

**‘Words from the Heart’:  
New Forms of Islamic Preaching in Egypt**

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**St. Antony’s College  
Oxford University  
Trinity Term, 2003**

**M.PHIL THESIS IN MODERN MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I owe great thanks to my thesis supervisor Walter Armbrust, for his guidance, infinite patience and encouragement, and perhaps most of all, for convincing me to keep an open mind about my thesis topic when I went to Cairo. His enthusiasm for my research gave me the confidence to take on a difficult project, while our long talks gave me the practical tools I needed to tackle the challenge. Secondly, to a man I consider a mentor, Bill Quandt, I can only say that words are inadequate to express how essential his inspiration, wisdom and support were to bring me to this point. If it was not for his stimulating classes and thoughtful advice during my time at the University of Virginia and afterwards, I would probably not be at Oxford, much less planning to build a career around the study of the Middle East. His constant encouragement over the years has convinced me to take risks, believe in myself and follow my heart.

I am also indebted to Partick Haenni, who shared his observations of the “Amr Khaled Phenomenon” and his file of press clippings with me. At the American University in Cairo, Asef Bayat and Emad Shahin both helped enormously by taking the time to impart their thoughts and analyses. To Prof. Shahin, I owe special thanks for offering to guide my research in Cairo if and when I return. In addition I am grateful to Dr. Hala Mustafa and Fahmy Howeidy for their openness and interest. Consultations with James Piscatori at the Islamic Centre and Ron Netter at the Oriental Institute were extremely helpful and perceptive. At the Oriental Institute, Najah Shamaa and I worked through many an article on Khaled together, helping me get through the mountain of primary materials. Thanks also to the sharp editing and keen interest of Pat Hanlon, whose heartfelt enthusiasm helped push me to the finish line.

Perhaps my greatest debt is to my Arabic teacher Abeer Heidier, who helped me translate *Words from the Heart*, and her family, who offered so much honest insight, Egyptian hospitality and sincere friendship. And of course, to all the friends and acquaintances in Cairo whose real names I have not used in the interest of privacy, I hope they may recognize their contributions and realize the respect and affection I will always have for them.

Thanks especially to Laura James for the late-night “tutorials” and tea in Cairo. Her compassion and wisdom touched me (and this thesis) more than she knows. And to Kanako Mabuchi, for being my rock in Egypt, as well as Rachel Ziemba, whose French translation and last-minute editing skills, lucky for me, nearly equal her talent in the kitchen. And, of course, to David, with gratefulness for his endless patience, utter faith in me, and all those things we know and love about each other that transcend words.

Finally, to Mom, Jason, Eric and Anne for putting up with me, believing in me, and being so proud of me, you are my heart and my strength. Most of all, to Daddy: Everything I ever write is for you. My achievements are yours. In all that I experience, everywhere I go, I live for you.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11 reinvigorated fears about “Islamic Fundamentalism,” a term used in the media to conjure images of bearded and turbaned zealots spoiling for holy war against the West. Throughout the search for answers and preparations for war in the tragedy’s aftermath, such images have continued to obscure the true nuance and complexity of Islam and its practice across the modern world. After all, the “most fashionable face of the faith” in Cairo today is a young accountant who wears sharp suits and a trim moustache, speaks in an elegant but easy-to-follow blend of colloquial slang and Classical Arabic, and moves listeners to tears and laughter with his retellings of Qu’ranic stories and promises of God’s redeeming love.<sup>1</sup> Amr Khaled, a soft-spoken 36-year-old lay preacher, works the crowds with a charismatic style that combines the trendiness of Egyptian pop singer Amr Diab with the down-home missionary appeal of Western televangelist Billy Graham, and the self-help wisdom of popular American TV psychologist Dr. Phil.<sup>2</sup> Ever since he began giving inspirational talks on Islam in private homes and clubs in the late 1990s, Khaled’s fame has grown to the degree that observers hail him as the most popular television preacher in Egypt since the beloved Sheikh Sha’rawi, who died in 1998.

Significantly, Khaled declines to discuss domestic politics or issue *fatwas*,<sup>3</sup> preferring to emphasize emotion, God’s love, and issues of personal piety, such as dating, family relationships, veiling, hygiene, manners, Internet use, and leisure. In one of his most popular taped sermons, *The Youth and the Summer (Ashubab wa a-sayf)*, Khaled addressed the question of whether it is a sin to go on a vacation to trendy beach resorts on the Red Sea coast, laying out step-by-step guide of how to enjoy the break constructively while

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<sup>1</sup> “Egypt’s Islamists,” 42.

<sup>2</sup> Bayat first suggested this specific set of comparisons in the July 2002 issue of ISIM Newsletter, but many articles in both the Egyptian and international press liken Khaled to Graham, as well as other televangelists. In addition, numerous articles in *Rose al-Youssef*, *Al-Ahram Weekly* and *The Associated Press*, have played up the similarity between those who admire the two “Amrs” Khaled and Diab.

<sup>3</sup> Khaled does comment on regional current events, including the war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Within the parameters of this thesis, I was not able to examine his comments on these topics very closely, but from what I gather, he sees such “Arab tragedies” as reflections of the spiritual shortcomings of today’s Muslims. His response to 11 September was to call for a dialogue of civilizations and understanding between Christians and Muslims, while his preaching during Gulf War II emphasized giving blood and donating aid to the Iraqis. The essence of his argument is that Muslims should help each other, but first have to “change themselves” and improve the moral character of society. Only then will God help them address these larger problems.

avoiding Satan.<sup>4</sup> But it is his style of preaching on TV—in a talk show format featuring audience participation and testimonials from both ordinary and famous people—that sets Khaled apart and makes him such a favorite with privileged youth and women. They say he looks like them, speaks their language and makes their religion relevant to their lives without shouting at them about fire and brimstone in incomprehensible Classical Arabic. His tapes, videos and CDs reportedly outsell Cairo's top music stars, while his lectures in mosques and clubs around the city have attracted thousands, many of whom reportedly stand listening in the streets, moved to public displays of emotion by his oratory skills. His numerous television shows on cable and satellite channels are among the most eagerly watched and talked-about programs during Ramadan. In the words of one 24-year-old Egyptian friend, "During Ramadan, it's nothing but Amr Khaled, Amr Khaled, Amr Khaled."

I first heard Khaled's name when visiting an Egyptian family I met in Cairo in the summer of 2002. An Egyptian-American classmate had invited me to her family's holiday apartment at the private Agamy beach resort outside Alexandria. In the course of conversation, she mentioned her aunt had only recently decided to wear *higab*, or Islamic dress in the form of a headscarf and modest clothes. My friend said a popular new television preacher had inspired greater religious observance in scores of other women like her aunt, an upper-middle class professional who long resisted the social pressure to wear *higab*, even as it became an increasingly obvious presence on the streets of Cairo over the last few decades. I began asking questions, and soon discovered a fierce debate in the Arab press and on the streets of Cairo over Khaled's meteoric rise to fame and fortune as an "Islamic televangelist." The following week, the rumor went out that the Egyptian government had banned Khaled from preaching at a mosque in an affluent suburb of Cairo, having already banned him from speaking publicly inside the city. By November 2002, Khaled had been ordered to halt all preaching activities and forced to leave the country.

Everyone I spoke to about Khaled seemed to find it both amusing and fascinating that an American graduate student was studying him. Consequently, I stumbled into useful conversations about him when I least expected it, like the time I found myself in an hour-long discussion with the man who was Xeroxing articles about Khaled for me at a copy center. Some people, however, seemed to think it disconcerting that if I wanted to learn about Islam, I would choose to focus on Khaled and not a "real" sheikh, properly trained in

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<sup>4</sup> The issue of how Egyptians spend their leisure time in the summer is not a new one. "Beach imagery is one of many vocabularies used to construct such cannons [of taste] in ways that are both modern and distinctly Egyptian." (Armbrust, "Bourgeois Leisure," 128.)

Azhar University. Such comments reflect the way in which Khaled straddles spheres of popular culture and religious tradition, refusing to fit neatly into conventional categories. The fluid ambiguity of his image enables Khaled to articulate a position betwixt and between normative images of sacred authority, marking him as potentially subversive, but also making him powerful.

This thesis investigates Khaled's controversial new form of preaching and its implications for the evolving role of religion in everyday modern life in Egypt. Analysis focuses on video and audio tapes of Khaled's sermons, articles from the Egyptian and English press, and interviews with Egyptians who have been following the trend. I gathered materials and conducted interviews during two trips to Egypt: for three months in summer 2002 and a return trip for eight days in December. The interviews with professors, journalists and officials were conducted quite formally, while most of the discussions I had with ordinary Egyptians were couched in the course of normal conversations and carried out in the context of personal relationships and interactions.<sup>5</sup> In particular, my relationship with my Arabic teacher, Abeer Heieder, and her extended family proved instrumental, as she not only helped me translate the four tapes I am using as the focus of my main analysis, but she and her family also became quite engaged with my research and with the tapes themselves, responding strongly to Khaled's presentations and explaining their reactions when asked. An interesting side-effect was that I inadvertently "converted" my teacher's husband to become a dedicated Khaled fan because I left the tapes with Abeer between translation sessions in the couple's home. One day when I arrived for a lesson, Abeer informed me that her normally reserved husband had watched all the tapes and had been so affected by them, he had wept. Usually a very shy and laconic man, he gushed to me that evening about how much he admired Khaled.

The public debate that has arisen around Khaled and other "new wave" preachers like him resounds not only in Egypt, but across the Muslim world. In an age of rapidly advancing technology and mass communications, how will traditional religious structures and discourses adapt to the diffusion and fragmentation of both authority and information, and who will lead the way? Some analysts, like sociologist Asef Bayat, argue that the emergence of popular lay preachers like Khaled—who uses a variant of Western-

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to interview Khaled himself. He was out of the country giving lecture tours during my time in Egypt, and stayed only briefly in Britain between trips to the Arab world to film his television shows and deliver religious talks. Further study would benefit from a personal interview, but for the purposes of this M.Phil. thesis, I concentrate on Khaled's recorded sermons and television programs. Whenever I can, I have made use of published interviews.

style televangelism to promote a non-political message of personal piety and salvation—may signal an important shift in the tone and character of Islamism. Egyptian newspaper columnist Fahmy Howeidy sees Khaled as a key figure who can woo troubled young people away from both the vices of religious disengagement and the dangers of extremism and violence. Others, like Dr. Hala Mustafa of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, say Khaled offers modernism without substance, manipulating people into embracing his socially conservative Islamic discourse by giving it a “modern” face.

In the summers of 2001 and 2002, the secularist Egyptian tabloid *Rose al-Youssef* launched a bitter campaign against Khaled, accusing him of being elitist, dangerous, and “in it for the money.” As for Azhar, it has remained officially silent, though some individual sheikhs and professors from the institution are quoted in both the Arabic and English press deriding Khaled as a dangerous, unlicensed and untrained imposter: a Muslim Brother, false prophet, or extremist in disguise. They know they are vying with him for the attention of Egypt’s middle- and upper-class women and youth and worry they may be losing the battle. Even after Khaled had left Egypt, the media circus continued. The latest uproar arose when a Coptic television producer was quoted on the Internet calling Khaled the “Rasputin” of Egypt, a comment he denies having made, but which was repeated and criticized *ad nauseum* over the airwaves and in tabloids for the entire week I was in Cairo in December.

None of the speculation about Khaled’s motives described above offer a satisfactory answer to the pressing question of why this seemingly moderate and apolitical preacher is so controversial, and moreover, why the government felt compelled to ban him from speaking, eventually driving him from the country. If he did not give *fatwas*, preach violence, present an extremist version of Islam, or discuss his opinions about government policy in public, what was so threatening about his discourse? Why did the government not encourage Khaled’s *da’wa* to counteract the political Islamists and radicals as a powerful voice for moderate Islam, instead of attempting to silence and discredit him? The answer lies in his successful presentation of an alternative Islamic discourse that not only threatens to be more popular and better marketed than the Azhar’s official version, but also wrecks havoc with the state’s attempt to categorize Islamists as poor, uncouth, fringe extremists. According to the state’s construction of “official” Islam versus “unofficial” Islamism, a fundamentalist does not look and talk like modernized, westernized “us”; he is a backward, dangerous “other.” Khaled’s genius is to style himself as an Islamist who is one of “us.” The phenomenon of Khaled’s

rise to popularity and his subsequent banishment can only be understood by examining the implications as well as the pitfalls of this dichotomy in the context of Egypt's ongoing Islamic Revival.

Understanding the Revival's impact on Egyptian society means appreciating how religion can affect political discourse and institutions both formally and informally. James Piscatori and Dale Eickelman argue that "politics have as much if not more to do with bargaining among several forces or contending groups as with compulsion."<sup>6</sup> Thus, a full appreciation for the politicization of Islam and its influence in the contemporary Middle East should not be limited to a measure of formal participation or the actions of revolutionary militants challenging the state. To do so runs the risk of ignoring how political interests are shaped by "socially defined values [that] play an important part in formulating the identities and goals of individuals and collectivities."<sup>7</sup> These values often are understood and expressed symbolically, through words and images that help define social relations. A range of both state and sub-state forces seek to manipulate this symbolic language through what Eickelman and Piscatori refer to as "boundary setting,"<sup>8</sup> defined as a political process to determine the dividing line between public and private, modern and traditional, religious and secular, "high" and "low" culture, moral and immoral. While the centralized state tries to delineate these boundaries using a roadmap of shared Islamic symbols, its authoritative interpretations are becoming increasingly contested as access to mass education and mass media technologies enable more people to produce their own interpretations. More and more, "new" Islamic thinkers, writers and lay preachers like Khaled are questioning or disputing the "boundary setting" language employed by the state and others, including traditional religious authority figures.

As Khaled's popularity grows, both the Egyptian government and established Islamist groups find themselves competing with Khaled's innovatively packaged "marketing" of Islam. When Khaled left Egypt for the Britain, the most prevalent rumor was that his influence had gotten too close to the top when President Hosni Mubarak's daughter-in-law decided to veil after listening to his tapes, embarrassing the secular regime and particularly the conspicuously un-veiled First Lady Suzanne Mubarak. Although specific reasons for Khaled's recent "exile" may be impossible to discover, the persistence of this particular rumor speaks to perhaps the government's most significant anxiety about Khaled: that he has become too widely popular to

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<sup>6</sup> Piscatori and Eickelman, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 18.

control and that his decision to target elite youth and women has been so successful that his influence has even infiltrated the ranks that wield real power in Egypt.

Despite being banned in his homeland, Khaled continues preaching from abroad, using Satellite broadcasting and Internet resources to transverse boundaries, both literal and imaginary, as his fame across the region grows. Over 10,000 people, including the king and queen of Jordan, attended four days of lectures during his recent trip there in January.<sup>9</sup> Lebanese Christian satellite channel LBC picked up his shows to add to the two already being broadcast on Saudi-owned Iqraa and ART, and a recent visitor to Syria confirmed to me that the stores and street stalls of Damascus are stuffed with his merchandise.<sup>10</sup> A Web search reveals an active online community dedicated to his teachings, centered around his own website, which features regular live online “dialogues” with the preacher himself as well as MP3 recordings of his sermons. Khaled’s mastery of new media technologies and techniques enables him to evade the ban against his preaching and create an innovative atmosphere in which to couch his message of personal salvation and ethical social reform as both compatible with and essential for finding a “culturally authentic” path to modernization.

Constructing an understanding of this accountant-turned-preacher’s growing appeal, as well as probing the rumors and debate provoked by his popularity, should shed light on the direction of the modern Islamic revival in Egypt and the dynamic role of mass media in both reflecting and shaping discourses and authority structures in society, religion and politics. The significance of Khaled’s new form of preaching resounds not only within Egypt, but across the Middle East to Europe and beyond as it illustrates the universal themes of identity politics in the age of globalized markets and communications. Intriguingly, Khaled’s most recent programs have all appeared with English subtitles and his next project is reportedly a TV show aimed at Muslims living in the West.

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<sup>9</sup> “Charismatic Muslim Preacher.”

<sup>10</sup> Bayat, interview.

## CHAPTER TWO: Preaching and Sociopolitical Authority in Islam

As the opening credits begin rolling for a *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation) television show featuring Egypt's late television star Sheikh Sha'rawi, the *bismallah* appears, written in white calligraphy on a blue background, while traditional instrumental music plays.<sup>11</sup> The camera pans over intricate details of Islamic architecture and art, showing the alcoves, domes and walls of a mosque. Another text appears, not as fancy calligraphy this time, to announce, "A meeting with Sheikh Sha'rawi," and then, "From the Mosque (*masjid*) of Sayyida Zaynab." The words are followed by a close-up shot of a white-haired, bearded sheikh, Sha'rawi himself, seated cross-legged on a low wooden chair that is decorated with geometrical carvings and Arabic calligraphy. He is positioned in front of the prayer niche that faces Mecca, holding a well-thumbed copy of the Qur'an in his lap and wearing simple black robes and a white skull cap.<sup>12</sup> Several freestanding microphones rise before him. He immediately begins pronouncing the *hamdala* and the *salat* of the Prophet, rocking gently back and forth. Then, still speaking in fully vocalized Classical Arabic, he announces that today he will be talking about the Qur'an's chapter on women (*surat al-nisa'*). As he warms up to his subject he slides into more colloquial Arabic and becomes more animated, his hands punctuating his words with deliberate, almost ritualized gestures. Often, he holds his palm out in front of him or touches his forefinger and thumb together as his hands move emphatically up and down with his voice, but the sheikh remains stationary and grounded, never rising or moving from his chair.

The early atmospheric shots of the mosque architecture and the establishing camera shot of Sha'rawi (directly in front and slightly from below) gives the viewer a sense of being inside the mosque and sitting at the sheikh's feet. The camera remains in this stationary position for quite a while. More than fifteen minutes pass before the shot widens to shows the audience, seated cross-legged on the mosque's carpets in a large semi-circle around the sheikh. It is crowded, and some are standing at the edges. They are all men, mostly middle-aged or older. Many wear beards or white skull caps or carry prayer beads. From time to time, they murmur collective responses, occasionally with gusto, but nothing very intelligible. Every once in a while, the camera will focus in on a cluster of men in the audience or return to focus on the sheikh, but for the most part it stays still. Production quality is relatively poor: The camera's movements are not always steady, and

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<sup>11</sup> Sha'rawi, *al-Sheikh Muhammad Metwali al-Sha'rawi: tafsir surat al-nisa'*

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix, Figure 1.

traffic can be heard outside, as well as a slight echo of the sheikh's voice resounding off the walls of the mosque.

Now, mentally switch the channel to watch the opening credits of "Words from the Heart" (*kalam min al-'alb*), a talk-show hosted in the year 2000 by Amr Khaled.<sup>13</sup> The stylized Arabic words *kalam min al-'alb* drift across the screen as emotive synthesized music sounds, reminiscent of a soundtrack to one of Egypt's soap operas. Khaled's face looms in a corner, tinted in pastel colors, his mouth silently moving in slow motion as the music plays on. His image is followed by the face of Sohair al-Babali, a star comedy actress, now wearing a conservative *higab* consisting of black robes and veil. She nods her head in slow motion, eyes closed, lashes glistening with tears. Next comes a montage of different faces, most of them young, all of them demonstrating a wide range of emotions in their features as the music ebbs and swells and credits for set design, music, concept, etc., run alongside. We see a young man laughing, a group of veiled girls with their hands over their faces, an unveiled girl in glasses speaking passionately into a handheld microphone. At the end of the song, the montage ends, and the camera shows the preacher, sitting in the midst of a group of people, a small microphone pinned to his lapel. The shot is a close-up, framing the image of a man in his early 30s, wearing a trendy checkered sports coat over a white dress shirt, with an unbuttoned collar and black trousers. He has slightly thinning short black hair, large, expressive eyes and a trim moustache, but, notably, no beard.<sup>14</sup> He says, "*bismallah*," and launches into an introduction of "our program" in clear and articulate colloquial Egyptian, explaining the reasons behind the show's name. It means, he says, that "we are very careful that everything that will be said in this program comes from the heart, so it will reach your heart." Khaled then reviews the "varied" topics we will cover together, the guest stars we will meet, and how "we will find out from them what's inside their hearts and communicate with them what's inside our hearts." There will be "a continuous dialogue with the audience," he explains, in which we will ask questions of each other and discuss the love of God (*hubb Allah*) amongst ourselves. His voice is warm and familiar, friendly and coaxing. At the end of this brief introduction, he gets up from his place in the audience and walks onto the studio stage, still talking, and occasionally consulting a batch of three-by-five note cards in his hands.

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<sup>13</sup> Khaled, *kalam min al-'alb*, : *al-hiya*'.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix, Figure 2.

As he rises and emerges from the studio audience, there is a change in the camera angle and the viewer sees the entire set, which gives the impression of an abstract, geometrical, space-age forum. The camera quickly pans to smiling faces of the young audience members, both men and women, sitting together on bleachers. They are subtly separated by gender in alternating rows, but otherwise give the appearance of a blended group. There is range of *higab* styles, some plain and relatively conservative; others flowery and stylish and worn with makeup. Several women wear no headscarf at all. The young men are all clean-shaven and well-dressed. A few wear expensive-looking watches or chains. The audience's seats are arranged in a semicircle at the edge of a round stage. Opposite the audience is a large, crescent-shaped, metallic-looking desk with two swivel chairs behind it and a round white light in the shape of a ball at its base. Khaled walks over and sits in one of the chairs, introducing the theme of today's show, which happens to be moral behavior (*khulq*), and more specifically, modesty (*al-hiya'*). The studio is lit primarily in soothing blues and purples. To the preacher's left is a large video screen, with the words "*kalam min al-'alb*" projected all over it in a jumble of letters. Behind him are seven large metal panels arranged at the perimeter of the stage, decorated by three small neon blue stars. Khaled begins to ask the audience questions, asking them to give examples of modesty in their lives and in modern society. The young men and women pass around a microphone, giving their opinions in response to Khaled's gentle prodding, often laughing along with him, or growing serious and reflective following his example.

These two descriptions are examples of the opening minutes in a televised *dars*, or religious lesson, but each presents a dramatically different image of the Islamic preacher and his relationship with his congregation, suggesting interpretations of religious authority and constructions of community that diverge widely from one another. Khaled's highly produced "modern" program, with its abstract studio, inter-gender audience and overt emphasis on individual relationships and personal emotions, contrasts powerfully with Sha'rawi's paternalistic, homespun traditionalism, qualities which come across in the conservative staging and filming of his show, which recreates the experience of attending a textbook example of a *dars* in the formal, gender-segregated environs of a mosque.

Born in a rural village in the Nile Delta, Sha'rawi was classically trained in a religious primary school (*kuttab*) and Azhar University. Most Egyptians view him as a charismatic "son of the country" (*ibn al-balad*), whose weekly religious lectures on television successfully project the image of "the people's

sheikh” by using simple examples and language to explain complex Islamic principles.<sup>15</sup> He once said, for example, that life without the Qur’an was like trying to use a television without consulting the manual.<sup>16</sup> Viewers valued Sha’rawi’s reputation for religious knowledge, approachability and influence to such a degree that several years after his death in 1998, he became an unofficial *wali*, or saint. Egyptians now visit his grave in his home town to celebrate a festival on his birthday (*moulid*) and to seek blessings (*baraka*), while the sheikh’s followers report evidence of miracles attributed to him.<sup>17</sup>

It is yet to be seen whether Khaled’s popularity is merely a fleeting star that will burn itself out of fashion in a few years, or a rising one that may someday rival the nearly universal devotion and respect that millions of Egyptians have felt toward Sha’rawi for decades, and continue to feel even after his death. Tellingly, Sha’rawi still commands prime Friday airspace on Egyptian television, endlessly preaching posthumous reruns, while books and pamphlets “with his smiling face fill the shelves of almost every bookstore and are standard stock with street vendors as well. Tapes of his sermons still sell by the hundreds, and the newspapers are still recycling his old speeches and sermons, editing them into weekly articles about almost every topic under the sun.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the undeniable popularity of Khaled’s television programs, lectures and taped sermons, particularly among a certain upper-class social set in Egypt, has successfully launched him into regional fame and fortune, aided by his creative use of the Internet and satellite television. It also has ignited a firestorm of controversy, not so much because of what he says, but how he says it, and to whom he says it.

Khaled is a Cairo University graduate who was a prosperous accountant before finding stardom on the small screen. He makes some people very uncomfortable for the same reasons he makes others feel so comfortable: His new form of preaching challenges both traditional normative constructions of religious authority and an official discourse that argues there is no middle ground between religious fanaticism and modern secular nationalism. His symbolic innovations and the powerful responses they elicit—particularly from segments of the population that seemed to resist the visible increase in displays of public religiosity during Egypt’s turbulent “Islamic Revival” in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s—indicate that this “revival” is far more symbolically complex and socially diverse than is appreciated in much of the present literature and

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<sup>15</sup> Nasrawi.

<sup>16</sup> Engel.

<sup>17</sup> Iskander, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

media debate. There is a tendency to portray the contestation over the interpretation of Islam as a two-way confrontation between fundamentalist extremists and a “secular” government backed by a co-opted “traditional” clergy. In reality, however, as Khaled’s example demonstrates, Islamization manifests itself in a wide variety of images, individuals and organizations that compete among themselves and the state for symbolic influence in the public sphere. The role of the Islamic preacher as a cultural mediator in this process is both essential and organic, due to a long history of the preacher as social leader, spiritual guide and political actor.

### **The Islamic Preacher in Context**

The tradition of Islamic preaching has its basis in the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, who is regarded by Muslims as the “first and model preacher (*khatib*).”<sup>19</sup> Muhammad delivered sermons, conducted meetings and rallied his followers in the first mosque, a space adjacent to his home in Medina.<sup>20</sup> Early on, the mosque took on a multipurpose character that reflected the multifaceted role of the preacher. As described by Richard Antoun, the mosque “was a place of asylum, a place to discuss important public matters including preparations for collective defense, a school, a resting place for travelers, and a place of worship.”<sup>21</sup> The elevated seat, or *minbar*, from which the preacher delivered the Friday sermon and announced important decisions, news and prohibitions, became a “symbol of religiopolitical authority,”<sup>22</sup> invested with the divinely sanctioned honor and earthly power of Muhammad, the original Islamic *khatib*, in his capacity as the first leader of the *’umma*, or Muslim community. In this sense, the mosque itself was conceived as the ultimate community center, with both spiritual and practical uses. The preacher’s role within such a framework logically corresponds to this blend of the worldly and soteriological, essentially mediating between the two.

Both Antoun and his student Patrick Gaffney suggest that the Islamic preacher’s authority ultimately rests in this act of mediation. Antoun highlights the preacher’s importance as a “culture broker” whose job is to reconcile “great” and “little” traditions, thereby acting as a local interpreter of “the relationship of popular

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<sup>19</sup> Antoun, 67. The title of *khatib* refers specifically to the preacher giving the Friday sermon (*khutba*) in a mosque.

<sup>20</sup> Gaffney, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Antoun, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

religion to the religion of the specialists,”<sup>23</sup> or, more specifically, between the teachings of the religious scholars (*‘ulama’*) and peasant practices. Preachers, like teachers and judges, Antoun writes, are “key figures who must accept reject, reinterpret, or accommodate the diversity of local custom with the ordinances of religion, be they ritual, ethical, legal, or theological.”<sup>24</sup> Gaffney follows a similar line of analysis, emphasizing the preacher’s duty to navigate the congregation through the “gap between the ideal and the real” presumed by religion, the sacred symbols of which carry such weight precisely because of “their capacity to mediate, fuse, transcend, and integrate what are felt to be these antipodal realms.”<sup>25</sup>

In the context of post-colonial modernization, globalization and transnational communications, the contemporary Muslim preacher – whether he delivers the “traditional” mosque sermon like Sha ‘rawi or produces a “modern” television talk-show variation like Khaled – mediates between tradition and modernity as well as the spiritual and mundane. By offering audiences competing visions of how to steer a culturally authentic course through the disorienting contradictions that characterize their everyday lives, today’s preachers contribute to evolving public discourses on religion and power in society. Through the dissemination of their symbolic messages and images, they articulate the changing nature of authority structures while contributing to the reconstruction of alternative ones. Understanding where Khaled fits in, and how his form of preaching challenges, modifies and adapts the traditional patriarchal authority of the preacher in Muslim society first calls for a summary of the theoretical and historical evolution of the preacher’s various sociopolitical functions.

### **Preacher and Ruler: An ‘Authoritative’ History**

Perhaps the most familiar and ritualized form of preaching takes place in mosques, where the preacher who gives the formal Friday sermon is known as the *khatib*, and his sermon is the *khutba*. The formal title of *khatib* (or *imam*, literally meaning the one who stands in front) and the ceremonial delivery of the *khutba* represent a straightforward inheritance from the tradition established by Muhammad, designed to replicate his method of speaking to the *‘umma*. Accordingly, the *khutba* precedes Friday prayers (*salat*) and includes two sermons, a short one first and a longer one second, both introduced with obligatory *bismallah*, *hamdala* and the *salat* of the Prophet, though these often vary in length and elaborateness. The *khatib* sits on

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Gaffney, 28.

the *minbar* briefly between the two *khutbas*, but delivers them both standing, in the manner of the Prophet.<sup>26</sup> After the formalized introduction, the *khatib* says “now then,” to indicate the beginning of the body of the *khutba* itself. Sha‘rawi does this in the tape of the sermon described above. Preachers can and often do adapt and adjust this basic format for rhetorical effect, but the essential framework remains consistent.

The development of the *khatib*’s role is inseparable from the legacy of Muhammad, but in order fully to understand the cultural, political and social roots of the preacher’s authority in Islamic politics and society, the tradition of the *khatib* should be traced back to a time before the spread of Islam, when the *khatib* was a tribal spokesman or storyteller, similar in stature and function to the *sha‘ir*, or poet. Although the office could be hereditary, the tribal *khatib*’s oratory skills, reputation for bravery and his ability to represent his tribe’s patriarchal honor were more important than birth or schooling, and consequently there were no special guilds or castes that developed around the position. Their insignia were the lance, staff and bow, which they always carried in public appearances, and their attributes included courage, boldness, clarity of speech and pronunciation, traits which were helped them carry out their duties of representing the tribe:

They appear not only at the head of a *wafd* (delegation) to negotiate as representatives of their tribe ... but, like the poets, they were also the leaders in the war of wits with the enemy (*mufakhara*). The *khatib* had to extol the glorious deeds and the noble qualities of his tribe and to narrate them in perfect language and to be able likewise to expose the weaknesses of his opponents.”<sup>27</sup>

In the early days of Islam, Muhammad adapted the role of the *khatib* to speak “publicly with ceremony and authority.”<sup>28</sup> Still carrying the staff or lance of the tribal *khatib* as a symbol of authority and dignity, the Islamic *khatib* now addressed the Muslim community, not in the context of tribal war and competition, but as a messenger of God’s divine purpose. However, as Anton cautions, “To say that the role of the *khatib* assumed a primarily religious character in the Islamic period has to be qualified in an important way. Islamic society from the very beginning was an ‘organic’ society. Religion tended to permeate all institutions rather than to be differentiated and/or autonomous.”<sup>29</sup> As *khatib*, Muhammad did not only pronounce on spiritual issues; he also used the pulpit to promote a dynamic project of ethical and social reform.

This significance of the preacher’s pulpit as a place where earthly and spiritual authority intersects is reinforced in its traditional association with the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs, all of whom

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<sup>26</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “khutba.”

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Antoun, 68.

delivered the *khutba* themselves in their capacity as leaders of the Muslim community. It was “quite in keeping with the nature of early Islam and with that of the Arab *khatib* that the ruler himself was spokesman and that he not only made edifying speeches from the *minbar* as *khatib* but also issued orders, made decisions and pronounced his views on political questions and particularly questions of general interest.”<sup>30</sup> This explicit political connection, linking the ruler with the *minbar* and the role of *khatib*, continued beyond the first four Caliphs under the rule of the Umayyads and their governors, who held the right to control the pulpit by giving the authoritative Friday sermon and presiding over congregational prayers (*salat*). In Egypt, the Fatimids designated the duty of delivering the *khutba* to others, but “still occasionally preached themselves (behind a veil), namely three times in the month of Ramadan and at the great festivals.”<sup>31</sup> Even long after the actual ruler ceased to act as *khatib*, a tradition developed in which the *khatib*, sitting on the *minbar* in the ruler’s place, would include a prayer for the well-being of the sovereign. Both Gaffney and Antoun cite examples of this tradition carried into modern times, when the mention or omission of the ruler’s name could indicate a political statement on the part of the *khatib*. In a particularly illustrative example of this practice, Gaffney describes two different sermons in the Upper Egyptian city of Minya on the occasion of President Sadat’s visit. In the nationally-broadcast sermon in the city’s largest mosque, delivered by a government-appointed *khatib*, a prayer was said for Sadat, who was in attendance, while a preacher at one of the independent mosques associated with the political Islamist movement used the visit as a lynchpin for a lashing critique of Sadat’s policies that same day.

Gaffney helpfully applies a Weberian analysis to the symbolic authority of the mosque and the *minbar*:

It encourages attention to the interaction between leaders and groups in the light of the articulation of particular systems of belief that ultimately result in the setting of goals, the evaluation of motives and the legitimation of authority. Seen from this perspective of the pulpit, a mosque represents a forum for the development and the transformation of power relation-ships.<sup>32</sup>

For Gaffney, the pulpit embodies public authority and mosques “are local manifestations of the religiopolitical order that characterizes the communities that build, maintain and ideally staff them.”<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the preacher’s authority comes not only from God, but also, significantly, from within the community

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<sup>30</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “khatib.”

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Gaffney, 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

itself, which theoretically legitimizes that authority through *ijma'* or “consensus,” a concept symbolically consistent with Khaled’s decision to start his *dars* seated among the audience members, where he emphasizes the communal ties between himself and the studio “congregation.” A literal and dramatic example of the *ijma'* process can be observed in the Jordanian village of Antoun’s case study, when villagers arrived at a consensus to support Luqman as *khatib* after his successful “preach-off” with another speaker in the local mosque. Luqman was offered a contract, to be renegotiated each year with the village families, each of which contributed a proportional payment towards the preacher’s personal upkeep. Anton refers to this practice as an aspect of Islam’s congregational, rather the Episcopal, emphasis: Instead of some established church hierarchy determining the appointment of a “parish” preacher, the arrangement was worked out directly between the *khatib* and the villagers, thereby reinforcing the symbolic weight of the *khatib* as representing “the Islamic community in each local context.”<sup>34</sup>

Antoun’s observations gave an accurate picture of village customs at the time of his research several decades ago. Actual practices, however, are not always characterized by such a textbook example of direct agreement between congregants and preacher, particularly in a contemporary context. At the time of his writing in the 1980s, in fact, Antoun already was observing changes starting to affect longstanding norms of behavior and social interaction in Jordan as the role of preacher, like many other aspects of village life, became increasingly affected by the central government’s attempts to bureaucratize. Accordingly, Antoun noted a growing “tendency to seek to influence the course of events at the village level.”<sup>35</sup> Like its counterparts in other Arab countries, including Egypt, the Jordanian Ministry of Religious Endowments started propagating an “official” brand of Islam by offering stipends for government certified marriage officers and pilgrim guides as well as by issuing a monthly journal suggesting sermon topics and even “canned” pre-prepared sermons. The government also attempted to exercise greater control over religious discourse by training and appointing *khatibs* in government-run institutions and mosques. However, Antoun argued that the centralization and bureaucratization of government “had variable and unpredictable effects,”<sup>36</sup> making the preachers more dependent on the state financially, but also freeing them from their dependence on villagers and enabling them to tackle sensitive local topics (such as blood feuds) more openly.

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<sup>34</sup> Antoun, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

This idea that government efforts to centralize and bureaucratize religion can have “unpredictable effects” is taken farther by Gregory Starrett, who studied on the effects of mass education, mass media and mass markets on shaping and reproducing Islamic practices and beliefs in Egypt. His research shows that attempts to create a hegemonic monopoly over Islam in the public sphere work paradoxically to fragment authority structures and inspire opposing discourses. The irony, he explains, is that the “political and educational strategies chosen by Egypt’s ruling elites over the last century have resulted in the diminution rather than the augmentation of their ability to control the public discourse on Islam.”<sup>37</sup> In short, by attempting to demarcate the boundary between religious and secular domains, the government actually ends up provoking a vigorous debate over the question of exactly where that line should be drawn. The result is that contestation causes the line to become more blurred instead of clarified and indisputable. Khaled’s popularity may be one indicator of just how far the government’s attempted “monologue” is sliding into a multi-sided “dialogue,” characterized by a range of perspectives which now extend well beyond those of the learned Azhar sheikhs and *’ulama* to include the voices of an ever-widening variety of political Islamist activists and lay preachers: students, professionals, revolutionaries, intellectuals, and well-off accountants like Khaled.

Despite this growing diffusion of religious authority, many individual preachers continue to use the sermon as a form of symbolic public discourse to promote the values of modernity, if not the actual skills necessary for modernization,<sup>38</sup> or the “official line” as dictated by the government. Since preachers and their sermons play central roles in transmitting ethical norms of behavior and “Islamizing” society, they are able to exercise a great deal of influence and flexibility within their contexts of their own communities. When those communities are broadened exponentially by access to mass media technologies such as tape or video cassettes, broadcast television and the Internet, the preacher’s reach expands beyond his immediate “studio congregation.” The television preacher invites his viewers to construct their relationships with him and each other, as well as the wider religious, social and national community. In doing so, Khaled, Sha‘rawi, and any other Islamic figures who use the mass media are engaging in a form of identity politics as they “mediate” viewers’ searches for a religious discourse to fit within the context of their modern lives.

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<sup>37</sup> Starrett, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Antoun, 128.

## Categorizing the Preacher: ‘Role Uncertainty’

Although it’s essential to understand the origins of the Islamic preacher in history and theology,

Gaffney is right to warn that the preacher’s role in Egypt and elsewhere is difficult to nail down:

[It] cannot be adequately described by any single model drawn from classical socioreligious theory. Attempts to reduce this role to what is arguably its historic norm, its primitive prototype, or putative cross-cultural equivalents are only partially satisfying. Similarly, efforts to define one master category as the basis for all others have also tended to elude or ignore the remarkable variety of social structures and ritual patterns that constitute this continuity and simultaneity of forms.<sup>39</sup>

The identity of the Islamic preacher is both multifaceted and ambiguous, reflecting a variety of overlapping and organic social, political and religious roles as well as changing historical, philosophical and cultural contexts. Gaffney refers to this ambiguity as “role uncertainty,” explaining that “Islamic preachers in Egypt fall into a number of significant categories rather than a single status group.”<sup>40</sup> Arguably, it is this very flexibility that gives the preacher such lasting and meaningful authority despite the kinds of modernizing or bureaucratizing developments described above. These changes tend to diffuse the traditional authority of the religious scholars (‘*ulama*’) by creating a text-bound relationship to knowledge, as opposed to the classical method’s emphasis on memorization and human-to-human oral transmission (*silsila*), opening the way for lay preachers like Khaled, a college graduate with a degree in business administration and no classical training. Theoretically, such flexibility in the identity and qualifications of the preacher is possible because Islam purports to be a religion without an official clergy, although, as Gaffney points out, “this claim obviously does not mean that Islam lacks persons who variously claim to represent its authority. Rather, there is an abundance of such representatives and no little controversy among them over their relative prerogatives. It is not therefore, the absence of authoritative religious specialists that is refuted by this declaration but merely a rejection of any single hierarchical definition of what entitles one to exercise this authority.”<sup>41</sup>

It is into this gap that Khaled is able to wedge himself. He openly admits he does not have the knowledge of a religious scholar and therefore declines to discuss politics, practice *tafsir*, or issue *fatwas*, telling *Al-Ahram Weekly* in a 2002 interview that “only scholars with an in-depth understanding of law are allowed to do that.”<sup>42</sup> These are conscious, substantive decisions that result in making him more attractive to some people, who are comforted by the apparent depolitization of Islam and the focus on issues of personal

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<sup>39</sup> Gaffney, 183.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> Khaled, “Preaching with a Passion.”

piety. But it also makes him suspicious to others, who accuse him of duplicity or ulterior (perhaps extremist) motives. Some of this uneasiness is evident in the confusion over how to refer to him.

When mentioning Khaled in articles or conversation, the titles of both “*sheikh*” and “‘*ustaz*” (professor) are most often used, the former occasionally derisively, but also respectfully. The latter most often appears on his own website and tapes. As demonstrated by the example of Sha‘rawi, the title of *sheikh* is “the most common term used by Egyptian Muslims for the one who preaches”<sup>43</sup> (in other words, the usual name used for the *khatib* when he is not actually giving the *khutba*), but *sheikh* also is a respectful term used to recognize the dignity of older men or those of superior social standing. ‘*Ustaz* is respectful title normally used in a modern context to refer to university lecturers or professors, though Khaled is neither. He also has been called *rajil al-din*, a phrase meaning “man of religion” that “makes no specific reference to preaching or even to Islam but it has come to be used for public spokesmen of religion who validate this identity primarily through the teaching of religion, its administration, or leadership of its ritual expressions. Recently, this term has been favored by some modernists as a replacement for *ulama*.”<sup>44</sup> Most commonly, however, Khaled is referred to as a *da‘iya*, the name used for one who calls people to Islam and a title with a multitude of political and social connotations all its own.

### ***Da‘wa*: Answering and Issuing the Call**

Along with Christianity and Buddhism, Islam ranks as one of the world’s three major proselytizing religions. As reflected in the diversity of roles Muhammad himself played during his own lifetime – military commander, political leader, spiritual guide and judge – proselytizing is only one of many possible socio-political duties of the Islamic preacher. Moreover, it is not a duty limited to *khatibs*, who lead prayers in the mosque and deliver the formal *khutba*. On the contrary, extending the “invitation” or “call” (*da‘wa*) to accept Islam can be considered the responsibility of all true believers and is not necessarily limited to a mosque setting.

Although the concept of *da‘wa* has a variety of theological, political and historical implications, which will be discussed below, its primary use in the Qur‘an refers both to a personal appeal or vow to God and to Allah’s commandment to Muslims to spread the message of the revealed religion by guiding others, through reason and persuasion, to the “straight path” of God: “Call them to the path of your Lord with

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<sup>43</sup> Gaffney, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 33.

wisdom and words of good advice, and reason with them in the best way possible.”(16:125)<sup>45</sup> Since the Qur’an also proclaims that there is “no coercion in religion”(2:256), the idea of *da‘wa* as a religious and social mission suggests an emphasis on “rational intellection” rather than force or compulsion.<sup>46</sup> The Qur’an acknowledges that some stubborn or foolish people will never answer the call, no matter how often or persuasively they are invited, but there is also a Qur’anic argument for stressing patience rather than retaliation: “Your Lord surely knows who strays from His path, and He knows those who are guided the right way. If you have to retaliate, do so to the extent you have been injured; but if you forbear it is best for those who bear with fortitude. Endure with patience, for your endurance is not without the help of God. Do not grieve for them, and do not be distressed by their plots.”(16:126-128)

*Da‘wa* is issued by a “caller” (*da‘i* or *da‘iya*), who can be any Muslim using well-informed argument, eloquent persuasion and self-example to summon others to take up an Islamic way of life and join the community of believers (*‘umma*). This “communal dimension” of *da‘wa* is emphasized by the Qur’anic concept of a “contract” or “covenant” (*mithaq*) existing between Allah and all Muslims. In this sense, believers enter into the *mithaq* in response to God’s original *da‘wa* as passed down to human beings through His Prophet, taking up the duty of *da‘wa* as an inheritance:

The appeal of God transfers into an appeal by the Prophet; whereon Muhammad, in turn, organizes those who answer him, taking from each a covenant and creating thereby an *ummah* that ultimately assumes the responsibility of *da‘wah* on its own.<sup>47</sup>

Importantly, *da‘wa* also can be understood as a spiritual project that is “as much intended for the benefit of Muslims as of non-Muslims.”<sup>48</sup> The fundamental essence of *da‘wa* is *tawhid*, or acceptance of the oneness of God,<sup>49</sup> but the concept can have a broader philosophical and social application. Isma‘il al-Faruqi argued that the idea of *da‘wa* is at heart of Islam’s spiritual and intellectual experience as a quest for self-knowledge and fulfillment of God’s divine plan to realize human potential:

All men stand under the obligation to actualize the divine pattern in space and time. This task is never complete for any individual. The Muslim is supposedly the person who, having accepted the burden, has set himself on the road of actualization. The non-Muslim still has to accept the change. Hence, *da‘wah* is necessarily addressed to both, to the

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<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I have used *Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation by Ahmed Ali*. 1984. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Faruqi, 36.

<sup>47</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, s.v. “da‘wah.”

<sup>48</sup> Al-Faruqi, 35.

<sup>49</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, s.v. “da‘wah.”

Muslim to press forward toward actualization and to the non-Muslim to join the ranks for those who make the pursuit of God's pattern supreme.<sup>50</sup>

Understood in this way, *da'wa* is as much a personal process of self-actualization as it is a religious mission. Al-Faruqi's image of *da'wa* summoning non-Muslims to "join the ranks" of Muslims in their efforts to realize God's plan conjures the image of an army of believers, not in the sense of military *jihad*, but as a divinely inspired society communally striving for self-improvement. Such an interpretation can be based in the following Qur'anic lines: "So let there be a body (*ummah*) among you who may call to the good, enjoin what is esteemed and forbid what is odious."(3:104) This verse has been referenced to support the belief that "*da'wah* is an activity of the whole community. It is the command to promote good and fight injustice at large. Surah 3.104 begins to articulate a sense of *da'wah* as a synonym of *ummah* and of righteousness itself."<sup>51</sup>

The implications of *da'wa* as a personal spiritual project joined in a communal effort resound not just in the lines of the Qur'an and in the tradition of the Sunna, but also in a modern context. Across the Middle East, *da'wa* has taken on powerful political connotations as Islamist opposition groups use the idea of *da'wa* to "call" followers to the "true" Islam that many believe Westernized societies and governments are neglecting. Piscatori argues that in the context of the recent "Islamic Revival," a crucial shift has occurred in the meaning of *da'wa*, placing greater emphasis on *da'wa* aimed at fellow Muslims and widening the scope of *da'wa* to make the striving for social reform and the realization of a unified 'umma central rather than peripheral goals:

A new consensus may be emerging that if God's call to mankind means anything today, it is a 'call' (*da'wa*) to uphold the fair deal of the Qur'an – a society both balanced and just. Indeed, the very idea of *da'wa*, a concept which the Qur'an mentions (14:44), seems now to have acquired broader connotations.<sup>52</sup>

The more *da'wa* becomes associated with activism and social reform, Piscatori writes, the harder it is to distinguish *da'wa* from politics. Piscatori's observations about the political nature of *da'wa* as social reform may help explain why Khaled is regarded so suspiciously by secularists. Although he goes out of his way to avoid any explicit discussion of domestic politics, Khaled nevertheless uses his influence as a *da'iya* to promote the idea of Islamic social reform openly and energetically. In his TV shows and sermons, he often refers to the Prophet's era as a model for Muslims today, using his retellings of Qur'anic stories to lament a

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Faruqi, 35.

<sup>51</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, s.v. "da'wah."

<sup>52</sup> Piscatori, 127.

deterioration of values and compare the lives and times of Muhammad and his companions to modern-day struggles of Muslims the world over. Even his proposed Ph.D. topic at the University of Wales, comparing Muhammad's model for social reform to Western models, confirms Khaled's preoccupation with *da'wa* as a modern-day social project, and his promotion of the re-Islamization of society as a process at the heart of that project. "I'm looking for a nation that is close to God, to other communities, and which is involved in social development," Khaled explained to *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "We are still lagging behind in these respects, and I think religion is the greatest solution for these problems."<sup>53</sup> It is a conviction which, at a basic level, is consistent with the political Islamist idea that "Islam is the solution" (*al-Islam huwa al-hal*), though Khaled does not (at least publicly) take his message to the next level to argue for building an Islamic state or waging an Islamic revolution.

In his study of Islamic preachers in Egypt during the beginning of the country's "religious revival" in the late 1970s and '80s, Gaffney observed that *da'iya* is a title "frequently preferred by those who preach in the spirit of the contemporary Islamic resurgence."<sup>54</sup> Located at the epicenter of this regional "resurgence" that began in the late 1960s, Egypt played a key part in developing *da'wa* as a modern social and political concept. As the government sought to control *da'wa*, individuals and groups responded by offering their own versions, often framed in opposition to the "official" discourse. Significantly, *Al-Da'wa* was the name of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's banned monthly magazine. Egyptian *khatibs*, in their formal roles as mosque preachers, also have played important roles in this *da'wa*, a notable example being Cairo's Sheikh Kishk, whose impassioned and energetic *khutbas* against the Egyptian regime, the West and Israel made him a celebrity as tapes of his sermons carried his message across the Arab world.

The flexibility and adaptability inherent in the role of Islamic preacher has combined with the spread of mass education, literacy and mass media to increase the number of "lay preachers" like Amr Khaled who take up the call without classical credentials or even a mosque of their own to preach in. Gaffney notes that "in contemporary Egypt the *da'iya* tends to denote a dedicated activist, usually a young man, advocating the totalistic application of Islam" and "has somewhat the sense of a 'missionary.'"<sup>55</sup> The terms development reinforces the plausibility of Eickelman's observations in Morocco, which indicated the '*ulama*' were losing their monopoly over religious information and interpretation:

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<sup>53</sup> Khaled, "Preaching With a Passion."

<sup>54</sup> Gaffney, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The carriers of religious knowledge will increasingly be anyone who can claim a strong Islamic commitment, as is the case among many of the educated urban youth. Freed from mnemonic domination, religious knowledge can be delineated and interpreted in a more abstract and flexible fashion. A long apprenticeship under an established man of learning is no longer a necessary prerequisite to legitimizing one's own religious knowledge. Printed and mimeographed tracts and the clandestine dissemination of "lessons" on cassettes have begun to replace the mosque as the center for disseminating visions of Islam that challenge those offered by the state.<sup>56</sup>

Khaled's television show quite literally seems to "replace the mosque" by lifting the religious *dars* out of its traditional environs and placing it in a much "more flexible and abstract" area, where genders mix (but within "decent" limits) and the "pulpit" is a shared space, and a shared microphone.

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<sup>56</sup> Eickelman, 168.

### CHAPTER THREE: Mass Media, Modernity and Islam

In a *Words from the Heart* episode featuring comedic actress Sohair al-Babali as the guest star,<sup>57</sup> Amr Khaled asks his studio audience to give proof of God's love by citing examples in their own lives.<sup>58</sup> Taking up the microphone, one young man shares the story of how he planned to go to Italy and France with his friends, but one day, one of his friends suggested they should go on the *Omra* (Lesser Pilgrimage) instead. After struggling with the temptation to go have fun in Europe, he and his friends decided to go on pilgrimage together. Laughing, Khaled says that if God takes your hand to lead you somewhere, you should go because He may be trying to warn you that something bad might happen to you in Italy or France. "This is a story of love," Khaled concludes.

Next to speak up is a young woman wearing *higab*, who describes how she once felt far from God, but last Ramadan she and her friends became closer to Him. After the *iftar*, she explains, her girlfriends used to gossip, but this time they suddenly found themselves talking about the Qu'ran and religion instead. They ended up in tears. "And I asked one of them, do you remember the last time we sat talking about religion like this?" The best gift from God, she concludes, is that she still has the same group of friends. Khaled agrees, saying good friends are one of God's greatest blessings.

An unveiled girl then takes up the mike to confess she is always depressed and feels she is "choking." But she is happy because her disobedience to God (*ma'siya*) is making her feel guilty, and this must mean God loves her and wants her to behave better. As one of only two unveiled girls in the audience, this young woman's comment seems to be directed at her conspicuous lack of *higab*, since later in this episode and others she mentions the importance of veiling several times, suggesting that once she puts it on, her life is likely to change for the better, and she will find a good Muslim husband.

As audience members pass the microphone around, Khaled constantly encourages, challenges and engages with them, calling on them to speak by gesturing and murmuring a polite "go ahead" (*itfaddal*). He always reacts individually to each person. Sometimes he repeats their words and adds his own thoughts, or uses one of their comments as a jumping-off point to relate a Qur'anic story or share relevant *hadith*. In one

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<sup>57</sup> Born in 1935, Sohair al-Babli began wearing *higab* in 1993 after a successful stage and film career spanning three decades. Her big break came in the play *Madrasat al-Musaghghibin* (School of Troublemakers) in the early 1970s, after which she took on starring roles. She married twice and retired from theater after appearing in more than 40 films. (Qasim and Wahbi.)

<sup>58</sup> Khaled, *Kalam min al-'alb: hubb Allah al-'abd*.

of the most dramatic stories, a young man describes an ill-fated vacation that ended in an accident when the car he was riding in turned over seven times. This makes Khaled and the audience laugh knowingly because seven is a mystic number. If anyone had seen the car afterwards, the young man says, they would have thought everyone had died. He survived, he says, because God loves him and gave him time to change. Recently, he turned his life around and went on the *Omra*. Still warmly smiling, but serious, Khaled comments that this young man should believe that if God had taken his life at that time, it would have been fair, but God is more than fair: He gives “chance after chance after chance.” Khaled tells the young man he was spared through the love of God. To illustrate his point, the preacher tells a story of Muhammad and his companions, who see a woman holding a baby. The Prophet asks them, “Do you think this woman would throw her baby into the Hellfire? ... Your God loves you more.” Khaled then relates a *hadith* about the Prophet’s nephew Ali, who claimed he would rather have God judge him on doomsday than let his mother and father reckon his sins, since God is even more merciful than one’s own parents.

In the course of the ongoing conversation, women talk about how donning the veil immediately changed their lives for the better, men reveal the miraculous ways in which prayer resulted in unexpected windfalls, a last-minute visa to Mecca, and the precise amount of money needed to go forward with a marriage by completing the job of painting and furnishing a new apartment. Khaled explains that the proof of God’s love is that he makes it easy to do right. “One way God shows his love is to block the path that leads to sin and open the path that leads to good things,” he says. Finally, a young woman wearing *higab* describes how she used to go to a “very famous” cinema all the time. One night she was planning to go, but decided not to at the last minute. That evening, the theatre burned down in a horrible fire. God’s love must have spared her. But Khaled rejects the suggestion that the fire was a punishment for sinful movie-going behavior, insisting both gently and firmly, “We must agree that all cinema is not forbidden (*haram*).” He asks jokingly whether the film she was going to was a good film, and argues that the cinema is only *haram* if the film involves improper sexy or provocative scenes. The smiling girl responds that of course she does not watch bad movies.

At this moment, my Arabic teacher Abeer stopped the tape. We were sitting in the library media room of the American University, where she was a graduate student, watching the show together on a small color screen at low volume. Before I had bought this tape and four others downtown and asked her to help me translate them, Abeer had heard of Khaled, but had never watched him in action before. “This is a very

good point, excellent point,” she said, explaining that the Helwan cinema fire was set by terrorists and “everybody knows this, it is very famous.” It was a great tragedy, she said. “Many sheikhs say now that the cinema and television is *haram* (forbidden), but he is saying this is wrong,” she added, seemingly impressed with both his reasonable approach to religious questions and the “smooth” (*raqiq*) way in which he spoke. “He is mixing *amiyya* and *fusha* because he doesn’t speak to low people only; he is educated,” she said approvingly. In fact, she grew more and more absorbed and interactive with the tape as it went on, laughing aloud and interjecting frequent exclamations of “*Yah Allah, Allah,*” and “*Mish mumkin!* (No way!)” when Khaled made a particularly persuasive point, told a touching story, or related a poignant *hadith*. “All the people love him because he doesn’t say you must do this, you must do that,” she reflected. “He is a very good person, Amr Khaled, because he invites to Islam not strongly, very softly.”

As an outgoing and ambitious young woman who worked long hours of overtime to pay for her own higher education, Abeer nursed dreams of teaching Arabic abroad in the United States or Europe one day “soon,” but family demands on her time made this seem unlikely for the near future. She was married and had two little boys. Most of the private lessons Abeer gave took place in the family’s two-bedroom apartment in Maadi, a long subway ride and drive from downtown, where she took classes at AUC, and even farther from Agouza, where she taught at the British Council. Abeer controlled her own teaching income, which she used to pay for her education, and was proudly independent, always pushing the envelope and asserting her own personality, needs and desires even as she tackled the demands of being a wife, mother, sister and a dutiful daughter to her father, a very ill but dignified old patriarch of the family. Buying her own car, for example, a used sedan, gave her immense satisfaction and drew praise from her relatives. But having spent most of her teenage years growing up in Saudi Arabia where her father used to work, she had chafed at the more restricted lifestyle for women there, and developed discomfort with what she considered “overly conservative” expressions of religious piety. In preparing me to meet a young female Azhar student dressed in *niqab*, Abeer warned me, half-joking, half-annoyed, “This woman will not like me because I wear trousers and a little makeup.” She often wore brightly colored *higabs* and dressed in loose-fitting, stylish trouser-suits. As someone who in many ways personified compromise as she struggled to balance personal, cultural and religious responsibilities and identities, she immediately was attracted to Khaled’s presentation and discourse.

## Character and Caricature: Putting a Face on the Islamic Revival

Abeer's initial response to Amr Khaled echoes explanations offered by other Egyptians when they try to articulate why Khaled is such an attractive and successful preacher. His relatively youthful good looks and snappy clothes, intangible charisma, easy charm and unaffected air of friendly, open intimacy seems to appeal strongly, particularly to his target audience of elite "Westernized" youth and women, many of whom are looking for ways to build closer and more meaningful ties with their culture and religion, but do not necessarily identify with the more traditional Azharite or "fundamentalist" preachers, who some perceive either as out-of-touch disciplinarians or rabid extremists, marginal to society, uncouth, and dangerously ignorant. As one 22-year-old Egyptian medical student told me, "They're always telling us what we *can't* do." His comment reflects an attitude toward traditional *khatib* preachers caricatured in several *Rose al-Yussef* cartoons, one of which shows a man in a skull cap and *galabiyya*, presumably a *khatib*, shouting from a bullhorn, "Surrender yourself! The place is surrounded!" A young, beardless man in Western clothes runs away in distress, surrounded by menacing letters spelling out, "*Haram! Haram! Haram!*"<sup>59</sup> Another cartoon in the same magazine shows a traditionally dressed and bearded *khatib* striding off the page with a huge bloody knife in his hand, as one clean-shaven man at a café nearby says to his neighbor, "No, he's not a butcher or anything of the sort. He's going to give a sermon."<sup>60</sup> Such stereotypically conservative images of religious authority preaching *takhwif*, or playing on fears of hell and damnation, also are fodder for jokes by Sohair al-Babali. At one memorable point on *Words from the Heart*, the actress demonstrates her comedic flair by mugging for the camera with a preposterously silly face, puckering her lips and crossing her eyes in imitation of just such a sheikh, the kind of sheikh, she complains, who never laughs and does not know how to relate with other people, the kind of sheikh she has no use for.

The *Rose al-Yussef* cartoons and al-Babali's antics in *Words from the Heart* call to mind a scene from the 1994 Egyptian film, *The Terrorist (al-Irhabi)*,<sup>61</sup> released as part of "a coordinated government campaign against terrorism."<sup>62</sup> The propaganda project included a Ramadan television serial "The Family" (*al-A'ila*) and a broadcasted "confession" from a former terrorist, followed by the opening of the feature film to coincide with the Eid, a fast-breaking holiday at the end of Ramadan. Armbrust describes *Terrorist*, a

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<sup>59</sup> See Appendix, Figure 3.

<sup>60</sup> See Appendix, Figure 4.

<sup>61</sup> Gala, Nadir, dir. *Al-Irhabi*.

<sup>62</sup> Armbrust, "Islamists in Egyptian Cinema," 924.

privately funded movie starring a top Egyptian actor, as “the crown jewel in the campaign,”<sup>63</sup> designed to portray Islamic fundamentalists as “death-obsessed fanatics held to the cause by their fear of the afterlife.”<sup>64</sup> In one scene, the college-age younger daughter of a well-to-do Egyptian family brings home an audio tape of an extremist fundamentalist preaching in a screeching, hysterical voice imitative of popular Islamist preachers like the famous Sheikh Kishk, an Egyptian *khatib* whose haranguing, energetic sermons criticizing public mores, the government, and Israel were distributed by audio tape across the Arab world in the 1970s and 80s and still are widely available today.

The young woman in the film—often seen obliviously wandering the house in spandex aerobic work-out clothes as the terrorist secretly hiding out in her house practically drools in lust—is distressed because one of her colleagues at the American University left school after “converting” to extremism, veiling, and giving her the tape in an attempt to save her too. At first the entire family gathers around the tape player, silently listening as the tension builds and the words on the tape grow more threatening, but when the preacher’s voice breaks at a critical moment, braying like a donkey, the entire family dissolves into laughter and the spell cast by fear and damnation rhetoric is broken. The speaker loses his power to terrify and threaten, and is reduced to a ludicrous anachronism, much like the “useless” sheikhs ridiculed by al-Babali on *Words from the Heart*.

When context is taken into account, however, it becomes clear that important differences exist between the eruption of laughter in *The Terrorist* and al-Babali’s joke in *Words from the Heart*. Coming as it does from the mouth of a “veiled-again” actress, cloaked in black robes, al-Babali’s comments carry very different connotations, and hint at layers of complexity simply glossed over in the propagandistic approach of *The Terrorist*. The film presents Islamists as single-dimensional, manipulative, low-brow social outcasts who dope the ignorant masses into becoming dependent on an Islamic “opiate,” but as demonstrated by the very phenomenon of “repentant artists” that began in the early 1990s, the reality of the movement’s broad influence on Egyptian life and politics is much more complex and socially diverse than the movie’s narrative suggests. A radical and violent strain of Islamism does exist, of course, but by insisting that there is only one form of Islamism and that its agenda is the natural and inevitable antithesis of enlightened modernity and prosperity, existing only outside the confines of decent society, the film fails to account for the existence of a

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 925.

version of Islamism that might appeal to well-off, educated people. It also fails to accept the possibility of an Islamism that competes with the “secular” nationalist state to define modernity in Islamic terms rather than simply rejecting modernity as un-Islamic. As Armbrust argues, “the film left no space for representing the activities of Islamists inside the state’s own institutions. One could not imagine the Islamist radicals of *Terrorist* as schoolteachers, lawyers, or doctors. It was precisely through such professions that the Islamist ideology was growing.”<sup>65</sup>

Actually, one gets the feeling that Khaled is exactly the type of preacher who would have succeeded in convincing the outgoing, fun-loving and independent younger daughter in the film to wear *higab* where the “hellfire and brimstone” sheikh failed. As a thoroughly “Westernized,” wealthy AUC student who works part time as a model, she falls smack into his target market. For his part, Khaled would fit comfortably into the plush lifestyle of the secular-but-spiritual Muslim family portrayed in the film, right down to sharing their nationalist passion for football matches.<sup>66</sup> As Khaled likes to remind people, sport is not un-Islamic. On the contrary, he is such a fervent fan (he used to play on the junior national team as a teenager) that he not only invites football players to guest star on his shows, but also ends his Saturday afternoon mosque sermons early if there is a match scheduled, so he and his audience do not have to miss any game time. “I allow young people to watch the match because we are part of society and should not be alienated from it,” Khaled told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.<sup>67</sup>

It is tempting to try to imagine what would have happened if the girl had brought home an Amr Khaled tape instead. What would have been the family’s reaction? But of course in the dichotomous universe of the film, such a situation simply could not exist. As a movie that pushes the government line by attempting to demonstrate there is no place for Islamism in modern Egyptian society,<sup>68</sup> *The Terrorist* has no way to explain the existence of figure like Khaled, whose image defies any obvious categorization because it straddles the contested symbolic boundary between Islamism and modernism, encouraging people to

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Football plays a prominent role in a critical scene in the film when the incognito terrorist, who is staying with the family, is “converted” to an appreciation for secular nationalism when he shares in the cheering and euphoria that erupts after the Egyptian national football team wins a qualifying World Cup match. He is so moved he even forgets himself enough to hug a Christian neighbor sitting next to him on the couch.

<sup>67</sup> Khaled, “Preaching with a Passion”

<sup>68</sup> Armbrust suggests that while the actors and filmmakers seemed to take up the anti-Islamist cause wholeheartedly, “The coordination of the film’s release with the government public relations campaign against Islamist terrorism begs the question of government involvement,” especially considering that a formerly banned film by the same actor-director team was re-released at the same time: “Hence the appearance of a quid-pro-quo” (Armbrust, “Islamists in Egyptian Cinema,” 927).

reconcile the two in their minds and perceive the boundary as both flexible and debatable. *The Terrorist's* failure to acknowledge Islamism's extensive social and institutional influence in Egypt is indicative of the state's general inability to address the challenges posed by the sheer variety of religious discourses competing in an expanding public sphere. As evident from *The Terrorist's* starring role in the propaganda war against Islamic militancy, the Egyptian government tries to employ the mass media in its own defense against Islamic fundamentalism. However, religious symbols are proving increasingly difficult for the state to monopolize through the usual methods of censorship and cooption. Far from enabling the state to contain the spread of religious discourse in society, the mass media has become the primary vehicle for a new style of *da'wa* with the potential to make its preachers super-celebrities who derive their authority not from state sanction or classical training in the text, but through their abilities to attract and sustain an audience for their particular moral messages.

### **Mediating Modernity**

As Arab regimes across the Middle East scrambled for legitimacy in the post-colonial period, they attempted to use centralized control of television, cinema, print and radio to manipulate nationalist discourse and impose their own definitions of Arabism, citizenship, modernity and Islam on the public consciousness. To this end, the Egyptian state took over radio operations in the 1930s and nationalized print media in the late 1950s. Television and cinema followed soon after, with state ownership of the film industry lasting from 1964 to 1971, though the government maintained censorship rights and control over means of production even after the move to privatization. In Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, leaders looked to the mass media as a political weapon as well as a social and cultural tool, relying on its broad discursive potential to construct and control the symbols and norms associated with identity politics. During Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency, for example, the aggressive Pan-Arab rhetoric of the Voice of Egypt Radio strove to build symbolic capital at home even as it pushed the region toward war with Israel and threatened to unseat Arab monarchs from Jordan to Saudi Arabia.<sup>69</sup> By engaging each other in symbolic competition over the norms of Arabism, Arab leaders hoped to bolster regime legitimacy and increase their power both at home and abroad.

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<sup>69</sup> The prominent role of Egyptian radio in affecting regional discourse on Arabism proves that transnational broadcasting is not a new phenomenon that arrived on the scene with the introduction of the Internet and satellite television. The influence of new media technologies should be approached as an intensification of a preexisting transnational media presence, characterized by a more diffused process of production and consumption, rather than as an unprecedented phenomenon that threatens to destroy the integrity of the nation state or presages the unchecked globalization of mass-produced culture.

But as Michael Barnett recognized, “Symbols could be double edged swords.”<sup>70</sup> Arab leaders, he wrote, inevitably became engaged in a “game of brinksmanship”<sup>71</sup> that ensnared them in divisive regional rivalries:

[T]he more they leaned on Arab nationalism to legitimate their rule, and the more their societies held them accountable to the norms of Arabism, the more vulnerable they were to the encroachments and symbolic sanctions of other Arab leaders. The result was that Arab nationalism with both an aid and a threat to domestic stability, the government’s autonomy, and perhaps even the state’s sovereignty ... By stressing the legitimacy of each Arab state and the differences between them, and by doing so in fairly aggressive ways, Arab leaders created the conditions for dividualation and fragmenta-tion.<sup>72</sup>

Far from delivering on its promises to unite Arab states, fend off Western interference and defeat Israel, Arabism exposed and hardened the differences between individual Arab nationalisms and culminated in deep disillusionment with the embarrassing defeat Arab forces in 1967. In Egypt, the events of 1967 dealt a particularly harsh blow to the country’s position at the head of the Arab world and to the personal prestige of Nasser, who had gambled his credibility on the ill-fated confrontation with Israel.

In the years that followed, Egyptians regained some measure of redemption with the “victory” of 1973, only to face Sadat’s unpopular separate peace with Israel, a move that left Egypt politically isolated and bitterly rebuked as a traitor by the Arab League. Meanwhile the oil-rich Gulf States began asserting their own bids for leadership, painfully underlining Egypt’s decline in regional influence. The combination of these historical events, writes Armbrust, “caused Egypt and the Arab world to reexamine, although not necessarily to abandon, the cultural assumptions through which their modernity was constructed.”<sup>73</sup> Secular Arab nationalism had been portrayed as going hand-in-hand with the image of a confidently modern and modernizing Egypt, but with the failure of Arabism and the rise in the political, cultural and economic influence of the religiously conservative Gulf states, Islamic discourse reasserted itself. The mass media became a participative arena for symbolic and normative negotiation where the state contended with sub-state groups and individuals for the authority to address pressing questions of identity, nationalism, and modernity in religious terms.

At first, the rise of an Islamic trend in politics and society was reinforced and even promoted by Sadat’s strategy of using Egypt’s Islamist groups to counter supporters of Nasserism and the left. Starting in the 1970s, his regime allowed the emergence of a private-sector press, legalized Islamic publications such as

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<sup>70</sup> Barnett, 47.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 50-51.

<sup>73</sup> Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, 7.

the Muslim Brotherhood's *al-Da'wa* magazine, and released Islamist political prisoners who had been detained under Nasser's rule. Gilles Kepel argues that Sadat's decision to show relative benevolence toward religious reformist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the *jama'at islamiyya* (Islamic Associations) was motivated by a desire to "offer Islamist dissidents some outlet other than planning *coups d'etats*"<sup>74</sup> and to bolster his own preferred image as "the believer president" (*al-rai's al-mu'amin*), complete with a conspicuous prayer bruise on his forehead.

Like Nasser, Sadat was dealing in symbolic capital, but in turning from Arabism to focus primarily on Islam, he avoided one set of potential normative pitfalls only to fall into another. He had taken up an Islamic discourse he could not dictate or restrain, and ultimately the Islamists turned against him. By 1977, Sadat's policies of *infitah* and peace with Israel rankled even with the more moderate Islamists, fueling the grievances of a violent, revolutionary fringe as "mutual tolerance soured into antagonism."<sup>75</sup> Sadat's 1981 assassination by an Islamist radical in the Egyptian army provided dramatic proof of just how disastrously Islamic symbols had escaped the regime's control: To his killer, Khaled al-Istambuli, Sadat was the evil *kafir* Pharaoh; not the "believer president."

### **Televised *Da'wa***

The Egyptian government's recourse to official Islam as a source of regime legitimacy was by no means a phenomenon that began with Sadat's presidency, though he attempted to take it to new levels. Despite its "secular" label, the Egyptian state always has sought to dominate Islamic discourse by co-opting and reorganizing Azhar's 'ulama', outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood, imposing a state-wide school curriculum that includes standardized lesson plans and textbooks on Islam, and sponsoring Islamic programming in the mass media. Religious content in the state-controlled audiovisual media has ranged from calls to prayer and Ramadan programming to sermons and talk shows. As Kepel notes, "Official Islam has made abundant use of the mass media in Egypt. Radio and television stations first began broadcasting readings and commentary of the Koran ... Next, the *ulema* took to the airwaves to explain to the people that the latest government measures were in perfect accordance with the prescriptions of the Book."<sup>76</sup> Under Sadat's presidency, Islamic programming on state-owned Egyptian television channels became more

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<sup>74</sup> Kepel, 71.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 173.

pervasive, and religious television shows “acquired such importance that a preacher like Sheikh Sha‘rawi appeared on television even more often than the president himself.”<sup>77</sup>

In what could be considered a precedent for *Words from the Heart*’s question-and-answer format, Gaffney describes programs broadcast in the 1980s featuring “officially sponsored public religious meetings at which representatives of various Islamic orientations would engage in a “dialogue” (*hiwar*).”<sup>78</sup> The speakers would include Azhari scholars as well as preachers from Islamic Society mosques and “sometimes a spokesman for some milder shade of Islamic extremism.”<sup>79</sup> In public meeting halls or on prime-time TV, the speakers would answer live questions from audience members about Islamic teachings, rituals and morals. The press would then report on the discussions. “The purpose behind these officially sponsored dialogues,” Gaffney writes, “was to allow the Azhari *shaykh* and some responsible lay preacher to set out the issues properly for the benefit of those confused or ill-informed Muslims who might have come under the unhealthy influence of fanatics.”<sup>80</sup> Similar logic may have motivated official tolerance of Sheikh Sha‘rawi, who even served as Minister of Waqfs, and Dr. Mustafa Mahmud, a physician and former Marxist-atheist whose “Science and Faith” (*al-‘ilm wa-l-iman*) television show catapulted him into stardom in the 1970s and 80s as a “public moral authority.”<sup>81</sup> Mahmud’s weekly program is a documentary series that places modern technology and scientific concepts within an Islamic context. As moderator and creator of the show, Mahmud “proved capable of swaying Islamic discourse back and forth across the thin border between the edifying and the entertaining.”<sup>82</sup> In the decades since his show first went on the air, he has become hugely well-known and respected as an Islamic intellectual, philanthropist, author of science-fiction novels and columnist for *Al-Ahram*.

Another lay preacher and media darling, “Sheikh of the Stars” Omar Abdel Kafi, often is cited as Khaled’s most immediate predecessor and “spiritual father.”<sup>83</sup> The story behind Kafi’s rise to fame as a preacher for rich women, celebrities and elite youth mirrors Khaled’s experience in uncanny ways, starting in the same sporting club mosque and ending with a similar government ban. But unlike Khaled, who has been

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Gaffney, 266.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 267.

<sup>81</sup> Salvatori, 20.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> El-Amrani and Holtrop, 16.

careful to steer clear of controversial statements, “Kafi was infamous for his outrageous decrees.”<sup>84</sup> These included a pronouncement that Muslims should not shake hands with Christians or acknowledge them with Islamic greetings. He also claimed he would be happy to carry out the death sentence *fatwa* against Salman Rusdie personally, if given the chance. Despite the abundance of controversy surrounding him, or perhaps because of it, Kafi became a huge sensation in the early 1990s, when he played a primary role in the movement to “reform” actresses by convincing them to wear the veil and quit working on the stage and screen.

Described as a “dapper man with a neatly trimmed beard,”<sup>85</sup> Kafi went from giving religious lessons in private homes and clubs of the rich and famous to producing taped sermons and preaching to tens of thousands of Cairenes gathered at a mosque in Dokki. Crowds reportedly were so large on Fridays that they spilled out of the building, blocking traffic like Khaled’s followers in Muhandiseen and Sixth of October City less than a decade later. Kafi’s popularity peaked when his “daily appearance on a television show during Ramadan 1993 (hosted by Kariman Hamza, the only veiled public broadcaster)” confirmed his status as a full-fledged media star.<sup>86</sup> It was at this point that *Rose al-Youssef* — the same left-wing magazine that would later campaign against Khaled in 2001 — attacked Kafi in fourteen issues for “the spell he had cast on the respectable.”<sup>87</sup> The magazine dubbed him “the smiling star of terrorism,” accused him of extremism, and fanned rumors that he was paying women to veil.<sup>88</sup> But even after the government banned Kafi from preaching in mosques and on television in April 1994, his taped sermons continued to circulate among his followers, who would play them to teach each other to convert others. By the late 1990s, however, constant tabloid attacks (alleging everything from sexual scandals to terrorist sympathies) combined with Kafi’s absence from public view to cause his star to dim,<sup>89</sup> just as Khaled’s was beginning to rise. Ironically, Khaled not only got his start speaking at the same Dokki Shooting Club where Kafi used to preach; he also got his biggest break under the patronage of former Egyptian singer Yasmine al-Khayyam, one of Kafi’s most famous converts, and a media celebrity in her own right.

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<sup>84</sup> Abdo, 143.

<sup>85</sup> Abou El-Magd, “Muslim Women Donning Veils,” 20.

<sup>86</sup> Abu-Lughod, 253.

<sup>87</sup> Abdo, 144.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Abdo reports that when she interviewed him in 1997 he was under house arrest, but apparently he was still giving private lessons at that time, since she describes attending one packed with “a few hundred AUC students” in a villa in November 1997. (Abdo, 139 and 152.)

But if Khaled learned from Kafi's successes, he also seemed to have learned from observing the controversial preacher's mistakes. By deliberately avoiding politics or *fatwas*, offering a softened, more moderated Islamic discourse (unlike Kafi, he does not strictly oppose women working outside the home, for example), and taking advantage of new opportunities offered by satellite channels and the Internet, Khaled made himself a more slippery problem for the government. He was not so easily classified as an extremist, as Kafi had been, and removing him from state-owned channels did not curtail his audience's access to him, since most upper-middle class people could follow him on the Web or watch his shows on Saudi and Lebanese satellite channels. The powers that be in the Egyptian government did not seem to know whether to actively promote him, simply tolerate him, or try to fight his growing popularity. Yet the dilemma Khaled's ascendancy presented is not a new one. Armando Salvatori recognized it in the success of Mustafa Mahmud and other "new" Islamic television preachers. He argued that their appeal proves "the cleavage between state-loyal vs. oppositional" Islam is far from clear cut.<sup>90</sup> On the contrary, Islamic discourse in the public sphere exists along a broad spectrum, and the popularity contests that take place in the mass media demonstrate that "the acquisition of credentials of public Islamic authority is subject to increasing differentiation: vis-à-vis the state, public Islam might be in relation of collaboration, complicity, indifference, suspicion, hostility and outward opposition to terrorism (at the level where public Islam eclipses from public visibility)."<sup>91</sup>

One side-effect of allowing such religious "dialogues" and Islamic-themed television shows on state-owned television in the first place has been to validate preachers with non-classical credentials. Like government efforts to control the spread of "unofficial" lay preaching by attempting to absorb, certify and process them through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, state-sponsored Islamic television programming has further eroded the traditional boundaries that separate the '*ulama*' from popular religious figures, activists and intellectuals. According to Gaffney, "To the extent that earlier institutional polarities separated them sharply with regard to training and the nature of their institutions, they have come to share much more of a common ground and a common language."<sup>92</sup> Khaled's rise to prominence illustrates the way in which this blurring of boundaries can lead the state to accommodate the career of a non-traditional religious figure that the government may eventually come to view as a threat. All of Khaled's tapes, for example, boast the tell-

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<sup>90</sup> Salvatori, 20.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Gaffney, 267.

tale stamp of approval legally required on all religious materials produced in Egypt: “Reviewed by Azhar.”<sup>93</sup> Perhaps even more tellingly, the semi-official newspaper *Al-Ahram Al-Arabi* gave away tapes of his sermons for free with weekend editions. Khaled also used to appear on state-owned Egyptian terrestrial channels and private Egyptian satellite channel Dream TV.

By the time of his effective “exile” from Egypt in the winter of 2002, the *da‘iya*’s growing popularity had demonstrated – like the explosive celebrity status of Mustafa Mahmoud, Sheikh Sha’arawi and Omar Abdel Kafi before him – that “the success of one or the other new Islamic spokesmen is certainly dependent on an increasing degree of capacity to match needs and orientations of a composite public. This makes the state’s task of controlling public Islam even more difficult.”<sup>94</sup> In Khaled’s case (like Kafi’s), the government’s response was to attempt to shut him down. But *Al-Ahram* columnist Fahmy Howeidy pointed out that in forcing Khaled from the country, the government acted as though “they were not aware of the communications revolution in the world. It is not easy to ban someone from speaking or writing these days. And even if you try to ban him, it’s difficult to give the people any alternative.”<sup>95</sup> The unintended result, he speculated, would be to make Khaled even more popular.

As Howeidy’s comments suggest, the effectiveness of the government’s media monopoly has eroded over time. The invention of new media technologies that are not only transnational, but also more symmetrical in their production and consumption, facilitate a more pluralist and participatory discursive experience. The irony is that the government’s use of the media to propagate its own version of Islam has inadvertently created mass markets for cultural goods in which the state’s own offerings are not guaranteed to be the most attractive products. “Rather than benefiting from its patronage of the ‘ulama,” Starrett explains, “the state has suffered from the public realization that there are, empirically, a number of alternatives available on the market, and that the state version hardly looks like the most disinterested ... Claiming their own return to sacred sources, lay religious intellectuals combat the subsidized ‘ulama by capitalizing on their access to market-oriented organizations and technologies and working to create a new and enlivened tradition of religious literature.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Al-Azhar University’s Islamic Research Institute has the right to review and censor all publications dealing with religious subjects and also has been known to exercise that power over nonreligious books and artistic productions.

<sup>94</sup> Salvatori, 20.

<sup>95</sup> Howeidy, interview.

<sup>96</sup> Starrett, 188.

## New Media and Discourse in the Public Sphere

Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson argue that a new public sphere “situated outside formal state control”<sup>97</sup> is emerging in Muslim communities across the globe. The growing proliferation of mass media, they say, vastly increases both the variety of messages and the scale of audiences, making it increasingly difficult for any single interpretation of Islam to hold sway over others, as multiple voices compete for authority at crucial “intersections of religious, political and social life.”<sup>98</sup> Eickelman and Anderson propose that this contested space creates a forum where Muslims engage each other in “identity politics” by using the symbolic language of Islam to offer alternatives to official or conventional discourses, thereby contributing to the breakdown of religious and political authority.<sup>99</sup> New media forms – ranging from “small” media such as audiotapes and videotapes, fax machines, copiers and telephones, to “large” but hard-to-censor media technologies like the Internet and satellite television – add to this fragmenting affect because their production and distribution traverse national borders and prove difficult to control through state ownership and censorship laws. The spread of new mass media in the Middle East has a pluralizing effect on normative discourses in society because it “further erodes the boundaries between kinds or sources of authoritative speech.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, there is a broadening and opening of public discussion as more voices in more forums have the opportunity to debate and interpret Islam and current events:

The asymmetries of the earlier mass media revolution are being reversed by new media in new hands. This combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created and feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.<sup>101</sup>

Eickelman and Anderson draw the conclusion that this emerging public sphere will likely result in greater civic pluralism, a stronger civil society and a challenge to authoritarian domination in Muslim-majority countries, but such far-reaching optimism may be overestimating the democratizing potential of mass media technologies. Nevertheless, their point about the mass media’s potential to open public space, diversify Islamic discourse, and fragment traditional authority structures still stands. In fact, it is instrumental in

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<sup>97</sup> Eickelman and Anderson, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Eickelman, 38.

<sup>101</sup> Eickelman and Anderson, 2.

explaining the persistence of anti-establishment sheikhs like Kishk as well as “new age” lay preachers like Khaled, Kafi, and others, all of whom have taken advantage of “new” media resources to evade government prohibitions and establish their own authoritative images and messages.

## CHAPTER FOUR: The Nature of Amr Khaled's Appeal

While visiting Cairo in December 2002, I was channel surfing at a friend's apartment when I stumbled upon one of Amr Khaled's recent productions, a television show titled *Beloved Companions* (*Wa nalqa al-'ahiba*).<sup>102</sup> The program was airing daily on the Saudi-owned *Iqraa* satellite channel several weeks after Khaled had left Egypt. Subtitled in English, *Beloved Companions* features Khaled telling stories from the life of the Prophet and comparing the lives and struggles of Muhammad and his companions with the lives and struggles of Muslims in modern society. In this particular episode, Khaled focuses on the story of Ali, the prophet's nephew and son-in-law. This is a much bigger studio than the one used for *Words from the Heart*, and here the camera shows no unveiled women. Gender segregation is more pronounced, with men and women seated on opposite sides of the aisle in what appears to be a large auditorium.<sup>103</sup> Khaled sits at a desk in the front, and audience members who want to speak or ask questions approach a standing microphone stationed in the aisle. By the time I tuned in, the show was half over, and Khaled was reminding his audience of Ali's remarkable courage and dedication, despite the fact that he "was only 27 or 28 years old then." Khaled called on young people today to look to Ali as inspiration to "serve Islam [and] represent your religion well." Success pleases God, he argued, and is a way of serving God. Learning computer skills or foreign languages can help others, for example, while dressing well and having good manners is a sign of respect for God and others. "Do something for Islam," Khaled encouraged his audience. "If you can't fight the enemies of Islam, at least lead people to the faith."

He tells a story about Ali to demonstrate that there are more ways than one to serve God: When Ali was left behind in Medina at a time the Prophet and others went to fight *jihad*, Ali was upset because he was stuck with the women and children. He wanted to fight too, but Muhammad told him, "Will you not be pleased that you are to me like Aaron was to Moses?" Khaled again stresses Ali's youth ("He was 32 years old then.") and wonders aloud whether young Muslims in the Twenty First century will promote Islam like Ali. Will they adhere to their religion "without feeling that it is backwardness?" he asks. Pointing to Muhammad's comparison of his relationship with Ali to Moses' reliance on his brother Aaron, Khaled maintains that there is much evidence of mutual love and affection between Ali and the Prophet, and for that

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<sup>102</sup> Khaled, *Wa nalqa al-'ahiba*.

<sup>103</sup> It is difficult to determine whether the stricter delineation of the sexes in *Beloved Companions* reflects Khaled's preferences, or has more to do with the fact that the show is produced for a Saudi-owned channel.

matter, among all the “companions” who made up the earliest Muslim community. “They were inseparable because of their love and their faith too,” Khaled says, offering examples of their kindness, bravery, wit, and “noble sense of humor.” Contrary to what some people may think about the dour seriousness of religion, laughter is not always inappropriate or sinful, Khaled argues, giving an example of a time when Muhammad played a practical joke on Ali. “Look at your laughter just now,” he tells the audience, laughing with them. “That was good. You’re involved.”

### **‘Marketing’ Islam**

Like *Words from the Heart*, these scenes from *Beloved Companions* showcase Amr Khaled’s form of *da‘wa* as an invitation to feel actively “involved” in a shared religious experience. His image is carefully crafted as moderate, prosperous, “modern” and fashionable, starting with his casual but trendy personal appearance and soft but coaxing voice, which occasionally reaches a sort of urgent, excited squeak in moments of passion, but never rises to a yell or any angry-sounding pitch. The friendly warmth in his voice and his usual smiling countenance communicates a charismatic intimacy and emotional intensity that corresponds closely with his usual choice of themes: love, forgiveness, morality, and community responsibility. By weaving stories from the Qur‘an into his sermons about religious belief and practice in contemporary society, and by telling these stories in such a way that brings them alive in the present, Khaled encourages his audience to identify with the characters as accessible and loving human individuals. He also persuades his listeners to look to these legendary religious figures as relevant role models, and to see their superior religious society as a blueprint for the reform of troubled modern communities, a task he stresses as a critical spiritual and practical duty of Muslim youth. “I love people passionately and want what’s best for them,” Khaled told *Al-Ahram Weekly* in an interview that appeared shortly after he was banned from preaching in Egypt. “A good preacher should be more compassionate than disciplinary. My main concern is to make young people love religion instead of fearing it.”<sup>104</sup>

Hoping to help his followers comprehend their faith and apply it to their everyday lives, Khaled summarizes each lesson clearly and concisely by numbering and listing the topics covered at the end of each segment; in effect, offering people a step-by-step program to a better Muslim life. It is “the ABCs of Islamic

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<sup>104</sup> Khaled, “Preaching with a Passion.”

literature,” as Howeidy observed.<sup>105</sup> Such a dismissive evaluation of the content behind Khaled’s preaching style may not demonstrate a fair estimation of his skills, knowledge or the sophistication of his discourse, and further research is needed to take a closer look at his references, sources and use of texts. Nevertheless, labeling Khaled’s message as a simplistic rendering of Islam’s scientific complexities is a widely shared practice, and one which Khaled himself perpetuates through his humble insistence that he is just an average Muslim performing *da‘wa*, not a scholar practicing *fiqh*. This tendency to present his sermons and lessons as organized, easy-to-digest packages endears Khaled with those who like the way he makes religion easy to understand, but is criticized and even ridiculed by some who feel he is overly simplistic and too touchy-feely. Several Egyptians, both young and old, made it clear to me in the course of my research that Khaled might be a good Muslim and an adequate teacher for those just starting to show an interest in Islam, but listening to Khaled was only a first step in the right direction. If one really wanted to learn about the full richness and complexity of Islam as a rational and intellectual faith, one must talk to a “real” sheikh or Muslim scholar, they said, and I was pointed to nearby mosques or Azhar University. Playing off this question of whether Khaled is a “real” sheikh, the Egyptian press likes to refer to him as the “five-star” or “handsome” sheikh. Although these descriptions sometimes are meant derisively, there is no question that his physical image, from his clothes and accessories to his moustache and hair cut, conveys to many young fans a sense that he is “one of us,” a friend and peer who looks like them, talks like them, dresses like them, and can appreciate where they come from and the temptations they face better than more orthodox sheikhs. By “speaking their language,” he is able to communicate his message that Islam is not only relevant, but essential to modern life.

Howeidy has criticized the government’s decision to ban Khaled in his column. He believes Khaled’s *da‘wa* is a product of a time in which Egyptians are searching for religious meaning in their lives, but many have lost trust for the Azhari scholars because the institution’s close ties to the regime have compromised its authority. In the absence of any credible legal religious organizations, he told me, people turn to fundamentalist groups or preachers like Sheikh Sha‘rawi, who appealed mostly to the lower and middle classes. But “there was a vacancy in the upper classes. They could not find anyone who could use the language that would carry the message to them.” Khaled is responding to a need for the upper classes and educated elite to feel closer to their religion without fearing it, Howeidy explained. “Others used to frighten the people,” he said. “Those people don’t use words like love. This very kind language [of Amr Khaled’s]

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<sup>105</sup> Howeidy, interview.

succeeded in attracting people.” Howeidly insisted to me that Khaled is harmless because “he does not belong to any organization” and only wants to provide moral guidance for Egypt’s misguided youth. “This shows you how weak the government is, because such a man cannot frighten any regime,” he said. “He is a very peaceful man.”

But just one building over from the downtown newspaper offices where Howeidly writes his columns, Dr. Hala Mustafa is convinced Khaled is not at all the benign figure Howeidly depicts. Mustafa is a professional, unveiled woman who was wearing a navy blue power suit when I met with her at her spacious office. As head of the political department at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies and editor of the Center’s “Democracy” journal, she was wary of Khaled’s popularity, and remarked that he presented himself “like a movie star” in order to appeal to women and “the younger generation.”<sup>106</sup> She was convinced that he must have ulterior motives and believed Khaled was successfully duping people into thinking the socially conservative message he propagated actually was progressive. “Islamists are accused of being anti-modern, so they think just with the look they can be modern,” she said, adding that in her opinion, Khaled’s “deceptive” appearance is what makes him so dangerous.

This question of whether Khaled is who he appears to be (a moderate agent of Islamic modernization) divides the Egyptian press as well as Egyptians themselves, and the public debate reflected in the pages of magazines and newspapers becomes, at some level, a dispute over whether Islamization and globalization can go hand-in-hand. A *Rose al-Youssef* article printed in 2001 attacks Khaled for his “modern” image and ability to “market” religion as a user-friendly product—qualities many of Khaled’s supporters commend. In an unmistakably sarcastic tone, *Rose al-Youssef* takes Khaled to task for his image-conscious “globalized” *da‘wa*:

But who is Amr Khaled? “Sheikh Amr” as those who love him and his followers call him, is the successor of Sheikh Omar Abdel Kafi and he is a smart preacher, without a doubt; a graduate of the American University department of marketing, as some say, or a graduate of the College of Commerce, as others say. Handsome, he wears a silver watch and carries a mobile and wears the most modern fashions. He is the latest edition of the sheikhs in Egypt, but he is a modern edition, suitable for the age of multi-national companies and consumption and globalization. Indeed, he is a marketing representative for spiritual guidance, and like any marketing representative, he targets an audience able to buy and those who need his goods.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Mustafa, interview.

<sup>107</sup> Al-Lutfi, 44.

The emphasis on aesthetics is worth noting, especially since so many of the *da'iyā's* admirers cite his appearance as one of his major attractions.

### **The Politics of Fashion: Interpreting Symbolic Displays of Public Piety**

Several Egyptian friends in their early 20s told me they were impressed with Khaled because did not have a prayer bruise and said you did not have to grow a beard to be a good Muslim.<sup>108</sup> This was a relief for them in part because of the association of beards with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Jama'at Islamiyya* groups and terrorists. As Gaffney observed in Minya, the way a man groomed himself served as a marker “especially within the student subculture, [where] not only did the beard signify positive approval and even advocacy of the line forwarded by the vocal leadership of the Islamic Society, but the absence of a beard could be construed not as indifference, but as active opposition unless a person made his views quite clear by some other form of outward expression.”<sup>109</sup>

Khaled's “costume” differs drastically from either loose-fitting white clothes adapted by Islamic Society members or the “Azhari uniform, a sort of long dark coat over a distinctive white caftan” complete with red tarboush and turban.<sup>110</sup> His is the costume of the affluent senior account executive turned talk show host, but it is not without its own symbolism. The choice of a moustache, for example, carries strong nationalist undertones, since the beard of the fundamentalists usually stands “in contrast not only to smooth cheeks, but to the more familiar male accoutrement of the area, which was the moustache in the style of ‘Abd al-Nasir.”<sup>111</sup> It is not hard to believe Khaled deliberately chose to wear a moustache because of its value as a signifier of national pride and its historical association with the ruling elite. He often lists patriotism (for both one's home country and the Muslim nation) as one of the values he hopes to instill through his *da'wa*.<sup>112</sup> But despite his conspicuous lack of a beard and prayer bruise, Khaled's “costume” offers its own symbolic version of Islamic piety. As Abeer once pointed out to me, “You see, he is wearing his watch on his left hand. This means he is a very religious person.” The significance of this detail argues that there are many ways of displaying public religiosity, some more subtle than others.

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<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, however, according to Khaled, you do have to wear a *higab* to be a good Muslim woman. The relationship of Khaled's discourse to women's lives will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

<sup>109</sup> Gaffney, 93.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>112</sup> Khaled, “People's Preacher,” 47.

One young man named Rashid explained that the way Amr Khaled dressed, spoke and shaved demonstrated that being more religious does not have to mean being “backwards.” This seemed like a powerful revelation to Rashid,<sup>113</sup> a former AUC student who spent a lot of free time hanging out in mixed-gender groups of both Egyptians and Westerners. Much of Rashid’s social behavior skirted the boundaries of the socially and culturally acceptable. He liked to attend illegal raves and experimented with drugs, listened to heavy metal music and wore his hair longer than most other Egyptian men his age, though still short by Western standards. He had had more than one brush with the authorities, but was more or less casually rebellious and often complained of the restrictions on self-expression in Egyptian society. Still, he admitted he admired Khaled.

The first time he had attended one of the preacher’s lectures, he had gone with the irreverent hope of seeing a girl he liked who he had heard would be there, but since then he had gone to hear Khaled speak a few more times. He said listening to Khaled had not made him significantly change the way he lived his life, as some of his friends had, but it did start to change the way he thought about religion. Khaled offered a version of Islamic piety that seemed more flexible and adaptable to the conflicting demands of contemporary Egyptian life, with its “‘twin faces of modernity,’ secular urban life and the Islamic trend.”<sup>114</sup> For people like Rashid and Abeer, Khaled introduces the possibility of reconciling the two. Bayat argues that the new trend of lay preaching, known in Egypt as the “Amr Khaled Phenomenon,” signals a “new genre of *da‘wa*” that resonates with an Egyptian youth culture that is becoming increasingly affected by globalization:

It is resonant of their aversion to patronizing pedagogy and moral authority. This globalizing youth display many seemingly contradictory orientations. They are religious believers, but distrust political Islam if they know anything about it; they swing back and forth from Amr Diab to Amr Khalid, from partying to prayers, and yet they feel the burden of the strong social control of their elders, teachers and neighbours. As the Egyptian youth are socialized in a cultural condition and educational tradition which often restrain individuality and novelty, they are compelled to assert them in a ‘social way’, through fashion.<sup>115</sup>

As Sohair al-Babali proclaims on *Words from the Heart*, this is “Islam *chic*.” The phrase seems to reinforce Bayat’s interpretation by implying that Khaled’s version of Islamic *da‘wa* is custom-made to fit the needs and tastes of cosmopolitan Muslims. Interestingly, the culturally hybrid “youth culture” Bayat describes in his analysis even has a name in Egyptian colloquial slang: “*Al-Rawshana*.”

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<sup>113</sup> The name has been changed to protect the source’s privacy.

<sup>114</sup> Starrett, 96.

<sup>115</sup> Bayat, 23.

### ‘The Sheikh of the *Rawshana*’

“*Al-Rawshana*” and “*rewish*” are terms often used to describe the social group from which the bulk of Khaled’s followers are drawn. Since both words are slang, definitions are difficult to pin down, but French researcher Patrick Haenni has translated “*rewish*” in French as “*branché*,” roughly meaning “plugged-in” or “connected,” while Bayat translates it into English as “hip-ness.” The adjective “*rewish*” can be used simply to mean something is “cool,” but when used to describe “*al-Rawshana*,” it takes on more complex connotations: “*Rawsha*” is roughly translated as “distractedness” or “mental confusion,” and in context, *al-Rawshana* seems to refer to Egyptian youths like Rashid who are “Westernized” in their behavior, but torn between the desire to rebel against tradition and the pull of their own cultural and religious heritage. *Rose al-Youssef* describes Khaled derogatorily as the “Sheikh of the *Rawshana*,” and *Al-Hayat* defines *al-Rawshana* as a fashionable lifestyle characterized by an identity crisis that resonates among the Egypt’s lost generation of “gilded youth”:

But because man cannot live without a certain belonging, those who have no identity found in “*Al-Rawshana*” a way to express themselves. “*Al-Rawshana*” is an expression that denotes a way of life that tends to differ with everything – even the language used – that tends to rebel against the prevailing traditions, and that tends to invent a pattern of life that differs from these traditions but does not clash with them.<sup>116</sup>

The article goes on to suggest that Egyptian youths are now divided in two groups: the religious ones and the *rewish* ones. The author, Wahid Abdel-Mageed, contends that *al-Rawshana* are not just found in the upper classes, but the middle classes as well. They can be distinguished by “their way of dressing, talking and behaving,” he says, arguing that Khaled and other preachers like him are the only authority figures who are able to reach this group and resolve the split-personality conflict plaguing a generation of Egyptians growing up under the influence of globalization:

This kind of preacher is the only bridge now in Egypt between the religious youths and the “*rewish*” ones. In the mosque where he preaches, young men and women from the two groups will be found. And he who likes to know how effective this preacher is will find out that many “*rewish*” youths are on their way to becoming religious.<sup>117</sup>

Such observations appear to reinforce an interpretation of the “Amr Khaled Phenomenon” as an expression of fashionable “Islam *chic*.” One 24-year-old Egyptian television reporter named Selim<sup>118</sup> confirmed this perception when he described the popularity of Khaled among his own group of friends as the latest fad for a

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<sup>116</sup> Abdel-Mageed, 17.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> The name has been changed to protect the source’s privacy.

frustrated and largely directionless generation whose mantra has been, “Okay, so now what?” (*Tayyib, wi bad‘ayn?*). In his opinion, people of his age and background became obsessed with Khaled when other self-destructive fads—such as heavy metal music, binge drinking, extra-marital sex, even experimenting with homosexuality—proved to be hollow diversions that left people feeling spiritually and morally bereft. As it turned out, however, Selim’s own father was a bigger Khaled fan than Selim himself, defying the logic that Selim’s age and lifestyle made him a member of the *Rawshana* and therefore likely to find Khaled’s discourse more appealing than his father would.

Such realities show that despite the powerful resonance of the *Rawshana* label, it has the potential to be misleading. In the few months I spent in Egypt, I found ample evidence of Khaled’s appeal among individuals who represented a much broader social circle and age group than the Egyptian press and academia characteristically associate with *al-Rawshana*. From Abeer’s middle-aged husband who wept after watching *Words from the Heart*, to a politically active young woman in full *niqab* who studied at al-Azhar and taught lessons based on Khaled’s lectures in her free time, Khaled’s fans do not fit into a neat analytical category. Certainly, many of Khaled’s devoted followers (and those who appeared most often on his shows) are women and young people who could be categorized as *al-Rawshana*, but I ran across an avid supporter of Khaled working long, low-wage hours at the AUC copy shop, Xeroxing textbooks and handouts for the *Rawshana* AUC students. Such encounters made me wary of generalizations about Khaled’s audience and suggested that to dismiss him as a mere “fashion” trend among the *Rawshana* is a misleading oversimplification.

## The Medium and the Message

As demonstrated by the wide popularity of everything from colorful pamphlets that explain the proper way to wear *hijab*, to call-in television shows featuring Islamic authorities like Sheikh Qaradawi, to “dial-a-fatwa” telephone services that charge by the minute<sup>119</sup> and live “Ask a Scholar” *fatwa* sessions conducted on the Internet,<sup>120</sup> there is a large and inventive market for materials catering to Muslims who seek religious guidance on a range of moral and practical quandaries. In the process, they look not only to their neighborhood *sheikh* or *khatib*, but to all forms of mass mediated religious authorities, whether personified

<sup>119</sup> Khaled al-Guindi, a rival “new-style” sheikh, founded an “Islamic Hotline” (*hatif al-Islami*) that enabled people to call a number to receive fatwas or advice from the al-Guindi and other sheikhs trained at al-Azhar. Al-Guindi claims his hotline receives thousands of calls a day.

<sup>120</sup> See [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net) for one of the most popular examples of live *fatwa* chat sessions.

by cheap tapes or expensive DVDs, printed tracts or broadcast television, telephone lines or the World Wide Web. Most likely, all of the above come into play in some combination, as people mix and match to meet their own individual preferences, needs and means. Once placed in this context, Khaled emerges as only one incarnation of a broader social movement in which the medium and the message work together to respond to the persistent demand for Islamic answers to modern questions of identity, politics and ritual. It would be a cliché to say the medium *is* the message, but analyzing how the medium both reflects and informs the message is essential to understanding the influence of a particular “mediated” discourse.

In Khaled’s case, his accessible image and language helps his audience identify with him and contributes to a powerful ethos of positive reinforcement, mutual respect and emotional catharsis. What Khaled offers in *Words from the Heart* and *Beloved Companions* does not resemble a formal *khutba* sermon, or even a traditional *dars*, so much as a multi-sided discussion, a theme echoed in salon-style private lessons held at people’s homes and in the weekly live “dialogues” (*hiwar*) held with the *da’iya* on his website. As reported in the *Cairo Times*, “When they attend a Khaled event, young people are not mere recipients of his religious knowledge and wisdom. Khaled *interacts* with his audience, working hard to win them over and capture their hearts.”<sup>121</sup>

By encouraging his audience to share their feelings, personal stories, spiritual struggles and questions about faith, moral behavior and religious practice, Khaled runs the *Words from the Heart* program as though it were a group therapy session. People have to trust each other and open up in order to experience the program’s full effect, which often culminates in a public display of emotion as Khaled leads the audience in a concluding “prayer” as the show draws to a close. In the episode with Sohair al-Babali, for example, the program ends with much of the audience covering their faces and rocking gently. Some, including al-Babali, are clearly in tears as they chant, “There is no God but God” (*la allah illa allah*).<sup>122</sup> Bayat observes that Khaled and other new-style preachers like him “function as ‘public therapists’ in a troubled society which shows little appreciation for professional psychotherapy. Emotional intensity, peace, and release (crying) often symbolize Khaled’s sermons.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> El-Amrani and Holtrop, 16.

<sup>122</sup> This scene evokes comparisons with aspects of the Sufi *dhikr* ritual, which uses the repetition of the *tawhid* phrase and the names of Allah to evoke an intense emotional and often transcendental experience of God.

<sup>123</sup> Bayat, 23.

One of Khaled's favorite things to say is "See the love?" (*Shuf al-hubb*). In making such a direct appeal to his audience to visualize and internalize his *da'wa*, Khaled's show encourages people to actively experience religion by sharing stories from the time of the Prophet as well as accounts of God's merciful intervention in people's lives today, starting with the preacher's own. "He's a born-again Muslim himself, so he knows both sides," explained Dr. Emad Shahin, a political science professor at AUC. Shahin has noticed Khaled's discourse affecting the way students in his classes act and dress. "He's not someone estranged from the youth."<sup>124</sup>

### **Testimonials: The Argument of a Changed Life**

Raised in a respectable but not particularly religious family, Khaled "returned" to Islam during Ramadan 1981, when he had a "sudden passion" during his first year of secondary school that led him to start praying regularly, read books on Islam, and reportedly even memorize the Qu'ran.<sup>125</sup> Khaled described his religious awakening in a 2002 interview with *he magazine*, an Egyptian men's periodical designed for the "executive businessman":

That year, Ramadan was in summer and it was so hot so I started going to bed after the TV programs ended. I often thought of my girlfriend, that I was placing our relationship above my religion. I prayed and woke up the next day feeling closer to God. I kept reading the Qur'an for the next four months, getting closer to God and feeling more complete. I admonished my friends at the club not to curse and kept up my prayers in the mosque. I realized how happy I was, much more than my friends who were not praying, or were sporadic in their religious duties.<sup>126</sup>

Indeed, Khaled evokes the theme of "sudden" spiritual transformation regularly on *Words from the Heart*. In all of the episodes I watched, fear of death was a constant subject, as was the miraculous power of prayer, which could save lives, restore souls, and provide money, jobs and spouses to the faithful. The acts of going on pilgrimage and putting on the veil are portrayed as symbolic turning points that establish the person undertaking them as a true Muslim and a member of the community of believers.

Actively sharing this process of "conversion" or "reform" through conversation with others is crucial, and *Words from the Heart* is structured around these personal exchanges, which take the form of testimonies: Khaled will give a short introductory speech introducing the topic of the day, usually a religious moral or concept, and then ask the audience to share their opinions and experiences. Next, the guest star is

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<sup>124</sup> Shahin, interview.

<sup>125</sup> Khaled, "Preaching with a Passion."

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, "People's Preacher".

introduced and interviewed by Khaled about his or her own relationship with religion. After taking questions from the audience for the guest, Khaled then transitions into a pre-taped video of a young man or woman who describes in detail how he or she experienced some life-changing event that caused him or her to turn to religion. These vivid and detailed testimonials take place toward the end of each episode and show the young speakers talking frankly about the threat of death and hell hovering over their lives. In responding to them and encouraging reactions from the audience, Khaled is able to address the volatile of issues of sin and damnation indirectly.

In one testimonial, for example, a young Egyptian woman working in England describes how she found faith and started wearing *higab* after her fiancée was killed in an accident during Ramadan.<sup>127</sup> In another, a 25-year-old senior account executive who used to have “many girlfriends,” drink alcohol, and work as a model, relates how watching a movie about the torments of hell made him feel he was going mad. After a sleepless night, he woke at dawn, picked up a Qu‘ran and began to pray. When he tried to go to the mosque soon afterwards, he started hallucinating that he was being followed by a tall man, a short man, and a pack of nightmarish dogs. They only left him alone when he repeated a verse of the Qu‘ran. He found out later that the day he saw the movie was the day his mother prayed he would become a good Muslim. “This changed all my life straight away (*‘ala tool*),” he says.<sup>128</sup>

One particularly dramatic testimonial stretched the bounds of believability to such an extent that it actually had Abeer and I in helpless fits of incredulous laughter the first time we watched it, though Abeer ultimately seemed reluctant to think it could be anything but a true story. In the video, a young man with a prayer bruise named Sharif describes how five of his sinful friends died, one after another, in horrible freak accidents that ranged from a drug overdose to walking drunk into an elevator shaft. Each time a friend died, Sharif says, he realized he might be next unless he turned to God. Still, he hesitated because he had a very dim view of religious people, whom he considered joyless and archaic. Even after he nearly died himself in a car accident, he still resisted God. Luckily, when new friends took him to lessons at a mosque, he realized he was wrong about religious people. The sheikh was smiling, and his new friends were religious, but they were also rich and played football, went to the cinema, and watched TV. Now Sharif is a rich and successful manager of a “multi-national company” and says he is not afraid to die because if he is happy to see God,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, *Kalam min al-‘alb: hubb Allah al-‘abd.*

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, *Kalam min al-‘alb: hiya’.*

God will be happy to see him. When Khaled asks him how he feels when he sees youth doing bad things like he used to do, Sharif replies, “I feel pity for them because they don’t understand.”<sup>129</sup>

After the testimonial finishes, Sharif takes questions from the audience. One young woman says that listening to Sharif makes her want to call her brother because she hopes he could learn from Sharif’s example and change his sinful ways before any of his own friends have to die. The woman’s readiness to see parallels between Sharif’s experience and her brother’s indicates that the testimonial is an associative “conversion” experience. The effect of sharing the story is to use the words of the “saved” speaker to inform the thoughts of the “unsaved” listener. It is a process remarkably similar to born-again Christian “Witnessing,” which Susan F. Harding describes as “dialogic encounter between person and God, or between a lost listener and a saved speaker.”<sup>130</sup> Intended to provoke a spiritual crisis by calling attention to the listener’s lost or spiritually bereft state, “the witness’s words, though they appear to be about the witness and about other characters on the narrative surface, are on a deep level about the listener: You, too, are a character in these stories; these stories are about you.”<sup>131</sup> Khaled’s adoption of such a quintessential tactic of Christian fundamentalist conversion may seem incongruous, but it is consistent with his entire approach to preaching, which strives to draw listeners into a shared narrative and a conversational relationship with fellow Muslims and with God. For Khaled and his followers, like the born-again Christians in Harding’s study, disbelief is “an unconscious refusal to participate in a particular narrative mode of knowing reality. Likewise belief also involves an unconscious willingness to join a narrative tradition, a way of knowing and being through storytelling, through giving and taking stories.”<sup>132</sup>

Harding encourages us to “conceive of conversion as a process of acquiring a specific religious language.”<sup>133</sup> The discursive mechanisms involved in such a process become apparent when Khaled asks Sharif what he would like to say to people who are leading the same sinful lifestyle he used to lead, and Sharif answers that he pities them because “they don’t understand.” Here the preacher and his “witness” are speaking to their listeners from within a narrative tradition that necessarily excludes the disbeliever, but simultaneously invites him or her, through an appeal to unconscious “inner speech,” to become an active

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<sup>129</sup> Khaled, *Kalam min al-'alb: da'a'*.

<sup>130</sup> Harding, 172.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 169.

participant in their enlightened conversation. The sinner can only “understand” once he too speaks the language of God, the language of the converted.

Indeed, Khaled’s distinctive style of Islamic *da‘wa* has evoked more than one comparison with born-again Christian evangelists, who encourage a form of active piety designed to “emphasize feeling as a sign of conversion.”<sup>134</sup> According to Bruce A. Rosenberg’s analysis of the rhetorical techniques used by the American folk preacher, a successful evangelistic sermon is “the effective one, the sermon that moves and that best allows the congregation to partake of the Spirit of the Lord with the preacher.”<sup>135</sup> Such a “lived” sermon depends on call-and-response interaction between the preacher and congregation and uses repetition, chanting, frequent digressions, and chains of association to build up to an emotional climax, during which the worshippers feel the Holy Spirit’s presence.<sup>136</sup> At revivalist meetings and on televangelist programs, the goal is the same, and the viewer in the audience or at home is expected to participate in the shared religious event: the miracle moment when God becomes manifest in the congregation.

Comparing this form of evangelistic preaching to the ritualized *khutba* in a Jordanian village, Antoun writes, “All of this stands in distinct contrast to the Muslim preacher in Kufr al-Ma who dresses in the traditional red fez, white turban, and long, dark, flowing gown characteristic of religious scholars, follows a set pulpit style, delivers his sermon in classical Arabic, and generally aims at inculcation of ethics.”<sup>137</sup> Instead of relying on the American evangelist’s “oral formulaic” to inspire the congregation’s active participation, the Kufr al-Ma preacher uses the standardized “prayer formulae” of the Islamic *khutba* to hand down an authoritative message, the enunciation of which “often makes the climax of the sermon coincidental to asking for particular works of righteousness.”<sup>138</sup>

Although Khaled’s form of preaching also “stands in contrast” with the formulaic delivery of the *khutba* in a traditional village setting, his approach is neither a literal Islamic translation of American Baptist fundamentalism, nor an unprecedented invention that operates completely outside and against the established Islamic preaching tradition. It does, however, synthesize elements of evangelism’s participative spiritual experience that has similarities to aspects of popular Sufism’s transcendental spiritual experience of God. In

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<sup>134</sup> Rosenberg, 15.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>136</sup> Although the idea of becoming “born again” carries special connotations in the Christian context because of the miracle birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, the experience of spiritual rebirth figures as an essential aspect of religious conversion in other proselytizing religions as well, including Islam.

<sup>137</sup> Antoun, 89.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

a practice evocative of the ecstatic feedback methods used in the American folk preacher's call-and-response sermons, the central Sufi ritual of *dhikr* (remembrance of God)<sup>139</sup> invokes the names of Allah as a means of "arousing collective religious enthusiasm."<sup>140</sup> The practice is similar to forms of Buddhist meditation and Jewish mysticism that use the repetition of key words in cyclical rhythm to excite a state of rapture, even ecstasy, in participants.<sup>141</sup> With *dhikr*, the goal is to achieve spiritual advancement by taking "the path that leads by total capture of the thought, heart, and most inward part to separation from the world and complete concentration on the divine. The process is assisted by specific techniques of breathing intended to facilitate the absolute involvement of the worshipper in the *dhikr* by the regulation of his physical nature."<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, the chanting prayer at the close of *Words from the Heart* that leaves Sohair al-Babali and audience members in tears, imitates Michael Gilsenan's description of the "first act of the *dhikr*" as "the quiet rhythmical recitation (seated) of the phrase *la ilaha illa Allah*, the witness that is the fundamental absolute of the Islam, of the oneness (*tawhid*) and unity of God."<sup>143</sup> Although Khaled and his audience do not exhibit the extremes of religious ecstasy that can occur in people who go into trances or fits in the physical throws of *dhikr* (or born-again Christians who speak in tongues or faint when possessed by the Holy Spirit), his low-key version still operates using the same principles of encouraging an active, participative and spiritual experience of salvation. Rather than the congregation passively listening to the performance as in a traditional sermon or *khutba* context, *dhikr* "participants are also the performers, re-creating the score and sharing the same symbolic actions, expressions, movements, words, space and stream of time. Each individual is linked through the clasped hands with every other so that each experiences what might be termed a corporate collective subjectivity."<sup>144</sup> The emphasis Khaled's *da'wa* places on heart-to-heart communication and emotional exchange between believers seems designed to evoke a similar sense of a coherent consciousness within the group.<sup>145</sup> As Gilsenan reports in *Recognizing Islam*, a trend of elite Sufism

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<sup>139</sup> Ecstatic feedback also is a function of *tarab*, a term which "describes a style of music and musical performance in which such emotional states are evoked and aroused in performers and audiences." It is a term in the context of Arab aesthetics to describe the dynamic experience of aesthetic rapture, whether in reference to art, music or historically, the recitation of the Qu'ran and poetry. (Shannon, 74.)

<sup>140</sup> Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, 157.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 157-158.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 156-157.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>144</sup> Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, 186.

<sup>145</sup> Further research would benefit from a closer study of the ways in which Khaled's discourse uses themes from popular Sufism, including beliefs that the repetition of certain Suras of the Qu'ran will result in the

emerged in Egypt in the 1960s, which sounds as if it appealed to many of the same constituents who are attracted to Khaled, perhaps preparing the way for a wider mass mediated *da'wa* like his:

Such small circles [of elite Sufi orders] may include academics, journalists, businessmen, bankers, insurance brokers, engineers, and a whole wider range of professionals. For them the true Sufism is not the religion of the streets (from which they are totally cut off). It is rather a journey on a path to illumination that requires that one see behind the mere appearances an forms of religion ... This may also mean that a member of such a group experiences no sense of contradiction between his Sufism and business affairs, the acquisition of wealth in a highly competitive situation, or a privileged place in society, or appurtenances of Western values and life-styles. There are surface matters and the reality exists beneath ... Political questions or reflection upon the nature and structure of society are irrelevant. Society is not a problem. One looks into the heart of things, not at the outward forms.<sup>146</sup>

Although Khaled is not a Sufi master or evangelist preacher, his appropriation of aspects of elite Sufism and Christian witnessing techniques results in a new conversational religious discourse that takes advantage of the organic nature of Islam's existing preaching traditions and adapts the authoritative sociopolitical voice of the Muslim preacher to create a powerfully interactive form of *da'wa*. As such, Khaled's discourse responds to many of the same anxieties about deteriorating cultural and spiritual values expressed by both Egyptians and born-again Christians in their attempts to reclaim modernity for God.

### **Born-again Christians and Veiled-again Muslims**

Although the Islamic Revival's causes can be traced to historical events, processes and conditions of development in Egypt and other Muslim majority countries, the trend's preoccupation with the crisis of modern identity is a universal theme.<sup>147</sup> As Piscatori observes, "Most Muslims, like virtually everyone else in the developed and developing world, are feeling ill at ease with a way of life that places less and less emphasis on loyalties to the family and seems to find religious institutions increasingly irrelevant."<sup>148</sup> This perceived shift in emphasis to the individual can generate feelings of alienation and disassociation, prompting people of all backgrounds, nationalities and beliefs to search for ways to recover a sense of community, history, heritage, and belonging. One common response to this search for identity is to turn to religion, writes Piscatori:

Religion, precisely because in the past it answered questions on life and death and provided its followers with moral links to each other, becomes the means by which individuals hope

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"miracle" of answered prayers, the way in which he relates stories of the Prophet, and his method of incorporating ecstatic feedback practices.

<sup>146</sup> Gilseman, *Recognizing Islam*, 245.

<sup>147</sup> Piscatori, 27.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

to answer the new question of what it is to be modern, and, in so doing, to gain perhaps a reassuring, common world-view. In this respect, born-again Christians and veiled-again Muslims are responding to the same broad phenomenon.<sup>149</sup>

Antoun and Gaffney recognized that traditional Muslim *khatibs*, in their interpretive roles as culture-brokers, use the authority of the *minbar* and formal *khutba* to address questions of “what does and does not represent Islam, or does so best.”<sup>150</sup> As Gaffney puts it:

[T]he current contending of forces within and about mosques reflects complex transformations of demography, social identity, ethical con-sciousness, inter-national pressure, political process, and economic structure, through all of which religiously minded people are straining to discover and to articulate a satisfying expression of the symbolic links between transcendent values and the pragmatic issues of daily life.<sup>151</sup>

Both Antoun and Gaffney choose to evaluate this process from the perspective of the “authoritative ritual setting, where Islam is regularly and publicly proclaimed and interpreted,”<sup>152</sup> but as they both acknowledge, this is not the only place where such interpretation occurs, nor is Islamic authority so narrowly defined and inflexible in practice that it must be expressed within strict boundaries. On the contrary, they give ample evidence that *khatibs*, *mujahids* and *walis* all maneuver within the interpretive space provided by the ambiguity of their roles to address the evolving social, religious and political issues facing contemporary Muslims. As described above, Khaled does the same, even as he pushes the frontiers of *da‘wa* into controversial territory, where it shares characteristics with born-again Christianity’s salvation narrative and Sufi mysticism, which stresses collective experience of direct appeal to the heart, from the heart. As Harding explains, “Among fundamental Baptists, the Holy Spirit brings you under conviction by speaking to your heart. Once you are saved, the Holy Spirit assumes your voice, speaks through you, and begins to reward your life. ... [Such] generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech.”<sup>153</sup> By naming his show *Words from the Heart*, Khaled signals that one of the goals of his discourse is to inspire people to “speak from the heart” to each other as they share stories, feelings and questions. It is impossible to miss the similarity in terminology, but more difficult to determine the significance of the overlap. This question requires a closer look at the content of Khaled’s discourse and the way it works within the atmosphere created by such terminology to create a message that appeals to Egyptians and in the context of their own history, culture and society.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>150</sup> Gaffney, 17.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Harding, 179.

## ‘Just Say No’ to Satan: A Discourse of Compromise

In *Words from the Heart*, Khaled uses the example of Sharif’s testimonial to stress the importance of helping others understand religion, and the dangers of hanging out with irresponsible friends. He then asks the audience for examples of behavior in society that reflects the loss of modesty (*hiya*). The answers are discotheques, smoking *shisha*, men in cars chasing girls in the street, lingerie displays in shop windows and on models. Khaled adds his own to the list: girls and boys chatting on the Internet or on the telephone in order to flirt with each other. “I want them to understand something when they speak these shameful words ... Imagine if their fathers were listening. God sees this.” Once again, the audience appears to be defining the direction of the discourse through their active participation in the program’s dialogue, while Khaled simply acts as moderator, but the reality is more complex.

Although he works hard to promote a moderate and flexible version of Islamic piety, Khaled does draw a line at certain types of behavior deemed unacceptable for true Muslims. In a hugely popular audiotaped sermon titled *The Youth and the Summer (a-shubab wa a-sayf)*, recorded in 2001, Khaled addresses the issues of death, hell and the devil more directly than in *Words from the Heart*, and the tape provides a powerful example of the way in which Khaled manages to set boundaries for his listeners without seeming to constrict them unreasonably. In *The Youth and the Summer*, he warns his young audience many people may behave well during the school year, but when the summer comes, they feel they can just let loose and behave badly, tempted by idleness and vice in their free time. Khaled starts out by summarizing and numbering the topics his “lesson” will cover. Then, as usual, he poses questions to his audience, thereby inviting them to put themselves personally inside the sermon’s discourse and become part of the community being directly addressed and symbolically constructed. Together, he says, we will come up with a balanced plan of how to spend the summer productively and safely, while still having fun:

Let’s have a flashback to last summer. Do we remember what we did? Do you think you spent it in a good way that Allah likes? ... Have you let your desires drag you to sins? For how many people was last summer a new start? (A chance) to be close to Allah? How have you planned for this one? Is it the same as the last one? What have you decided? I’m asking all of you those questions ... I’m sure you have decided what you are going to do. We are here, my brothers, to set an ideal plan for the Muslim summer that you’ll be happy with, not only in worshipping, but also in playing, traveling, and hanging out. I don’t recommend spending all your days and nights praying, but having fun within the limit of being a good Muslim who wants to gain God’s blessings.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Khaled, *A-shubab wa a-sayf*.

Khaled does not shy away from talking directly about Satan and the threat he poses to young Muslims on summer vacation. He lists the “big” sins (unbelief, sex, gambling, drinking, drugs) as well as the “little” sins (like idleness or apathy) that the devil will tempt people to commit, causing unhappiness, wasted potential and possibly even physical harm. Again, addressing his audience in a casual, simple, yet serious manner, Khaled paints a picture of the summer as a series of traps set by Satan to trip up unsuspecting young victims:

Satan! Yes ... What is Satan? He is your enemy. He whispers to us every single day. So, why am I warning you to take care of that in the summer? Because you are easier prey to him in the summer than at any other time. All year you are so busy with your duties, studying, so you don't have time to think how to enjoy your time in a proper way. ... Every one is pushing you hard to study, and you are focusing on your future, and what you want to achieve. But now (in the summer) you are relaxed. Finally, you've gotten past the hard time, and you are free to do whatever you want. ... Finally, you are allowed to travel, to hang out with friends. You have freedom and free time, and your devil is there with you. He follows you wherever you go ... Do you feel what I said? Do you feel that you should resist?<sup>155</sup>

Khaled's description of Satan portrays the devil as an incarnation of peer pressure, an ever-present antagonist who “whispers” dangerous enticements in young people's ears at a time of year when they are most susceptible to sin. He arms his listeners with ways to counter Satan's maneuvers, describing a method that recalls the “Just Say No” approach: Repeat “There is no God but God,” and fill time by attending religious lessons, studying the Qu'ran, working constructively in society, and spending time with similarly well-behaved friends. Despite the implicit (and at times even explicit) threat of hell that runs throughout the sermon, Khaled clearly is at pains from the beginning to set up a balanced argument for Islamic observance that does not preclude the possibility of “having fun,” as long as it is responsible Islamic fun. The underlying message is that religion may demand that one follows certain basic rules of behavior, but compromise is possible, and part of the process of becoming a “good Muslim” is learning how to judge for oneself what rules are negotiable and how far one can take the principle of compromise before it verges into the unacceptable.

By refusing to reject trips to the beach and summer resorts as un-Islamic in and of themselves, Khaled creates a space for the negotiation of cultural, religious, and even class values. It is in this public space that many of his listeners find refuge and confidence. For Rashid, it meant he could even filter out elements of Khaled's discourse while accepting other aspects because he had become an active participant in framing the discussion. The discourse had become *his* as much as Khaled's. Although Khaled's devoted

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

followers may end up transforming their lives and perspectives more radically than Rashid, his *da'wa*'s reputation for compromise remains Khaled's most attractive and controversial quality. The marriage of content and style evident in the *Youth and the Summer* sermon and Khaled's other productions reinforces the underlying social conservatism of his discourse while simultaneously demonstrating the inherently supple nature of its language and symbolism. As Khaled explained in the *Al-Ahram Weekly* interview, when he talks about religion, he means "a balanced and modern religion. I don't want people to be 'anesthetized by religion' ... but rather for there to be a balance between worship and morals; between physical and spiritual requirements."<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid, "Preaching with a Passion."

## CHAPTER FIVE: Is Amr Khaled Subversive? The Risks of Boundary-Straddling

Amr Khaled left Egypt in November 2002, claiming that authorities had banned him from continuing his *da'wa* activities there. His departure seemed all the more dramatic because it took place during the holy month of Ramadan, when Khaled's television shows were airing several times a day on Lebanese and Saudi satellite channels as part of their special holiday schedules. Although reports of his exile immediately prompted a wave of speculation in the press and on the street, his departure did not come as a complete surprise. Rumors had swirled for weeks that Khaled might leave the country soon, and many felt it was only a matter of time before the government acted decisively to stifle him. Government officials already had tried to limit Khaled's public speaking engagements, citing traffic congestion near the mosques where he preached. In 2001, officials forced him to move his lectures from a mosque in the upscale Cairo neighborhood of Muhandiseen to Sixth of October City, a new suburban development near the city's outskirts. It soon became clear, however, that Khaled's affluent fans were unfazed by the 30 kilometer drive, and by July 2002 the government reportedly had requested that Khaled stop preaching there as well, once again pointing to traffic and parking problems. After spending the rest of the summer in Saudi Arabia, Khaled had returned to Egypt in the fall amid widely held expectations that his stay would not last long if he kept up his *da'wa* efforts. "Everyone knew this was coming," Shahin told me a few weeks later. "Everyone expected him to be arrested."<sup>157</sup>

Shortly after leaving Egypt, Khaled gave a telephone interview from Britain to the *Associated Press* in which he reflected on why he had been banned:

"Is celebrity the reason?" Khaled said, speculating about the roots of his problems in Egypt. "Is it because many implemented the moral aspect of my message, which is not very welcomed nowadays? The history of reformers throughout the world says that I'm on their right path, they all suffered similar things."<sup>158</sup>

Using his trademark technique of asking questions to answer questions, Khaled maintained an elusive attitude, but by identifying himself as a reformer and linking himself with the legacies of other "reformers throughout the world," the *da'iya* cast himself in the role of an embattled activist, dedicated to his *da'wa* as a spiritual and moral call for social reform. His comments implied that he believed authorities were trying to silence him because his appeal to the hearts of Egyptians had been all too successful. Khaled adopted an

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<sup>157</sup> Shahin, interview.

<sup>158</sup> Abou El-Magd.

unmistakably political language as he assumed the character and voice of a charismatic leader in exile. His words and the ban that provoked them illustrate the way efforts to define cultural and religious values in the public sphere can and do become politicized.

### **The Aftermath: Denials, Distrust and a Cyberspace Counter-Offensive**

In the same *Associated Press* article, journalist Nadia Abou El-Magd reported that Egypt's Ministry of Interior repeatedly denied banning the preacher "amid speculation that the government was sensitive about anyone establishing a popular base of support – whether political or religious – that could rival its own standing."<sup>159</sup> An article published in *The Christian Science Monitor* the following day also quoted "a government spokesman" rejecting the allegation that Khaled had been forced out of Egypt, but the author noted that even relatively moderate Muslim voices had started to come under official scrutiny in the state's "struggle to control a [religious] message that is reaching broad swaths of Egyptian society."<sup>160</sup>

In the Egyptian press, there seemed little doubt about who was behind Khaled's departure. Despite government denials and the inevitable conspiracy theories, a number of publications adopted Khaled's cause as an issue of freedom of speech and religion. In an angry column, the editor of independent weekly newspaper *Al-Osboa* argued that the decision to ban Khaled was counterproductive, unreasonable and reactionary:

But are we able to say that Amr Khaled has committed a crime and transgressed boundaries to such a degree that he should be put under siege for *da'wa* until the only choice left before him is to leave Egypt? He has left Egypt and still poisonous pens do not stop attacking him ... Certainly they are enemies of all those who guide our youth to the right path and salvation. What do they want exactly? Do they want Egypt to be a state without faith? Do they want youth without values and without principles and without morals?<sup>161</sup>

Writing for English language weekly magazine *Cairo Times*, columnist Steve Negus dismissed rumors that the ban was a "publicity stunt" orchestrated by Khaled, and argued that his banishment demonstrated the regime's growing inability to control religious discourse in Egypt:

[S]omehow I suspect that the whole fracas – which has reportedly seen Khaled's popularity soar – is genuine. Firstly, Khaled has not previously seemed to be the confrontational type. Secondly, the government obviously has it out for the young preacher, as he was the subject of attack over the last year in the state press. Finally, this kind of behavior has become all too typical of a regime that, though it was once a master of the art of co-opting and containing public discourse, has gotten increasingly clumsy over the last decade.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Kovatch, 6.

<sup>161</sup> Bakri, 3.

<sup>162</sup> Negus, 4.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood joined journalists in Khaled's defense. Hamdi Hassan, an MP known to be affiliated with the Brotherhood, wrote to the Minister of Religious Endowments to demand an explanation for why such a moderate *da'iya* had been banned. He complained that forcing Khaled from the country at a time when "Muslims and Islam are accused of terrorism, just seems illogical."<sup>163</sup>

As the public fracas heated up, Khaled benefited from all the attention. In fact, some of Khaled's opponents were critical of the ban because they felt persecuting him actually appeared to validate the preacher's message and make him a hero.<sup>164</sup> In the weeks following his departure, sales of Khaled's tapes and CD sales skyrocketed, and Iqraa announced it would air two new programs by the *da'iya*.<sup>165</sup> On the Internet, Khaled and his followers reacted virtually overnight by launching a snazzy new website devoted entirely to promoting the preacher, spreading his teachings, and presenting his version of events.<sup>166</sup> The first announcement posted on the site was a text headlined: "The real reasons behind the Amr Khaled's departure from Egypt." The statement claimed it had been written with the "desire to clarify the true picture and place the dots over the letters."<sup>167</sup> It was intended, the statement read, as a response to "many recent editions of newspapers and the mass media," which had been speculating on the reasons for Khaled's sudden relocation to Europe without knowing the facts. In an effort to set the record straight, the statement explained that Khaled had been in the process of preparing the upcoming episodes of a Ramadan special, *The Tent*, scheduled to air on the Saudi satellite channel ART, when "authority circles requested" that participation in *The Tent* be limited to invite-only audience members, and not be chosen at random "from the general public," as Khaled had planned. According to the statement, these same nameless "authorities" returned later, "requesting to move the filming to an interior studio" that would limit the numbers in the crowd, and finally instructing Khaled to suspend his broadcasts and lectures altogether. The statement explained that these authorities accused Khaled of recently dealing with issues that "provoked many problems," but Khaled denied the vague charge, saying that it was nothing but "malicious gossip" and arguing that his tapes spoke

<sup>163</sup> Shahine, "Preacher on the Run," 4.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> The old website, [www.forislam.com](http://www.forislam.com), continued in operation as a forum for news and Islamic issues, but the new website specialized in Khaled and his sermons. Shared advertisements, content and links tie the two sites together. Another website, Al-Aqsa, recently branched out from forislam, identifying itself as a "member of forislam" and using the same format as forislam and Khaled's new website. It features commentary and articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at <http://www.forislam.com/ar/aqsa/index.php>.

<sup>167</sup> The statement was posted at <http://www.amrkhaled.net/ar/amr/article.php?sid=1> and accessed by the author 4 December 2002.

for themselves and proved his innocence. The statement also quoted Khaled saying he would continue to preach from abroad while studying for a Ph.D. at the University of Wales, where he would write his dissertation as a scholarly comparison between Western-style social reform and Islamic social reform in the time of Prophet Muhammad.

Over the following weeks and months, the website became increasingly high-tech and elaborate, hosting bi-weekly live chat sessions with Khaled, transcripts of his shows, MP3 recordings of his sermons, up-to-date schedules of his broadcasts, and digital pictures from his lecture trips across the Middle East. The Internet also served as the breeding ground for organized protest against the ban. In an article entitled “Preacher on the Run,” *Al-Ahram Weekly* reported December 12 that “[m]ore than 10,000 of Khaled’s supporters ... have reportedly signed a petition asking Minister of Awqaf (religious endowments) Mohamed Hamdi Zaqqouq, to lift the ban ... The pro-Khaled campaign may be Egypt’s first ever on the Internet. The online petition describes the ban as “unacceptable, unacceptable, unacceptable.”<sup>168</sup> By taking advantage of new media technology in creative ways, Khaled managed to engage in an effective counter-offensive: He responded to the charges and rumors, arranged an organized protest against the ban, and maintained a high profile in public life through his tapes, website and broadcasts. In that sense, the ban was an utter failure: The state may have physically removed Khaled from Egypt, but his influence remained and grew.

### **The Rumors: Implications of a Boundary-Straddling Identity**

Long before he left, rumors and conspiracy theories about Khaled were ubiquitous. Over the course of my research I heard a wide variety of stories, including that Khaled was seducing women in order to entice them to veil, that he was on the payroll as part of a vast Saudi conspiracy, and that he was taking advantage of his intimacy with rich Egyptian families to put himself forward as a false prophet, asking his followers to kiss his hand and put his picture up in their homes. Some Egyptians told me the government had banned him because he was too popular; others were convinced the government banned him to make him *more* popular. I also heard that he was an extremist in disguise, a radical who shaved off his beard just so he could lure in people who would not naturally consider themselves religious. A friend of mine heard he was the grandson of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna.<sup>169</sup> As far as I could tell, this is an unfounded rumor,<sup>170</sup> but it

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<sup>168</sup> Shahine, “Preacher on the Run,” 4.

<sup>169</sup> Kanako Mabuchi, a fellow M.Phil. student, heard this from a Palestinian woman in the United States when she was there to interview her for her thesis.

nevertheless carries interesting implications, since its existence means that at least some people identify Khaled as a descendant (and possibly heir apparent) of the father of Egypt's oldest political Islamist movement. However, no rumor of a Muslim Brotherhood pedigree is necessary to convince Mustafa that Khaled is essentially a politician in disguise. "He doesn't have to talk politics; he is doing politics," she said. "Amr Khaled acts more like a politician than a jurist. He's exactly like any charismatic political man or secretary general of a political party."<sup>171</sup>

The sensationalized debate about Khaled in the press contributed grist to the rumor mill. In its campaign against Khaled, *Rose al-Youssef* published "exposés" alleging that he had belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood in college, threatening to unlock the sordid secrets of his bank accounts, and suggesting that Khaled had mysterious connections with people in positions of power:

... Someone secretly supports him. And to be frank, some may imagine that support of a preacher keen on maintaining an image of moderate missionary work may be the best way to keep the youth from the extremist sheikhs, but this is a dangerous gamble and possibly deadly. Because Sheikh Amr and others like him plow the earth before the extremists and sow the seeds that will be reaped and rise up one of these days. There are many former examples of this. Their (the extremists) champions were also representatives who brought religion into people's homes.<sup>172</sup>

In warning against Khaled as a recruiter for a new generation of Islamic extremists, *Rose al-Youssef* exhibits a common tendency among Khaled's detractors to read his moderate, modern reputation as a dangerous veneer. As the article's author Wa'il al-Lutfi sees it, Khaled cannot possibly be a "moderate" and "modern" sheikh, because there really is no such thing. It would be an oxymoron. Al-Lutfi's suggestion is that Khaled can only fit into one category or the other, religious or modern; there is no middle ground. But Khaled is hard to place because he is a conscious boundary-straddler. If he is not a real sheikh, neither is he a *sufi*, nor a *khatib*, a *qadi* (judge), an *'alim* (scholar) or a *mujahid* (militant). He avoids openly discussing domestic politics, so he cannot easily be termed a political Islamist. Neither does Khaled's popularity among upper-class, Westernized elites seem to fit the preexisting pattern set by Islamist preachers, who reportedly draw their followers from the lower and middle classes. By virtue of the fact that he practices *da'wa*, Khaled is a *da'iya*, but theoretically anyone can be a *da'iya*, so such a label still does little to place him safely within an identifiable category, especially since his creative style of *da'wa* itself defies obvious classification. Looking

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<sup>170</sup> The *Cairo Times* that Khaled's maternal grandfather, Abdel Hadi Pasha, served as a prime minister under King Farouq. (El-Amrani and Hotrop, 16.)

<sup>171</sup> Mustafa, interview.

<sup>172</sup> Al-Lutfi, 44.

to Khaled's official website and tapes does not help place him either, since his own materials refer to him as *'ustaz*, but that title technically describes someone who possesses a doctoral degree (which Khaled does not). In common colloquial usage it is a decidedly vague honorific which can be used in a joking manner to refer to a taxi driver, for example, or more sincerely to acknowledge someone who is well-educated or respectable.

This inability to pigeonhole Khaled strongly appeals to his followers, who interpret it as evidence of the freshness and flexibility that makes his *da'wa* so attractive and enables his audiences to perceive religion as compatible and negotiable within the context of modern life. Nevertheless, the pervasive rumors about Khaled described above, and the suspicions voiced by critics ranging from Dr. Mustafa to *Rose al-Youssef*, underscore the profound uneasiness provoked by Khaled's charismatic versatility. His ability to stand with one foot the modern world of consumerism and globalization and the other rooted in the "traditional" sphere of religious piety and ritual upsets the sensibilities of those who feel there should be a proper distinction between the two realms. Even those who admire Khaled's preaching often speculate on the rumors and express anxiety about Khaled's true character and motivations. "What is he really up to?" they all ask, "Who is he, and what's in it for him?" As Shahin said to me, "Amr Khaled is dangerous and the question is why. This is the biggest question."<sup>173</sup>

Cultural Anthropologist Mary Douglas identifies the tendency to demarcate symbolic boundaries and divide human experience into categories as evidence of a common impulse "to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."<sup>174</sup> Douglas points to religious dietary laws and rituals of purification as examples of this universal urge to codify and conform, to impose order on disorder. Anomalies present a challenge to established patterns of behavior and belief, resulting in conflict that may be reconciled at the individual level through revision of one's "own personal scheme of classifications."<sup>175</sup> Since "no individual lives in isolation," however, the act of addressing the presence of anomalies in society inevitably becomes a matter of public negotiation and debate:

Culture, in the sense of the public, standardized values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And above all, it has authority since each is induced to assent because of the assent of others. But its public character makes its categories more rigid. A private person may revise his pattern of assumptions or not. It is a

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<sup>173</sup> Shahin, interview.

<sup>174</sup> Douglas, 4.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 40.

private matter. But cultural categories are public matters. They cannot so easily be subject to revision. Yet they cannot neglect the challenge of aberrant forms. Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions.<sup>176</sup>

As somewhat of an anomaly himself, Amr Khaled uses his innovative form of *da'wa* to challenge the rigidity of culturally determined symbolic categories as they are often expressed in contemporary public discourse on religion and modernity in Egypt. Antoun and Gaffney, however, both insist that far from being rigid, the Islamic preacher's traditional role is multifaceted and inherently ambiguous. In fact, it is these very qualities which allow preachers to carry out their function as culture brokers who mediate the "organization of tradition" to accommodate the changes brought on through modernization. Khaled operates within this dynamic heritage without necessarily contradicting or contravening any of the traditional categories of Islamic preaching. At pains to identify himself simply as a *da'iyā* or *rajil al-din* (man of religion), Khaled exercises socio-religious authority without making any claims to be a scholar, saint or judge. Still, many view him as competing with or undermining those types. The language, format and style of his *da'wa* disconcerts those who feel his modern presentation necessarily contradicts his socially conservative religious message. Such concerns reflect a distinctly modern preoccupation with questions of cultural authenticity at the core of identity politics. One response to such feelings of displacement and discomfort, Douglas argues, is to label the offending object, event or individual as "polluted" or dangerous. "Attributing danger is one way of putting a subject above dispute," she argues. "It also helps to enforce conformity."<sup>177</sup>

Applying Douglas' analytical framework to Khaled cannot fully explain why he has been branded as dangerous and banned from preaching in his own country, but it may help to shed some light on the way in which competition to set the boundaries that define cultural norms, values and traditions is a "public matter" (the stuff of rumors) and consequently a political matter as well. Khaled uses a boundary-straddling discourse focused on promoting "culturally authentic" morals, values and social behavior as easy, friendly, and fully compatible with modernity. In doing so, Khaled verges into the territory of symbolic politics and becomes, in his own words, a social "reformer." Eickelman and Piscatori make the case that symbolic politics are expressed as disputes between various forces contending for control over the boundary-setting process:

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 41.

The drawing of boundaries is part of the political process, whether it involves the demarcation of decision making units in society and the enforceable rules for resolving jurisdictional disputes among them ... or demarcation of areas open to state control over production of dominant values and those that are not. Indeed, a political system has often been thought to reflect a relatively stable and hierarchical consensus on boundary setting, but in fact challenges to this consensus and the desire to shift boundaries have always been present.<sup>178</sup>

As explained above, the Islamic preacher's role of culture broker allows Amr Khaled to take part in the "organization of tradition" as he struggles to reinterpret and redraw symbolic boundaries in competition with other individuals, informal groups and formal organizations, as well as the state itself. In the process, Khaled provokes accusations branding him inauthentic and taboo. But such allegations have so far failed to significantly undermine his authority as a cultural mediator. On the contrary, they may have enhanced his credibility, or at least legitimized the presence of his discourse in the competitive bargaining arena that is the public sphere. Although the Egyptian regime has attempted to build Islamic credentials, its credibility in religious matters is hotly contested, meaning that official censure may only add to Khaled's notoriety and prestige.

In Howeidy's opinion, all the rumors are scurrilous. Khaled has never been part of any organization, he argues, and publications like *Rose al-Youssef* that argue otherwise are mere tools of state intelligence services, which had always had it out for the young preacher. For Howeidy, the controversy surrounding the ban and its aftermath demonstrated the underlying weakness of the state, which he believes makes decisions using a narrow "security mind" as opposed to a shrewd "political mind." The result, Howeidy noted, is a boost for Khaled's credibility and a hit to the government's reputation. "He became more popular because the people usually sympathize with the victims," Howeidy said. "The people are missing him. I think the government was not very intelligent ... It encourages an anti-government attitude among the youth."<sup>179</sup>

### **The Hijab Rumor: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Repentant Actresses**

One of the most persistent and intriguing rumors surrounding Amr Khaled's departure was that Mubarak's daughter-in-law had decided to veil after listening to some of Khaled's tapes. Her actions supposedly embarrassed the president and his unveiled wife Suzanne, who styles herself as a secular campaigner for women's rights in Egypt. The implication was that Khaled's influence had gotten too close to the top, coming in direct (even humiliating) conflict with the interests, image and policies of the regime.

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<sup>178</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, 18.

<sup>179</sup> Howeidy, interview.

This rumor's significance lies beyond any question of its veracity. It would be nearly impossible to confirm anyway, since no one would ever openly print such a thing. Limited freedom of the press in Egypt does not extend to personal criticisms of Mubarak and his family. Such topics are understood to be strictly off-limits, particularly when touching on Mubarak's two sons, and consequently, the issue of political succession. Even the usually outspoken *Cairo Times* referred to the gossip only obliquely: "Known as the preacher who got to the conscience of the daughters of the moneyed elite, the obvious question is just who was it that went nuts when their little girl took the veil under the influence of Khaled's preaching?"<sup>180</sup> Regardless of whether the rumor contains any elements of literal truth, however, there is no question that it resonates symbolically in the context of Egyptian society and politics. The suggestion that the veiling of Mubarak's daughter-in-law represented the "last straw" for decision-makers at the top implies that two particularly controversial aspects of Khaled's *da'wa* lie at the heart of his conflict with the state: his influence over women and his ability to recruit followers from the ranks of Egypt's powerful and wealthy elite.

### **Amr Khaled, Islamists, Feminists and the Veil in Egypt**

Gender issues are historically tied to the question of how Middle Eastern societies should approach modernity. Even before the "women's question" emerged in the colonial era, representations of women and gendered projects of social reform in the Middle East have been co-opted, renegotiated, translated and manipulated by Orientalists, nationalists, feminists and Islamists alike. The interpretation of the family as a microcosm of society means that a woman's perceived place at the center of family life guarantees a symbolic role for women in the politics of modernization, but it also "traps the issue of women with the struggle over culture."<sup>181</sup> As Deniz Kandioti observes, "The politicization of gender in the Middle East speaks to, attempts to heal, and, at the same time, exacerbates the confusions and uncertainties of modernity."<sup>182</sup>

The veil is the most prominent and visible manifestation of this "politicization of gender," but it also is a thoroughly ambiguous symbol that carries a myriad of cultural, social, religious and political messages, some of which seem to conflict with and even contradict each other. Contemporary Muslim dress in Egypt is not a return to some traditional past, but a construction of its modern context. It usually includes some form

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<sup>180</sup> Hammond, 14.

<sup>181</sup> Ahmed, 236.

<sup>182</sup> Kandioti, 284.

of head covering and loose fitting clothes, but in actual practice, the wearing of *higab* in Egypt involves a great deal of variety, with designs ranging from trendy veils in flashy colors, loosely covering the hair and are worn with tight jeans, to drab *niqab* robes that completely hide the shape of the body and all skin except for the eyes. As such variety in veiling practices suggests, the *higab* “clearly means different things to women in different cultural, national and class contexts.”<sup>183</sup> Modern Egyptian history provides ample evidence of the veil’s versatility as a political, social and religious symbol. In the early Twentieth Century, Egyptian feminists like Huda Sharawi removed their veils in public to protest what they saw as sexist traditions holding women back and limiting their personal freedoms. In the 1970s, Egyptian University women put the veil back on as a form of political protest against the policies of the secular state. Today most women in Cairo veil in some form or another. For many, like Abeer, veiling is a both an intimate personal decision and a compromise that enables them to take greater part in public life while demonstrating that they remain faithful to their socially significant roles as wives and mothers. Drawing on her observations of women’s veiling practices in 1980s Cairo, Arlene Macleod argued that the recent increase of veiling among women in Egypt, particularly among the lower middle class women in her study, is a complex reaction to economic and social pressures. Modernity brings changes that improve women’s status through increased mobility and access to education and professional life, even as rapid changes to class structure, economic outlook, and demographics threaten women’s traditional sources of respect, protection and influence in the realm of the family. Veiling thus becomes an act of protest, but an inherently ambiguous one that is easily diluted, misunderstood or simply “lost” in the process of what Macleod calls “accommodation.” Nonetheless, in deciding whether to wear the veil, and even how to wear it, Egyptian women are engaging in a political negotiation of public space. Macleod argues that using their dress as form of symbolic bargaining ultimately may result in solidifying permanent gains for women, but could just as easily work to reinforce their subjugation. As the rumor about Mubarak’s daughter-in-law suggests, however, the essential ambiguity of the veil as a symbol does not prevent (and may even encourage) its treatment as a politically controversial image.

Accordingly, Egypt’s mass media has become a battleground of sorts as representations of women take on symbolic weight through the process of mediating modernity. The state’s assertion that liberal, educated, “modern” women do not veil is an argument embodied in the person of Suzanne Mubarak, who

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<sup>183</sup> Macleod, 104.

depicts herself as a paragon of civilized secular female citizenship. Her Westernized personal appearance reflects an unspoken “code of representation” in state-controlled visual media that largely excludes images of veiled women as broadcasters, models and actresses. This “code” creates a virtual world on film and television that contrasts with the lived experiences of Egyptian women, most of whom choose to wear *higab* as an expression of their “search for an authentic identity coherent with traditional culture yet consistent with women’s goals of increased opportunity, a search for modernism that builds on, rather than rejects, traditional culture and the traditional sources of women’s power.”<sup>184</sup>

While the state tries to use the media to deny the veil, the Islamists are trying to use the media to promote it. For Islamists, women are “central to the larger political and moral imagination, essential to the upholding of civic order and virtue.”<sup>185</sup> The target of their moral criticism is not only the interference of the alien Western “Other” in the Middle Eastern government and society, but also local upper-middle class and wealthy elites who represent an “internal Other”<sup>186</sup> that seems threatening the Muslim community with secularization and Westernization. Citing sources from the Qur’an, Sunna and Hadith, the Islamists often argue that women and men operate in separate spheres, a male public sphere and a female private sphere.<sup>187</sup> According to Lila Abu-Lughod, Islamists began directing religious reform efforts at the public figures of famous actresses and singers because they symbolized the extreme opposite of the Islamist model: a virtuous Muslim woman, whose natural place is in the home. “Actresses and other show business personalities epitomize the challenge to that model and they are targeted because they represent the moral nightmare of the sexual looseness of professional women,”<sup>188</sup> Abu-Lughod writes.

She adds, however, that the spectacle of “repentant actresses” also demonstrates that Islamist discourse on the veil has adjusted to changes brought on by modernity’s economic, political, social and demographic realities. Since the issue of cultural authenticity is subject to selective bargaining, Islamists

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>185</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, 91.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>187</sup> The key honor of men in the family (and by extension society) resides in the modesty of women and so the burden is on women to rein in their sexuality. Otherwise, men may not be able to control their desires and the female violation of the “moral order” will result in *fitna*, or civil strife and chaos. The political Islamists’ quest to build a virtuous society and Islamic state requires women act as a cultural and moral vanguard in their “private sphere” roles in the home, where raising the next generation of good Islamic citizens is their top priority. Accordingly, they tend to support women’s education and organization if the goal of such activities is revitalizing society, but discourage working after marriage if not economically necessary because it takes women outside the home and exposes them needlessly to the *fitna* hazards of the male public sphere.

<sup>188</sup> Abu-Lughod, 251.

have made concessions or modifications to their discourse to include positions typically associated with secularists and feminists:

... what is characteristic of the Islamists is that they stigmatize sexual independence and public freedoms as Western but much more gingerly challenge women's rights to work, barely question women's education, and unthinkingly embrace the ideals of bourgeois marriage. Yet the latter three are elements of the turn-of-the-century modernist projects that might well carry the label "feminist" and whose origins are just as entangled with the West as are the sexual mores singled out in horror.<sup>189</sup>

Khaled's close association with Sohair al-Babali and other veiled-again Egyptian actresses links him with this Islamist project to "reform" celebrities, which began with the efforts of his predecessors Sheikh Sha'rawi and "Sheik of the Stars" Omar Abdel Kafi. However, as in most things, Khaled's approach is slightly more nuanced than theirs. He takes the Islamist "concessions" even further: Instead of requiring actresses to quit working altogether, he just asks them to take less lascivious parts, and pursue roles in films with religious or moral themes. Such compromise is typical of Khaled's entire approach to the issue of the veil and consistent with his overall argument that becoming more religious is a reasonable and relatively painless adjustment that one makes within the context of a fully modern lifestyle.

Khaled insists on the veil as a requirement of a good Muslim life, but he stresses that a woman should don *higab* only after she has built up her "inner faith."<sup>190</sup> As with the question of whether men should wear beards, Khaled frames the issue as a matter of prioritizing the interiorization of religion (*bina al-gawhar*) over literal adherence to the religious laws regulating appearance (*fiqh al-dhahir*).<sup>191</sup> There is no question, however, that for women, the *higab* is portrayed as a must, while Khaled's own clean-shaven features prove that he considers the beard optional, perhaps because its association with extremist sheikhs preaching *takhwif* makes it incompatible with Khaled's efforts to put a moderate "face" on his *da'wa*. Khaled clearly is unwilling to challenge the *higab*'s symbolic role as an "authentically Islamic" antidote to the social and moral "problem" of modern female sexuality, but his reputation for integrating women into his programs and speaking to them "as equals" and not "second class citizens" makes it difficult for his opponents to stigmatize him by placing him in the same stereotypical category as sexist traditional sheikhs and

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 243-244.

<sup>190</sup> Khaled, "Preaching with a Passion."

<sup>191</sup> Haenni, "Au-delà du repli identitaire."

“regressive” Islamists.<sup>192</sup> “If people understood the true status of women in Islam, society would never treat women as second-class citizens,” Khaled said in his interview with *Al-Ahram Weekly*. “Women, in my view, are even more than half the population. They represent the entire nation because they are the ones who raise the other half of the nation, i.e. the male citizens.”<sup>193</sup> Such an interpretation of women’s significance is nothing new, and echoes Islamists’ emphasis on the primary duty of the Islamic woman as mother, nurturer and carrier of society’s moral values. Like many Muslim feminists, however, Khaled’s choice of themes and language plays up the role of women as Islam’s pioneers and heroines, pointing to women characters as the first convert, first martyr in jihad, and important partners in companionate marriage, which Khaled presents as a Qu’ranic ideal. Khaled insists on the veil, but in the context of a discourse that argues that a woman can “be successful in life, have good morals and also remain veiled.”<sup>194</sup> He says he has never asked his own wife not to work. “She is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Arts,” Khaled told *he magazine*. “In fact, she is finishing her Ph.D.”<sup>195</sup>

Khaled’s *da’wa* comes across as a frustrating antithesis to current government policies toward women. As Shahin explained, “The government is promoting women’s rights, reviewing the personal status laws, and here is someone who comes along and seems to be very popular, but the essence of his message is that women should veil, and if need be, women should stay home. But he does it in a nice way, in a non-coercive way.”<sup>196</sup> Khaled’s reasonably phrased argument for *higab* speaks not only to wealthy, Western-educated young women, but also established older professionals who previously had resisted the veiling trend. The middle-aged aunt who invited us to join her niece at the family’s apartment in Agami falls into this category. An incredibly strong and independent character with a successful career in real estate, she was careful to pray regularly, cover herself and chaperone us, but brushed off our own attempts to dress modestly at the beach as unnecessary, even silly. She explained to her teenage niece, who did not wear *higab*, that we need not dress as modestly as in Cairo because this was a private beach, and anyway, there was no reason for us to cover up if it was not something we believed in. Once we saw the crowd at the beach, we realized we were by no means alone in showing some skin, although the suit styles varied from French bikinis to baggy

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<sup>192</sup> A cartoon in *Rose al-Youssef* ridicules such “anti-modern” attitudes toward women in a cartoon in which a man wearing a beard and galabiyya welcomes news of his new baby by saying, “A girl? We’ll call her *Fitna* (chaos)!” (See Figure 5, Appendix)

<sup>193</sup> Khaled, “Preaching with a Passion.”

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, “People’s Preacher,” 48.

<sup>196</sup> Shahin, interview.

*higab*-inspired swimwear, complete with water-proof bathing cap. In retrospect, the scene at Agami evokes Khaled's warning to girls in "The Youth and the Summer" sermon to be conservative and "avoid the summer fashions" because "swimming suits are disasters!"<sup>197</sup> Still, he did not say women could not go to beach resorts at all, just that they should be responsible enough to evaluate which forms of dress were reasonable modest compromises and which ones would leave one with a lot of explaining to do on doomsday, when the beaches will speak, he warns, and "tell what they have witnessed."

### **Amr Khaled and the 'Protestant Ethic': The Implications of Class Discourse**

As evident from Khaled's discussion of beach and leisure activities, his discourse is also about the construction of class and consumption. Unsurprisingly, Rose al-Youssef was eager to make much of this by accusing Khaled and his followers of elitism. Reporting on the audience's composition at one of Khaled's lectures in 2001, al-Lutfi noted that "most of the young women are wearing *hijab*, but this *hijab* is not by way of avoiding the expense of going to the hairdresser as is the case for poorer women in the cities, neighborhoods and villages far away from Agouza. The *hijab* here is "five star" quality, covering the head with linen to soothe the heat of the summer."<sup>198</sup> Khaled counters that he never intended to become "a preacher of the elite,"<sup>199</sup> but his upper class background and study abroad experience in England gives him access to a privileged segment of Egyptian society that has trouble identifying with other religious figures. French Sociologist Patrick Haenni believes that one of the major reasons for Khaled's success is that his discourse legitimizes wealth and promotes a Protestant Ethic of social responsibility for the prosperous classes. "The rich have a discourse of responsibility which is the discourse of Amr Khaled as well," Haenni said, pointing out that many of Khaled's sponsors are big businessmen and successful entrepreneurs.<sup>200</sup>

Throughout his sermons and talk shows, Khaled identifies the high income bracket of his target audience when he talks about trips to Europe, chatting on the Internet, the dangers of fast cars and the blessings and responsibilities conferred by top-end salaries and positions at the top of the social ladder. He preaches that riches are a sign of God's love and should be used to do good works that will shore up people's souls as well as society, buying the giver a place in paradise. This aspect of Khaled's *da'wa* comes across a

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<sup>197</sup> Khaled, *Al-shubab wi al-sayif*.

<sup>198</sup> Al-Lutfi, 44.

<sup>199</sup> Khaled, "Preaching with a Passion."

<sup>200</sup> Haenni, interview.

scene in *Words from the Heart*, when Sohair al-Babali discusses her anxieties about money. She identifies consumerism as an unavoidable fact of modern life:

I will say a thing that is not strange for God: Every time Satan approaches me from any direction in my life, he says to me, “Make a serial wearing the veil.” And I want money. The world has become materialistic and we are translated into materials! “How much?” “How much are you worth?” We are suffering the reality of (being judged by) how much you have.<sup>201</sup>

Al-Babali adds that whenever she is worried about money she prays to God, and He always provides. The suggestion is not that materialism itself is bad. It is just a fact of modern life. What is important is how one looks to religion as the best response to the moral, ethical and practical pressures of global, mass mediated consumption.

Such efforts to justify wealth, rationalize the existence of materialism, and preach an ethic of social responsibility from the perspective of the upper classes marks a sharp contrast with the discourse of Sheikh Sha'rawi, Sheikh Kishk, and the Muslim Brothers, whose discourses primarily address the middle and lower classes. Khaled's popularity among the wealthier classes means that his preaching presents the state with a different threat. Instead of inciting militancy or provoking popular uprising from the suppressed masses, Khaled's *da'wa* threatens to infiltrate the actual support base of the regime, influencing the decision-making classes and institutions from the inside. The rumor about the veiling of Mubarak's daughter-in-law hinted at the theory that too many important and powerful people are being drawn into his discourse: the wives, daughters and sons of influential Egyptian businessmen and Ministers, even some of the Ministers and businessmen themselves. Is the “Amr Khaled Phenomenon” a sign of the Islamic Revival filtering upward through the class structure? His *da'wa* may be evidence of the re-Islamization of Egyptian society from the bottom-up, a process of Islamic socialization rather than straightforward politicization.

Khaled is part of a growing trend of “new preachers,” of whom he is only the most prominent and successful example. He and his colleagues, like Yemini preacher Habib Ali and Egypt's Khalid al-Guindi, are at the center of a larger ongoing struggle to define the individual's relationship to state, society and religion. It is a process that exposes the underlying weakness of the state and its lack of ideological hegemony, but also reveals that the political process of symbolic bargaining works both ways. The mild tone, participative format and modern flavor of Khaled's discourse did not emerge in a cultural, social and historical vacuum. On the contrary, Khaled demonstrates that the “complex process of borrowing translating,

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<sup>201</sup> Khaled, *Kalam min al-'alb: hubb Allah al-'abd*.

and creating new mixtures – what some theorists prefer to call cultural hybrids”<sup>202</sup> is a crowded, creative process that highlights the “ways in which new ideas are given firm bases by social and economic transformations as well as ideological familiarization, especially now through powerful forms of mass media.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Abu-Lughod, 263.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 264.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Several months before the ban on Amr Khaled's *da'wa* activities forced him to leave Egypt, *The Economist* published an article signaling him out as "just one sign of the accelerating depoliticisation of Islam."<sup>204</sup> In addition to examples from the mass media and consumer culture, the article cited recent state-sponsored "confessions" by former militants to argue that a "kinder, gentler Islam" has confirmed and accelerated "the fading of the Islamists' vision."<sup>205</sup> The state's subsequent decision to toss Khaled out of the country would seem to throw a wrench into that theory. If Khaled was such a benign incarnation of moderate Islamic piety, why would the state try to silence him? Why did the regime not parade Khaled as a paragon of instead? It may be that Khaled said or did something specific to spark the crackdown on his preaching, but the ample precedent for the state's repressive actions against charismatic Islamic lay preachers,<sup>206</sup> combined with the halting-yet-persistent process of Khaled's fall from grace, suggests a deeper and more revealing reason for the ban, which cannot be explained by simply labeling Khaled's *da'wa* the antithesis of political Islamism. As this thesis has argued, the "Amr Khaled Phenomenon" does not expose the failure of political Islam so much as a different manifestation of political Islam, one that reflects a more subtle game of symbolic bargaining and ideological rivalry with the state.<sup>207</sup>

The reality is that Islamism as an ideology vacillates along two "revolutionary" and "reformist" poles, the first of which emphasizes change through state power and second of which argues for Islamization from the bottom up.<sup>208</sup> In Egypt, the militants managed to assassinate a president, but their violent tactics were unable to inspire the kind of mass movement that would spark a larger upheaval and topple the government, giving them control over state apparatus and institutions. For that matter, it did not even work as a small-scale *coup d'état*. Sadat's assassination simply led his successor to crack down more brutally on Islamic movements as a whole, while the violent Islamist-led campaigns of the 1980s and '90s encouraged

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<sup>204</sup> "Egyptian Islamists," 42.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> In addition to Kafi, Yemini preacher Habib Ali was deported from Egypt in the summer of 2002 "for no apparent reason, the main charge against him being that he concentrated on preaching to upper-class businessmen and convincing well-known actresses and singers to take the veil." (Shahine, "Preacher," 4.)

<sup>207</sup> There remains a need for further study of Khaled and his fellow "new-style" preachers, particularly in terms of a textual analysis that would look more closely at Khaled's use of stories and verses from the Qu'ran, Hadith and Sunna, as well as a more thorough investigation of his own attitudes, teachings and personal background.

<sup>208</sup> Roy, 24.

further regime repression and alienated many Egyptians who disapproved of terrorism in the name of religion, even if they did not necessarily buy into nationalist counter-propaganda like *The Terrorist*.

Islamic discourse, stripped of much of its overt militancy, has become a fixture of public life in Egypt, since authorities can repress but not ignore the symbolic challenge posed by Islamism. The norms established in the process of Islamic protestation already have affected discourses on power, modernity and morality in the region. Olivier Roy goes so far as to argue that the moment for a radical Islamic political revolution already has passed, and that since the 1980s, Islamism has shifted toward a more conservative “neofundamentalism” which stresses “Islamisation from below”:

In short, far from being the revolutionary avant-garde, the Islamists have branched out into both civil society and the political class. Although the specter of Islamic revolution is fading, Islamic symbols are penetrating the society and the political discourse of the Muslim world more than ever. The retreat of political Islamism has been accompanied by the advancement of Islam as a social phenomenon.<sup>209</sup>

Roy’s analysis sets up what may be too sharp a distinction between neofundamentalism and political Islamism, exaggerating the certainty of political Islamism’s demise. The relationship between “political Islam” and “neofundamentalism” may be much more intricate and overlapping (and, for that matter, successful in penetrating political classes, affecting government practices, and adjusting the institutionalized relationship of religion to the state) than his discussion suggests. But Roy’s main point remains salient, especially in the case of Egypt, where an increasing re-Islamization of society—impossible for the state to contain through conventional means of force of coercion—appears to be taking advantage of the scale and scope proved by new media technologies to filtering through the classes both upwards and downwards. “This is the strategy of the Islamists: Islamizing from within,” warns Mustafa, arguing that Khaled and others like him are gaining influence by taking advantage of the lack of channels for political expression in Egypt to become charismatic preacher-politicians. “He’s gaining more votes,” she complained. “If we had a free election who will win? They will.”<sup>210</sup> Ironically, however, the more broadly popular Islamist ideas are, the more diluted they may become. “Islamist ideas have spread throughout broad sectors of Muslim societies, losing part of their political force in this popularization,” argues Roy.<sup>211</sup>

As described in Chapter Two, Khaled shares Islamism’s mantra, “Islam is the solution,” but the inherent vagary of such a motto leaves him in his element, with plenty of room to maneuver. To many of his

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>210</sup> Mustafa, interview.

<sup>211</sup> Roy, 26.

fans, Amr Khaled's *da'wa* exemplifies a new trend of Islamic preaching that offers a third way between disillusionment with "old-fashioned" state-subsidized preachers, and discomfort with political Islamism's association with *takhwif*, extremism and religious violence.<sup>212</sup> But just how much of an innovator is Khaled? How far does his "reform" go? Bayat argues that Khaled "advances a religious discourse which contains passion, clarity, relevance and humor, but lacks novelty, nuance and vigour. While his style is highly imaginative, his theology remains deeply scriptural, with little perspective to historicize, to bring critical reason into interpretations."<sup>213</sup> In Bayat's view, it is only really Khaled's style that is innovative, not his message. Khaled's real importance lies in how he is both a "by-product" and a "catalyst" of "a clear shift from the earlier emphasis on Islamist polity to one on personal piety and ethics; from constituencies centered around impoverished middle classes to more fragmented adherents including the privileged groups."<sup>214</sup> Haenni agrees, saying that the new preachers are neofundamentalists whose discourse represents "modernization without modernists."<sup>215</sup> He argues Khaled is an agent of modernization "more through the atmosphere he is creating" than in the content of the lessons he is teaching.<sup>216</sup>

However, the "atmosphere" Khaled creates through his *da'wa* is a function of the marriage of message and content reinforcing each other to create a malleable synthesis of symbols and techniques that offer to reconcile modernity and religion. At the core of Khaled's popular success, particularly with *al-Rawshana* youth and women, is his ability to use these symbols and techniques to adapt, adjust, compromise and attempt to reinvent the way a religious authority figure interacts with and relates to his congregation. His stated goal is to create a conversion "dialogue" between interlinking hearts and souls. Accordingly, Khaled's form of preaching encourages the audience's active involvement and input. Speaking to his followers as a friend and equal, or an older brother perhaps, rather than from the formal distance of the *minbar*. Khaled seems to offer an alternative to the hierarchical and authoritarian image of the traditional *khatib*. "Compared to the patronizing manner of a typical Azhari sheikh," Bayat notes, "the amiable and compassionate Khalid appears as a true democrat."

By offering a more "democratic" *experience* of religion, Khaled may be reconceiving norms of sacred authority as they are expressed and understood in modern Egyptian society, but is he challenging

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<sup>212</sup> Shahine, "Piety."

<sup>213</sup> Bayat, 20.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Haenni, interview.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

concepts of political authority as well? Abdellah Hammoudi argues that authority structures in the Middle East are historically, culturally and socially constructed using the Sufi Master-Disciple relationship as a template. Leaders or chiefs use a combination of the exchange of gifts, the manipulation of force and a system of close personal ties to establish and maintain his power:

The repeated displays ... reveal the existence of a lasting consensus about how a chief should look: we can see that a certain way of marking all matters of precedence—between fathers and son, mentors and apprentices, masters and disciples—has come to acquire a lasting hegemony. This schema, which articulates the discourse of social arrangements within families, labor organizations and institutions of learning and initiation, reaches its highest elaboration in cultural history—particularly in the lives and actions of the saints.<sup>217</sup>

According to Hammoudi's analysis, the unequal Master-Disciple paradigm is driven by an ethic of charisma (*baraka*) that informs power relations by contrasting the absolute authority of the Master with absolute submission of the Disciple. The imprint of such dialectic, he argues, is everywhere: in mosques and homes as well as palaces and bureaucracies. Beloved Sheikh Sha'rawi, with his reputation for *baraka* and his traditional Azhar education, embodied the classical ideal as he handed down his interpretations from the incontestable authority of the *minbar*. For his part, Khaled retains charisma and love as sources of his public moral authority, but his advocacy of a form of preaching that encourages a conversational "dialogue," rather than a dictatorial "monologue" sets him apart and potentially could be interpreted as challenging the normative foundations of Hammoudi's Master-Disciple image. Shahin speculates that Khaled, intentionally or not, is promoting a "tolerant, ethical and moral version of Islam may give rise at a political level to a movement that could espouse Islamic liberalism. It is not against individualism or technology, does not force you to submerge your identity in a collective, but it's not uncommunal."<sup>218</sup> While such a possibility must remain purely speculative, Hammoudi's Master-Disciple theory may help explain why the Egyptian "regime is particularly allergic to charisma in religious figures, but it's not much more tolerant of leadership skills in any other facet of public life either."<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Hammoudi, 76.

<sup>218</sup> Shahin, interview.

<sup>219</sup> Negus, 4.

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**APPENDIX**

[See Full Thesis for Images]