwîn an-nafs*) expressed in the aim of finding wealth and a place in life and, less outspokenly, of widening one’s horizon of experience.

These registers are not isolated fragments, nor do they constitute a coherent system. Different normative voices (both collective and individual) that make

sense of the everyday and constantly intertwine in conversations—take, for example, religion, respect and family, or good character and love, or religion and social justice, which in a given situation can be identical—they can, and at times do, clash. This is not to ignore the spaces of negotiation. But not everything is negotiated, and not everything needs to be negotiated. I do not intend to posit these registers as unresolvably opposite or even clearly distinct—in most cases they are not, and at times they go perfectly together. But sometimes they do not. In those cases we should resist the temptation (which may be due to a general human inclination to try to make things fit even when they do not) to analytically resolve all contradictions as only apparent ones. Some contradictions are resolved, others are not. The most evident and generally recognized contradiction is that between respect and good character: good character is often seen by the young men I have discussed the matter with as a more ‘true’ virtue than respect, which in their view often is purely based on money and can conceal an essentially vicious character. Nevertheless, most young people work hard to become respectable.

The perhaps most urgent contradictions in the lives of the young people of Nazlat al-Rayyis concern the complex issue of mutual affection between men and women. A subject provoking great passions, anxieties and troubles, it is frequently discussed in circles of families along different registers. One can judge its permissibility on the basis of relevant texts from scripture, discuss the sincerity and truthfulness of affection and the willingness of a person to take over the responsibility it entails and problematize the impact of affection to the social status and family relations of a person. In this case, four registers—religion, respect, family bonds and love—can be used to describe and to prescribe mutual affection between a man and a woman. While the first three should be fairly recognizable for anthropologists of morality, the latter may require some explanation.

Romantic love is a very present and powerful way to tell and experience what it means to be a good human being. Romance is strongly present not only in everyday experience but also in the public media in the form of love songs, films, soap operas, etc. While the plots and the kinds of problems that the heroes of love songs and stories face certainly move within a moral universe that makes them meaningful and understandable to their audiences (see Larkin 1997), they cannot be reduced to the religious discourse of legitimate and illegitimate relationships, the vernacular ethics of patriarchal family or the forms of double morality that measure different actions on different scales depending on gender, social status and context of the action. The ethics of love implies a valorization of commitment to a degree of madness and obsession, of the willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of the beloved. Such

idealization of emotional commitment can stand in a stark contrast to the religious discourse on chastity and the social ideal of parental arrangement of marriages according to criteria of respect, as well as the ideal and experience of connectivity between family members (Joseph 1999).⁶

My friend Ismâ'îl once had an Internet affair with an Australian woman whom he had met in an Internet chat room. Relationships of this kind have become common since the spread of Internet cafés and private computers in the village, and they are frequently discussed in the village cafés by older men as a threat to the morality of the youth, leading them to adultery and unrespectable relationships. Ismâ'îl was strongly criticized by his brother, and in the end he, too, looked back at his experience rather critically—but not for any of the reasons that café talk would highlight. His brother was upset because he felt that Ismâ'îl, not truly willing to be committed in a serious relationship, was playing with his chat room girlfriend's feelings. Ismâ'îl himself afterward dismissed her, commenting to me that she was having romantic conversations with half of the village. What is important is that in both cases the dominant register of moral reasoning is neither one of disciplining passions nor one of respect and reputation, but one of romantic commitment and responsibility, in both cases (although from different perspectives) judging the situation on the basis of the premise that a romantic involvement must be serious, honest and exclusive.

But committed to the ideals of romance as the young men are, they can simultaneously be very convinced about the necessity of gender segregation, the absolute prohibition of adultery (*zinâ*) in Islam and the importance of finding a bride who is accepted by the family and suits its social standing. In the complex interplay of different moral registers around love, sexuality and marriage, young men have much more space to maneuver than women do (see also Rogers 2008: 90). While men can more easily balance between different ethical ideals, women experience much more pressure to fulfill conflicting ideals of chastity and attractiveness. Various forms of flirting, courting and dating have become increasingly common, especially in the institutions of higher education. Young men expect girls to be attractive and willing to meet them in cafeterias, promenades and other such spaces that have become preferred sites for potential couples to meet, lest they risk being seen as 'backward' (*mutakballifa*). At the same time, however, young women's status of being respectable (*muhtarama*) is essentially linked to the virtues of virginity and seclusion, with the paradoxical result that romantic love itself can become an obstacle in the way of marriage. A girl who goes out with boys is 'bad' (*wibsha*) and not respectable (regardless of her virginity), and thus not suitable for marriage in the eyes of young men and their families. Or, as a friend of mine put

it: 'The girls you go out with are not the girls you marry'. Girls who do go out with boys therefore usually marry from outside the village. This does not mean that young men would simply take advantage of young women. While some do, others are seriously troubled and heartbroken when it turns out that considerations of descent, class and respect make the girl they love unsuitable for marriage. But the discourse of respect gives them a way to rationalize the situation and to turn it into their advantage.

Mustafâ: When I was at secondary school I met a girl. She was a girl of no virtues (*bint ayy kalâm*). I knew her a long time, full three years, and lived with her when we were students. I was either with her in Damanhûr [a province capital some fifty kilometers from the village], or she was with me in Alexandria where I studied. It was all really wild and crazy (*hîsa khâlis*), and a lot of problems happened. After that I was surprised to realize that she isn't the person that suits me, she isn't the one who should be in house, she isn't the one to bring up my children.

Here at home, I spoke to my mother, too, about the subject [of marrying her], my mother of course rejected her completely. There is one more thing: descent (*nasab*). Her descent's no good for us. I talked about it with my mother at home, I talked about it with my uncle [but they refused]. There [with her family] the matter was clear, they wanted me to come and ask for her hand, to make things clear: you know her for three years and she knows you, that's no good, there are circumstances and customs, there's a scandal about to happen.

From inside me, there are of course other things. Although my feelings toward her might have become even stronger in the meantime, in life itself, in this life we live in, is she suitable to be a wife?

Tawfiq: Look, marriage is not just about the bed, it's about being a nuclear family (*usra*); how come can you start it on the base of an illegitimate (*bâtil*) relationship and with people talking about you?

Mustafâ: I started feeling other things, I started feeling constant doubt. How come did she get to know me this way? Couldn't somebody else just take my place with her? I started to fear her. When she would be away from me for two or three days I would call for her to talk with me. She got used to this from me. She was always telling me what she'd done in the past three days. That was the main reason inside me, she did not sense it, that I was doubting her, thinking that she could meet someone else.

Samuli: But you, too, could meet someone else?

Mustafâ: Inside me, I'm an Egyptian, Oriental (*sharqî*) guy, I was educated that way.

Tawfiq: Here the guy can know so many girls, but the girl can't know any guys.

Samuli: But isn't that unfair toward the girls?

Tawfiq: Unfair, yeah, sure.

Mustafâ: As for marriage itself: if a man and a woman agree on marrying, there is a new woman entering the extended family (*âyala*)—my mother will be her mother and my father will be her father.⁷ . . . After the first experiment, I realized that there were things that I had completely forgotten and hadn't thought of: how do I find one that suits my mother and her character? I have to see what my mother wants, too. I have to find a girl whom my mother accepts.

Tawfiq: You have to think about marriage from the side of religion, and from the side of material wealth and money, and from the side of education, from a lot of sides. Maybe the descent of [the girl's] family is not good and spoils the whole marriage. And there can be a girl who's beautiful and from good family and has money, but if she's not respectable (*muhtarama*) it's no good, it has to be all four together.

The complex moral reasoning undertaken by Mustafâ and Tawfiq is telling of the difficult choices and inner conflicts young people experience. Far from being an overarching discipline that would guide a pious Muslim's volition—and it is important to mention that Mustafâ became a strictly committed Salafi sometime after giving up his plans to marry his girlfriend, an experiment that was coming to an end at the time the interview was made—religion is one of the many issues that one must take into consideration. This is, in fact, a good case of *phronesis* (albeit in retrospect), practical judgement as originally developed by Aristotle and taken up by Lambek, but it is less about finding a balance between conflicting commitments than making painful decisions in the absence of a middle way—moral compromises between incompatible aims of good life. This kind of moral reasoning is not only about making a practical decision and weighing the different elements and requirements of a situation; it is about deciding, in a moment, who you want to be (see also Lambek 2002; 2007). And yet it does not mean that the other ways of being would be then dropped in favor of the one chosen—they remain part of one's personality and wishes, and at times they prevail.⁸ In the circumstances I describe, these are always painful decisions, and they leave people remorseful in different ways. Young men like Mustafâ—more so perhaps than his more pragmatic friend Tawfiq—regularly face impossible equations and unhappy love relationships where any choice they make will involve acting against their ideals and desires.

To do justice to young men it must be noted that love does not automatically come second to reputation. Despite the moralizing discourse against 'bad', unmarriageable girls, many young men do marry 'bad' girls in spite of their reputation and the resistance of their own parents. Their choice may not be any less painful than Mustafâ's, however, troubled as they are by parental opposition (the relationship between daughters- and mothers-in-law, especially, is a great worry for recently married men), neighborhood talk and doubts about the legitimacy of one's relationship. Whatever the choices people make, they regularly find themselves in dilemmas that are not foreseen in the ideals of romantic love and respect of parents, nor in the virtuous confinement of sexuality—and indeed passion in general—to marriage.

4. Aspiration and Frustration

Not only moral struggles make life difficult to young people. Equally if not more urgent are the fantasies, expectations, contradictions and disappointments related to the aspirations of success, wealth, status, a happy life, excitement and seeing the world. Young people often have high expectations, and in a time marked by the connection of even the deepest countryside to the global flows of mediated images, styles, goods and migration, these expectations stand in a particularly striking contrast to their everyday lives.

There is a rich literature on the experience, expectations and morality of globalization, aspiration and consumption that has convincingly shown how the development of global capitalism, corresponding practices of production and consumption and the aspirations of progress and a better life have become a fundamental constituent of people's expectations and experiences even in the most remote places—be it on the level of physical or imaginary interaction and movement (see, e.g., Piot 1999; Karlström 2004). While the analyses vary in their focus on the disciplinary (e.g., Appadurai 1996: 66-85) or the antidisiplinary (e.g., de Certeau 1984) aspects of consumption, it is clear that in any case consumption and moral practice have become intertwined in a complex way as key modalities of aspiring to and realizing happiness (Nisbett 2007). Religion, too, has become mediated by the means of mass production and consumption in a way that does not leave the nature of religious communities and messages unchanged (Starrett 1995; Schulz 2006). A number of recent ethnographies (Masquelier 2005; Mains 2007; Hansen 2005; Graw forthcoming) have shown the problems and dead ends of aspiration under conditions of poverty and economic stagnation—with the result that 'globalization, development, and political participation are often experienced more in their absence than as ongoing processes of improvement of one's personal life-conditions' (Graw forthcoming: 15).

Aspiration, success and self-realization have thus developed into teleologies of the subject in their own right in a world where notions of progress and consumption increasingly frame people's economic and personal horizons of expectation. At the same time, they are inherently paired with despair and frustration on two levels. Firstly because practical circumstances make it difficult or impossible to realize one's ambitions, and secondly because the individualistic tendencies that the aim of self-realization entails can come to stand in conflict to community- and family-oriented values and aims. The ambitions young people have are partly congruent with the communal registers of respect and social standing. Obviously getting a decent job, becoming wealthy, building a house, buying a car and marrying a beautiful girl from a good family—to name some of the ambitions young men mention—are in no

way opposed to either religiously or communally articulated ideals of being a good person (although the means to reach these aims often are). On the contrary, the ability to take care of oneself and one's family is seen as a key quality of what makes one a 'man'. But like love, the register of self-realization also entails aims and ideals of personhood that, while they do not necessarily stand in a felt conflict to community and religion, are not framed by them.

This becomes especially clear when we look at the almost desperate urge to migrate that most young men (and an increasing number of women) express (see Mains 2007; Graw forthcoming). Various strategies to migrate and the success and failure of those who made it are standard topics in discussions. When asked, people regularly name earning money, returning home, building a house and living happily as the aims they wish to realize with migration. But the way people weight different countries to migrate to and tend to prefer Europe and the United States to the Arab Gulf states (because even if the latter are easier to reach by legal means, the West entails a promise of not only wealth but also freedom and respect) compels us to problematize the ambitions that feed the urge to migrate.

For the young people in the village, and to a significant degree also in the cities, life sucks most of the time. Lack of prospects, both in terms of material welfare and self-realization, is a key topic that some of my friends frame as 'emptiness' (*farâgh*), which one attempts to fill with different things: drugs, sports, sex and religion. In this sense of emptiness and stagnation, migration is the grand paradigmatic strategy of escape and success. This is an escapist perspective for sure, and escape is a strong topic indeed in the aspirations of young people. While material wealth is clearly the most pronounced issue in people's discourses on migration, escape from the 'constraints' (*qayûd*) of village society also features as a key motive. There is often a tone of despair and obsession in the way young men perpetually discuss possible ways to work in the Gulf, or to illegally cross to Europe, with only a vague idea of what exactly they wish to make out of their lives once there, but a very strong sense that 'here' there is nothing: no chances, no hope, no future.

The most outspoken of my friends about his ambition to see the world and to expand his horizon, Tawfiq sees boredom as his main motivation and escape as his main ambition:

Samuli: Are you serious about what you told me before, that you want to escape from here?

Tawfiq: Absolutely. Every day here is like the other: I wake up, go to work, play football, eat, sleep, wake up, go to work, play football, eat, sleep and so on and on and on. There is nothing new, every day is like other. Assume that today is Saturday. Well yesterday was Saturday, and tomorrow is Saturday, and every single day is a Saturday

like the other.⁹ I want to get out of here, out of this boredom and lack of prospects, to see things change, to see the unexpected, to travel. I like to travel even if it's just for two days to Alexandria.

Tawfiq's dream is to migrate to the United States by whatever means possible, but by the time of writing this, he has settled for a two-year contract as a migrant worker in Bahrain. Far from enthusiastic about his life there, he nevertheless sees it as a chance to move on, a potential step on the way further—but the success of his plan remains to be seen.

As Tawfiq's account indicates, boredom is a key experience in the lives of village youths and a driving force of their aspirations. While material poverty certainly is an important factor, it alone does not explain the desperate urge to get away (see also Hansen 2005; Mains 2007; Graw forthcoming). After all, compared to the intense poverty in which the generations of their fathers and grandfathers grew up, the present-day generation lives in relative comfort: the great majority of children survive to adulthood, people have enough to eat, they no longer live in houses with earth floors and almost everybody can afford refrigerators, telephones and televisions. But with increasing comfort and connectedness to the world, boredom and despair have actually increased. Village life becomes measured against imaginaries and expectations that by far exceed anything the countryside or the nearby cities have to offer.

Both in its successes and failures, migration as a solution to frustration and boredom brings up new kinds of troubles and conflicts. The themes of migration and escape strongly stress the ideal of self-realization, of living a good, happy and materially secure life. At the same time, however, they often risk a disregard of the connectivity (Joseph 1999) with family and the wider community for the sake of self-realization. Admired as the migrants are for the opportunities that they are believed to realize, they are also under constant suspicion of disregarding their family obligations. This is especially the case with oldest sons who are by custom responsible for the care of their parents and siblings, and women whose relatives and prospective grooms sometimes find their desire to work abroad hard to understand. Especially nurses often work some years in the Gulf before getting married, among them Nârimân, who originally went for two years to the Arab Emirates. After her return she started immediately planning a next assignment, partly for the money but partly, as she told me, because she enjoyed the work very much. Eventually her growing professional ambitions became an obstacle for her engagement when she informed her fiancé, who had agreed with her going for a second assignment, that she was thinking of a third one, too. Unable or unwilling to understand her ambition, he was puzzled about her wish to work even though he was able to offer her a comfortable life with the money he makes with his

stationery shop. With other problems coming up at the same time, he felt let down by his bride and her family and broke the engagement.

Migration is most troubling, however, for those who stay behind. For those who manage to get abroad, escape is a solution, no matter what new conflicts it may produce. But for those whose dreams of migration and success remain unfulfilled, it actually aggravates the intensity of everyday despair and boredom. In such situations, boredom transforms from a motivation to an existential lack of prospect and purpose (see Schielke 2008) as it is described by many if not most of the young men I have talked with. With its tone of despair informed by an implicit valorization of excitement and self-realization, existential boredom stands in conflict not only with the ideals and aims of family and community bonds but also with the revivalist promise that Islam as a guiding virtue of life provides clarity in place of ambivalence and hope in place of despair. Boredom presents a passive denial of that hope, creating a deep and unsolved tension between the pious promise of happiness and purpose and the daily experience of frustration and despair. This tension can be temporarily overcome by doing something meaningful—be it celebration, work or worship—but as long as the frustrating logic of consumption and progress in the absence of realistic prospects prevails in people's lives, it cannot be abolished.

5. To What Is Islam a Solution?

In election campaigns, the candidates of the officially banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood are always recognizable by the slogan 'Islam is the solution'. In its unspecific and general nature, it is one of the most successful political slogans of our time. By not specifying what Islam is a solution to, it highlights religion as a paradigm, as a way of making sense of things and getting them organized. This is a promise that extends way beyond the field of laws, administration and political representation: it is welcomed as a guideline of everyday practice by many of those who on the level of party politics are not supportive of Islamist movements. I take up this slogan to highlight the character of revivalist religion in general and piety in particular, as a promise that entails not so much specific solutions as a way to solve all kinds of problems. In the following concluding pages, I will try to show what kind of solutions piety promises and what it delivers on the levels of both individual lives and social organization.

In a circumstance 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. Theirs is not, however, the discipline nor the self-vigilance of the Salafi piety movement, nor is their aim to structure and describe all social relations according to the register of political religion in the manner of the Islamist movements. 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. Those friends and contacts of mine, however, who actually have taken the path of pious self-formation are among the most troubled people I know. This is not to say that piety has made them so, but that they have moved toward the project of piety partly in search of a solution to their troubles, and that the success of piety in solving them has been limited.

Take, for example, Mustafâ and Tawfiq, both in their early twenties, who were quoted above discussing love and marriage. Mustafâ has gone through very difficult times in the past several years. After his father's death he got into 'bad company' and started smoking hashish on a regular basis,¹⁰ spending a large part of his inheritance on the habit. The unhappy end of the love relationship he describes above also took place in this period. 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. Months of intensive piety and worship followed, a period that he describes as a time of intense spirituality and happiness. 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 has begun to suffer from feelings of guilt and failure.

His friend Tawfiq, who to my knowledge has not gone through such intense crises as Mustafâ did, describes Mustafâ's move to piety as a sudden and surprising transformation and thinks that those who have gone seriously astray in their lives are the ones who become very strict when religious. He argues that Mustafâ may have gone too far and put himself under so much strain that he now is suffering a backlash. Tawfiq is religious in his way, and he prays, if not regularly, at least frequently. But he does not perceive his religiosity in contradiction to his love for music and his ambition for travel and adventure, nor does it affect the ways he interacts with female friends. Like Mustafâ, Tawfiq adheres to notions of religious 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 saint.) But he sees himself as moderate and open-minded and does not like to be involved in debates about correct ritual practice.

Mustafâ and Tawfiq stand for two trajectories of religiosity that are common among young people in Egypt. While Tawfiq appears to be less troubled, this should not be taken as a proof of a general failure of the project of piety. Tawfiq's solution to the problem of boredom and lack of prospects is not piety but escape, the success of which is yet to be seen. Both strategies offer great promises but in practice often turn out troublesome.

Of course the promise of piety is not restricted to the solution of personal crises by clear guidelines and routines. Beyond the experiences of committed Salafis, the register of religion as a comprehensive discipline is an enormously influential way of describing, judging and organizing social relationships. The promise of religion as a social ideology, however, is of a similar nature to the promise of piety as a teleology of subject. And in a strikingly similar way it also has had crises as its breeding ground. People born in the 1950s always mention the defeat of the Arab armies against Israel in 1967 as a turning point toward religion after a perceived failure of the secularist project of Arab socialism. In the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of the Islamic revival was accompanied by a widespread sense of moral corruption (see, e.g., Hoffman 1995: 27). Younger people often bring up the current War on Terror (which many Muslims interpret as a war against Islam) as a key reason why religion has become more important for them. In all cases, a turn toward religion has been accompanied by the promise that following the example of the Prophet and his companions, making clear distinctions between the permitted and the forbidden on the basis of the objective word of God and making Islam the key frame of identity and solidarity will provide for clarity in the face of confusion, success in face of defeats, perfection in face of corruption and harmony in face of juxtapositions.

The success of the revivalist religious public sphere, once it has been able to establish itself as an objective reading of religious 'facts', successfully draws upon key religious sensibilities of Muslims. The success of revivalist Islam cannot be understood without taking the Hereafter into account. The promise of piety is not only about good life, it is also (and perhaps primarily) about going to paradise. For Muslim believers, heaven and hell are real things, and any religious discourse that can successfully mobilize the fear of hell (hell being currently more present in religious sermons than paradise) for its ends has a tremendous argumentative advantage.

Saba Mahmood (2005: 140-145) offers us a very insightful analysis of fear as a religious sentiment. For the women in the piety movement, she argues, fear is not simply a motivation to follow commandments and prohibitions, it

is most importantly an ethical faculty. Learning to be pious is learning to fear God, and cultivating this fear is a way to cultivate a self-vigilant character willing to make the commandments of religion part of one's life. This is a very important point that I want to develop further in the way of a conclusion by relating it to the taboos and silences of the religious public sphere.

What makes the promise of Salafi revivalist piety so peculiar, so successful—and in practice so troubling—is that it excludes the possibility of discussing its success. To put it bluntly, if piety fails to bring you sustainable happiness, hope and certainty, the fault lies always with you and never with religion. This does not mean that the Islamic revival would exclude thinking, debate and deliberation (Hirschkind 2006a; Osella and Osella 2008; Ahmad 2008). On the contrary, it encourages reflection and debate, though in a specific frame, a paradigm of deliberation that privileges religious scripture as the source of comprehensive and strict norms superior to all other references, and very strictly excludes the possibility of debating this reference to scripture itself. The project of piety promises clarity, success, perfection, harmony and hope, but by taking a harmonious and self-conscious subject as its explicit goal and implicit starting point, it in practice leads to ever more contradictions, juxtapositions and impossible equations. Take, for example, the issue of sexual harassment. Prescribing a sexual morality based on the discipline of passions and the control of (primarily women's) bodies, the Salafi revivalist reading of Islam problematizes all contact between men and women to a degree that, for most young people, is impossible to enact. Not only aggressive grabbing but also dating and even shaking hands fall into the same category of forbidden acts that lead to adultery. This makes it very difficult to accommodate mixed-gender socializing and romantic contact in a religious framework, with the result that the different registers of love and religion stand in a stronger juxtaposition than they otherwise might. In consequence, a key normative register is inactive when it comes to organize (rather than merely permit or prohibit) desire outside of marriage. It would be exaggerated to claim that revivalist Islam is a cause of sexual harassment, but it is justified to say that, contrary to its aims, it fails to prevent it.

This problem cannot, however, be addressed in the register of religion because the premise that God has wisely and rightly prescribed Muslims to limit sexual desire to the context of marriage and to prevent its other expressions cannot be questioned in the revivalist religious framework. Of course the tabooing nature of religious public sphere does not cover all debates, and the roots of sexual harassment can, as Du'â' Sultân's article quoted in the beginning of this paper demonstrates, be discussed from other perspectives. But the problem remains that the aim of perfection is accompanied by increas-

ing contradictions and juxtaposition that cannot be accounted for within the frame of revivalist religious discourse. The long silence about the problem of sexual harassment on the streets that was broken by the night of the Feast in downtown Cairo, and the cognitive dissonance of those who, in spite of contrary reports by eyewitnesses, insisted that seductively dressed women were the true initiators of the events, are telling of the many silences and rationalizations that are necessary to keep up the self-image of harmony and perfection.

This is where the ethical modality of fear fits into the picture. Fear as a religious sentiment implies not only a willing self-discipline regarding one's desires and actions, but also a constant vigilance toward thoughts, questions and theories that could undermine the fragile coherence and perfection of the project of Islamic revival. But the centrality of the sentiment of fear also indicates that the ethical formation that is so central to the endeavor of piety may not be quite as stable as it may seem. If constant vigilance is required to prevent sinful desires, heretic ideas and subversive questions from becoming part of one's subjectivity, then we must assume that they in fact do threaten to undermine pious discipline.

In practice, people constantly balance (and sometimes fall) between different aims and ideals. Some of these differences can be accounted for, some cannot. Two key solutions to this problem are available in practice. The first one is ambiguous tolerance, allowing for a significant degree of situationality, negotiation and shifts between different aims, desires and normative registers. This solution has a long tradition in Islamic mysticism and popular religious culture and continues to be widely practiced also by the many people who, like Tawfiq, have embraced reformist notions of ritual but not revivalist ideals of subjectivity (see also Masquelier 2007). The second solution is upholding the aim and the image of perfection by the means of self-suggestion.

Key religious rituals and media of communication, 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 (*nawâfil*) is central to Salafi piety. A constant schedule of ritual self-suggestion directs one's attention toward God and, when successful, offers a fulfilling spiritual experience. But if the drive of self-suggestion recedes, the entire pious disposition is in danger. This point is made explicit by Mustafâ, who, longing back to his earlier almost euphoric sense of piety and commitment, is 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 Salâh 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 (*'ibâdât*) the heart keeps being blackened by dirt.

This account clearly describes pious commitment as a fragile form of continuous self-suggestion rather than as cumulative self-perfection. 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 ethical power of habit. But we must distinguish between the formation of specific dispositions and senses of proper behavior and between the formation 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 one's personality an ideal that stands in contradiction with the way human subjectivity actually works: as a dialogue of 'a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions' (van Meijl 2007: 929). Human character 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 self-suggestion.

Furthermore, Mustafa's story pinpoints how the Salafi discourse of piety with its enormous emphasis on purity makes it very difficult to find a balance with different desires if the drive of self-suggestion recedes—as it often does. Since religion stands totally beyond critique, people can only search the fault in themselves. And since the Salafi interpretation of religion insists that there is only plain objective religion on the one side and erroneous deviations on the other, it becomes difficult to reconcile faith with love and despair. The notions of love as self-sacrificing madness that breaks all boundaries, of boredom and despair as a state of no hope and of piety as the consistent and complete habituation of a will to live according to God's will (all of which have been articulated by Mustafa at different occasions) are unresolvable. Other, less radical notions of love and other, less strict notions of piety can be reconciled

or accommodated to some degree, at least. But these two radical aims, as well as the nihilistic sense of purposelessness articulated by boredom, significantly shape the life experience of young Egyptians.

This interpretation takes a perspective on the cultivation of virtues that shares with Lambek the emphasis on *phronesis*, practical judgment with the aim of doing the right thing. But in contrast to the Aristotelian notion of subjectivity he articulates, I emphasize the complex, dialogical ways personality, subjectivity and moral practice are shaped. My interpretation also shows the project of Islamic revival in a different light than that explored by Hirschkind and others. Rather than promoting sustainable formation of virtuous selves, the practice of piety is often characterized more by fragile day-by-day self-suggestion, which, by its nature, is a troubled and usually incomplete process.

This conclusion begs the question about the future of the project of piety. While religion, in its currently popular revivalist interpretation, does promise to solve all major problems, in practice a large part of the promise is based on its being unfulfilled (because only as an aim and an ideal can it have the perfection it demands and promises). Unfulfilled promises, however, may lose their power after a while. And yet it is unlikely that this would imply a general secularist or even antireligious backlash in a profoundly religious society such as Egypt. More likely, I speculate, the contemporary religious euphoria may give way to a sense of alienation and even guilt in many ways similar to the experience of formerly pious Salafis. Such a situation can be a fertile breeding ground for ideologies that claim to offer a new paradigm to solve problems of all kinds. They are unlikely to replace religion as a central source of meaning and normativity, however, just like revivalist Islam, while successful in marginalizing Marxism as a political and social ideology, has not replaced socialism as a register to discuss social justice and the relationship of state and the citizens.

The future of religion after the Islamic revival is likely to be characterized by major clashes and a heightened sensitivity to anything that can be seen as undermining religious truth, much in the way already laid out by the Rushdie affair, the Danish caricature affair, and many others of their kind. But rather than expressions of a religious revival successfully establishing an ethical monopoly, the increasing frequency of such episodes must be taken as a sign of a slightly different kind of religious sentiment. As I have said, the normative register of religion is not only about positive commandments and ethical dispositions. Even when people do not follow those, they commonly hold to religion as a metaphysical order of truth and meaning, and while religion in the first, ethical or political sense does not generally dominate the lives of Muslims, in the second sense of a meaningful imaginary structure of world it

provides a powerful overarching framework and hierarchy of meaningfulness. The ethical faculty of fear and the suggestive technique of indignation that so easily come to work in global events of anger are a powerful way to establish the certainty of that grand order of truth in a time where it, in terms of both daily experience and global politics, has become in many ways uncertain because its claim for practical validity has come to extend over all aspects of life in a way that makes it increasingly difficult to maintain its purity.

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Notes

1. The research for this article was made possible with the generous support of the DFG Collaborative Research Centre 295 at the University of Mainz, Germany. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the European Conference of African Studies, Leiden, 12 July 2007, and the Nordic Conference of Middle Eastern Studies, Helsinki, 22 September 2007. I am indebted to the people of Nazlat al-Rayyis, who do not appear in this article with their original names, for their friendship, assistance and observations, as well as to Roman Loimeier, Benjamin Soares, Daniela Swarowsky and the anonymous reviewers of the *JRA* for their critique and comments that helped me to develop the ideas of this article.

2. The issue of grabbing and sexual harassment in the streets has become visible in public debates partly because cases of collective grabbing have begun to take place in more prominent locations, notably downtown Cairo, and partly because of a shift in the media landscape, with a number of independent weblogs and newspapers willing to take up a subject that state-controlled media may have found too unpleasant to discuss.

3. It is unclear whom exactly Hirschkind means by secular liberals. Are they secular Egyptians, or is he arguing against a position in the American political and academic? If the former, he understates the legacy of socialism rather than liberalism in Egyptian secularism; if the latter, he embeds his argument in a complex ideological contestation in the wake of the liberal-communitarian debate.

4. This does not mean, of course, that the Aristotelian reading as proposed by Lambek would be devoid of conflicts, but the conflicts are located between ideals and practice: 'Aristotle recognizes the prevalence of incontinence. The incontinent is someone who has heard certain ethical principles expressed and learned them rationally but has not inculcated them through habit so that they become disposition; his actions do not conform to the judgments he thinks he holds. Conflict, then, is located between disposition and rationalization' (Lambek 2000: 317).

5. Some of my more intellectually oriented friends from the village do, however, take pleasure in reading novels that have been forbidden because of thought experiments that have been considered blasphemous, such as Yûsuf as-Sibâ'i's *Nâ'ib 'Azrâ'il* (1987 [1947]) and Nagîb Mahfûz's recently republished *Awlâd hâratinâ* (2007 [1957]). This is less to be understood as an intellectual rebellion against religion, however, than as speculative exercise of the intellect in many ways analogous to the cultivation of provocative debate described by Marsden (2005): 112-113.

6. It is often difficult to draw a clear line between arranged and love marriages because a degree of negotiation is at play in most cases (See Hart 2007).

7. Since Mustafâ's father died a few years ago, it is evident that he is quoting common wisdom here rather than talking about his father in particular.

8. Here I agree with Lambek's point about the way decisions and sacrifices mark directions for 'specific ethical lives' (2007: 33) but differ with him in the way I highlight that

such beginnings do not remove the traces of other, alternative or parallel ethical lives in a person's life experience.

9. In Egypt, Saturday is the first day of the week—similar to Monday in the West.

10. While smoking hashish and marijuana is common and largely socially accepted in Egypt, habitual consumption is deemed to be a moral and personal problem.