Piety, Privilege and Egyptian Youth

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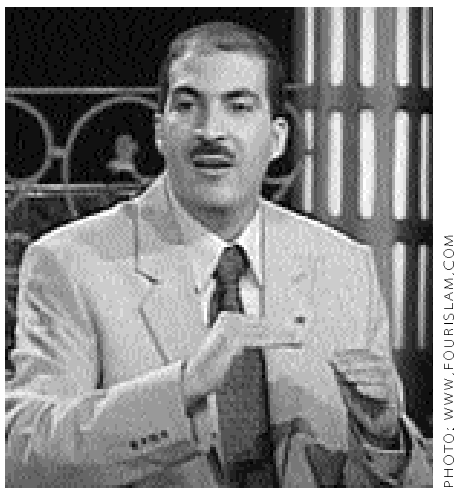
Understandably, the 11 September terrorist attacks in the USA have reinforced more than ever Western anxieties over the 'threat' of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. The perpetrators' Islamic identity and the subsequent mass street protests in the Muslim world during the US bombings of Afghanistan left little doubt that political Islam in the Middle East is here to stay. However, the picture conceals some significant changes that Islamism in the Middle East has been undergoing in recent years. There is a clear shift from the earlier emphasis on Islamist polity to one on personal piety and ethics; from constituencies centred around impoverished middle classes to more fragmented adherents including the privileged groups.

Specificity of individual Muslim countries notwithstanding, there seems to be a change from Islamism as a political project with a contentious agenda into an active piety concerned with personal salvation and culture. The causes of the change are complex, but broadly include the crisis of Islamic rule wherever it was put into practice (as in Iran and Sudan), the failure of violent strategies (e.g. in Egypt and Algeria), more hostile Israeli policies which overshadow domestic conflicts in Muslim countries, and thus the emergence of new visions about the Islamic project.

The following concentrates on one aspect of change in Egyptian religious activism – the popularity of a new genre of lay Muslim preachers. In particular, the focus is on what is currently described in Egypt as the 'Amr Khalid phenomenon'. As the most popular preacher since Sheikh Shaʿrawi, Amr Khalid exemplifies a transformation of Islamism into a post-Islamist piety – an active piety which is thick in rituals and scriptures and thin in politics. It is marked and framed by the taste and style of the rich, in particular, affluent youth and women; and sociologically underlies a Simmelian 'fashion'. Thus, the convergence of youth sub-culture, élitism, and a pietistic Islam together produce this new genre of *daʿwa* and its appeal. It has grown against a backdrop of a crisis of political Islam, and a profound stagnation in Egypt's intellectual and political landscape.



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Amr Khalid

Since 1999, Amr Khalid, an accountant-turned-preacher, has become a household name in wealthy Cairo. Khalid followed the leads of fellow lay preachers ʿUmarAbdel-Kafi and Khalid el-Guindy, but surpassed them in popularity amongst the well-to-do youth and women. A gifted orator – televangelist style – he began by lecturing in private homes and exclusive social clubs, but soon rose to stardom at the pulpit of El-Hossari Mosque in the trendy Muhandesin, before he was forced by the authorities to move to 6th October City, a new posh community in the outskirts of Cairo. His weekly lessons have become a spiritual staple for thousands of young people who flock from throughout the city's affluent districts to hear him. Crowds arrive hours in advance of the sermons to get a spot, filling the lecture halls, the surrounding streets and sidewalks, often causing heavy traffic congestion. In 1999, Amr Khalid delivered up to 21 lessons a week in socially prominent households, peaking at 99 during the Ramadan. The tapes of Amr Khalid's sermons were the unparalleled best sellers in Cairo's massive Book Fair in 2002, and have travelled as far as the back-street markets of East Jerusalem, Beirut and the Persian Gulf cities.

Faith and fun

The new preachers deliberately target youth and women of the élite classes, 'the people with influence', because 'they have the power to change things', according to Khalid el-Guindy. Since the élite families generally kept away from the traditional mosques located in the lower class areas, the young preachers brought their message to their doorsteps, to the comfort of their private homes, social clubs and the stylish mosques of their posh neighbourhoods. More importantly, in addition to face-to-face sermons, Amr Khalid utilizes a full range of media to disseminate his message, including satellite television channels such as Dream T.V., Iqra'a and Orbit, the internet with his state of the art website, and audio and videotapes – media which particularly reach the middle and more affluent classes. For some time a popular state-sponsored magazine, *Al-Ahram al-Arabi*, distributed his tapes as gifts to readers. Khalid el-Guindy established a paid 'Islamic Hotline' (*hatif al-Islami*) to be used by the public to seek advice from the sheikh. Within the period of one year daily calls increased from 250 to 1,000. For his part, Amr Khalid travelled with his message to the stylish Agami and other upper middle class north coast resorts, and has more recently gone on speaking tours to Arab Gulf states where his fame had already spread. The colourful décor and a talk-show-like aura of his lecture halls, in contrast to the austere Azherite pulpits, reflect the taste of his main audience – males and females from 15 to 35 years of age, never before exposed to religious ideas in such an appealing and direct manner.

Amr Khalid's style resembles that of his young, affluent audience; he appears cleanly shaven in blue jeans and polo shirts or in suit and necktie. Khalid simultaneously embodies the hip-ness (*rewish*) of Amr Diab (Egypt's most revered pop-star), the persuasion power of evangelist Billy Graham, and unsubtle therapy of Dr Phil, American popular talk-show host. For the young, Khalid, in the words of a female fan, is 'the only preacher that embraces and tackles *our* spiritual needs', someone who 'makes us psychologically comfortable', 'who treats us like adults, not children'. Unlike more orthodox preachers known for their joyless moralizing and austere methods, Khalid articulates a marriage of faith and fun. Speaking in a sympathetic tone, compassionate manner, and in colloquial Arabic, Khalid and his colleagues convey simple ethical messages about the moralities of everyday life, discussing issues that range from relationships, appearance, and adultery, to posh restaurants, drunk driving, the *hijab*, and the sins of summer vacations in Marina. In a sense, the new preachers function as 'public therapists' in a troubled society which shows little appreciation for professional psychotherapy. Emotional intensity, peace, and release (crying) often symbolize Khalid's sermons.

From the likes of Khalid, the young hear the message that they can be religious and still live a normal life – work, study, have fun and look like anyone else in society. More importantly his words assure the audience that they can be pious while maintaining their power and prestige. Khalid's message operates within the consumer culture of Egypt's nouveau riche where piety and privilege are made to cohabit as enduring partners. Analogous to the Methodist church of the well-to-do in the American Bible belt where faith and fortune are happily conjoined, Khalid's style makes the Egyptian rich feel good about their fortunes.

Of course, adherence to religious ethics and the search for spirituality are not new among Egyptian Muslims, including the wealthy youth. But theirs was a *passive* religious attachment. That is, as believers, they unquestioningly carried out their religious obligations. However, what seems to be novel (since the late 1990s) is that affluent families, the youth and women in particular, have begun to exhibit an *active* search for religious devotion, exhibiting an extraordinary quest for religious ideas and identity. Not only do they practise their faith, they also preach it, wanting others to believe and behave like them.

Scriptural cosmopolitanism

Khalid is not a scholar or interpreter of the Qur'an, and does not issue fatwas. Rather he is devoted to correcting individuals' ethical values and everyday behaviour, fostering such values as humility, generosity, trust, loyalty, and repentance. However, he is not a liberal Muslim thinker. Some of his ideas remain highly conservative, and his methods manipulative. Khalid advances a religious discourse which contains passion, clarity, relevance, and humour, 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. On the *hijab*, for instance, Khalid begins by basing the 'integrity of society […] on the integrity of women' and the latter on 'her *hijab*', because 'one women can easily entice one hundred men, but one hundred men cannot entice a single woman'. Since, according to this logic, unveiled women are promoters of sin, a 'complete, head-to-toe *hijab* is an obligation in Islam'. The unconvinced Muslim women are not really Muslim, he claims, because Islam, in the literal terms, means simply 'submission' to the words of God.

In fact, Khalid's doctrinal views hardly differ from those of orthodox Azharite sheikhs who dismiss him despite, and perhaps because of, his popularity. Rather, in the current juncture in Egypt where religious thought in general possesses little sign of innovation (and this is testified by Islamic thinkers from Yusef al-Qaradawi to Salim el-Awa, to the activist Essam el-Erian), Khalid appears as an innovator, if only in style. The mass appeal of the likes of Khalid is a by-product of Egypt's mass education, one that valorizes memorization, fragmenting knowledge, revering printed words, and nurturing authoritarian mentors. Compared to the patronizing manner of a typical Azhari sheikh, the amiable and compassionate Khalid appears as a true democrat. For those who have learnt to take shortcuts in seeking knowledge, or are trained to be docile learners, Khalid emerges as a superior source of wisdom. 'He is easy to understand' echoes what the young admirers of Khalid invariably express.

Yet this new genre of *daʿwa* is as much the initiative of the sermonizers as a response to the appeal of the increasingly globalizing youth. In a sense, Egyptian cosmopolitan youth fostered a new religious sub-culture – one which is expressed in a distinctly novel style, taste, language and message. 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'.

Thus, from the prism of youth, this religious sub-culture (ideas, emotions, and identities) galvanized around the 'Amr Khalid phenomenon' is partly an expression of 'fashion' in the Simmelian sense, in the sense of an outlet that facilitates a simultaneous fulfilment of contradictory human tendencies: change and adaptation, difference and similarity, individuality and social norms. Adherence to active piety permits the Egyptian youth to assert their individuality, undertake change, and yet remain committed to collective norms and social equalization. In the social juncture in Egypt characterized by the decline of organized Islamism, intellectual stagnation and political closure, Khalid ingeniously took his *daʿwa* literally to the sitting rooms of his audience. By doing so, Khalid and his colleagues became catalysts for a gradual shift in Egyptian religious politics.

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