Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians

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So much has been written in recent years on Muslims who consciously and consistently aim to be pious, moral, and disciplined that the vast majority of Muslims who – like most of humankind – are sometimes but not always pious, at times immoral, and often undisciplined have remained in the shadow of an image of Islam as a perfectionist project of self-discipline. Taking the month of Ramadan, as a time of exceptional piety, as a starting-point, this paper tries to account for the different views and experiences that young people of Muslim faith in a northern Egyptian village articulate, the models of action and subjectivity they have access to, and the contradictory outcomes that the Islamic revivalist ideal of perfection has for some of them.

For young men in the northern Egyptian village of Nazlat al-Rayyis,[1] the holy month of Ramadan is a privileged time for football. Every afternoon before fast-breaking time, youths gather to play at schoolyards or other open spaces. At the secondary school, a Ramadan tournament of local amateur clubs attracts up to a hundred spectators, who sit from early afternoon until shortly before sunset in the shade, watching the usually two or three consecutive matches that take place in an afternoon. I was amazed at first by this display of what seemed to me an extreme exercise of physical endurance in face of a fasting that involves complete abstinence from food, drink, smoking, and sex from dawn to sunset. But when I discussed the subject with the young men, they said that playing football during the hours before fast-breaking is not very arduous at all. On the contrary, concentrating on the game makes one forget the feelings of hunger and thirst.[2] The hours before the fast-breaking can be long, and male students and civil servants especially often have a lot of free time in Ramadan.

Football is not only about killing time, however. It is also seen as a form of the sociality (*lamma*) and amusement (*taslîya*) that characterize Ramadan in Egypt as much as fasting and praying do. Despite the ascetic character of fasting, Ramadan in Egypt is surrounded by a festive atmosphere. Streets are decorated with flags, colourful strips of paper, lights, and lanterns. In the evenings – especially towards the end of Ramadan – people invite friends and relatives, the cafés are full, and in the cities a veritable season of cultural events characterizes the second half of the month. But

festive as they may be, Ramadan gatherings nevertheless express a spirit of religious and moral discipline. Forms of entertainment deemed immoral or un-Islamic – flirting and making out, consumption of alcohol and cannabis, pornography – largely stop during the holy month. In the cities, bars are closed. In the villages, internet cafés are empty. The trade in cannabis that otherwise flourishes in cities and villages alike reaches a seasonal low. Other forms of entertainment that are not seen as immoral as such are suspended in Ramadan because they have no place in the rigid schedule of fasting. Popular celebrations such as saints-day festivals (*mûlid*s) and weddings are not cel-ebrated at this time.[3] These forms of entertainment, temporarily unavailable during the holy month, are partly replaced by football. 'The football matches', a friend of mine argued, 'are for the youths a way to compensate for not being able to go after girls, smoke marijuana and drink beer. It's a way to fill the emptiness that they otherwise fill with immoral entertainment'.

Ramadan football is an ambivalent exercise. It is one of the gatherings so charac-teristic of the sense of community that prevails in the month of fasting, and a way to kill time that is not deemed immoral or un-Islamic. But at the same time it shows a very complex understanding of religion and morality. Not only does it mix ascetic discipline with fun and entertainment, it is also part of a time of exceptional morality that, by its nature, will only last as long as Ramadan lasts, and that by virtue of its temporally limited nature indirectly legitimizes less consistent approaches to religion and morality for the rest of the year.

Since the Islamic revival of the 1970s, rigid religious moralism has become a leading tone of the debates in Egypt on norms and values. Daily life, however, continues to be characterized by the ambiguity between and an uneasy coexistence of religious moral-ity and discipline, communal respect and reputation, the expectations and promises of consumerism and romantic love, and the limitations of practical circumstances. This tension is most strongly present among the youth, whose life experience has become (or perhaps has always been) highly fragmented, characterized by contradictory values and expectations, and often by strong crises and shifts in lifestyle and attitudes.

While subjectivity, religiosity, and morality have become a central topic of the anthropology of Muslim societies, the issues of ambivalence and fragmentation have so far been given relatively little attention. Notably Talal Asad (1993), Michael Lambek (2000), Charles Hirschkind (2001; 2006a; 2006b) and Saba Mahmood (2005) have – with somewhat different emphases – argued for an anthropology of morality that, rather than focusing on codes, commands, and prohibitions, should have as its focus the ways in which moral personhood and responsibility are created and practised. Morality, in this sense, is about the conscious cultivation of virtues with the aim of developing a virtuous self. The problem of these approaches is that although they give considerable attention to practical judgement in the face of conflict, debate, and con-testation, they look at the practice of morality and religion primarily from the perspec-tive of coherence. In the work of Mahmood and Hirschkind, this is especially evident in the way they juxtapose the ideals of the Islamic revival with an equally idealized secular liberal position, and most crucially in the way they focus on the declared aim of a pious discipline rather than its actual outcomes. Lambek's approach with its emphasis on practical judgement (*phronesis*) is more nuanced, but it remains grounded in the Aristotelian notion of moral action as a search for an ideal middle way. Yet if we are to understand the ambiguity of Ramadan football, we must find a way to account for views that are neither clearly nor consistently in line with any grand ideology, and lives

that are full of ambivalence – not only between moral and amoral aims, but also between different, at times mutually hostile, moral aims.

Other scholars in the field have given more consideration to ambiguity. Katherine Ewing (1990) and Gary Gregg (1998; 2007) demonstrate that while people may present their identity, aims, and trajectory as clear and coherent at a given moment, they routinely shift between conflicting self-representations, and are regularly torn between conflicting self-ideals and aims (see also van Meijl 2006; Masquelier 2007). Lila Abu-Lughod (1996 [1986]: 255-8) makes a similar point in her study of Bedouin oral poetry, showing that neither the public face of honour nor the more intimate face of love poetry can be taken as the more true expression of people's sensibilities. More recently, Magnus Marsden has argued that approaches with an emphasis on self-discipline 'are unable to confront the ways in which Muslims are called upon to face, explain and contend with inconsistencies and complexities in their attempts to live virtuous lives' (2005: 261). Benjamin Soares (2006) argues that rather than producing hybrids and compromises, the various normative registers and ideals present in modern Muslim societies often stand in strong juxtaposition to each other in the public sphere and in people's lives. My own research on Muslim saints-day festivals (Schielke 2006) indicates that while in earlier, more mystical traditions of Islam ambivalence was accommodated as part of a normative order that did not require a comprehensive and universalizing discipline, modernist and reformist approaches that emphasize rationality and purity often take the abolition of ambivalence as a key task. Their attempt to do so, however, actually leads not to more clarity but to more fragmentation.

In this paper, I argue that moral subjectivity is a very important issue indeed, but there is a risk – especially when morality and piety come together – of favouring the complete, the consistent, and the perfect in a way that does not do justice to the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday experience. To develop this theoretical critique, I shall depart somewhat from the conventions of academic writing: I will present my empirical case first and only afterwards conclude with a detailed critical discussion, informed by my empirical argument, of current research in the field. For the sake of clarity, I single out one particularly influential and good example of the study of piety and subjectivity – Saba Mahmood's *Politics of piety* (2005) – which, I believe, offers inspiring directions for the anthropological study of religion, but falls into the trap of what Katherine Ewing (1990) has called 'the illusion of wholeness'.

Ramadan morality

Ramadan, in Muslim belief, is a blessed, holy month which constitutes a special period of piety that involves much more than just fasting. There is a general sense of increased social, moral, and pious commitment during Ramadan. In the evenings, the mosques are often packed with believers participating in the voluntarily *tarâwîh* prayers, in addition to canonical ritual daily prayers that can extend over more than an hour after the evening (*'ishâ*) prayer. In the streets of the cities, wealthy citizens offer large-scale services of free food at fast-breaking time, known as 'tables of the Merciful' (*mawâ'id ar-Rahmân*).

Arduous to maintain especially in summer heat, fasting is seen by many as a spiritual exercise in disciplining carnal desires. Furthermore, many people ascribe to the feeling of hunger a strong power in facilitating social responsibility towards the poor. The central and most important motivation for fasting, however, is the prospect of Paradise. Ramadan is a time when God rewards believers most generously and forgives their sins.

For the duration of Ramadan, 'the gates of Paradise are open and the gates of Hell are closed'.[4] According to a *hadith* (authoritative tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad, distributed as a poster by the local Branch of the Muslim Brotherhood,

> Whoever fasts and stands for prayer in the month of Ramadan with faith and entrusting God with counting the reward, the sins he has previously committed are forgiven. And whoever stands for prayer in the Night of Destiny (*Laylat al-Qadr*)[5] with faith and entrusting God with counting the reward, the sins he has previously committed are forgiven.[6]

Other traditions state that the obligatory prayer counts seventy times its value during Ramadan, that voluntary prayer gains the same reward as an obligatory one, and that a prayer in *Laylat al-Qadr* is better than that of a thousand months. On the other hand, the consequences of not observing Ramadan are severe. Intentionally breaking the fast without a legitimate reason cannot be recalled or equalled out by anything, and both good and bad deeds count their double in reward and punishment during Ramadan.[7]

Not surprisingly, then, Ramadan is 'the season of worship' (*mûsim al-ʿibâda*), a time when people try to be good – that is, observe religious commandments and moral virtues more rigorously than they usually do. People who otherwise rarely pray try to fulfil this obligation during the holy month, especially in the beginning and around *Laylat al-Qadr*. Since it is believed that anger, curses, and insults break the fast, people attempt to avoid them during Ramadan, and in arguments and fights (which are numerous in Ramadan as people often have short tempers due to fasting), people often use the phrase 'Oh God, I'm fasting!' (*Allâhumma ana sâyim*)[8] to avoid using foul language but also to call oneself and others to calm down.

During the holy month, one must abstain from all the other minor and major misdeeds that may be forgivable at other times. If God's reward and blessings are very close during Ramadan, so are His wrath and punishment. This belief involves not only practices deemed as immoral and sinful, such as drinking, flirting, adultery, watching pornography, lying, stealing, and violence. It also implies restrictions upon practices with more ambiguous status, notably cinema, music, and dress. Many women opt for a more conservative dress during Ramadan (by not using make-up, for example), and some people abstain from listening to pop music and watching movies, arguing that 'they are *harâm* (forbidden) during Ramadan'.

This focus on reward and piety is framed, however, by the general sense of gathering, joy, and entertainment of which the afternoon football matches are only one example. A month of fasting, Ramadan is also a privileged time of eating as people compensate for the fasting in daytime with special delicacies in the evening. The consumption of meat and sugar skyrockets. Special television programmes and, in the cities, cultural events in theatres and tents offer a wide range of Ramadan entertainment. At night, cafés, promenades, and parks are packed with people, including many more women and families than usually. People generally spend more money in Ramadan, and towards the end of the month, with *ʿîd al-fitr* (the feast of breaking the fast) approaching, consumption reaches an intensity similar to that of Christmas in the West.

This 'Christmasization of Ramadan', as it has been called by Walter Armbrust (2002), and the character of Ramadan as a time of exceptional morality have been regularly subjected to criticism both from religious authorities and from ordinary citizens who feel that the 'true' spirit of Ramadan is lost in the midst of all this. They argue that Ramadan should be a time of spirituality and discipline that helps to create a

'committed' (*multazim*) Muslim character and society free of vices and unnecessary spending, orientated to the purpose of individual and collective self-improvement (Abû l-Ma'âtî 2006: 7; al-Khashshâb 2006: 7; Matar 2006: 23-4; Sha'bân 2006: 4; al-Shurbâsî 2006: 1428-31).

The popular practice of Ramadan, both in its ascetic and festive variations, does not focus on progressive improvement of society and self. Firmly based on the authoritative sources of Islam but with a different emphasis than offered by established religious discourse, its focus is explicitly on reward (*thawâb*), the forgiving of sins, and the ultimate aim of entering Paradise in the afterlife. During Ramadan, people frequently discuss in detail the correct form of voluntary prayers and the exact details of fasting in order to maximize the reward of praying and fasting. This is a highly utilitarian understanding of religion that implicitly allows Ramadan to be established as a moral and pious exception from not so perfect everyday life. If Ramadan is a time of exceptional reward when God forgives one's previous sins, one may commit some sins and slip a little from one's obligations during the rest of the year – in a year's time, after all, it is Ramadan again.

The ways in which most people practise Ramadan do not require an ethical subjectivity that aims at the perfection of a purified, God-fearing self capable of keeping right and wrong clearly apart in one's judgement of one's own and others' conduct. This is, however, the ideal promoted by the Salafi reformist movement and, to a less radical extent, established public-sector religious functionaries. It is, more importantly, closely connected with the (for the time being) hegemonic ideology of developmentalist nationalism, which, despite some severe compromises it has undergone in the process of economic liberalization, continues to posit the ideal of a rational, committed, and disciplined citizen who, much like the ideal Salafi believer, has 'awareness' (*wa'y*), that is, clear and authoritative knowledge and a correspondingly sound ethical disposition. This is a notion of society, religion, and the subject which, in its secular and Islamist varieties alike, centres on discipline, clarity, and consistence in service of a grand purpose (Schielke 2006; 2007). What the modern citizen or believer (or, most commonly, both in the same person) should not have are ambivalent states of mind and contradictory values. This, however, is not the case with Ramadan morality, which is based not on progressive discipline and perfection but on a temporal and contextual hierarchy of different norms, motivations, aims, and pressures. The moral subject in this practice of and vernacular discourse on morality is one who acts appropriately according to the time and the occasion in order to find a more or less acceptable temporary balance between God's commands, social customs and values, personal desires, and economic pressures, a balance in which the weight of different constituents can change depending on the social context of a practice, the time of the year, and one's personal biography. For such a notion of moral subjectivity, norms and boundaries are not absolute; on the contrary, they are subject to temporal and contextual shifts, as is stated in the colloquial proverb: 'There is an hour for your heart and an hour for your Lord' (*sâ'a l-qalbak w-sâ'a l-rabbak*), in other words: there are times to follow your desires, and there are times to follow the commandments of religion. Ramadan as a time of exceptional morality demonstrates and enforces the supremacy of God's commands by constituting a time in which morality is not situational but strict and in which religious obligations *must* be fulfilled. But in the end it is precisely the temporary rigour of the holy month that establishes and legitimizes the flexible nature of norms and ethics for the rest of the year.

This can be best seen in the time of *'id al-fitr*, the feast of breaking the fast that marks the end of Ramadan. In line with the established traditions of ritual Law, Muslims take the Feast as an occasion to reward themselves for withstanding the trial of fasting. But the extent and ways in which they do so can significantly depart from individual and collective self-improvement and reform. The Feast marks not only a reward for fasting, but also the return to a normal order of affairs. On the first Friday after Ramadan, at the congregational Friday noon (*gum'a*) prayer, the sermons invariably circle around one issue: reminding the believers that they must follow the commandments of their creed not only during Ramadan, but for all of the year, that the Feast does not mean that one is allowed to revert to one's bad habits. And yet every year when Ramadan football gives way to other forms of entertainment, the same young men who pray and fast during Ramadan now celebrate in ways that would have been out of the question a few days earlier. The sales of hashish skyrocket, cafés with satellite dishes start showing porn again, and, most visibly and dramatically, youths gather in parks, promenades, and public places to celebrate in an excited and tense atmosphere that often leads to outbreaks of sexual harassment with young men aggressively touching and grabbing women passing by (Malek 2006).

But the power of the moral shift of the Feast lies not simply in the reversion to bad habits. More importantly, it marks the shift from a period of observance during which the sins of the previous year are erased, to a more complex order of morality. Sexuality is a strong case in point. While, according to Islamic rituals, sexual intercourse is allowed in the night during Ramadan, the rigorous and often tiring schedule imposed by fasting leaves little time and energy for sex. On the first evening of the Feast in 2004, I met with young men from the village in a café. They were sitting outside in the alley, while inside, behind mostly closed doors, middle-aged family fathers were watching porn on a French satellite channel.[9] The youths explained that the married men were 'warming up' to go home and have sex with their wives after a month's abstinence. Since the young unmarried men did not have wives waiting for them at home, they were doing their best to annoy and make fun of the older men, who were slightly but not very uncomfortable with the situation, exposed, on the one hand, confirmed in their striving for potency, a very important male virtue, on the other. But also for the young men the Feast meant a return to male virtues based on virility and sexuality after temporarily devoting themselves to the more ascetic virtues of piety and sportsmanship during Ramadan. Many of them had girlfriends and prospective brides whom they were courting, and those who did not were nevertheless busy with romantic and erotic fantasies, as well as attempts to make contacts with girls, with strategies ranging from flirting to aggressive harassment. The end of Ramadan meant that they were free to resume 'going after girls' (*yimshi wara l-banât*), a practice deemed morally questionable but all the same essential for their male self-esteem and their expectations of romantic love.

Moral registers

The moral universe in which Ramadan morality is embedded is characterized by a profound ambivalence that is not only a coincidental result of circumstances but actually provides the foundation of situational moral action and an ethical subjectivity that is based on a coexistence of various motivations, aims, and identities that can and often do conflict but do not constitute exclusive opposites.

Young people in the village, often strongly influenced by Salafis and Muslim Brothers in their religious beliefs, generally share a literalist understanding of religion as a clear, exact set of commandments and prohibitions that leave little or no space for different interpretations or negotiation. In their everyday practice, however, they also express other ideals that may more or less clearly contradict their religious discourse.

The life experiences and expectations of the young men of Nazlat al-Rayyis are characterized by several moments of ambivalence that consider not only others' expectations of them but also, as far as I can tell on the basis of their accounts, their own expectations of themselves. Ideals of rigid sexual morality coexist and compete with the imaginaries and experiments of romance and sex, wishes of self-realization with the aspirations for social status, ideals of moral integrity with the drive for material well-being. In fact, people often speak in very different tone and with very different arguments and style about different topics. While young men often ridicule Salafi activists with their long beards, short-hemmed *gallâbiyas* (long loose gowns worn by men), and painstakingly precise ritualism, at the same time their idea of a profoundly religious person is usually identical with the image of the Salafi. A talk, very critical and satirical, about social values can turn suddenly very serious and dogmatic when the subject of religion crops up. On the other hand, people can argue for very 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 in parallel and often contradict each other. There are several key moral registers, each with values, terminologies, discourses, and fields of their own, that play a role in the lives and discourses of the young men with whom I did fieldwork. The most important among them are as follows:

- Religion, understood as a set of clear norms, often referred to as 'Qur'an and the Sunna', that is, the two central sources of Islam. Religion, in this understanding, is essentially a normative system that defines all acts as either permitted (*halâl*) or prohibited (*harâm*) on the base of evidence from the Scripture.
- Social justice, generally with a clear socialist overtone problematizing issues such as corruption, privatization of public-sector enterprises and public services, nepotism, authoritarian rule, economic exploitation, the lack of opportunities of people with state education, and the ridiculously low salaries of civil servants.
- Community and family obligations, usually referred to with 'respect' (*ihtirâm*), including one's social standing in the community, good behaviour, responsibility for one's family, recognition of authorities and hierarchies, and wealth.
- Good character (*tîba*, *gadaʿâna*), based on the readiness to help friends, avoidance of conflicts, and a general sense of joviality and sympathy. Good character is often seen by young men as a more 'true' virtue than respect, which, in their view, often is based purely on money and can conceal an essentially vicious character.
- Romance and love, celebrating passion and emotional commitment and describing 'pure love' as an all-sacrificing obsession that disregards both self-interest and other moral ideals.
- Self-realization, expressed in the aim of finding a well-paid job and a place in life and, to a lesser degree, of widening one's horizon of experience.

Morality in this sense is not only unsystematic and ambiguous, it is also accompanied by declaredly amoral aims and strategies that people deem necessary to fill the 'emptiness' of the everyday and to reach material well-being. Some of the most important amoral registers are money and the necessity of earning an income (which, for example, force a respectable and God-fearing civil servant to live on bribes), sex and desire, and fun and excitement, including the consumption of alcohol and drugs. On the other side, there are also recurring topoi which in a moralizing tone at once establish a moral register and offer an excuse – most notably so a critique of materialism which consists of claiming that 'in this village' or 'in our society' all that really counts is money and that true moral values have no importance anymore. By insinuating that if it were not for all this money and materialism, people really would be able to live happy, spiritual lives in justice and harmony, the critique of materialism at once establishes the registers of religion and social justice and explains why it is not possible to live according to them.

Romantic love and sexuality, to stay with an example that is deemed crucially important by the young men I have followed in my fieldwork, form an ethical discourse with specific virtues and teleologies of the subject, that is, ways to become and be a good human being (see Foucault 1990: chap. 3). Romance is strongly present not only in everyday experience, but also in the public media in the form of love songs, films, soap operas, and so on. 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, they definitely 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 the context of the action. Love represents an ethics of desire and commitment (which can reach the degree of obsession) that stands in stark contrast to the religious discourse on chastity and the social practice of parental control over marriages.[10] But committed to the ideals of romance as the young men are, they can simultaneously be very convinced about the necessity of gender segregation and the absolute prohibition of adultery (*zinâ*) in Islam. The interesting point here is not just the fact that despite the religious discourse on chastity premarital sex does take place quite often, but the ambivalent coexistence of partly opposing teleologies of the subject, on one level striving for a sinless and pure disposition that excludes erotic relationships before marriage, on another level aiming for a romantic and erotic relationship that in the end (not at the beginning) may lead to marriage, while on a further level committed to ideals of family hierarchies and respect that exclude girlfriends from the role of potential wives exactly because their participation in romantic affairs makes them 'bad' (*wihsha*) and unrespectable.[11]

The practice of all these contradictory and conflicting expectations and ideals is necessarily situational and inconsequent. Love stands in a continuous tension to the register of gender segregation and sexual morality and the register of family responsibilities. The communal quality of respect is often seen as a mere mask based on material values and detached from the virtue of good character. The ideal of social justice stands in a striking juxtaposition to a reality where nepotism, bribes, and illegal trade are often the only and usually the most lucrative way to make a living. The over-arching normativity of religion, finally, is continuously relativized by references to other registers that, rather than questioning or subverting religious norms, circumvent them.

Ramadan, in this mosaic of a moral universe, is a site of higher order, a moral exception which through the exercise of fasting establishes a clear hierarchy and a clear teleology: the commands of God and the prospect of Paradise. By the logic of its exceptional nature, it cannot and need not be a permanent state of affairs. My point here is that this is not merely a compromise that allows for amoral practices for the sake of material necessity. Romantic love, social respect, good character, and self-realization constitute moral registers and ethical teleologies of the subject that are by no means amoral; on the contrary, they imply normative expectations in their own right. While during Ramadan they can be temporarily subordinated to the superior normativity of religion, in the everyday their relationship is one of competitive coexistence.

Living according to the book

This coexistence is increasingly troubled – but not replaced – by the current turn of many young people towards a Salafi revivalist understanding of religion as an all-encompassing ritual and moral discipline that has as its declared aim the abolition of ambivalence and the imposition of clarity (see also Lincoln 2006: 56-60). Good life, in this understanding, must and can only be based on full and comprehensive application of *al-kitâb wa-s-sunna*, that is, the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition *qua* definitive manuals of moral action. This, however, does not mean that people would actually live in this way, and therein lies both the power and the fundamental trouble of the Salafi ideal of religiosity. On the one hand, people can hold to it without actually having fully to realize it, and its being unrealized allows it to remain pure and simple while life is messy and complex. On the other hand, however, it can become a serious obstacle in people's lives, a debate-killing argument that can lead people into serious crises and dead ends.

Many researchers have convincingly argued that the Islamic revival is not simply an expression of dogmatic fundamentalist obscurantism, but in fact very dynamic and open for a great degree of debate and difference (Ahmad 2008; Hirschkind 2006*a*; Osella & Osella 2008). But we should be careful not to over-state the possibilities of debate and deliberation opened by the democratization of religious interpretation that has accompanied the spread and popularization of Islamic reformism (see Eickelman 1992). With its emphasis on direct knowledge and application of religious 'facts', Islamic reformism opens up powerful possibilities of critique while excluding or marginalizing others by positing them beyond discussion. Other styles of being religious exist, but they are increasingly stigmatized as incomplete or erroneous. Spaces of ambiguity are increasingly dependent on silence, double standards, and cognitive dissonance. While values can be debated, declaring them religious often ends the debate. All other moral registers have either to accept or ignore the supremacy of religion, but they cannot openly contest it.

What makes this troubling for young men is the way the current wave of religiosity often leaves people hanging in a situation where they accept the promise of religion for a better life both in this world and the Hereafter, but cannot measure the promise in any legitimate way, or search for alternative solutions should the reality fall short of the promise. The problems this causes are best seen in the fragmentation of people's biographies. Young age is often characterized by strong changes in beliefs and attitudes, and it is usually at young age that people choose to become 'committed' (*multazim*) Salafis who not only meticulously fulfil religious obligations such as praying and fasting, but also apply a wider pious discipline to all aspects of their lives, changing their

style of dress, giving up smoking,[12] starting to socialize primarily with other Salafis, and adapting a distinctive jargon. Becoming an active Salafi with the corresponding comprehensive discipline is usually marked by a strong break between a 'sinful' (*âsî*) past and a 'committed' present – therefore disqualifying the more ambivalent forms of morality. But we must be careful not to take the way from ambivalence and imperfection to clarity and commitment as the regular and typical one. The perfectionist nature of the piety movement produces much starker contrasts between commitment and deviance than the temporal relativism of Ramadan morality. The result is not necessarily a general shift from Ramadan piety to comprehensive piety, but rather the increasing intensity of the juxtapositions and shifts. People always live complex lives; a person's identity is in practice dialogical, made up of different voices and experiences (Gregg 2007; van Meijl 2006). In consequence, people commonly shift between different roles and identities. This can become a problematic and troublesome experience, however, when one or some of the ideologies of the self a person holds to are based on a demand for strict and exclusive perfection – as the Salafi revivalist notion of subjectivity based on 'commitment' (*iltizâm*) is.

Salafis, just like everybody else, live everyday lives loaded with ambiguities and contradictions. To a certain degree Salafi discourse allows for pragmatic solutions legitimized by the Islamic legal category of necessity (*darûra*). Shaving one's beard for conscription is a common case of such compromises for the sake of necessity that young Salafi men face. The problem, however, is that this by no means lessens the pressure on pious self-perfection. On the level of emotional and spiritual commitment, there is little space for negotiation. The rigour of Salafi piety that makes it so attractive in the mess of the everyday also makes it difficult to maintain in the face of ambivalent feelings. Take, for example, the story of Mustafa (a pseudonym), a man in his early twenties who after a period of excessive consumption of hashish and a lifestyle deemed irresponsible and unrespectable by his friends and family turned to Salafi religiosity in order to find a clear distinction between right and wrong.

I first met Mustafa some time before his military service and shortly after he had given up his practice of Salafi piety. While he continues to hold to Salafi ideas on religion when asked, he now regularly shaves, has returned to smoking, prays irregularly, and maintains contact with female friends in a way which Salafis would consider unacceptable (but which is considered well within the limits of respectable behaviour by his friends). It has not been an easy shift for him: he frequently reports intense feelings of guilt and failure because of the temporary suspension of his commitment (he does indicate that he hopes to return to a more pious lifestyle after the end of his military service). Neither his move from deviation to commitment, nor his slip (as he describes it) from commitment to ambivalence are in any way unusual. I know people who have gone through periods as a Muslim Brotherhood activist at school, a left-wing atheist as a university student, and a liberal believer attached to ideas of Nasr Abû Zayd[13] as a family father. There are some women whom I came to know as veiled and conservative young students but who have since given up veiling and have grown increasingly critical of what they see as misguided religious moralism, without, however, turning against religion as such. Others again have begun to wear a more covering dress and adopted a more 'committed' (*multazima*) lifestyle after completing their studies, seeing this not as a break, however, but rather as a ripening process. Some men I know have become radical and strictly committed Salafis who make a clear break with their past, grow their beards, and (try to) stop smoking after spending wild

student years with girlfriends, alcohol, and drugs. Some among them remain Salafis, while others later shave their beards again and return to an ambiguous, 'ordinary' lifestyle.

It is for the people for whom pious commitment is only a period in their life that the Salafi aim of comprehensive purity is most troubling. They often tell of having experienced a period of intense happiness and satisfaction as active Salafis but then losing the drive, facing everyday problems at work or with state authorities (who view Salafis with great suspicion), and reverting to their old habits. In the following period, they often report a feeling of failure and guilt. With their earlier standards and norms no longer sufficient or legitimate in their eyes, they are nevertheless not able to hold the drive for purity so central for Salafi piety. Troubled by the loss of his earlier almost euphoric sense of piety and commitment, Mustafa says:

> 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 Shaykh 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.

For one thing, this account describes pious commitment as a fragile form of continuous self-suggestion rather than as cumulative self-perfection. Furthermore, it pinpoints how the Salafi discourse of piety with its tremendous 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. There is neither return to the relative comfort of the negotiated ambiguity of living for God in Ramadan and for oneself for the rest of the year, nor comfort in the rigid understanding of religion. Since religion stands totally beyond critique, people can only search for faults in themselves. And since the Salafi interpretation of religion insists that there are no interpretations of religion, only plain objective Religion on the one side and erroneous deviations on the other, rural young people rarely have access to other interpretations of religion that would allow them to reconcile their ambivalent experiences with their religious faith.

As a consequence, the wave of Salafi religiosity with its insistence on purity and perfection actually intensifies the fragmentation and contradictions in young people's lives. While wishing to be good Muslims living by the Qur'an and the Sunna and going to Paradise in the Hereafter, the young men in the village still also wish to fall in love, to be excited, to get high, to be wealthy, to get abroad, to have sex, and many other things. Some of these aims do not contradict the young men's religious convictions. But those that do are becoming more and more difficult to include as legitimate elements of a necessarily ambiguous and complex life. Instead, they become increasingly separate and mutually antagonistic.

Flaws of perfection

With football as a paradigmatic case of Ramadan piety and morality, we reach rather different conclusions than we would have with, say, the practice of prayer (see, e.g., Henkel 2005; Möller 2005: 380). Of course, Ramadan is about prayer as much as it is about football, and, if given the choice, most Muslims would certainly name prayer as

the more important part (although the most important, undoubtedly, would be fasting, which gives both prayer and football their special 'taste' during Ramadan). But my point is that in looking at what may seem a marginal practice and a way to kill time instead of focusing on a core ritual, we may actually learn more about the moral and religious world to which both belong. A focus on key religious practices and the attempt to fulfil them is likely to produce analyses that highlight the moment of perfection. A focus on the margins of these practices, on the contrary, is likely to shed more light on the much less perfect social experiences and personal trajectories that all too easily remain obscured by the strong tendency of religious discourse – both in first and third person – to describe the normative as the normal.

Before closing, the final part of this article is devoted to a critical theoretical discussion of some of the current research on religion and morality, especially in the fields of Islam and the Middle East. Much of the recent research on morality, piety, and subjectivity is characterized by what I see as a problematic tendency to privilege the aim of ethical perfection. Here I single out the currently perhaps most prominent example of such a tendency: Saba Mahmood's (2003; 2005) work on the piety movement in Egypt, which, closely aligned with the work of Talal Asad (1986; 1993; 2003) and Charles Hirschkind (2001; 2006a; 2006b), has gained great (and for a large part deserved) acclaim within the anthropology of Islam (see, e.g., Bautista 2008).

Mahmood argues that rather than positing a liberal autonomous subject as a natural starting-point of the study of religious and moral subjects, we need to look at the creation of an ethical self through embodied religious practices and accept that there are religiously and culturally preconditioned moral subjectivities that differ from those prescribed by liberal and feminist theory. This research programme owes allegiance, on the one hand, to the later work of Michel Foucault (1990: chap. 3), who, in his *History of sexuality*, shifted his focus towards the techniques of forming the self, and, on the other hand, to communitarian moral philosophers, most notably Charles Taylor (1989), who, critical of the abstract rationalism of Kantian ethics, have turned towards the Aristotelian tradition. Aristotle (2002 [350 BC]), in his *Nicomachean ethics*, develops a theory of ethics that is based on the habituation of virtues: virtue does not exist before practice; it is developed by the power of habit that enables one to live a good life.

Critical of both the denunciatory tone of many studies on Islamist piety movements, on the one hand, and of the search for moments of resistance and subversion, on the other, Mahmood refers to Aristotle to call for a focus upon the way people attempt to learn and live moral dispositions. Acting within a moral universe that provides certain kinds of legitimate arguments and forms of action, the women active in the piety movement consciously attempt to develop a docile and pious character. In doing so, Mahmood argues, they are neither making free choices of the autonomous, liberal kind, nor are they passive objects of manipulation. To avoid such simple oppositions and the ideological weight they carry, we should look at the kind of actions and arguments that are available to people and the ways they relate individual dispositions to ethical practice.

A key category in Mahmood's study of the piety movement is habitus; however, in a very different sense from that popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 168-77). Mahmood criticizes Bourdieu for missing the Aristotelian point of *habituation*, the active acquiring of an ethical disposition by the means of bodily habit. Habitus, according to Mahmood, involves the active capacity of forming and transforming the self through bodily practice:

> [T]he Aristotelian notion of habitus forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world (Mahmood 2005: 139).

Mahmood's emphasis on practice, at once formative and expressive of ethical disposition – and the way she relates practice to the discursive imagination of the world providing people a framework for action – offers significant advantages for the study of morality both as a socially negotiated collective order and as individual practice. She is also right, in my judgement, in criticizing attempts to find moments of resistance and subversion in the women's piety movement. Such attempts, she argues, are guided by a romantic search for empowerment that may distract our attention from the power of authoritative religious discourses which the women of the piety movement, firmly convinced of their Truth, attempt to realize in their life. But there is a problem: Mahmood actually tells us very little about practice and life. She does tell that the path of piety can lead to conflicts, most notably between the task to serve God and the obligation to obey one's husband. But the cases she discusses, and the solutions the women in her ethnography find, are success stories of piety. They tell of women who work to develop a docile pious disposition, and of wives who, in the end, manage to persuade their not so religious husbands of the necessity of their pious commitment without questioning the husbands' authority (Mahmood 2005: 174-88). While there is no doubt that stories like these do exist and that they make a strong point against the quest of resistance and subversion, they offer only one part of a much more complex story. What we, given the scope of her ethnography, do not hear are the stories of people who at some point in their life experienced a period of strong religiosity which they, however, later gave up in favour of a more ambivalent relation to religion, nor do we hear about the more profound contradictions of different urges and wishes which even the most pious are likely to experience (see, e.g., Gregg 2007: 189-225). The image of ethics that Mahmood draws on the basis of the Salafi piety movement is too perfect.

Mahmood's analysis, as important as it is in many ways, is flawed in three respects: firstly, in its taking committed religious activists as paradigmatic representatives of religiosity; secondly, in its focus on the *attempt* to realize a docile, God-fearing ideal which leaves out the actual consequences of that attempt; and, thirdly, in its hermetic approach to 'culture' and 'tradition'. The first is a limitation which *Politics of piety* (Mahmood 2005) shares with many other studies on religious practice, especially in the context of Islam, where perhaps too many works have been devoted to religious activists, on the one hand, and intellectuals who attempt to revise the very basics of religious morality, on the other. The problem of such studies is that by limiting the scope of religious expression either to a strive towards perfection or a fundamental critique of religious norms, they unintentionally reproduce the bias of the committed groups they study. If we are to understand the ambiguous logic of Ramadan morality and the fragmentary outcome of the Salafi project of perfection, we will have to look at that majority of people who are not actively committed to religious or political activism, who do share a recognition of the supreme authority of religion but do not practise it as an over-arching teleological project of ethical self-improvement (see Marsden 2005: 251-61; Masquelier 2007; Otayek & Soares 2007: 17-19).

More importantly, we will have to avoid Mahmood's second and perhaps more profound flaw of looking at the declared attempt, but overlooking its outcome. In a way, Mahmood offers us an analysis that takes practice as a central category but does

not tell us much about actual practice itself. 'Practice' in Mahmood's usage is primarily a conceptual category describing 'the relationships [people] establish between the various constituent elements of the self (body, reason, volition, and so on) and a particular moral code or norm' (2003: 846). As a result, she can tell us much about the intended outcomes of the project of piety, but only little about its actual consequences. As Gary Gregg points out, the fact that a person has fashioned a perfect pious identity 'does not predict how consistently his or her experience will conform to its contours' (2007: 297-8). What happens when claims and ideals such as those formulated by the women of the piety movement come to be practised as guidelines in a life that has other, competing orientations and is characterized not by the primary purpose of perfection but rather by a struggle to find one's place in life?

Piety does not proceed along a unilinear path. It is an ambivalent practice that is often related to specific periods in life, especially those marked by crises. While it does not leave one unchanged, the endeavour of pious self-suggestion does not seem to build such strong dispositions that they would simply override other parts of an individual's personality. This is, of course, common knowledge in Egypt, as it is probably everywhere. But when we try to conceptualize the constitution of moral selves, we are easily tempted to take the more perfect and consistent life-stories as the more paradigmatic ones. I posit that it is precisely the fragmented nature of people's biographies which, together with the ambivalent nature of most moral subjectivities, should be taken as the starting-point when setting out to study moral discourse and ethical practice.

A third flaw in Mahmood's argumentation is that she too easily identifies the moral universe of the pious women with that of an Islamic discursive tradition that offers a set of references to the Scripture and ways of argumentation and reasoning (see Asad 1986). While there is no doubt that a such discursive tradition exists – or, more accurately, is produced and imagined by the people who as Muslims talk about Islam (Schielke 2007) – the problem is that a focus on 'discursive tradition' makes it very easy to view religion as if it were a coherent entity, dynamic within but clearly demarcated to the outside. The focus on the inner dynamics and traditions of Islam easily insinuates a determining force of 'culture' that is contradicted by those often highly idiosyncratic ways of positing oneself in the world that I have encountered among the young men of Nazlat al-Rayyis. To state that people are primarily acting within their discursive traditions understates the complexity, reflectivity, and openness of their worldviews and life experiences, especially so in a globalizing world characterized by the registers of consumerism, nationalism, human rights, and romance just as much as it is articulated by the striving for pious discipline and communal respect (Gregg 2007; Marsden 2005).

Developing her concept of ethics and self-formation, Mahmood notes in brackets that as far as specific conceptions of the self are concerned, 'there may be different kinds that inhabit the space of a single culture' (2005: 139). The short exploration of moral subjectivities among the young men of Nazlat al-Rayyis that I have undertaken in this paper suggests that while this statement clearly is true (although it is very unlikely that such a clearly demarcated thing as 'a single culture' exists), it does not go far enough. Not only do different conceptions of the self inhabit the space of a single culture, they are also present in the life experience of a single individual, to some extent simultaneously, to some extent periodically. An anthropological study of morality and ethical subjectivity has to take this inherent ambivalence as a starting-point. Rather than searching for moments of perfection, we have to look at the conflicts, ambiguities,

double standards, fractures, and shifts as the constitutive moments of the practice of norms.

NOTES

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[1] Nazlat al-Rayyis, where I have conducted a large part of my fieldwork for this article, is a large village between the Rosetta branch of the Nile and Lake Burullus, some 30 kilometres from the Mediterranean coast. A centre of schools and services for surrounding hamlets, it is nevertheless clearly rural in character, unlike many other villages of similar size. The population is entirely Muslim and divided into two economic groups of approximately equal size: farmers and fishermen who earn their living on Lake Burullus. This economic distinction is also an important base for identity, especially for the fisher families, who identify themselves as such even when they earn their living as workers, civil servants, and so on. By rural standards, Nazlat al-Rayyis appears to have relatively high levels of literacy and education. The village also has a long history of political activism. In the colonial period, it was a Wafdist stronghold, and in the republican period it has had a high level of leftist and communist activism. Today it has a strong and active branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The people with whom I conducted the fieldwork for this paper mostly come from fishermen families but aim for careers in trade or the public sector. They have middle or high education, but their actual work and careers often fall short of their qualifications and expectations.

[2] Trying it out myself, I found out that fasting and football indeed do go well together, to the degree that I once almost missed fast-breaking because of a match. The bigger problem for me was the absolutely superior level of the youths compared to my very modest skills and condition.

[3] While there is no provision in Islamic rites against celebrating weddings in Ramadan, it is unusual to do so. This, like so many religious sensibilities, derives less from any specific textual traditions than a common sense that designates practices and times with specific qualities which, while not mutually exclusive, don't harmonize well.

[4] Al-Bukhârî: *Sahîh*, book of fasting (as-sawm), chapter 5; at-Tirmidhi: *al-Jami' as-sahîh*, book of fasting (as-sawm), chapter 1, hadith 682. (Because of the great variety of different printed and electronic editions of the Sunnite *hadith* collections, I refer to the *hadiths* by chapters rather than page numbers. References to canonical *hadith* collections are by editor, short title, and chapter.)

[5] One of the last ten nights of Ramadan, when according to Islamic belief the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad began. The exact date of *Laylat al-Qadr* is not known, but it is commonly celebrated on the night before the 27th of Ramadan.

[6] Reported in slightly different versions by ad-Dârimî: *Sunan*, book of fasting (as-sawm), chapter 54 (Fadl qiyâm shahr Ramadân); at-Tirmidhî: *al-Jami' as-sahîh*, book of fasting (as-sawm), chapter 1, hadith 683; al-Bukhârî: *Sahîh*, book of fasting (as-sawm), chapter 6.

[7] For *Laylat al-Qadr*, see Mâlik ibn Anâs: *al-Muwatta'*, book of retreat in the mosque (al-i'tikâf), chapter 6 (mâ jâ' fî laylat al-qadr), hadith 15; for intentionally breaking the fast, Bukhârî: *Sahîh*, book of fasting (as-sawm): chapter 29; for double reward, Muslim: *Sahîh*, book of fasting (as-siyâm): chapter of the merit of fasting (fadl as-siyâm), hadith 164.

[8] Similarly, bystanders can also appeal to people involved in an argument with the phrase 'Because you're fasting' ('ashân inta sâyim).

[9] Owing to the exposed character of cafés and the recent spread of internet in the countryside, pornography has largely disappeared from regular cafés and moved to internet cafés and private homes.

[10] 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).

[11] While men can more easily employ common standards of double morality to manoeuvre between different ethical ideals, women experience much more pressure to fulfil conflicting ideals of chastity and attractiveness.

[12] While smoking cigarettes is not seen as a vice in Egyptian society, the Salafi movement makes a strong point about smoking being *harâm*.

[13] The hermeneutic approach to the study of the Qur'an employed by the Egyptian academic Nasr Abû Zayd, which caused a scandal that forced him to emigrate to Europe, has significant popularity among people searching for alternatives to what they deem a narrow-minded, fundamentalist interpretation of their religion.

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La bonté pendant le ramadan : ambivalence, fragmentation et Moi moral dans la vie des jeunes Égyptiens

Résumé

Il a tellement été question, ces dernières années, de musulmans consciemment et constamment soucieux d'être pieux, moraux et disciplinés que la grande majorité des musulmans, qui sont parfois pieux mais pas toujours, parfois immoraux et souvent indisciplinés, comme le reste de l'humanité, est restée dans l'ombre de cette image de l'islam comme projet d'autodiscipline perfectionniste. En prenant pour point de départ le Ramadan, période de piété particulière, l'auteur tente de rendre compte de différents points de vue exprimés par les jeunes musulmans d'un village du Nord de l'Égypte, des modèle d'action et de subjectivité qui leur sont ouverts et des résultats contradictoires que donne pour certains d'entre eux l'idéal de perfection portée par l'idée d'un renouveau islamique.

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