

## Islamic Televangelism: Religion, Media and Visuality in Contemporary Egypt

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In the Egyptian hit film *Awqaat Faraagh* (Leisure Time, 2006), three young college students experience an existential crisis when one of their friends suddenly dies while crossing the street to buy them more beer. Sitting in a souped-up Mercedes Benz filled with hashish smoke and scantily clad girls, the three boys watch in horror as their friend, high and tripping, is hit by a car and immediately falls to the ground, breathing his last with the words: “I am afraid, I am afraid.” Chastened and shocked by this tragedy, they vow to repent their dissolute lifestyles and lead more moral lives. Instead of watching Internet porn, they begin to download and watch together episodes of a religious talk-show by Amr Khaled, an immensely popular Islamic *da’iya* (activist, “caller” to Islam), who regularly appears on satellite television. This is an integral part of a strict moral regimen of increased prayers, abstinence from sex, alcohol and cigarettes, and more regular visits to the mosque. Soon, however, with the memory of their friend’s sudden death fading and their own lives no longer seeming so precarious, the three friends tire of this pious leisure. They switch off Khaled’s show and venture once more into Cairo’s glittering nightlife in search of other highs and ways to fill their free time.

For the three characters of this film and thousands of other young Egyptians, Amr Khaled’s brand of Islamic televangelism is merely one element – however prominent – of the diffuse and variegated “mediascape” (Appadurai 1996) that marks urban Egypt. Far from being dominant or hegemonic, such new Islamic media are part of an array of other mediated practices (both secular and religious) that alternatively cohere, clash and contradict.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is one of the arguments of this paper that this is precisely where

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the appeal of media producers like Amr Khaled lies – in their ability to navigate between, and capitalize on, different modalities, genres, and forms of media that go beyond any conventional boundaries of the “religious” or even the specifically “Islamic.” Dubbed by Time magazine as one of their “100 most influential” people in the world, Khaled is not just an Islamic da’iya (pl. *du’ah*): he is also a television host, author, motivational speaker, inter-faith mediator, entrepreneur, doctoral candidate and an international media celebrity around whom there has been incessant press hype since he rose to fame in 2001, when his hit Ramadan show “Kalam min al-Qalb” (Words from the Heart) aired on satellite, after initially coming out on video-tape (Wise 2004). The show was the first example of what was to become his trademark preaching style, since copied with equal success by a handful of other young *du’ah* – an easy-going yet energetic performance that is in colloquial Egyptian, the linguistic register of everyday life and conversation, and that makes frequent rhetorical use of allusions to popular culture and contemporary issues among youth. Even more novel was the format of the religious program – it consciously located itself halfway between an American televangelist show and an American therapeutic talk-show, inviting participation from a live studio audience and viewers at home through call-ins.<sup>2</sup>

This paper seeks to understand the modes of production and representation that frame “Islamic televangelism” in Egypt by undertaking a preliminary analysis of the “Islamic talk-shows” hosted by young *du’ah* such as Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud and Mustafa Hosni.<sup>3</sup> I focus on this specific type of programming because it was the first to

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<sup>1</sup> See Schielke 2008 for an excellent discussion of the different modes of diversion at work among Egyptian youths, albeit in a rural context.

<sup>2</sup> Amr Khaled’s popularity soared as the show attracted an increasingly vocal viewer-ship, leading to thousands of young people attending his Friday sermons in a 40,000-capacity mosque in one of Cairo’s new satellite suburbs and his well-maintained website receiving more than 3 million hits per month, making it one of the most visited sites in the nation. The domestic press simply could not get enough of the then-thirty-something “sheikh in a suit.” By late 2002 the Mubarak regime, always wary of a religious charisma it cannot lay equal claim to, had had enough and Khaled, the aristocratic former-accountant turned pious celebrity *extraordinaire*, was banned from preaching both in mosques and on television. The ban was apparently lifted a few years ago, with Khaled returning to Egypt from what he said was a voluntary exile in the UK. He had never stopped his satellite television programs, however, taping and airing many while abroad, a testament to the inability of the state to (fully) control this transnational, privately-owned medium as well as its spin-off small media such as CDs, DVDs, downloadable mp3 files and internet-clips (cf. Mohammedi and Sreberny-Mohammedi 1994).

<sup>3</sup> There are of course other, equally popular, “televangelists” appearing on more Salafist Islamic satellite channels such as *Al-Nas*. Such *du’ah* have not been as successful in attracting the attention of Western observers, perhaps because they are not perceived as “modern” due to their conservative

emerge on the Islamic satellite channels and was responsible for launching not only the public careers of many of its presenter-preachers but also the very idea of “Islamic televangelism,” as well the Islamic satellite channels themselves, which until then were relatively obscure.<sup>4</sup> While the anthropological literature on various aspects of the piety movement or “Islamic Revival” in Egypt is rich (see especially Starrett 1998, Abu-Lughod 2004, Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006), there is a dearth of scholarly examinations of new Islamic modes of preaching that are televisual. I therefore ground my analysis within a growing body of theoretical and ethnographic literature that examines the intersections of media and religion across a number of diverse sites, integrating as well interview material from various media producers working in the Islamic satellite sector in Egypt.

I argue that while the television medium is central to the public performances of the Islamic media producers – with their satellite programs illustrating a particularly fecund “interocular field” that draws on globalized expressive genres, from daytime talk-shows to music videos – a consideration of this should not displace the centrality of the pious message itself, as this is the most important aspect for Muslim viewers. However, the specific articulation of this pious message by the television du'ah associated with the new Islamic satellite channels is inflected both by the way in which their audience is imagined (as “lax” Muslims in need of religious education) and what the du'ah imagine is the best way to reach this audience (by narrating their own journey from laxity to piety).

By way of conclusion, I wonder how a consideration of contemporary media practices in Islam may expand our definition of what the visual might be and what acts of seeing might entail. While Christianity is usually posited in the literature as a “visual” religion and Islam as an “auditory” one, the specific dynamics of sacred mediation

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appearance and religious discourse. In this paper, I have not focused on such televangelists because I am interested in Islamic preachers who occupy spaces of “in-betweenness” (what used to be fashionable to call “hybridity”). This understanding of such preachers -- and the channels they appear on -- is echoed by Muslim viewers of Islamic satellite channels. An Egyptian woman who recently took on the *niqab* (and who is an avid watcher of *Al-Nas*) told me Amr Khaled was key in her transition from laxity to piety because “you can’t just go from watching *Mazzika* to watching *Al-Nas*, you need something in between, and that’s Amr Khaled.”

<sup>4</sup> One *Iqraa* executive estimates that at one point Amr Khaled’s program was providing 80% of the channel’s ad-generated revenue (in Shapiro 2006).

evinced by Islamic televangelism challenge such easy bifurcations. I extend an invitation to privilege, and then question and investigate, the “visual” in such forms of preaching.

### ***Islam on (Satellite) Television***

As with other postcolonial developing countries in the 1990s (see Mankekar 1999, Rajagopal 2001 for India), Egypt’s media-scape went from being the exclusive domain of state-controlled, highly centralized and terrestrially based television to an increasingly competitive and fragmented satellite television scene with much private-sector control. Indeed, in Egypt, private broadcasters are only allowed to air on satellite television, with the state retaining full control over terrestrial television which, being free, easy to access, and of high programming quality, continues to command the greatest share of national viewers. Increasingly, however, middle-class and upper-middle-class viewers with moderate levels of disposable income, leisure time and more specialized viewing preferences that are unmet by mainstream fare are tuning in to one of the many satellite channels on offer, with “ed-dish” becoming a ubiquitous presence on urban roof-tops.

The advent of satellite technology in the region, as with the Internet, led to a flurry of scholarly and media publications predicting a more pluralistic, democratic future as non-state actors began articulating an alternative to the state's discourse through these ostensibly unregulated broadcast spaces (Anderson 1999). More cautious observers have pointed out, however, that while satellite media may not be under the direct control of the state, in many instances the industry players involved in setting them up have close personal and business ties to various political regimes, rendering the state a vocal participant by proxy (Sakr 2001; see also Kraidy 2009). In addition, top policy-makers in various countries such as Egypt and Lebanon saw an opportunity for greater influence on a regional scale through a strong satellite presence. While Abu-Lughod (2004) tracks how Egypt’s national media policy during the 1980s to mid-1990s was geared to containing and neutralizing a domestic “Islamist threat”, by the new millennium the country’s Ministry of Information had shifted its attention from “television-for security” to television for the preservation of an “Arab-Islamic identity”, with Egypt at the helm (Sakr 2001:33). However, satellite channels with strong private Saudi financial capital

would increasingly usurp this role (Kraidy 2009), attracting the most talented Egyptian producers, presenters and technicians, to the great dissatisfaction of the Egyptian regime, which instituted a policy of “media nationalism” that stressed that Egyptians should work only for “Egyptian” channels (Sakr 2001:79). However, conversations with Egyptian media professionals made it clear that they are attracted to the new “Saudi” channels, not only for their higher pay and better working conditions, but also because they promise more innovative programs and more scope for personal creativity.

The Islamic satellite channels thus entered a power-laden media field with as many constraints as opportunities. Furthermore, their founders were not inexperienced entrepreneurs bent on an idealistic project of staking a “voice” for Islam on air, but rather seasoned industry players managing multimillion dollar investments across a variety of domains, not all “pious” in the conventional sense of the term. For example, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia, who finances the popular Islamic channels Al-Resalah, also has big stakes in EuroDisney and various European television holdings (Sakr 2001). Indeed, the Islamic channels are not located in a contestatory space outside circuits of capitalist consumption, but rather are created by such circuits. While Hirschkind (2006), in his important analysis of cassette-sermons in Egypt, argues that a stress on the “commercial aspects” of this media would be misleading, since they are not the site of “intense capitalization”, it is clear that the television-sermons, with their big dollar budgets and high-stake investments, are deeply enmeshed in processes of commodification, of buying and of selling, that are not at all at odds with their ethical impulse. As one of the producers then-working for Al-Resalah puts it: “I’m promoting [moral, Islamic] ideas in the first place” but “if I lose money, that means I’m not appealing, that means I don’t have my viewership, that means I am not promoting my ideas.” (in Lindsey 2006).

To attract viewers these channels rely heavily on the appeal of the televangelist style pioneered by Amr Khaled and further innovated on by a new generation of tele-preachers following in his footsteps. This style is presented as an explicit alternative to the religious programming on offer within state-controlled terrestrial television, where the programs tend to be very conservative, if not dull in format, attracting an older and

more sporadic audience.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the first satellite Islamic channel *Iqraa* (Read) – set up in 1998 through the Arab Radio and Television (ART) satellite service, one of the biggest and most established satellite providers in the region with a very diverse programming “bouquet” – aimed from the start to compete with European and American satellite content for regional viewers. While *Iqraa* is responsible for some of the most admired and innovative Islamic programming aired within the last decade – including the phenomenally popular talk-shows of Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud and others – *Al-Resalah* (The Message) bills itself as a more “entertaining” alternative to its rival.<sup>6</sup> A recent entrant in the increasingly competitive and differentiated field of Islamic satellite television,<sup>7</sup> the former head of *Al-Resalah*’s main Cairo office, Ahmed Abu-Haibah, highlights how the new channel aspires to distinguish itself through its globally competitive production values, glitzy studios and the celebrity power of its presenters, many of them former film stars who gave up acting after donning the headscarf (See Abu-Lughod 2004, Tartoussieh 2007, and Van Nieuwkerk 2008 for perceptive discussions of “veiled stars”). In an interview, Abu-Haibah says “I consider myself a religious man but I don’t spend all my time in front of sheikhs speaking about the Qur’an because I don’t like the way they’re speaking. I’m bored! It’s natural.” He offers a definition of “Islamic media” that goes beyond conventional boundaries, saying: “An Islamic program doesn’t have to speak about the Qur’an or the Prophet. I consider speaking about friendship is Islamic, speaking about love is Islamic, about sex is Islamic. What matters is what I’m going to do behind that. The values.” (Wise 2005). According to press reports, *Al-Resalah*’s line-up of current and planned programs includes a trivia show where participants compete for consumer durables (“House of Dignity”), a knock-off of “The Apprentice” which features Sheikh Tarik Al-Suweidan – a respected Islamic scholar, businessmen, and engineer-by-training who is also the general manager of the channel – putting aspiring entrepreneurs to the test (“The Making of a Leader”), and a

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<sup>5</sup> Although of course the popularity of Sheikh Shaarawi, who appeared weekly on state television, is legendary.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that being a “rival” does not preclude joint ownership and overlapping media producers – Prince Talal also holds a major stake in ART, which owns *Iqraa* (along with a dozen other channels, including those airing the sultry video-clips pious Muslims often criticize) and the general manager of *Al-Resalah*, Sheikh Tarek al-Suweidan, used to host a religious program on *Iqraa*. Amr Khaled has appeared on both channels. The field of Islamic satellite programming still remains a small one, with a dearth of producers and investors.

<sup>7</sup> A 2007 *Washington Post* article notes 27 satellite religious channels in 2007, a dramatic increase from only five in 2005 (Sullivan 2007).

reality show featuring three youths traveling across the Middle East tracing the historical geography of Islam's spread in the region, in addition to music shows airing video-clips whose lyrics and presentation do not violate Islamic norms of modesty and virtue. Abu-Haibah highlights how his objective is to make Islamic media competitive with non-religious media, so that people tune in not just for religious edification, but also for entertainment. "It is our hope...that we can make Islamic media not just as good, but much, much more interesting than the most interesting programs on other channels," he says (in Wise 2005).<sup>8</sup>

Al-Resalah and Iqraa are thus prime examples of what in anthropological theory has been termed an "interocular field" involving the translation and dislocation of "meanings, scripts and symbols" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, Pinney 2004) across a range of visual registers and economies, including devotional literature, music video-clips, advertising spots, dramatic serials, pop art, sacred performances and state ritual. Indeed, these channels are sites where corporate commercial interests, transnational cultural forms, technological innovation and religious strictures come together in a mix which invites us to "examine not the internal constitution of religious movements but the instability of their borders" (Larkin 2008a:103). As Larkin goes on to ask of Islamic evangelist Ahmed Deedat's mediated circulation in northern Nigeria and elsewhere: "What happens when Islamic revival deploys the forms of the secular public sphere?"(ibid). Critiquing Warner's (2005) influential discussion of "publics" and their constitution, Larkin argues that "there is an implicit assumption that different publics each have their own circulatory modes, their own discursive forms, so that one can neatly be separated from the other" (2008a:104). By contrast, Larkin is "interested in what happens when those forms are promiscuous – when one public takes the discursive forms used to constitute another public" (2008a:105).

Such a question is certainly an apt one when it comes to understanding Islamic televangelism in Egypt, especially given that the "promiscuity" of this form is often explicitly framed as such. Abu-Haibah – who produced and directed Amr Khaled's first

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<sup>8</sup> Since that interview, Abu-Haibah left his post at *Al-Resalah* and in 2008 started his own Islamic satellite channel, *4Shbab*, which has been dubbed the "Islamic MTV" by the press (see Stack 2009).

series and whose media production career took off with the success of this genre – was impressed by Christian televangelism, telling an interviewer that he “believ[ed] that if we did this with Islam it would be a new experience for Islam.” He adds that he “wanted something very modern. The set needed [to be] something that had no relation to Islam. I told the designer he needs something that will feel like a top-ten [music] program” (in Wise 2004). Indeed, not only are the opening sequences of many of the televangelist shows shot to “look” like music videos, they are also music videos in their own right, with catchy lyrics sung by famous Egyptian pop-stars. A particularly illustrative example of this is the opening trailer for da’iya Mustafa Hosni’s series “Al Kenz Al Mafqood” (The Lost Treasure), which aired on Iqraa in 2008. It featured the voice of the successful Egyptian singer Mohamed Fouad, whose music video-clips enjoy a wide circulation in mainstream satellite Arab music channels such as Mazzika and Melody.

Of course, such a linkage between the medium of television and entertainment is by no means unproblematic for all actors in the da’wa (Islamic evangelism) movement. For example, Hirschkind notes (2006:92) how for many of the Egyptian preachers he interviewed, the medium of the cassette, being also a medium for “merely” entertaining songs, was a cause of anxiety: “How is the experience produced by the tape different from the non-ethical senses of pleasure, fear, or well-being produced by other popular media?” they worried. Furthermore, “for khutabaa’ (mosque preachers) and their audiences, the danger of Western cultural forms and popular-media entertainment lies in the fact that they engender emotions and character attributes incompatible with those that in their view enable one to live as a pious Muslim” (2006:127).<sup>9</sup> Hirschkind states (2006:127) that cassette sermonizers routinely criticize “media entertainment, film stars, popular singers, and television serials” while viewing categories such as fann (art), adab (literature), thaqafa (high culture) and mooda (fashion) as partaking in a strictly secular-Western genealogy.

The new television du’ah this paper is concerned with, whose influence arguably equals if not exceeds the more traditional preachers of Hirschkind’s ethnography, operate

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<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Hirschkind (2006:193) acknowledges that “there can be little doubt that the great popularity of such tapes owes in some degree to their ability to compete with non-Islamic entertainment and to offer their consumers the sorts of pleasure that other media products provide.”



within a vastly different set of premises regarding the relationship between piety, entertainment and popular media. Rather than worrying about the “secular” origin of the television medium, du'ah such as Masoud and Khaled make this medium an integral part of their pious performance aimed at moving their audience to a more virtuous life. It deeply matters that one can see them – educated, young, attractive, obviously well-to-do – working the camera, inhabiting spaces of modern technology, yet still maintaining a high commitment to Islamic practice, as their middle-class audience should too (so the message goes). Furthermore, it is precisely the association of television with entertainment (its “promiscuity” in Larkin’s terms) that makes it such an attractive medium for these televangelists, rather than a source of anxiety. This association works to bolster Islam as a viable (entertaining) alternative to secular and potentially immoral media. Thus, far from shunning Western media/cultural forms as morally suspect, these forms are appropriated to new moral ends. The theme song for Moez Masoud’s show “Al-Tareeq Al-Sahh” (The Right Way) can become, without any sense of trepidation, a popular hit alongside non-Islamic songs, and downloadable as a cellphone ring-tone. Song and sermon don’t compete for the sensory attention of believers, but conjoin to amplify it. Film actresses and drama stars are brought in, now in Islamic attire, to preach a moral message of repentance to an audience which tunes in as much for spiritual upliftment as to take pleasure in seeing their favorite celebrity speaking “From the Heart” – as the title of Amr Khaled’s first show puts it. At the same time, the televangelists themselves become celebrities in their own right, hailed by their believing “fans” – the word almost doesn’t need the square-quotes, seeing as one can join Masoud’s “fan-page” on Facebook – in much the same way secular celebrities are (“He is better than Brad Pitt” one female Masoud fan tells a Washington Post reporter as she waits in a long queue to greet the latter).

Given these factors, it is clear that Islamic televangelism in Egypt, despite being the most prominent part of that country’s contemporary da’wa movement, can only be productively understood within the context of regimes of mediated technology and celebrity as much as religion. This is not to subscribe, however, to a technological determinism displacing the centrality of the pious message itself and its perceived ethical consequences for individual viewers, which count as the most important aspects for

interested Muslims. Following De Vries (2001:19), it is clear that “where a relationship between the phenomena is acknowledged at all, the assumed link is often an instrumentalization of one by the other, as if media formed the mere vehicle of religion or as if the medium could ever succeed in creating religion in its own image. Yet the medium is not secondary, nor is the religious mere epiphenomenon.”

Indeed, the fact remains that the most publicized and closely followed shows on the channel remain precisely those programs about the Qur’an, the Prophet’s biography and questions of Islamic ethics and values. Click on Iqraa’s “most-watched” program icon on its fully functional website, which permits live streaming of its shows as well as access to a downloadable archive, and the three that pop up are Amr Khaled’s most current talk show followed by two others hosted by newer tele-preachers who acknowledge a deep debt to Khaled. These shows have at their center an ethical discourse that draws upon both traditional forms of speech (popular story-telling about the Prophet’s time, exhortatory and exegetical modes of address) as well as Western-derived genres such as a “panel of experts” with viewers calling in to weigh in with their own opinions. These shows thus speak to an intense interest in, and desire for, religious knowledge on the part of ordinary Muslims concerned with leading a more pious life.<sup>10</sup> Muslims tuning into these Islamic programs are not only conscious of being hailed as Muslim subjects, but in fact call forth this interpellation themselves as they make a conscious choice to watch an Islamically correct media and accrue the virtuous benefits such a choice brings. In the next section, I would like to examine in greater detail both how Islamic media producers imagine this television audience and the best way to reach out and “connect” with it.

### ***Ordinary Muslims Addressing “Ordinary” Muslims***

Abu-Lughod notes (2004:172) how by the 1990s the influence and scope of the Islamic Revival had led to the allocation of more air-time to Islamic programs on national

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<sup>10</sup> This desire is met by *Iqraa* not only through the actual programs, but also through a constant ticker-tape of *fatwas* (religious opinions) on various questions running through all programs – “Is the stockmarket halal or haram? Is it haram for women to take part in religious chants? Is it okay to watch soccer matches on TV? Is it okay to play chess?...” The stream of questions-responses is literally unending.

television in Egypt as the state “tried to appropriate for itself the role of supporter of a legitimate Islam”. However, the fact that these programs were on state television ultimately worked to discredit them among those they were designed to attract most – young, educated and motivated Muslims who were critical of the secular regime’s domestic and foreign policies. Seeking to attract such Muslims, the religious programs on satellite television position themselves as viable alternatives to the religious discourse of state television. At the same time, it is not exclusively this audience segment which the new Islamic channels aim to capture as loyal viewers. Indeed, the satellite channels, whose footprints usually extend beyond the Middle East into Europe and, although less so, into North America, seem to be addressing two distinct audiences. On the one hand, their producers seek to counter dominant stereotypes of Islam in the West as a violent and irrational religion by presenting what they describe as a “moderate Islam” to a non-Muslim audience which they hope might, however intermittently, tune in.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the new Islamic channels aim to attract Muslim youth who might not necessarily be drawn to religious discourse and might take as unproblematic secular, Western-inflected imaginings of what it means to be modern in today’s world, as well as other youth who might have fallen under the ambit of extremist articulations of Islamism, especially those espousing violence as a political instrument.

In his historical ethnography of various media technologies in northern Nigeria, Larkin (2008:3) calls our attention to “the intentions and ideologies that go into conceiving and funding any specific technology. Media systems are sponsored and built to effect social action, to create specific sorts of social subjects.” This is of course true as well of the new Islamic satellite channels this paper is concerned with – at stake with the new Islamic channels is the promotion of a very specific ideology centered around a particular understanding of what it means to be a (good) Muslim subject in a world where it is ostensibly difficult to be one, an ideology in which technology is both an enabler and a consequence. In an early interview, Sheikh Saleh Kamal, a major stakeholder in the

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<sup>11</sup> This is why ART has set up an English translation department for Iqraa (as well as its movie channels) explained to me the head of that department.

satellite outlet ART and the driving force behind its Iqraa channel<sup>12</sup> said that the impetus behind this channel was to cater to “someone like me [who is] not completely to the left or the right – and there are millions like me. (I) wanted to present a more tolerant, middle of the road message to the Arab and other people of the world” (in Sakr 2001:47). A former Egyptian film-star who hosted on Al-Resalah a program producers hoped would be the next “Muslim Oprah Winfrey Show” says: “My show is not for conservative Muslims. It’s for Muslims who don’t know right from wrong, because of the [other] media that targets them” (in Lindsey 2006). Indeed, the channel’s website breaks down the target audience by programming percentages as follows: only 10% for “devoted religious people”, 40% for youth, 30% for “women and the family” and 10% for “the elite” (www.alresalah.net). More generally, the website maintains that the channel is for “ordinary people” as opposed to those well-versed in Islamic knowledge. This official line was reiterated to me again and again by both Islamic media producers and Muslim consumers of such media, with one producer characterizing most Islamic satellite programming as “Islam-lite” for “people who don’t know much about religion”. And to accomplish this aim of reaching out to a general audience with a “superficial” knowledge of Islam, the channels rely most prominently on “lay” preachers rather than traditionally trained authorities, Azharite or otherwise.

The recent success of an up-and-coming young da’iyya named Moez Masoud is an excellent case in point. A Washington Post article quotes one young woman as saying: “He talks to young people the way we talk,” while another man says that he tunes in to Masoud’s shows because “he talks about things that happen to me everyday” (in Sullivan 2007). Traditional religious scholars seem to agree that this felt affinity between the likes of Khaled and Masoud on the one hand, and young middle-class Muslims on the other is the reason behind their success. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a hugely influential Islamic scholar living in Qatar since 1961 after serving time in Nasser’s political prisons, said once in an interview that aside from Khaled’s choice of homiletic topoi – popular stories from early Islamic history involving the Companions of the Prophet, “What makes him even more attractive to youth is that he is young like them, clean shaven, in regular Western attire,

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<sup>12</sup> Sheikh Kamal is a Lebanese-Saudi multi-millionaire with close ties to the Saudi ruling family and major investments in the construction industry across the Gulf region. His wife is a well-known Egyptian actress who has appeared sometimes on the channel.

and he speaks in simple language” (in Schliefer 2004). But popularity should not be confused with authority, warns al-Qaradawi, who hosts a very popular program of his own on Al-Jazeera: “Amr Khaled does not hold any qualifications to preach. He is a business school graduate who acquired what he knows from reading and who got his start by way of conversations with friends about things that do not really involve any particular thought or judgment” (in Schliefer 2004).<sup>13</sup>

But the argument, made both by secular critics and traditional religious figures such as Qaradawi, that Khaled and others like him lack the requisite authority to preach on Islam may be missing the point. Khaled’s authority derives not from a mastery of the authoritative textual canon of the Islamic tradition and its attendant disciplinary practices of study, reflection and deliberation, but rather from his projected status as an “ordinary Muslim” who struggles to lead an Islamically correct life in a world where it is manifestly difficult to do so. He has authority not because he is different from the audience he preaches to, but because he is one of them. The biography of the even younger televangelist Moez Masoud, as told and retold by him and his supporters in countless interviews, illustrates this point better. Like Khaled, Masoud hails from an affluent background at home in private American schools, open-bar parties, regular trips abroad and Hollywood-generated entertainment media. Also like Khaled, he found himself in a preaching career almost haphazardly, after experiencing a personal crisis when three of his close friends died, one due to drunk-driving. Masoud makes much of the fact that prior to becoming a more observant Muslim, he did not even know how to pronounce the Qur’an’s Classical Arabic correctly, relying on an English translation for understanding. If he can do it, then anyone can – in this logic, piety is an ordinary condition of human life, not an extraordinary state open to a select few.<sup>14</sup> In an

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<sup>13</sup> There was a recent public confrontation between Qaradawi and Khaled involving differences on how to best respond to the Danish cartoon incident. Khaled and Masoud had flown together to Denmark to set up a series of workshops aimed at “inter-faith dialogue” and “reconciliation,” which Qaradawi criticized for being insensitive to Muslim feelings of hurt over the offensive cartoons. In the international media, Qaradawi was characterized as a “hard-liner,” while Khaled emerged as a “moderate Muslim.” For a discussion of this incident and more on Qaradawi, see Graf and Skovgaard-Petersen 2009.

<sup>14</sup> At face value, there seems to be much similarity between these Egyptian televisual *duah* and the Turkish religious media celebrity Ozturk whom Oncu (2006:246) describes as a “sermonizer in tune with the spirit of the times – a happy blending of Islamic theology, aerobics, the Internet, English and a modern (uncovered) wife.” However, Oncu (2006:239) argues that Ozturk’s “claim to authority and self-framing is that of a “man of scientific learning” as distinct from “man of religion” – given the mystique of science, he

interview, Masoud stresses that he does not aim to persuade people through “preaching”, but simply through telling the story of his own and others’ paths to persuasion.

Indeed, story-telling is an important aspect of the Islamic discursive tradition. Since the Middle Ages there “existed a popular storytelling tradition of prophetic legends that was instructional and moralistic as much as it was entertaining. It appertained to the *qussas* (“narrators”), freelance preachers and popular theologians whose audience were the illiterate masses within the mosques and without, and from it was developed the popular literary genre of *qisas al-anbiya* (tales of the prophets)” (Stowassar 1994:16-17). A noted historian of medieval Cairo argues how while some Islamic scholars at the time feared that these tales would be taken only as amusing crowd-pleasers, there was in any case a “certain degree of overlap between such genres of entertainment, on the one hand, and the recitation of tales for didactic purpose and as a form of exhortation, on the other” (Berkey 2001:15). This elite scholarly disdain for such story-telling traditions continues in some important ways in the contemporary era, leading someone like Yusuf al-Qaradawi to dismiss Amr Khaled as only a teller of pious tales – a laudable endeavor that brings people closer to God, but nonetheless one that does not come with any authority.

There is, however, a different type of story-telling present in the new Islamic media that is based on an alternative conception of religious authority.<sup>15</sup> This story-telling has at its center a narration of how various Muslims came to repent their previously lax ways and lead a more Islamically correct life. This mode is a confessional one not unlike the secular human dramas of American day-time talk-shows. For example, Amr Khaled’s first show “Words from the Heart” featured former actresses who have realized the error of their past ways and repented (symbolized visually by their donning of the head-scarf) after various life-changing encounters either with a Qur’anic

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is thus far from being ordinary. Also, Ozturk apparently “dismisses questions about the morality of everyday practices (swimming in the beach, etc) as trivial” (2006:242) while for Egyptian *duah* it is precisely these daily practices which matter most. Finally, while Ozturk puts forward a definition of “secular Muslim” as the “real Islam,” the Egyptian *dawa* movement strives to counter that definition. See Mahmood 2006.

<sup>15</sup> As well as being transformed of course by the very medium of television and its attendant grammars; as Faye Ginsburg notes (2002:39) in her discussion of indigenous media “retelling stories for the media of film, video, and television often requires reshaping them, not only within new aesthetic structures but also in negotiation with the political economy of state-controlled as well as commercial media.”

message or a pious Muslim. As the title itself implied, this show can be construed as much as an avenue for self-expression as for religious education. Indeed, the two cannot be easily separated, with an important part of the persuasive apparatus of the da'iyā's performance being not only the Prophetic stories alluded to above, but how these stories affect ordinary Muslims to change their lives for the better – that story then becomes part of the technologies of ethical self-improvement being presented.

Various episodes of Masoud's hit-series exemplify this point well. In one, he is standing in the main square of Covent Garden in London, a leisure destination popular with both locals and tourists that has many outdoor drinking spots and restaurants. He says that this is a familiar scene for him but he is looking at it with through a new lens – not one of desire, but of pity. "I used to love traveling abroad so I can come to places like this, and get away from all those constraints we have [in Egypt]. I lived this life before, I know it very well." This latter is a line that continually reappears throughout the series whenever Masoud wants to make a point about his pre-pious self, a self that was "Westernized" in all the wrong ways from an Islamic viewpoint: "I am talking about myself long ago; This is the life I lived before; I myself went through this situation." Eickelman and Andersen (2003), in their important edited volume on new Muslim media, speak about the "fragmentation" of religious authority engendered by such media through the creation of alternative sites of religious discourse beyond the traditional commentaries and manābir (pulpits). This fragmentation results, however, not in the negation of the idea of authority, but its relocation – the legitimacy to narrate is now derived not from one's mastery of the religious sciences but through one's own personal experience and journey to a more virtuous life. In yet another episode, Masoud recounts for his viewers an anecdote of him driving his car one night with a friend in the back getting high on weed while he was in the front "getting high" on a certain Qur'anic chapter playing in the tape-deck. He recites verses from this chapter for the camera with a technical virtuosity, stopping every few lines to tell the viewer exactly what he felt when he first heard those words and how those words moved him to change his dissolute life-style. This part of his account is relayed in the colloquial Egyptian dialect, the use of which has become a hallmark of contemporary Islamic televangelists. Indeed, the linguistic registers of the du'ah play an important role in situating their television shows

as an entertaining alternative to non-Islamic media, even as the boundaries between what is “Islamic” and what is not are blurred. As Armbrust notes (1996) in his discussion of Egyptian mass culture, there is a “functional diglossia” in Egypt between classical Arabic, used for “high-culture,” intellectual production and tightly associated with a religious domain (cf. Haeri 2003) and colloquial Egyptian, the language of everyday life that is also the language of all popular media, from songs to serials to cinema to advertising and even some novels. Armbrust argues (1996:10) that the fact that colloquial Arabic has become the linguistic vehicle for such “artistic mediums” does not work to break down the old dichotomy with the classical register, but rather reinforce it. By speaking in colloquial Arabic – and especially in its youthful, slangy register – about Islam, the du'ah re-situate religious belief and practice as a rich site of creativity, play and pleasure.

But however popular the new television preachers are among Egyptians and other Muslim Arabs, their channels’ definition of “ordinary people” does not include the vast majority of people in a region with rife poverty, illiteracy and non-access to satellite media.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, there is a noted overlap between the target audience of these channels and the target addressees of new Islamic preachers such as Amr Khaled more generally – primarily upper-middle class, highly educated if not cosmopolitan young Egyptians (Bayat 2002). One Khaled devotee justified this class focus by arguing that “We don’t have to worry about the poor. They’ve always been more religious. The problems come in with the money. We’ve been losing the upper class on drugs, loud music, films and dating” (El-Amrani 2002).<sup>17</sup> Unlike the poor urban Brazilians Birman (2006) writes about, who partake in a Pentecostal media world as a means for social mobility and cultural capital accumulation, the Muslims tuning into certain Islamic satellite programs have no need for this end, being already the trend-setting elite of their societies. Furthermore, while Lehmann and Siebzechner (2006) write how religious activists of the t’shuva movement in Israel (which seems in many respects akin to the

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<sup>16</sup> Scholars researching satellite television have noted how precise figures of this media’s penetration are notoriously hard to come by in the region – Sakr (2001) puts satellite penetration in Egypt at only 10% in 1999, with much higher figures for the Gulf.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that Amr Khaled is not popular with other socio-economic groups – to the contrary it seems that his popularity knows no class boundaries. But his message is marketed most directly to upper to middle-class youth and women.



da'wa movement in the Arab world) broadcast from spaces of high social capital such as orchestral chambers as a way to enact a critique of the elitism perceived to inhere in such venues, in the religious programs I am interested in televangelists occupy spaces of cosmopolitan modernity – high-tech, tastefully decorated television studios, Oxford Street in London, a yacht in the Red Sea – to show how an Islamically oriented life can comfortably and seemingly effortlessly inhabit them. As an Islamic media producer put it to me in a conversation about the Egyptian televangelists, “Amr Khaled and others like him succeeded in making religion something chic, something ‘wow’ you know – before, people thought being religious was something baladi (vulgar), something for the poor.”<sup>18</sup>

In many respects, this vernacular understanding of who is religious and why is echoed in the scholarly literature on the Islamic Revival, which posits it as a lower-class expression of discontent against an inept and parasitic state – Egyptians are turning to religion as a spiritual haven against their material woes, as one recent New York Times’ article headlined “Stifled, Egypt’s Young Turn to Islamic Fervor” argues. Recently, anthropologists concerned with Islamism in Egypt have questioned the assumptions underpinning such analyses.<sup>19</sup> Mahmood (2006:16), for example, points out that dominant socio-political explanations for the Revival privilege “standard models of sociological causality (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomie or utilitarian strategy), while terms like morality, divinity and virtue are accorded to the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized.” Starrett (1998:245), in an earlier ethnography of religious education in Egypt, eschews materialist class-based analyses of Islamism that imply “religious ideas and commitments have no independent cognitive force, no power and attraction aside from the socio-economic correlates that predispose particular groups to adopt them.” The educational and class composition of the Islamic satellite channel’s

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<sup>18</sup> This informant stressed that in large part this perceived “chicness” stemmed from the fact that Khaled prefers the more high-prestige television medium to, for example, cheap cassette technology. That Khaled uses this technology, long associated with a libertine secular culture, for Islamic ends is one of the secrets of his success. As Ginsburg notes (2002) in her discussion of Inuit media, “The *fact* of their appearance on television on *Inuit* terms, inverts the usual hierarchy of values attached to the dominant culture's technology, conferring new prestige to Inuit "culture-making.”

<sup>19</sup> As do young Muslims themselves. In an online response to this *NYT* article, students at Cairo University who were given an Arabic translation said after reading it that “they did not see the connection between government failure and lack of opportunity with their emboldened faith. Being religious, they say, is about leading a good life. For them, it’s a gesture of free will, an individual choice disconnected from larger issues. Determinism plays no part.” ([thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/16/what-the-generation-in-question-thinks/](http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/16/what-the-generation-in-question-thinks/)).

imagined audience illustrates the tenuous nature of such claims, and invite us to move away from theoretical frameworks which work to “explain away” the desire on the part of individuals to orient their lives towards a greater adherence to Islamic practices as a backlash against harsh material straits. This, in turn, invites us to take seriously the ethical conceptions of visual media being put forward by the media producers this audience is attracted to. In the next section, I take some preliminary steps towards unpacking a few of the issues at stake in positing the notion of a “pious viewing” within a religious tradition usually associated with an oral/aural piety.

### *Virtuous Viewing and Mediating the Sacred*

In my foregoing discussion of Islamic satellite television, I treated as self-evident and unproblematic what is perhaps the most salient aspect of my object of study: television. In the ensuing discussion, I would like to shift tacks and put at the center of the discussion Islamic televangelism as a particular form of visual media<sup>20</sup> and practice. I do not pretend to give any definitive conclusions or insights, but merely want to make a small attempt to take more seriously, within a Muslim ethnographic context, what Mitchells (2005: 345) calls “the visual construction of the social field” and spotlight it as a productive area of future research for scholars concerned with the intersections of contemporary visual culture and Islam.

The emergent interdisciplinary field of visual culture studies shares with anthropology a concern with everyday, socially grounded practices of seeing (Evans and Hall 1999, Mirzoeff 1999, Mitchell 2005, Sturken and Cartwright 2004). Despite the proclaimed global focus of visual culture studies, in reality the field “remains a discourse of the West about the West” (Mirzoeff 1999:10). By contrast, however, the anthropology of the senses has sought to decenter the ocular-centrism inherent in modernist, Western-based epistemologies (Howes 1991, 2005; Classen 1993) by researching the different sensory orders and bodily modes of knowing at work in diverse non-Western cultures

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<sup>20</sup> See Mitchell 2005:346-50 for a critique of the positing of something as “visual media.” While I agree with Mitchell that all so-called “visual media” are in fact “mixed media” – and television is of course an audio-visual medium – I still want to refer to Islamic televangelism as a visual media product here because I want to assert the importance of taking into account “vision” in discussions of this particular form of preaching.

(e.g. Desjarlais 2003, Hirschkind 2006, Geurts 2002, Schulz 2008, Seremetakis 1996, Stoller 1989). This paper, however, poses a different question: how do we recuperate an understanding of visuality beyond hegemonic Western norms by exploring contemporary Islamic understandings of the faculty of seeing as a key site for reflecting certain desires and anxieties about being a believing subject in neo-liberal Egypt? Indeed, with Christianity usually posited in the literature as a “visual” religion and Islam as an “auditory” one (e.g. Derrida 2001), most scholarly works looking at the intersections of visuality and religion have done so in a Christian or Pentecostal context (Birman 2006, Meyer 2006, Morgan 2005, Spyer 2008). Although the specific dynamics of sacred mediation evinced by Islamic televangelism challenge such easy bifurcations, to date there has been no ethnographic account of Muslim practices of visuality in mass media.<sup>21</sup> How might a consideration of contemporary media practices in Islam expand our definition of what the visual might be and what acts of seeing might entail? What visual aesthetic – or the sensuous, “embodied experience of meaning” (Morgan 2003:107) – animates Islamic media producers? How do they conceive this aesthetic as bringing viewers closer to piety and religious conviction? What happens when believers are addressed as spectators (Birman 2006)?

While religious preachers have appeared on television since its introduction into Egypt in the 1960s, the advent of Islamic satellite preachers like Amr Khaled marked the first time that the very fact of being on television, the materiality of the medium itself with all its technological capabilities, was made an integral part of the performance. The glitzy studio, the lighting, the panning between the da’iyya and his rapt addressees, the music montage introducing the show, the computer-generated title images – these elements were as integral to the homiletic message as the Qur’anic parables and prophetic stories which constituted the discursive substance of the programs. As McLuhan famously remarked: “The medium is the message” (1965:7). McLuhan’s now aphoristic phrase, however clichéd it may have become through overuse, invites us to pay attention

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<sup>21</sup> And nor do I attempt one here. Of course, the literature on “visions” in Islam (especially its Sufi articulations) is quite rich (see, for example, Al-Baghdadi 2006, Green 2003, Hoffman 1997, Mittermaier 2007). As is the literature on aesthetics in Islamic philosophy and art and the role images and sight play within such traditions (e.g. Al-Baghdadi 2006, Blair and Bloom 2003, Gonzalez 2001). What there is a definite dearth of, however, are scholarly discussions of contemporary practices of imaging (e.g. television and film) within an Islamic referent that foreground visual practice as the object of analysis.

to the ways in which, as Kittler puts it (1999), “media determine our situation” – that is, to the ways in which media technologies shape, inflect and constitute modes of perception as well as the objects of perception.

In a published roundtable discussion on religion and media, Derrida (2001:58) makes the point that Christianity is the televisual religion par excellence, the only one of the three monotheistic religions permitting the mediatization of a sacred “event.” By contrast, with regards to Islam, observers working on religious media have stressed how it is “technologies of the voice” (Asad in Derrida 2001) or listening which is “privileged as the sensory activity most essential to moral conduct” (Hirschkind 2006:22). At the same time, as Hirschkind notes (2006:54), the popular attraction to Sheikh Shaarawi, one of the first preachers to have a regular slot on television, “centered on his televisual image and not his vocal performance”. Nevertheless, Hirschkind argues (2006:161) that “televisual technique is for Egyptians necessarily indexical of a national perspective”, and hence morally suspect because politically corrupt. While this claim undoubtedly makes great sense in the context of state-controlled terrestrial television, the advent of a multiplicity of satellite channels, most privately controlled, has dramatically changed the contexts of reception. Indeed, while Abu-Lughod (2004:9) notes that “television may be one of the richest and most intriguing technologies of nation-building in Egypt [as] it weaves its magic through pleasures and subliminal framings”, an argument could be made that television is now also a “technology of piety” for the very same reasons.

In an article on American televangelism, Alexander (1997:198-202) notes how many Christians prayed before and after watching evangelical preachers on television as the “ritual experiences created by the telecast enhances the power of the religious message”. Similarly, some Hindu viewers of televised religious epics such as the Ramayan reported that they watched the show out of a religious devotion that was in turn heightened by its visual mediation on the small screen, with Rajagopal (2001:94) citing “stories of viewers who bathed before the show, distributed sweets, decorated the TV set with flowers and incense”. While it is very hard to find a comparable relationality to religious television programming on the part of Egyptian Muslims, for many Muslims tuning into an Islamic channel is seen as a moral act, a willful choice to improve the self

through a shunning of non-Islamic media which may be corrupting to that self in what they project on the screen – scantily clad women, sex-scenes, glorified violence and so on. At the heart of this choice, then, is a concern with vision and visuality – with what to see, what should be seen and how to see.

In his discussion of mediated religion alluded to above, Derrida (2001:58) makes the point that in contrast to Christian media where “the thing actually takes place “live” as a religious event, as a sacred event. In other religions [Judaism, Islam] religion is spoken about, but the sacred event does not take place in the very flesh of those who present themselves before the camera” (emphases in original). While I agree that this is largely true, with the most popular programs on the satellite channels being, as I noted above, talk-shows featuring various du'ah, expert panels or ordinary people talking about Islam, I would still like to complicate this argument in a number of ways. While Islam, like Judaism, is an iconoclastic religion, this does not mean that it is a visually impoverished one. On the contrary, a consideration of contemporary media practices in Islam invites us to expand our definition of what the visual might be and what acts of seeing might entail. The most popular program on Iqraa is an image-driven narrative of the Prophet's life and times, relying on cinematic techniques (Hirschkind 2006) of storytelling to bring this distant historical period into the imaginative horizons of contemporary viewers, what Mitchell (2000) in her discussion of Christian preaching terms “visually speaking”.

For example, Mustafa Hosni, a twenty-something da'iya on Iqraa, opens the first episode of his show 'Ala bab al-ganna (At the Gates of Paradise) with a precise laying out of the program's objective. Perched on the edge of a red-orange couch, a glass table in front of him and various objets d'art around him, he tells the mixed-gender studio audience and viewers at home that tuning into this program will help “transform Paradise from merely an invisible dream to a daily reality” as he brings to life eschatological accounts of the after-life through a passionate narration of Qur'anic and Prophetic stories. Hosni notes that while the Qur'an describes believers as those who believe in the unseen or the unknown (al-ghayb), it is incumbent on Muslims to “bring into being the afterlife into our material reality through our morals and acts.” Hosni thus transports listeners to

an Elsewhere even as he concretizes for them this ontologically intangible place through a highly visual language:<sup>22</sup> “Imagine the gates of Paradise before you [Hosni draws his arms wide apart to show the immensity of this gate]...the believers are walking one after the other on a tight-rope toward it [he rocks from side to side on the couch as if precariously balancing]...the hell-fire is below [he furrows his brow in horror]...the Prophet is waiting patiently besides the gates for all his umma to pass through [he smiles, a calm expression setting on his face as he raises his right hand to his chest, a traditional gesture of peace].”

The performance of representation here makes visible and present the invisible and absent and in doing so enacts it as a representational subject (Spyer 2008). In Derrida’s terms, the “sacred event” here becomes the visible transformation of inward dispositions that is effected through these performances – it is not uncommon to find Amr Khaled and his audience in tears sobbing at the end of a show, moved as they are by the retelling of the Prophet’s deeds. Viewers at home are in turn visibly moved by the display of such a transformation, experiencing a feeling of spiritual catharsis that is, for them, a testament to the authenticity of the television event – a friend once told me he came home one evening to find his parents making tearful supplications in front of their television as Amr Khaled beamed in from Mecca during the final days of Hajj, exactly as if they were in Mecca themselves.

Within these Islamic visual modes, myth, metaphor (cf. Zito 2007) and the body become signifiers of an affect, praxis and imaginative landscape informed by a relationship to the necessarily unseen, invisible and unrepresentable – a transcendent God. In one of Amr Khaled’s earlier shows on Iqraa, he introduces the idea of a “visual da’wa” whereby a Muslim, through his very bodily and sartorial appearance, can come to call others to a more faithful adherence to faith, an inward disposition not accessible to external knowledge except through its visual embodiment. For him, the hijab (head-scarf), for example, is “a walking symbol of Islam” and “wearing your higab at the beach, even if surrounded by semi-naked girls, will lead to society becoming more religious.

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<sup>22</sup> I owe the stylistic structure of this paragraph to Hirschkind’s (2006) analysis of a cassette-sermon by Sheikh Kishk in Chapter 5.

This is the way to fix society.” In another lecture he says, addressing women, “remember you are a da’wa to God with your higab. Your higab combined with your education, beauty and wealth is a powerful blend. Through this you will purify society.” Moors notes (2006:116) how “conceptualizing the modern public sphere – be it “secular” or “Muslim” – as an arena of verbal debate easily leads to the neglect of other forms of communication, such as comportment, body language and styles of dress. In short, public spheres are not simply sites of disembodied debate but also arenas for the formation and enactment of embodied social identities...” Unlike the academics who write about them, the Islamic media producers are highly conscious of embodied communication, tightly controlling what is allowed to appear on their pious screens and what cannot – a modest dress-code is mandated for the studio audience, for example, while women’s cleavage in street-footage is blurred out. A producer working for one of the leading Islamic satellite channels told me that they are very careful about filming in public locations such as shopping malls because they cannot always control what might appear in the background, specifically women not conforming to the station’s interpretation of what constitutes acceptable Islamic attire. Viewing such women would undermine the pious efficacy of the, in Derrida’s terms, “sacred event” being broadcast.

As should be clear by now, the Islamic media this paper has been concerned with are engendered by a profound concern with how to lead an Islamically correct life in a secular modern age. An ethics of vision – how to see and what to see – is central to this concern as visual culture becomes a key site for thinking out the different trajectories of religion in contemporary Egypt. At the same time, as the first section of this paper attempted to lay out, the scopic regimes enacted by Islamic media producers depend for their efficacy, appeal and coherence on the technologies, genres and visual modalities of commercial television, whose ambit transcends any religious moorings. Further exploring new practices of Islamic preaching on television will no doubt complicate and enrich anthropological understandings of the intersections of media technologies, religion and authority, but also invite us to rethink some taken-for-granted assumptions about “ways of seeing” and how this may be important for mediating the sacred.

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