CHAPTER FIVE

PIETY-ATTAINMENT AND EXPRESSION IN A CONSUMER CONTEXT

Leila, Raga and I made it a habit to exercise right before iftar to help burn off some of the fat accumulated through the many delicious meals consumed during the course of Ramadan. We enjoyed jogging around Hadeqat el-Tefl (Children’s Park) in Nasr City, which is safe and relatively green with wide pavements to comfortably walk on. One time we came across a street billboard advertising a new type of phone card called ‘Alohat’ (Hellos) provided by Mobinil, one of Egypt’s leading mobile operators. The advertisement showed Egyptian actress Yasmine Abdel Aziz speaking on her cellular phone and wearing tight leather pants and a sleeveless t-shirt. I caught Leila shaking her head disapprovingly and saying under her breath ‘Wallahi..Haram ‘alehom’. I asked her why did she not like the advertisement and she quickly responded ‘We are in the month of ‘ibadah (service to God) and taqwa (piety) and not a cabaret’. She explained that Ramadan should be the time when one is expected to focus attention on religious duties and charity work, and not material things. She added that sexually-explicit images give a wrong impression of Ramadan, the so-called ideal time for Muslims to realize taqwa by strictly adhering to Islamic modes of piety such as modesty. In addition, seductive representations may particularly disrupt males’ attention from service to Allah by sexually arousing them. Raga agreed with Leila’s statement adding that the seductive image of actress Yasmine Abdel Aziz also mis-represents how a ‘proper’ Muslim woman should look like. While neither Raga nor Leila wears the
headscarf or hijab, they stated that a proper Muslim woman should be dressed in modest clothing that should be neither transparent nor defining her body shape. A few days after this discussion, we went exercising again in the same area and to our surprise the Mobinil advertisement was sprayed with black paint to specifically cover the model’s arms and private parts. The word haram (prohibited) was written with black paint on the billboard (See image 9). Laughingly Raga looked at the maltreated advertisement and said ‘Looks like Mobinil will be loosing millions this Ramadan!’ implying that the mobile operator’s Ramadan campaign turned out to be a failure.

This incident reflects one of the main issues of contestations in Egyptian society in terms of representation and, to a large extent, commercialization of piety during the holy month. Many Egyptians feel that their society is witnessing a decline in the understanding of religious obligations (as a way to organizing daily conduct) highly dictated by the sacred month. Secularization (‘almana or ‘almaniyya) and Westernization are usually blamed for reducing Islamic knowledge and practices to mere customs (‘ada) such as consumption of ‘Islamic commodities’ (cf. Starrett 1995).154 These trends are generally held responsible for the overall penetration of the market system in almost all religious and traditional practices or spaces. In this view, nearly all Ramadan-related religious objects and practices have come to attain monetary value and denied their normative significances. To those who are immersed in a consumerist lifestyle, however, the infusion of the sacred with the profane is highly appealing. Their consumption of Islamic commodities and access to technological media (television and the internet) allow them to attain piety without giving up the pleasure of modern life.155 Finally, the incident noted earlier with Leila and Raga, highlights the fact that in Muslim societies it is particularly women’s diversion from the ‘proper’ and ‘modest’ Islamic dress-code and behavior that is prone to the highest criticism.

154 Social sciences have mostly studied religion from the perspective of the secularization thesis. According to Casanova (1994) this thesis is made up of three (uneven) assumptions, namely secularization as a separating force from religious institutions, secularization as marginalization of religion, and secularization as limiting religion to the private domain (1994: 211).

155 This perspective opposes what Emile Durkheim (1953) proposed that the sacred resides separately in the sphere of religion and the profane in the secular world. ‘The sacred….cannot, without losing its nature, be mixed with the profane. Any mixture or even contact, profanes it…destroys its essential attributes’ (Durkheim, 1953:70).
It is crucial to clarify that the prevailing sentiment shared among many Egyptians that religious values and practices have become undermined nowadays, stands in a striking contradiction to the reality of increasing religiosity in Egypt. It appears that the more Egyptians cultivate a religious sensitivity the more they complain that their society is less religious than ever. Egyptians attribute the feelings of loss of religious guidance to secularization, Westernization and global consumption as noted earlier. The sense that the moral and spiritual foundations of their society has weakened, is in fact a ground stone of the Islamic revival movement, described in chapter one. The general popular feelings that Egypt has become more secular and less moral are a religious and political claim to more Islam. In other words, these sentiments are cultivated as a way to make more and far-reaching demands for Islamisation.156 These Islamisation demands involve more strict religious practices, for instance, stern codes on dress-style, worship and socialization.

In this chapter I will explore how contemporary Ramadan leisure practices are characterized by interacting discourses on piety and consumerism. Similar to research conducted by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989), the focus will be on how contemporary social values and conduct have shifted boundaries between the sacred and the profane in relation to the market culture.157 What becomes apparent is that Ramadan has become a highly commercial month where piety and global consumption go hand in hand. Piety is embedded in, and shaped by global consumerist discourses, which, in turn, are transformed through this interaction with piety. There are voices in the Egyptian society that oppose the blend of religious and commercial values, in fear that it may

---

156 Islamist groups, non-political preachers like Amr Khalid and the Salafi reformists (The Salafi movement is the most radical current within the wider discourse of Islamic reform. They are committed to a rigid and comprehensive moral discipline) on the satellite channels employ and reinforce the sentiment that the Egyptian society has become more secular and less moral. Accordingly, they preach for more strict religious practices. For example, the Salafi preachers' demand the *niqab* dress-code for women. They admit that it is not an Islamic obligation but claim that it is necessary because of the assumed current moral crisis. In this light, claims of moral crisis and secularization appear as a way to handle the fact that despite increasing Islamisation, things are still not all right in Egypt. Rather than questioning the project of Islamisation, the reaction is to assume that Egypt is more secular than ever, and demand more religious rules.

157 The market culture is a global phenomenon that was first monitored by historian and economist Karl Polanyi (2001) in *The Great Transformation*, in which Polanyi recorded the huge transformation that happened in Europe over the past three centuries. Polanyi highlighted the growth of the global ‘market system’, where almost everything is transformed into a commodity and hence becomes for sale. Under this market culture, many things gradually came to be the object of a transaction of buying and selling, and hence, gain in monetary value.
undermine religious values and practices. I argue, however, that from an anthropological point of view, this blend of values can be interpreted as opening up new ways of being modern and religious simultaneously. For the young upper-middle class women who are thoroughly embedded in modern lifestyles, consumption has become an important self-technique to construct and experience a religious self. Moreover, the sacralization of everyday life allows religion to emerge in public spaces that were previously marked as secular. Finally, in the last section I examine gender-specific cultural issues related to women’s expression of piety within the public sphere in modern Cairo.

1. The Meaning of taqwa in the Islamic Doctrine

The term taqwa is one of the most essential recurring terms in the Koran and is the biggest drive for practicing Muslims during Ramadan. Taqwa is used in the Koran for both ‘piety’ and ‘fear of God’ and often used interchangeably with the terms khashya (fear, anxiety and apprehension) and khauf (fear). Taqwa has other various translations and definitions. For this research I found Amina Wadud’s definition as the most applicable in relation to Ramadan and debates about what taqwa entails in contemporary times. Wadud states that taqwa means ‘piety, that is, a pious manner of behavior which observes constraints appropriate to a social-moral system; and a consciousness of Allah, that is observing that manner of behavior because of one’s reverence towards Allah’ (Wadud, 1999:37).

Piety is interpreted by a number of `ulama to be mainly facilitated through purifying the body, mind and physical space (Trittoon, 1987:608). In Ramadan piety can be developed by fasting and increased participation in religious activities while putting profane interests aside. Physically, fasting is believed to purify the body through helping release waste products that have been built up. Various polluting substances are

---

158 A similar argument was raised in exploring consumption patterns at al-Husayn area (Old Cairo) during Ramadan. See, Buitelaar and Saad (2010).
159 In this perspective I adopt Asad (2003), George and Willford (2005) stance who refute the secularization thesis which predicted that religion would become more and more a private matter.
160 Piety has been translated by a number of religious scholars as ‘best conduct’, ‘warding off evil’, ‘most righteous’, ‘not to transgress’, ‘moral excellence’, and ‘a unique balance of integrative moral action…to be squarely anchored within the moral tensions, the limits of God and not to transgress or violate the balance of those tensions or limits’ (Wadud, 1999:43).
considered to undermine one’s body pureness (cf. Tritton, 1987). Such impurities must be removed by performing the *wudu*, the minor ritual ablution that consists of rinsing one’s head and limbs three times. Sacred spaces, like the mosque, are also expected to be thoroughly cleaned.

On the spiritual level, sinning or having evil or *haram* thoughts is viewed as contaminating one’s conscience and fast and, consequently, undermining one’s ability to attain a higher state of piety (al-Husayni, 1975). In Ramadan, Muslims are advised by religious preachers to strive for the highest state of piety, and hence to avoid sinful acts or places that were presented in chapter two. Muslims are also expected to engage in religious acts with the intention or *niya* to please God. Moreover, any forms of temptations or distractions that may deviate one from the righteous path are disapproved of.

The Koran does not privilege one gender over another in terms of the capacity for *taqwa*. In surat al-Hujarat (49:13) it states *Inna akramakum ‘inda Allah atqakum* or ‘Indeed the most noble of you from Allah’s perspective is whoever (he or she) has the most *taqwa*’. Wadud (1999) interprets this to mean that from God’s standpoint the differentiating criteria between individuals is not wealth, nationality, sex or historical setting but piety. She notes that this verse follows verses that warn all individuals for mocking, defaming and back-biting one another (cf. Koran al-Hujurat 49: 11-12) without making any distinctions in gender, race or any forms of identity.

### 2. Egyptians’ Views on *Taqwa*

Ramadan is viewed by Egyptian Muslims as the month that offers the best opportunities and rewards for developing *taqwa*. Often Egyptians would interchangeably use the Arabic words *tadayyun* (religiosity) and *iltizam* (discipline) as means of attaining or expressing *taqwa*.

General focus on religion by the media and public facilities through increased provision of religious classes, Islamic commodities and charity projects all create an atmosphere of sacredness. Further, people are spared more free time to engage in religious activities with reduced work hours during the days of fasting. Moreover, as
stated in the previous chapter, a common belief among Egyptians is that Ramadan is a *shahr moftarag*. It is believed to be the time when the spiritual connection between God and humans is strongest and the time when prayers are answered. In order to attain and express piety, many engage in religious leisure activities such as prayers, philanthropy, attending religious classes and, for some social groups, consumption of religious commodities.

Ramadan-related religious activities are expected to be carried out in a context of physical purity. Physical purity for the informants does not only entail thorough cleansing of one’s house, neighborhood, behavior and attitudes but also ‘purifying’ physical appearance. How one appears or dresses in public is viewed as a crucial criterion for piety. Consequently, more rigid social expectations for increased modesty in dress-style and behavior within the public sphere apply in Ramadan. This issue is particularly vital for women who are expected to resort to a modest dress-style in Ramadan as aids to be recognized as pious persons more than men do. In that perspective, women are expected to exert more effort to appear pious within the public sphere.  

Ramadan also becomes the time when Muslims strive for spiritual purification. The holy month is perceived as the prime time for one to strengthen self-determination in terms of commitment to positive habits and abstinence from unhealthy or forbidden acts. During the holy month people express and show more persistence to conduct all religious *`ibadat* and abstain from negative habits such as lying and cheating. Ramadan is thus regarded by Muslims as a crucial temporal time for moral training and cultivation.

However, many people complain that the increased commercialization of the holy month has made it a challenge to focus on religious acts and, accordingly, become spiritually purified. Ramadan nowadays is heavily immersed with consumerist and secular interests that may distract one from attaining spiritual purification and achieving the much aspired *taqwa* during the holy month. Examples include the presence of numerous entertainment shows on television and, overall, excessive availability of profane leisure services in the public sphere. In the next section I will explain how some commercial trends, apparent in Ramadan, are believed to undermine one’s ability to achieve *taqwa*.

---

161 I will address this issue more elaborately in section 5.3 in this same chapter.
3. **Opposition to Consumerism and Westernization**

The *Infitah* or ‘open-door policies’ by the late president Sadat has marked major changes in Egyptian social practices and lifestyles. Following Abdel-Khalek (1981), the so-called economic liberation policies may be better called ‘turning West’. Turning West in the sense of opening the Egyptian market to the importation of durable Western consumer goods, particularly from the United States, which have become integrated into new patterns of consumption.\(^{162}\) Along with the increased importation of material goods from the West, came also the transmission of Western culture values. I argue that the intensification of capitalism and transmission of Western discourses, facilitated by the *Infitah* policies, have profound implications on how piety is sought and expressed nowadays. In this section I highlight the main issues of criticisms towards consumerism and Westernization in relation to how upper-middle class women experience Ramadan.

The *Infitah* policies have created fertile ground for the blossoming of the market system. With the sudden turmoil and increase in oil prices during the early seventies, the gradual reduction of government intervention for the protection of lower-income groups and the flow of wealth into the country from transfers of funds, encouraged the flourishing of the market culture and the purchasing power of large segments of the population (Amin 2000). Another important factor that facilitated the prospering of the market culture at that time was the development of the television.\(^{163}\) Amin notes that television is the main vehicle for the promotion of the market culture and all its commodities (El-Noshokaty, 2006:14).

Accordingly, during the holy month, commercialism takes on a life of its own as nearly everything has been dressed in the cloak of Ramadan, straight from the increased promotion and sales of commodities to their over-consumption. Some people believe Ramadan has changed from a month of sacredness to one of consumerism; they criticize those who use faith to commercialize products and services and, simultaneously, those who over-consume goods during that month.

---

\(^{162}\) During the 1950s and the 1960s, Egyptian trade was directed towards Eastern Europe, mainly exchanging agricultural products and other raw materials. A geographic and structural reorientation took place during the 1970s to include the establishment of close ties with the West.

\(^{163}\) While television existed in Egypt in the early 1960s, its promotional functions and reach (number of television sets) have grown immensely in recent times.
Objects and practices related to Ramadan and Islamic rituals have been subjected to ‘commodification’, which refers to the process by which things and activities come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value in a context of trade (Goulding, 2000:837). It will become apparent that commercial interest informs some people’s intention to participate in religious activities and, additionally, has transformed religious symbols into money-making commodities.

Consumerism is also perceived by some to have marginalized Islamic knowledge, both as a mode of conduct and as a set of principles, to an abstract set of beliefs with no link to contemporary practicalities and challenges. This marginalization of religion is reflected in some people lack of iltizam or commitment to religious obligations. For instance, women’s adherence to modest dress-styles during Ramadan and/or fasting hours only. Consumption of what is known as ‘Islamic commodities’ as a means to express piety are also viewed by some social groups as undermining religious knowledge.

The young upper-middle classes in particular have oriented themselves towards prestigious consumption of Islamic commodities. Most people from this social group prefer to adopt that kind of consumption as a visual symbol of their religious identity, which in turn, distinguishes them from non-Muslims. However, lower-class segments of society view these patterns as undermining religious practices by transforming them to mere conventions, fashion icons and empting them of their normative significances. Mahmood (2003:841) refers to this kind of bodily display as ‘Muslim folklore’ which is undertaken as a form of entertainment or custom to exhibit a religo-cultural identity but is not intrinsically religiously motivated.

Along with the intensification of consumption, a new mass culture in Egypt emerged with the Infitah policies. This new culture pertains to the communication of...
Western images, narratives and discourses such as independence, freedom and romance. These discourses or what Appadurai (1990:299) would call ‘ideoscapes’ are mainly transmitted through the avant-garde media, predominantly satellite television and internet. Other factors that opened the doors to Westernization were the growing number of tourists visiting Egypt, bilateral trade and business relations with the West, increased number of foreign education institutes and the integration in the international financial systems (Werner, 1997).

Stauth (1987:80-81) draws an interesting analogy between consumerism and mass culture in Egypt as follows:

We understand mass culture as a new form of communication related to the distribution and consumption of goods and imagined attitudes. In this form, communication takes on a certain logic in representing and exchanging goods, formulas, pictures, visions, symbolic expressions, signs of a far away practical and real everyday world that comes close to you. Within the logic of communication people create and recreate their own practical and ideal orders of everyday life.

In that sense, the Infitah policies have not only opened the doors for the consumption of Western goods but also for new global values that people negotiate into the symbolic order of their societies. The trend of upper-middle class women who prefer to adopt a merge of Western and religious practices or values, may not always be welcomed by previous generations.

One common criticism among the older generations (regardless of social class) is that the young people’s increased exposure to Western culture leisure lifestyle, such as alcohol consumption, may undermine their religious beliefs. Within the context of Egypt this issue is particularly relevant where families and religious preachers urge piety twenty-four hours a day throughout the year; while foreign media shows encourage personal freedom to seek one’s own path without restraints. The result is confusion on issues such as how traditional-religious views should be translated into concrete behavior/conduct; and to what extent one has the personal freedom to make choices related to religious expression while not compromising social approval. This perspective

166 Ideoscapes are concentrations of images, mainly political and having to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it (Appadurai, 1990: 299).
matches what Gregg (2007) has defined as ‘Westoxication’, the common perception that the merging of Western culture with local traditions results in a negative outcome so that individuals experience a ‘cultural schizophrenia’ in terms of being torn between various cultural repertoires.167

Youth are also viewed by previous generations as an important segment of the population, since they will be the transmitters of culture and Islamic tradition through their own families. Older interviewees would frequently refer to the young people as the ‘future’, ‘protectors’ and ‘preservers’ of Islamic values. In other words, how youth behave is perceived to have long-term consequences on society and the Islamic umma as a whole.

In addition, the Islamic revival or Islamic awakening (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) movement began roughly sometime in the 1970s, at the time of the Infitah. The main implication of this movement is that Egyptian society has become much more religious in the past decades. This is manifested in greater religious piety, and community feeling, and in a growing adoption of Islamic culture, dress, terminology, separation of the sexes, and values by Muslims. Proponents of this Islamisation process further propagate the idea that the Egyptian society has become more secular and less moral, which is not factually true. Accordingly, I emphasize that many of those statements made by respondents in opposition to consumerism and Westernization are first and foremost performative statements. These critical remarks are used by particularly low-income respondents to make claims to social legitimacy and a moral high ground where they lack economic prestige. For instance, the poor Cairo residents who oppose the consumer culture of the elites, actually do celebrate Ramadan in a consumerist fashion, too, only more modestly. Their opposition towards the elite’s lavish consumption patterns may not mainly be about consumerism in the first place. Rather, they are making a point about social class differences. It is more rewarding to maintain that a modest economic life style is more ‘religious’, than strive for the unattainable life style of the rich.

In this section I present in detail the perceived negative implications of the commercial culture and Westernization discourses on how Ramadan is practiced

167 The term ‘Westoxication’ goes back to the Iranian Philosopher Ahmad Fardid and was popularised by the Iranian author Jalal Al-e-Ahmad in the early 1960’s. Curiously, the notion seems to be heavily influenced by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.
nowadays. Commercialization is believed to have transformed the month of piety into that of trade, propagated the notion of freedom of choice in relation to morality, distracts people from attendance to pious acts and, finally, motivates people in pursuing religious acts. Simultaneously, Westernization is noted to have introduced new global values that are believed to challenge religious values and, hence, hinders one’s realization of piety.

3.1 Distraction from pious acts

I once attended a pre-Ramadan meeting organized by Rotaract, the local branch of a social organization, where I witnessed a very interesting debate between the members. A young female volunteer, Nagla, enthusiastically came up with a large number of ideas for the kinds of charity activities that could be organized in Ramadan. The activities ranged from organizing mawa'id al-Rahman to distributing food packages to orphanages. Through vast discussions it became clear that the activities Nagla suggested would consume much time and energy in terms of preparation and fund-raising. Some members thus refused in taking part in some of the proposed activities, explaining that they had other social commitments during Ramadan. With surprise and a frown Nagla responded ‘What is wrong with you people! Ramadan Karim!’ Some of the attendees were quiet, others giggled nervously and some said they will reconsider her proposals. I later asked Nagla what she had meant by her statement. She explained that people nowadays get caught with worldly recreation to the extent of forgetting that the core of Ramadan is investing one’s time in religious and charitable duties.

Mainly the presence of so-called ‘excess’ profane leisure services and ‘sexual obscenities’ in various public spaces are believed to distract people’s attention from service to God and to hamper the attainment of the much desired state of taqwa in Ramadan. Here I explore the main sources of distractions that are thought to do so.

Older informants particularly opposed those television programs that introduced ‘Western recreation’ activities like romantic dating, alcohol consumption and gambling in Ramadan. During my stay in Boulaq I came to know two elderly men who preached in

---

168 Rotaract is an international professional service, leadership and community service organization for young men and women between the ages 18–30.
the neighborhood mosque and taught Arabic and religious studies to children at a school. Sixty-year old sheikh Aly views Western forms of recreation as destructive to the morals of the Egyptian youth and the future of the country. Sixty-two year old Hajj Sayed agreed with the sheikh Aly, adding that most Western leisure images and narratives are abiha or impolite, ‘brainwashes’ teenagers and are like ‘poison’ that undermine Muslim identity. The men were referring to Hussein Fahmy’s television program al-nas wa-ana (The People and I), a show where the presenter discussed contemporary issues like romantic dating, internet chatting, domestic violence etc. Sheikh Aly and Hajj Sayed blamed government authorities for their failure to monitor local television shows as well as, media productions for their greed in making money regardless of ethical considerations to the holy month.

Generally, most young female informants opposed Sheikh Aly and Hajj Sayed’s perspective on the acceptability of Ramadan programs that tackle issues like alcohol consumption, dating etc. The young female respondents affirmed that such practices did indeed exist within their social circle and it was the media’s role to cover these issues. Their own criticism was mainly directed on shows that presented sexually-explicit images or those that were trivial in nature and not directly adding to one’s intellect or knowledge. This perspective is reflected in the below quote:

I think every year el-hayafa beytazdad (triviality increases, ns) during Ramadan. And every year harassment (in terms of sexual images in the media, ns) on the holy month increases. Every year I see things in Ramadan that shock me more than previous years (she is shocked because she believes that the images get more sexually vivid each year, ns). For example, there was a TV series starring Nadia el-Gendy (Egyptian female actress known for her seductive roles, ns)….they are not actors but cheap entertainers. These figures (seductive actresses, ns) should not be associated with the holy month. Such shows do not allow people to do the right things in Ramadan (religious duties, ns) and follow the light of Islam (Noha, 27).

In relation to advertisements, those commercials that have sexually-explicit scenes or seductive-looking models are openly criticized by many (regardless of social position), particularly by devout or practicing Muslims. During the introduction of this chapter, I have described how Mobinil’s billboards’ advertisements for Alohat service were

---

169 Hussein Fahmy’s television program al-nas wa-ana was aired in Ramadan 2008 on Egyptian state-owned channel. The show received immense criticisms due to the topics tackled and, thus, some people believe that this was the main reason it was not broadcasted in consecutive years.
attacked by some people. The ‘attractive’ image of actress/model Yasmine Abdel Aziz wearing revealing clothes was viewed as inappropriate for the sacred month. Another known incident is that of the television commercial *Easy Mozo* cocktail drink which was aired a couple of years ago in Ramadan. The cocktail drink’s advertising campaign, launched in Ramadan, presented attractive models, dancing to hip-hop beats and seductively pronouncing the brand name. The camera was mainly focused on the product and the females’ private parts (hips and breasts). Following a public outcry against the sexual nature of the *Easy Mozo* advertisements, the entire campaign was terminated halfway in Ramadan.

Some informants (regardless of age or social class) expressed opposition towards Arab Music channels like Melody and Mazzika as they continue to air ‘obscene’ or ‘sexual-implication’ scenes of attractive female models or singers wearing tight or revealing clothes. As a matter of fact, many Egyptians criticize the high level of nudity of Arab video clips aired on satellite channels. In March 2005, for example, almost three thousand students at Alexandria University of all political groups, not limited to Islamist, demonstrated against music clips.\(^{170}\) Not only are nudity scenes generally signified as *haram*, but they are especially regarded as ‘impure’ during the holy month. That is because repetitive exposure to sexual content is believed to distract people from purifying their conscience, a prerequisite step for achieving piety. Many people also believe that ‘impure’ sexual thoughts may invalidate their fast.

Some people refute the presence of tempting profane leisure facilities in Ramadan as well. The great number of Ramadan-tailored entertainment shows and profane leisure facilities in the public sphere are criticized for wasting people’s time. Various comics satirize the dozens of TV drama series, advertisements, quizzes and other Ramadan line-ups aired on local and satellites channels. Concurrently, some people disapprove of the ever-so popular *kheyam Ramadan* for taking up so much free time. The key issue is that these profane leisure facilities are perceived to waste one’s time that could instead be

\(^{170}\) Youth demonstrators banners carried slogans like ‘no to stimulating the desires of the youth’ and ‘*Kifaya* (enough) to Rotana and Melody’. They also changed Rotana’s slogan from ‘you won’t be able to shut your eyes’ into ‘we can shut our eyes’. For more on the incident, see Sadek (2005) and Muhammad (2005).
used for religious activities, and would ultimately enable one to reach an elevated pious state of mind.

More importantly, the wide availability of profane-sexual distracters in the public sphere is believed to be responsible for hindering people’s ability to habitualise religious `ibadat.171 This view is shared by some religious preachers and many members of the older generation respondents. Consistent with Aristotelian moral philosophy and Saba Mahmood’s habitualisation concept, Ramadan is propagated by religious preachers as a vital time for Muslims to engage repetitively in pious acts, until actions or reactions become second nature and end up as unconscious behavior throughout the year. Muslims are encouraged to train themselves through repeated religious bodily acts, so as to train their memory, desires and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct. They are also urged to train themselves through continuous persistence in refraining from sinful acts or places. This is also expected to be carried out with the niya of developing an enduring pious attitude and not just within a specific time-frame.172

To conclude, Ramadan is widely believed to be the main impetus for encouraging people to realizing piety in the entirety of their lives. While this view is generally shared by many, in reality, not everyone is able to attain the desired pious state in Ramadan due to the availability of ‘excess’ recreation facilities. For one thing, many people may not only be not able, but also not particularly willing to attain a highly pious state. And more than that, the same people who consume video clips and pursue happiness through consumption also sometimes argue for purist ideals of religious commitment/iltizam. Moreover, few people are able to maintain the same spiritual momentum, initiated in Ramadan, once the sacred month is over.

171 Mahmood (2003) refers to habitualisation as those bodily practices that operate as exercises of ethical self-making. These practices do not simply signify the self but shape it. In her research on a women’s piety mosque movement in Egypt, she notes that the objective of that movement is to counter the trend of Islamic folklorization, which I argue later is facilitated through consumerism. Accordingly, the mosque preachers’ objectives are to restore the understanding of rituals and forms of bodily comportment by teaching women the requisite skills involved in its practice, so that the desire to perform these practices can be cultivated and strengthened in the course of repeated performances of these practices (Mahmood, 2003: 839-840).

172 Reference to van Gennep (1909), the third and last phase of the ‘rite of passage’ is re-aggregation, which succeeds the liminality phase. Re-aggregation or re-integration represents the return of the individual, after having gone through the liminal phase, to society with new positive values and experiences. Those positive values attained are expected to remain with the person for eternity. Ramadan as a liminal phase is expected to transform individuals so that they will continue to live according to new ever-lasting moral values.
3.2 Lack of commitment to ‘ibadat

‘Rega’et Rima li-’adatha el-adima’ or ‘Rima (female name) went back to her old habits’ and ‘deel el-kalb ‘omroh ma yet edel’ or ‘the dog’s tail never straightens-out’ are common sayings that Egyptians tease each other with when someone reverts to an old negative habit after vowing never to do so. Certainly, those people who are committed to religious practices only during the holy month or fasting hours are subject to strong criticisms.173

One of the most prominent phenomenon I have witnessed which receives by far the largest criticism among the Egyptian public is the trend of girls taking up the hijab only during Ramadan and/or fasting hours. For practicality, I will focus on the issue of the hijab in this section.

Generally, Muslims in Cairo make more effort to appear more modest during the holy month. Most female informants resort to wearing long sleeves and skirts, while others prefer to cover their hair, particularly during fasting hours. I also observed that most of the veiled respondents took more extreme forms of the hijab such as full body, head coverage and, in rare cases, hand coverage during fasting hours. Extreme forms of veiling were usually substituted with the ‘Spanish’ or ‘Gypsy’ style headscarves, trendier and less modest outfits after breaking the fast.

In an interview with Dr. Aly Gomaa (Muslim Grand Mofti or interpreter of religious laws), the Imam declared in Ruz al-Yusuf newspaper (29/9/2006) that a Muslim woman should commit to the hijab not only during Ramadan but throughout her life. Her hijab should cover her body except her face, hands and her clothing should not be transparent or lining her body-shape lest she would attract males’ attention. He added that this kind of modest hijab should be adopted throughout the year.

Some older respondents described those who only commit to more modest dress-style during Ramadan/fasting hours as ‘hypocrites’. They identified that ‘unfavorable

---

173 Ramadan is not the only context where people adhere to a more modest conduct. Locality also dictates women’s dress-style to a large degree. I observed for example, that many female employees that reside in rural or working class areas and work in the city dress differently in both areas. They come to work in full veil, take it off during working hours and put it on back before heading back home. In that instance the veil or modesty becomes more a source of protection while taking public transportation. Also in rural/working class areas low modesty in dress-style is not easily tolerated by the community.
attitude’ as one of ‘ignorance’ on the ‘true’ Islamic values, which are based on the notion
that the true essence of living a pious life is one of continuity, striving to improve oneself
and moving closer to God at all times. Some clarified this point by saying that the Allah
of Ramadan is the same God throughout the year, and that therefore one should stick to
the righteous path throughout the year and not only during a specific month.

Many of the young respondents expressed their views on this issue by stating that
it is a ‘personal right’ or ‘matter of personal freedom’ for a person to do whatever they
wish as long as they are not hurting anyone or threatening the safety of the community.
Conflicting views on how morality can best be organized or exhibited is presented in the
below argument I witnessed between two nurse interns, in their early twenties, at
Heliopolis hospital in urban Cairo:

I don’t respect girls who wear the hijab just during Ramadan and then immediately take it off once the holy
month is over. Ramadan, should be the initial push for being better and not returning to previous bad
manners…Instead these girls use the hijab to show-up their religiosity. The essence of religion is not really in
their heart. If it was then it will show (by wearing hijab, ns) all year long (Suzan)

I am sorry but it is not up to us to judge people’s behavior or appearance. Only Allah is the one who is to
judge humans. Even if you try to convince a teenager or adult person to amend her behavior she is mostly
likely to be stubborn and resistant. Only God is the one yehdi (guide people to the right path, ns) humans.
For example, I once tried to convince my sister to take the hijab. She replied and said: it is none of your
business. God has hadaki (guided you to the right path, ns) but my time has not yet come. So don’t push me.
When you took the hijab no one forced you. When I decide to take the hijab I want it to come from within
and not from external pressure. I don’t want anyone telling me what to do……I understand that what I am
saying may shock you. But believe me your surprise will not surpass my dad’s when I told him (her views on
personal freedom when it comes to morality, ns) (Dina).

Several key issues come to the forth in analyzing the discussion between Suzan and Dina.
Suzan’s argument helps to identify the connection between religion, identity and the
religious practice of the hijab. She opposes those girls who adopt the hijab during the
holy month as a symbol of their Muslim identity (folklorization) but fail in cultivating it
to contribute to the formation of an enduring ethical disposition. She explains that once
women understand the virtues of the hijab in terms of its connectedness to the
practicalities of daily living, then the likelihood of quitting it is low. For Suzan, the hijab
is not only an obligatory act but it also protects women from undesired male gazes and
harassment. I have also heard other respondents state that the *hijab* is practical in contemporary over-populated Cairo as it acts as a ‘protection shield’ especially for those women who take crowded public transportation.

Another key point Dina raises is that of freedom to choice in matters related to piety. This perspective supports Abu-Lughod’s (2005) argument were she declares that in any consumer society people are presented as free to choose, since morality is less certain because many issues are presented as variations in lifestyle. Abu-Lughod’s analysis comes from examination of the Egyptian television. She concludes that in the Egyptian television programs, unlike American ones, free debate on matters related to morality is relatively limited. I, however, argue that Egyptian upper-middle class youth’s wide exposure to American media is slowly shifting their attitudes in terms of openly discussing matters related to piety and *`ibadat*. However, such ‘open-debate’ occurs privately between people and not in public areas, and certainly not in public media. A central notion in such debate is *niya* or intention.

### 3.3 Niya for participating in pious acts

In chapter two I have provided the theological basis for the notion of *niya* or intention, in terms of validating one’s fasting and other pious acts. Generally speaking, one’s intention is believed to shape one’s leisure choices. While in turn, one’s leisure behavior is perceived as an indicator of intention of whether it is good/pious or bad/unmoral. Volunteering at charity projects, for example, reflects a person’s pious intention to get closer to Allah. Nonetheless, I will argue in this section that not all religious acts are performed with the *niya* to serve God only. Some activities are motivated by commercial and worldly interests as well. Here I focus on criticisms revolving around people’s *niya* for participating in religious acts, which extends to preaching as well.

Religious preachers can be viewed as the ones who are mainly responsible for communicating religious teachings and values. Still, in practice some preachers are driven by commercial interests whereby they compete aggressively among one another to gain a dominant market share over others. Particularly in Ramadan when demand for religious sermons is exceptionally high, famous preachers are known to be offered
contracts worth thousands of dollars by television producers. The *el-Nabaa* newspaper, part of the Egyptian independent press, ran a story on 23 September 2007 presenting incredibly high incomes that famous Egyptian preachers are paid for the religious lectures or shows they host. This and similar stories have caused wide criticisms among youth on the credibility of those preachers, or as some call them ‘businessmen’, who are believed to misuse religion to acquire monetary gains.

Like in any market place, competition becomes mandatory. One time in Ramadan I was attending a religious class at Abu Bakr Siddiq mosque when I witnessed a very interesting incident. While the woman preacher was delivering her lecture to an audience of more than 200 females, we suddenly heard the loud sound of a vacuum cleaner. The preacher tried to ignore the disturbing noise, but in the end she gave up, walked out of the hall, and can be overheard telling the cleaner-boy to stop vacuuming. While the preacher was out one girl next to me said ‘This usually happens. Preacher X pays the cleaner boy to cause distractions while she is lecturing. Dirty competition’. Another girl who overheard the comment added ‘It is ridiculous that these people (referring to the preacher who paid the cleaner boy) are the ones who represent our religion. This is exactly the reason why I research a preacher’s history before attending her lecture’. Similar to this informant, other girls I spoke to stated that they are skeptical and reluctant to attend religious lectures as they feel that some of these preachers are in the ‘business’ for monetary interests solely.

Moreover, it is generally believed that some individuals join prestigious social organizations not solely with the *niya* or intention of helping underprivileged communities, but also with the motivation of gaining social recognition and creating business networks. During my interview with Nagla, who is an active volunteer at Rotaract, she stated that she came across many volunteers whose ‘bad behavior and intentions’ greatly disappointed her. In the quote below, Nagla recites one ‘shameful’ story that recounts how some people take part in charity projects with the purpose of getting famous:

174 The religious classes at the mosque are for free of charge. Preachers who become famous though capitalize on their fame by selling some of their books, CDs or tape cassettes displayed at the mosques’ entrances. In addition, those who manage to rise to fame are more likely to get invited to host well-paid religious shows on Arab television or hold lectures at the affluent Gulf countries.
I remember one time we decided to send a press release along with a picture of our volunteers distributing free Ramadan bags. We spent more than an hour deciding which photo to send as there were a number of volunteers fighting. They each wanted to make sure that the photo sent had their faces on it. Each one claimed that they deserved more to be in the photo as they invested more time in the charity project. It was such an ugly fight! When we finally decided which photo to send to Egypt Today magazine, some of those who were not happy with the choice quit Rotary all together.

Sponsorship of charity projects during the holy month are also subject to wide debates among the Muslim public. For example those *mawa'id al-Rahman* sponsored by an artist, especially belly-dancer, or someone with the reputation for being corrupt raises discussions on the acceptability of breaking the fast there. A few individuals question whether there is *baraka* (blessings) in eating food purchased through ‘*haram*’ commercial resources or non-credible sources.

Some people go so far as to say that it is a ‘disgrace’ that belly-dancers and dishonest individuals are allowed to even host a *ma'idaat al-Rahman*. They view the *ma'ida* as a sacred symbol for *ajr* encouraged by the holy month that should not be associated with anything immoral. One religious scholar went as far as to issue a *fatwa* saying that being tempted to break the fast at the banquets of such ‘sinful people’ is a wicked deed and negates the fast itself (Nkrumah and El-Sayed, 2007). Others disagree with this point of view and state that it is up to God and not people, to judge those who sponsor a *ma'ida* or eat there. They believe that the virtue of charity, for which the banquet of the Merciful stands for, is not threatened by the sponsors’ identity or assumed *niya*. They explain that since the final outcome is that of charity and feeding the poor, breaking fast at any *ma'ida* is *halal*. Below is an interesting argument between two men sitting in Boulaq, discussing the acceptability of eating iftar at a *ma'ida* sponsored by a belly-dancer:

It doesn’t make sense to me that a belly dancer sponsors a *ma'idad al-Rahman*. Most of these belly dancers’ money comes from *haram* sources. I personally refuse to eat there. I feel the food they are offering does not have *baraka* in it (Nour, 40)

I don’t agree. Let Fifi Abdou (one of the most famous belly dancers in Egypt, ns) or any other belly dancer sponsor such a charitable cause. What is the objection to that? It is up to God to judge humans and not
humans to judge one another. God is the one who judges what is haram and halal and not us. I personally think that the more people organize such charitable things the better….especially with the tough economic situation we are living in. It would be better for all the well-off in Egypt to carry out ma'idat al-Rahman throughout the year and not leave a poor family go to bed hungry (Hajj Ahmed, 50)

No but for me it is a psychological thing. I wouldn’t feel happy eating at a maidah, knowing that a belly-dancer paid for it (Nour, 40)

Amm Ahmed’s opinion matches the edict or fatwa issued by Dr. Nasr Farid, the late Mofit of Egypt. Dr. Farid noted that those eating at a ma'ida are not obligated to inquire about the status or profession of the person hosting the ma'ida (Sameh and Sherif, 2007). Dr. Farid added that it is up to God to judge humans according to their intentions and actions (Sameh and Sherif, 2007). However, like Nour many people do not agree and view banquets hosted by celebrities as haram venues. Sheikh Farahat el-Mengy, an Azhar scholar, stated that it was haram to break fast at celebrities’ ma'idad al-Rahman, especially belly-dancers, or those that trade in alcohol, cigarettes or other toxic products (Abd El Malak, 2007). Sheikh el-Mengy explains that Allah condemns all those who earn their income through trading in products that threaten human health, well-being and the environment. Accordingly, most banquets of the Merciful hosted by celebrities have gradually disappeared in the last few years. One of the most popular ma’ida that disappeared since Ramadan 2007 is the one sponsored by belly-dancer Fifi Abdou that was located next to the Shooting Club in Mohandiseen district.

What I find particularly intriguing about the debate between Nour and Hajj Ahmed is that it highlights the general trend in the current debates existing within Egyptian society concerning morality. As I argued earlier, the consumer nature of contemporary Egyptian society has propagated the notion of freedom of choice in many aspects, including morality. Hajj Ahmed highlights the practicality of charity work in relation to the economic crises Egypt is experiencing. In his view it makes more sense to encourage charity projects to elevate people’s sense of poverty and deprivation than focusing on ‘trivial’ matters. In other words, issues of morality must be contextualized in relation to economic factors.

To conclude, one’s engagement in religious activities during the holy month does not go uncontested. Commercialization has permeated modern life to such an extent, that
it often becomes difficult to assess whether the niya for engaging in pious acts is motivated by pure piety or to attain fame, monetary returns or other materialistic values. Commercialization has also led to the commodification of religious motifs associated with the holy month.

3.4 Commodification of religious symbols

Religious symbols related to Ramadan and other Islamic rituals have come to attain monetary values, thus became commodified within the context of the market system. In this section, I will particularly focus on the Ramadan lantern, which has become one of the most demanded commodities during the holy month.

An interview with a middle-class medical doctor proved to be the most insightful in how the commercialization of the lantern is widely perceived as undermining the noble values that it stands for:

The fanus is an Islamic tradition that represents kheir (goodness and charity, ns). A long time ago when there was no electricity, people used to volunteer and hang a fanus in front of their houses to light the path for people walking by. This is a sadaqa. Today the fanus is used as an item of decoration….it has lost its purpose of providing kheir. Now with the presence of electricity, we should try and come up with something else that would provide the same kind of kheir and be an icon for Ramadan. But we simply missed the point and just developed the fanus into a commercial product rather than promoting its true noble purpose (Dr. Abbass, 45).

According to Dr. Abbass’s view, the commercialization of the fanus has transformed the Ramadan symbol into a profit-making product rather than promoting its charitable moral purpose. The fanus, being a symbol of virtue, prominently stands for ‘goodness’ and ‘charity’, according to him. However, commercial companies have transformed its noble virtues to more of a marketable commodity.

Commercialization is clearly presented in observing how the modern fanus is now made more attractive to appeal to youngsters and children’s tastes through adding fancy colors and including latest-hits tunes. The fanus is no longer used to light the way (free of charge) for persons walking by, but rather became a piece of decoration, commonly exchanged between friends and love couples as gifts.
In other words, in the processes of commercialization, religious symbols like *fanus Ramadan* have become folklorized. Folklorization of the lantern is opposed by some as undermining religiosity and reducing it to a meaningless commercial symbol rather than one based on a thorough understanding of its religious positive values. It is important to highlight that this kind of criticism was mainly noted by members of the lower-class segments of the population, who cannot afford the expensive lanterns widely available in the market today. The lower-classes are painfully aware that the life style of the well-to-do is unattainable to them. Therefore, one can argue that commodification and folklorization of the lantern and other religious symbols may act as differential markers for social class.

To conclude, the status of the Ramadan lantern is perceived to have become transformed from a religious symbol to an expensive and elaborate ritual around which revolves a great commercial fanfare. The lower-middle classes were mainly the ones to criticize the folklorization of the lantern. For the upper-middle classes, however, the transformation of the lantern into stylish models is generally approved. This kind of commercialism of religious symbols allows the affluent to develop and express religiosity in a convenient manner as will be exemplified in the next section.

4. **In Support of Consumerism**

In various ways, then, we can observe that the market culture in modern society has redefined the blurring of boundaries between religion and consumerism, which comes to the fore most prominently during Ramadan. While there are voices in Egyptian society that criticize the prevalence of the market culture for diminishing Islamic knowledge and practices, I argue that the commercialization of religion has also caused a sacralization of everyday life. The consumer culture has enhanced the presence or visibility of religion within the public sphere through the integration of religious motifs into profane commodities and public leisure spheres. This process is accelerated through the development of television, internet and mobile phones that are used to promote those sacralized products and venues. Besides, it will become clear that the folklorization and
commercialization of religious culture helps young upper-middle class women to experience a pious self.

4.1 Islamic commodities

Islamic commodities have become ever so popular among Muslim female youth since the last few decades. Particularly during Ramadan, demand for those goods and services provided under the banner of Islam becomes conspicuous. Those commodities range from prayer mats, prayer beads, headscarves, skullcaps, bumper sticker, key chains and framed Koran verses (Starrett, 1995). People exchange some gifts like the Barbie-type doll named Hend that congratulates Muslims on the arrival of Ramadan and Fulla that wears the headscarf, a long flowing gown, or abaya and comes with her own prayer rug; Nokia’s special Ramadan edition N78 model cellular phone that alerts Muslims time of prayers, iftar, sahur and includes Koranic recitations; also there is the use of an easy-to-remove nail polish that can be chipped off in seconds before the woman attends to her ablutions and prayers. The demand for these Islamic goods and services arose mainly due to the effects of the open-door policy on the Egyptian market culture. Also, the increase of

175 While these products are presented as ‘Islamic’, Abdelrahman (2006) states that the production and promotion of these commodities are not predominantly related to Islam. Most of these commodities, including the lanterns, are produced in non-Islamic countries such as China and Europe. Some are affiliated with Western banking systems and inhuman labor conditions. As for marketing, companies mainly use the same kinds of techniques involved in selling any kind of commodities like sales promotions, discount coupons etc. None of the producers refer to fair-trade or any kinds of social justice in the production of these products.

176 The creators of Fulla, NewBoy Design Studio in Damascus, Syria, announced that the doll represents ‘Arab and Islamic values such as modesty, respect and piety’ (al-Jadda, 2005).
Egyptian migrants who worked in the Gulf region bought back with them a religious lifestyle, which is highly dependent on ritual and often creates demand for Islamic goods and services (Abdelrahman, 2006).

Targeting the elite’s modern tastes, Islamic commodities are restyled into trendy and quality items, which have thus become part of a cosmopolitan high-culture. Some of these cosmopolitan traits include the production of headscarves in quality fabrics and fashionable styles that are sold at luxurious shopping malls in Cairo. Another example is the fashionable gallabiyya, that is made and advertised as combining elegance, sophistication and modesty (See image 10). Also, the Ramadan lantern that was formerly lit by a candle, is now equipped with a light bulb and loudspeakers that produces modern Arabic pop songs. The cosmopolitan touch that is added to these products involves a redefinition of Islamic identity in such a way that it is attuned to the experiences and modern lifestyles of Cairo’s young high class citizens.177

Islamic products have become popular among the young affluent Egyptians, as they fit well with their cosmopolitan identity which combines piety and a consumerist lifestyle. As Navaro-Yashin (2002) affirms identities in the global world are to a large extent produced within the consumer culture. Surely, religious identities were expressed by the informants through their ownership of ‘Islamic’ goods. It is vital to remember that upper-middle class youth lead a consumerist lifestyle apparent in their choices of stylish, expensive and modern products or recreation activities as observed in their year-long leisure activities. At the same time, when the holy month arrives they strive to attain higher piety without necessarily giving up consumerism. Cosmopolitan Islamic products seem to fulfill that demand where these items are offered in trendy packaging and made with quality ingredients to appeal to their modern tastes.

To conclude, the new trendy Islamic commodities appeal to many Egyptians, particularly those affiliated with upper-middle classes. This new discourse is attractive to them since it motivates and compels them to practice their religion without giving up the pleasures of modern life. For the upper-middle class women, who are thoroughly embedded in modern life styles, consumption has become an important self-technique to

177 See, van Wichelen (2008) who builds a similar argument for the elite in Java, Indonesia; and Kapchan (1996) for bridal festivities in Morocco.
construct and experience a religious self. It is through the consumption of restyled religious commodities that they can attain piety and relate to other categories of Egyptian citizens.

4.2 New da`wa that support consumerism

In Max Weber’s famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism*, he theorized that features of ascetic Protestantism (namely Calvinist ethic and ideas) contributed to the development of capitalistic notions including the state and bureaucracy in Western countries. Parallel to Weber’s perspective, I argue that the new styles of Islamic da`wa in Egypt seek to sow the seeds of capitalism by proposing a complementary relationship between monetary gain, worldly fulfillments and positive spirituality. The new da`wa offers Muslims the opportunity to express their piety without necessarily having to abandon a consumerist lifestyle. This allows them to exhibit their affluence and enjoy the luxuries of consumerist culture prevalent in contemporary times.

New Islamic preaching of Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud and other young preachers do no express opposition towards consumerism. On the contrary, they occasionally express the notion that Islam is compatible with capitalism. The importance of this new discourse is that it affirms to wealthy people that it is possible to lead an elitist and

---

178 In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber notes that Calvinism supported rational pursuit of economic gain and worldly activities which had been attached to positive spiritual and moral meanings. These doctrines further encouraged planning and self-denial in pursuit for economic success. In another study titled *Weber and Islam*, Bryan S. Turner writes that Weber in his study of Islamic civilization revealed that many of the pre-requisites of capitalism were absent in the Middle East. These pre-requisites, that he argued existed in the West, included asceticism, ‘appropriation of the physical means of production by the entrepreneur, freedom of the market, rational technology, rational law, free labor and finally the commercialization of economic life’ (Turner, 1998: 12). However, I argue that many of these capitalistic attributes exist in Egyptian society, particularly in contemporary time.

179 Other popular preachers include Khaled El-Guindi, the Yemeni El-Habib Ali and Mohamed Hassan. They all hold non-Azhar university degrees, hail from the middle and upper middle classes, lecture in simple colloquial Arabic, and dress in western clothes. More importantly, perhaps, these preachers are independent and are not affiliated to any religious group, political party or official body.

180 During late president Nasser’s leadership Islam was made compatible with socialism. However this practice changed immediately after president Sadat took over. Since Sadat’s time, Islam has become made compatible with capitalism. Religious scholars and representatives, during Sadat’s leadership, have issued *fatwas* that opposed communism and socialism. Instead, for example, they emphasized the right of private ownership (Werner 1997: 57).
modern lifestyle and still remain a good Muslim (Bayat, 2003). These young preachers communicate the idea that it is possible to maintain the power and prestige that goes along Western education and travels abroad, while remaining a pious Muslim. Good Muslims can be religious but still live, work, have fun.

Amr Khaled started preaching in mosques and private clubs in the early 1990s, and today, his shows are broadcasted on a number of satellite channels, reaching an audience of millions of young Muslims all over the world. The popularity of Khaled and others like him is mainly based on their ability to relate to youth’s modern lifestyles. These preachers recommend for people to reconcile religion and life or din wa dunya as commonly referred to by Egyptians. Life in this perspective refers to modern society and capitalism, and not to an antiquated style of early Islamic community, which is often idealized by more traditional preachers. In their consumer practices observant Muslims in today’s Egypt are involved in the same capitalist consumption market as secularists (Abdelrahman, 2004).

I interviewed an Azhar preacher and scholar Mahmoud Kamal, regarding the relationship of Islam to consumerism. He assured me that Islam does not oppose trade and business. He referred to the Prophet Muhammed who helped trade with his wife Khadija. He added that a proper Muslim business person should be ethical and not cheat or violate the three main principles of Islamic law, which call for protecting life, honor and property.

Interestingly, various religious representatives are used as icons to advertise consumer goods and inaugurate new commercial enterprises.\(^{181}\) It is common for one to hear that key representatives of official Islam declared their support to some ‘Islamic’ commodity; for example the Mofti and Sheikh of al-Azhar gave their public approval for the use of Mecca Cola soft drink and its commercial enterprise.

Finally, the Egyptian state also appears to endorse this new consumerist trend. According to Abdelrahman (2004), it is in the government’s interest to support consumerism and individual interest as this approach leads to a decrease in political

\(^{181}\) Simultaneously, Islamic preachers are also active in endorsing social non-profit enterprises. For example, Sheikh al-Azhar was used as a spokesperson at some television commercials that aired in Ramadan 2008 and 2009, to endorse the new free-of-charge children’s cancer hospital in Cairo
uprising against the government.182 In chapter seven, I will probe further on this issue to explain how the Egyptian government shapes and facilitates commercial transactions during the holy month.

4.3 Sacralization of profane venues and technological devices

The market culture has not only triggered the development of Islamic commodities but has also sacralized profane venues and technological modes of communication. This trend of profane items being associated with religious symbols comes to the fore most prominently during Ramadan. I will argue that in the process of sacralization of profane items, religion becomes more visible within the public sphere.

*Kheyam Ramadan* has received immense criticism for being consumer-oriented and only catering for the wealthy segments of the population. Nevertheless, the success of these venues’ business is based on its integration of religious themes and symbols. At most of the *kheyam* I visited, walls were decorated with Koranic scripts, lanterns, CDs (complimentary or for sale) with religious songs were distributed, religious/Ramadan songs were played and *sahur* meals were served. Moreover, some of the banquets’ proceeds went to charity projects. In other words, the *kheyam Ramadan* venues enable people to realize piety through charity (in the form of money donations), fulfill the *sunna* of *sahur* and be exposed to religious symbols, all in a fun setting.

During the holy month consumer goods are rebranded and popular motifs associated with Ramadan are temporarily incorporated.183 Re-branding and other promotion strategies described in prior chapters, are all attempts by marketers to sacralize their ordinary commercial commodities to appeal to the Muslim target market. These mainly include integration of Ramadan motifs like the lantern, cannon, *mesahharati* into their promotion campaigns. For example, Pril’s (dish-washing detergent) marketers promote early Ramadan the new shape adjustment of the product’s package into a Ramadan lantern (See image 11).

---

182 See, Clammer (2003: 408) who raises a similar argument. He notes that increase in consumption leads to a decline in politicization and increase in individualism and a diminishing of class solidarity.

183 For more on how advertising employs ritual symbolism to create messages about products and services not designed for use during such occasions, refer to Otnes and Scott (1996)
Marketers thus try to appropriate cultural or religious meanings to their products to serve commercial purposes. Some people may oppose this strategy stating that these producers misuse the holy month for monetary gain and, accordingly, undermine its sacredness. From a different perspective, however, this kind of marketing strategy promotes important religious-cultural symbols and practices associated with the holy month.

Television in particular plays a crucial role in the process of sacralization of the profane. Not only is the television the main medium used for the promotion of those commodities that are re-branded or sacralized in Ramadan, it is also the main source for the transmission of religious knowledge that is highly demanded during the holy month.

Some authors like O’Guinn and Belk (1989) and Frankl (1987) oppose the association between religion and its transmission through secular television. They noted that through such use of this modern technology (television) sacred knowledge may become weakened when broadcasted into profane spaces and times. Applying this perspective to Ramadan, it is common to see people watching religious television programs while recreating at a coffee shop or while socializing with family during iftar or sahur times. Therefore by religion becoming more linked to television (a secular medium) some secularists may argue that religion might have undermined its own sacredness.
I, however, argue that through utilizing the television, religion has become more visible in the public sphere and reaches large market segments. Particularly in a country like Egypt, where many remain illiterate and many women have limited access to public space, television has become one of the most important media vehicles addressing issues that pertain to all aspects of society.

Young women access religious knowledge through religious-oriented television channels presented in the previous chapter. In addition they use the internet and mobile phones to develop and express piety. Female respondents were in the habit of sending mass e-mails to remind Muslim friends of Ramadan teachings, prayer and iftar timeschedule etc. The internet also proved to be a great tool for circulating religious messages. Sending scriptural texts and religious tips through the mobile phone was mentioned by some respondents as a great way of supporting one another during the holy month. Some of the interviewees also mentioned that they were in the habit of giving one another rings on their cellular phones to wake each other up for dawn prayers. They sent text messages wishing one another a happy Ramadan, verses from Koran and ahadith related to the sacred month. In addition, a few days before the month starts one receives mobile text messages mainly from social organizations asking for donations and volunteers to support Ramadan-related types of charity activities. The same kind of information is widely circulated over social-networking websites such as Facebook.184

The utilization of technological devices for the attainment and expression of piety supports Repstad (1996) argument that religion and modern technology not only co-exist but thrive together. This might surprise some as Islamic rituals and movements or promoters are widely perceived to stand in opposition to modernity. Westerlund and Hallencreutz (1996), however, argue that rather than modernity, Islamic movement oppose modernism. Islamic movements specifically reject those aspects of modernism defined as an ideology to do with belief in the perfection of science and human reason. As evident in many leisure spaces during Ramadan, modernity in terms of modern

---

184 Facebook is not only used for spreading religious messages but also political one. Opposition groups and internet activists launched an online campaign for a strike. Thousands joined the 2008 ‘April 6: a general strike for the people of Egypt’ group on the social utility website. There was so much talks about the strike that the Ministry of Interior mad a public announcement on television threatening any of those who take part in the strike. This caused much people to get scared and not even go to work or school on April 6th. For more on the story, see Carr (2008).
technology and communications is celebrated and widely used by Muslims. In a Muslim context, the opposition between modernity and modernism might be better viewed as ‘modernization’ versus ‘Westernization’, since Islamism is a reaction to the globalization of Western localism (Roald, 2001).185

Modernization can be observed in the way that profane recreation venues, commodities and communication devices are re-defined in Ramadan to incorporate religious knowledge and symbols. Through such incorporation, religion becomes more visible within the public sphere. In addition, the publicly disseminated and consumed religious discourses offers upper-middle class women compelling ways to attain religious knowledge and express piety. We will now turn to the issue of modernization and womanhood.

5. **Women and Piety**

‘The pillars of *taqwa* rests on women’s shoulders…they are the gatekeepers of honor and mothers that raise future Muslim generations’. This view was forwarded by Dr. Mahmoud Abdel Baset, a professor of Arabic and theology at Azhar university whom I got to know in the course of my research. Dr. Abdel Baset’s views are shared by almost all research respondents, regardless of gender or social class. In this section I argue that women continue to be viewed as the ‘gatekeepers’ of piety in modern Cairo, since they are protectors of their family honor, mothers of future Muslim generations and they are believed to have the ‘sexual power’ to cause public disorder. They are socially expected to commit to strict modesty and strive to achieve a pious self during the holy month. Deviations from these expectations are received with harsh criticisms. Finally I analyze why women’s focus on fashion and achieving an ideal body weight is believed to divert their attention from attending to pious acts.

---

185 Islamism’s reaction to the globalization of Western localism is built on the belief that local Islamic traditions are dissolving in face of Western culture imperialism.
5.1 Women as central for the moral order

Women are generally viewed as the main representatives of dignity and piety in Muslim societies (Kandiyoti, 1995). Their conduct is regarded as crucial for the social and moral order in the Middle East (Timmerman, 2000). Moreover, while the family or *usra* is regarded as the foundation of the ideal moral order, women have the responsibility for keeping the honor (especially sexual honor) of the family intact (Zuhur, 1992). The degree of modesty (*al-ihtisham, al-haya*’) adopted by women is not only considered to reflect their integrity, but the integrity of society as a whole. A woman who looks or behaves in an immoral manner does not only risk her reputation, but her family honor as a well. In addition, her ‘immoral’ behavior may give a negative image to non-Muslims, on the Muslim society she is affiliated with.

As mothers, females are responsible for teaching future generations Islamic values. Islamic scriptures stress the importance of the mother’s role in raising her children and the great difficulty that she must endure for the sake of her family, for which she will be abundantly rewarded by God (Inhorn, 1996). Many times during my interviews with members of older generations (regardless of gender), present day mothers were the ones to receive harsh blame and criticism for the perceived lack of *tarbiya* (upbringing) or *adab* (morals) of their children. Fathers were usually excused from the responsibility of child-care on the basis that their primary role is to earn a living for the family, and accordingly, they are expected to spend long hours away from home and family.

To sum up, the moral order of the Muslim *umma* and its future is generally believed to rest for a large part on the morals of its female Muslim community. Especially during the holy month, women are faced with a larger burden of giving a positive image of Islam. They are thus expected to be or strive to be at their best moral order. That does not only encompass adherence to strict modesty but also efforts to engage actively in religious activities during the sacred month.
5.2 Habitualisation of a pious self in modern times

Young upper-middle class women expressed preference for those preachers that discuss religious `ibadat in relation to its applicability and usefulness in their lives. Also, those preachers who communicate religious messages in easy-to understand colloquial Arabic or even the English language facilitate young women’s ability to habitualise a pious self.

Female interviewees criticized traditional sheikhs for their failure to address practical worldly issues in their sermons. They disapproved of traditional preachers who only discuss the importance of `ibadat as a religious obligation, while failing to explain its applicability or usefulness in their lives. In this tradition, instruction is geared towards instilling a scholarly knowledge of the texts rather than providing a practical understanding of how these texts should guide one's conduct in daily affairs. One young female, for example, stated that while Sheikh Metwali Sharawi was talented in explaining religious scripts and stories, he did not probe much into how the moral/wisdom of the texts were of direct use to her.

Young informants’ criticism corresponds with Mahmood’s (2005: 4) argument that the process of secularization has reduced Islamic knowledge to an abstract system of beliefs that has no direct link on the practicalities of daily challenges. One may thus argue that preachers who propagate `ibadat as a sense of obligation only rather than its usefulness to modern challenges, alienate young people who are most likely to fail to cultivate these practices. In contrast, the popularity of the new religious youth subculture initiated by Amr Khaled is to a large extent based on its preference to discuss practical implications of the exegetical tradition of the Koran and the hadith. Khaled’s choice of relevant subjects and the way he tackles religious `ibadat, paves the way for them to cultivate or remain committed to religious acts on a long term basis.

186 For example in Bahgat’s novel (1988) Ramadan Diary he satirically portrays a sheikh who speaks about Tayammum (performing ablutions without water, that is, when there is no water available to Muslims like in the desert) to a group of people who neither live nor travel to the desert. The sheikh also warns a group of peasants, who could not even afford winter clothes, against wearing/using silk or gold.

187 Egypt best known Islamic cleric Mohammed Metwalli Sharawi, who died at the age of 87 on 17th June 1998, got his chance of stardom at the age of 59 when he took part in the country's first ever Islamic religious discussion programme to be televised nour ala nour (Light upon Light). Within few years, Sharawi became one of the most popular preachers in the Islamic Arab world to an estimated 70 million Arabic-speaking viewers.
Amr Khaled and other young preachers lecture on contemporary issues like befriending the opposite sex, working or studying in mixed gender communities, homosexuality and the importance of wearing hijab at these contexts. They explained the ‘wisdom’ behind the hijab and its applicability in gender-mixed recreation centers, universities and other modern facilities. In one television episode delivered by Khaled, he discussed the challenges the young population may face during summertime. Summer is known to be the time of intense struggle for female youngsters, who try to overcome sinful temptations like dating and swimming in a bikini while remaining tied to Islamic values of dress modesty. In relation to Ramadan, Khaled explains that fasting is a ‘blessing’ for human health as it purifies one from food toxins provided from junk food that are widely consumed nowadays.

Furthermore, Khaled among other preachers representing the new trend in da`wa are favored among young Egyptians for their usage of colloquial Arabic as opposed to the standard Arabic spoken by traditional preachers. When I discussed Khaled with some Egyptian teenagers, they highly praised his style, agreeing that it was ‘easier to grasp the message’ through the simple Arabic words he used and modern day-to-day examples he provided to support his argument.

Also on the rise is the growing phenomenon of preaching in the English language. Moez Masoud (a graduate of the elitist American University in Cairo) is a religious preacher who gained immense popularity among second-and third-generation Muslims living abroad and English-speaking communities in the Middle East. During Ramadan he presents two series, named Parables in the Koran (2001 and 2002) and Stairway to Paradise (2003 and 2004), all of which aired on Iqraa and ART International channels. Both series are presented in the English language and offer discussions and explanations of Islamic spirituality. Masoud’s shows are especially famous among affluent Egyptian bi-lingual students and youth who studied at English foreign institutions or have resided abroad.

Therefore, those preachers that are able to use modern languages/dialect, relate religious obligations to daily life challenges and thus become the ones who win credibility and mass support among the increasingly globalizing women youth. Nevertheless, Bayat (2003) notes that Amr Khaled and others like him are no liberal
Muslim thinkers. Some of their ideas remain highly conservative, and follow a religious discourse that lacks innovation, nuance and dynamism. Their theology remains deeply scriptural and tied to religious principles as will be explained in the next section.

5.3 Women, fitna and modesty

A well known statement of preacher Amr Khaled’s is ‘one woman can easily entice one hundred men, but one hundred men cannot entice a single woman’. Accordingly, Khaled frequently states that the hijab is essential for the preservation of society. In relation to this commonly shared view, unveiled women are promoters of sin, and a ‘complete, head to toe hijab is an obligation in Islam’ (cf. Bayat, 2003). Women are expected to exert more effort than men to maintain a modest appearance in the public sphere during the holy month not only to give a good image of Islam and maintain moral order in society (as argued earlier), but also to help males to keep their fast.

The prevailing moral discourse on Egyptian Muslim women is contradictory in nature. In the eyes of many Muslims (particularly males), women are seen at once as innocent and incorruptible. Simultaneously, they are viewed as lesser moral beings who are unable to control their sexual desire and are easily tempted.188 This, in turn, is perceived to cause fitna (chaos or temptation) and public disorder (Walseth and Fasting, 2003). Gender-segregation in public areas and encouraging higher levels of modesty for women are measures to avoid fitna.189 In addition, the contradictory logic on women, makes it possible to grant men the moral responsibility to control women, and at the same time, place the blame on women when public disorder occurs.

The issue for modesty on the part of women is particularly relevant in Ramadan where Muslims are religiously commanded to abstain from any sexual relations during

---

188 Some male respondents frequently referred to a hadith where the Prophet is narrated to have said ‘women are deficient in both mind/intelligence (aql) and religion (din)’. They interpreted that deficiency in religion is because a woman is not required to pray or fast during her menstruation and thus her piety does not live up to males’ standards. Mental deficiency was interpreted to refer to the Koran in Surat Al Baqara 2:282: ‘ two women witnesses are required in place of one-man witness’. This stipulation refers to business transactions, or in other words matters in which women are generally less versed then men due to their inexperience.

189 On the same line of argument, some authors conclude that the existence of female circumcision in some countries is an attempt to control the sexuality of women and thus maintain public/moral order.
fasting hours and are generally encouraged to maintain a ‘pure state of mind’ devoid of
sexual excitement or other forms of distractions. Those males that become sexually
attracted towards a woman, may risk having their fast revoked.

The four madhahib or law schools affirm that secreting sperm due to seeing
something arousing does not invalidate the fast (cf. Möller, 2005). Yet some informants
explained that being exposed to something arousing may tempt one to have forbidden
sexual relations during fasting hours and may distract one from attending to religious
duties.

In many of my interviews with female informants they noted that one of their
main motivations to adhering to more modest dress-style and behavior (al-ihtisham, al-
haya’) was to ‘help Muslim brothers complete their fast successfully’. While they all
affirmed that modesty was expected from both men and women, they found that females
are religiously expected to attend to this issue more. Some women referred to the Koran
surat Nur 24: 31-32 to explain how Muslim women are commanded to not expose their
‘adornment’ or beautification to male strangers. A few female informants said that these
verses specifically addressed females or ‘wives…daughters and women’ and not males.
What I noticed is that while most women were often unable to quote Koran verses or
ahadith to support some of their opinions, almost all of them clearly referred to Koranic
verses 24:31-32 and tirelessly spoke about how crucial female modesty is in Islam.

Moreover, modesty as a social expectation that strictly applies to women is also
tied to cultural beliefs on femininity. All female informants shared the belief that
‘women’s bodies are naturally more sexual and attractive than males’. To support this
argument, one informant pointed to music video-clips where the cameras zoom at the
female models’ private parts rather than that of the males. Therefore, based on religious
and cultural beliefs, some women noted that they should not wear tight or revealing
outfits or engage in activities that may cause sexual arousal. Since Ramadan is regarded
as the sacred month, any act of immorality or seduction on the part of women was
perceived as liable to twice the religious punishment one would get during other months
of the year.

Indeed, women who stray from the ‘conservative norm’ during Ramadan are
harshly criticized by their female counterparts and males alike. Girls who walk in public
dressed in ‘seductive clothing’, laughing or giggling loudly or behaving ‘immorally’ tend
to receive comments from onlookers like ‘Allahom enni sayem’ (By God I am fasting) or
‘Astagfar Allah el-Azim’ (I ask God for forgiveness). Some males resort to these
comments to ask God’s forgiveness for gazing at these ‘seductive-looking’ females and
to remind themselves that they should not risk breaking their fast by staring at the
opposite sex. Others use these comments to publically denounce the ‘provocative’
appearance of these girls and remind them that the holy month dictates increased modesty
and purity.

In an interview with the earlier mentioned twenty-five year old Suzan, a nurse at
Heliopolis hospital, she felt ‘obliged’ to give me advice on my dress-code. Apparently,
she perceived Ramadan as the month where an un-conservative dress code can not be
tolerated. Suzan asked me: ‘Are you Muslim? Are you fasting?’ When I responded by
‘Yes’ to both questions, she asked me ‘Will this do? (Yenfa` keda)’ referring to what I
was wearing. When I asked her ‘what she meant’, she stated the following:

It is Ramadan and you are not even wearing long sleeves. Your sleeves are way up above your elbows. This
is not acceptable. Especially in Ramadan…the month we all strive to get closer to God and not disappoint
him. You should at least try to stick to the Islamic dress-code during Ramadan. We all wait for Ramadan
each year so that we may make-up for all the wrong we have done previously. They say most wishes are
granted during Ramadan, es-shahr el-moftarag (Blessed month). The way you are dressed attracts males’
attention. Not only will you take zanb (sin) for what you are wearing but you will also bear the zanb of all
those males who look at you.

Suzan offered to donate me an extra scarf of hers to put around my shoulders and cover
my ‘bare’ arms. This incident in particular drew my attention to the notion that women
have to remain extremely cautious on how they appear and behave in public, for any
deviation from the norm will not only negatively reflect on themselves but all those they
may sexually arouse. Moreover, Suzan’s comments shed light on how the holy month is
viewed as an exceptional time for Muslims to strive to fulfill an optimum state of
physical modesty.

In general, the responsibility of avoiding fitna during the holy month rests more
strongly on the shoulders of women than on those of men. Women, who are believed to
be more likely than men to seduce others, do not only risk having their own fast revoked but also that of men who lustfully gaze at them.

5.4 Women and fashion

Women are usually believed to be more vulnerable to negative global images and discourses than males (Ghannam, 2002). One recurring complaint I heard from older informants, regardless of gender, is that young women have become so preoccupied with fashion and weight loss that they no longer have time for religious acts. Their ‘excessive concern’ with their physical appearance, is believed to divert their attention from service to God, particularly desired during the Ramadan.

Many young women in Cairo spend much time and effort trying to keep up with the latest fashion trends through consumption of Western or Hollywood media images and fashionable clothes, accessories or make-up as described in chapter three. They spend long hours discussing, researching and consuming up-to-date outfits, accessories and make-up. The integration of the veil with contemporary Western fashion is a noticeable phenomenon in Cairo (Herrera, 2001b). Some of those who wear the headscarf have adopted new styles of covering and knotting like the ‘Spanish’ or ‘Gypsy’ style headscarves as mentioned earlier. What one witnesses today in the streets of Cairo is an extraordinary rich variety of coexisting different fashions. Some girls wear tight jeans and bright colored make-up and outfits, with or without the head-scarf. Others wear the face-veils (munaqabat) or wear long black garments without covering their faces.

The wide variation in fashion tastes that appear today in Cairo can be interpreted from various interrelated perspectives. Starting with the implementation of President Anwar al-Sadat’s open door policy in the 1970s, Egypt has witnessed a boom in consumer culture (Abaza, 2007). Shopping guides and shops that mainly incorporated Western fashion and tastes, imported or local-made, have become available to large population segments in the market. Many women, who prefer to pursue religious values without compromising their fashionable looks, choose to incorporate the headscarf with trendy outfits. Moreover, all women informants agreed that modesty in dress-style is an essential Islamic virtue that is mainly defined as wearing outfits that are not transparent.
or define the body figure. How this decodes into actual appearance is, however, not agreed upon. Thus for some females, only covering one’s hair fulfills the Islamic code for modesty. Others consider full head-to-toe covering mandatory, while in the view of again others, the headscarf is not the main criteria for modesty.

Bayat (2002 & 2003) proposes that it is important to understand the new cosmopolitan fashion trend of Egyptian youth in relation to the way they have been socialized. Young Egyptians are raised in a cultural and educational tradition that limits individuality and innovation. Their only outlet for realizing partial freedom of expression is through asserting their opinions in a social manner, such as fashion. Bayat stresses that this sub-culture fashion trend can be considered as a channel that allows ‘simultaneous fulfillment of the contradictory human tendencies: change and adaptation, difference and similarity, individuality and social norms’ (Bayat, 2003). Taking part in this new cosmopolitan fashion trend allows youth to affirm their individuality and accomplish change, while respecting cultural norms. As presented in chapter one, Egyptian upper-class women youth are faced with contradictions in trying to cope in their life styles with their religious-culture values and, the sometimes contradicting, global discourses. In response they innovate new culture traditions like a dress-style that combines trendy fashion with the hijab.

Furthermore, presentday young women are highly concerned with their body image. They are keen in maintaining a low body weight and remaining fit. The Western media is the main source for popularizing a ‘Hollywood’ female appearance which is slim, seductive and attractive to the opposite sex. Moreover, in the last few decades Arab television channels and lifestyle magazines have propagated that same image for women. For example, on Arab music channels such as Melody and Mazzika the female singers and models dress and perform much similar to artists that appear on American and European Music channels.

Keen to keep up with the desired Hollywood body image, young women hope to increase their chances on the marriage market. Voluptuous and curvy figures, which

---

190 Reference again to Wearing’s (1996) definition on femininity, where females are conditioned as sexual beings that fulfill men’s desires, many girls act out this gender role through voluntarily beautifying themselves for the pleasure of the male gaze. Thus those women who attend to their looks to attract male attention are actually re-affirming the Western discourse on femininity.
used to be an indicator for wealth and fertility, are now detested by both genders (C.f. Eum, 2005). In the global culture context of Cairo, overweight has become associated with the lower-classes, immaturity and low self-esteem, whereas slim women are usually affiliated with the upper class (Basyouny, 1997).

Accordingly, many women resort to consuming diet pills and joining fitness centers, which have increased tremendously in the Egyptian market. Ramadan as a fasting month is not only viewed as a good opportunity time for *taqwa* but also loosing the extra weight. Many young women follow special Ramadan diets and exercise schedules, widely advertised on the internet, health centers, lifestyle magazines and other public venues.

The Hollywood image for women has been further promoted with the increased importation of Western clothes and local-made outfits that copy those fashion tastes discussed earlier. The body is thus conditioned to fit the garments that the store provides. It is made a subsidiary to an abstract framework that stands outside it and is outlined by marketing (Corrigan, 1997). In this sense, consumerism can be seen as a source of power that dictates women’s conception of their body image and appearance. As early as 1990 Abu-Lughod raised this argument in an interesting essay where she stated that the trend of some Bedouin women, who are believed to wear sexy lingerie to oppose parental authority and dominant social norms, can also be explained from another perspective. These women’s dress preference can also be understood as being affected by alternative forms of power embedded in practices of capitalism consumerism and urban values (Abu-Lughod, 1990:50). Thus the prevalence of consumerism should be seen as a source of power that influences people’s social behavior, similar to family authority.

The concept of modesty that is highly strived for in Ramadan, must be understood within the framework of globalization. Where not only a global ‘Islam versus the West’ discourse has emerged, but also new dimensions on body image, marriage and, in turn, consumption. Consumerism and other global values that shape women’s image may thus act as sources of distraction from attending to religious duties or applying a modest code. These struggles that many modern Muslim women face surfaces vividly during the holy month, where profane and religious leisure are mutually emphasized.
Young women are caught between expectations of modesty to ensure everybody’s piety and to avoid *fitna* as well as, expectations of new body-image and lifestyles due to globalization & consumerism. To resolve such an issue some women have resorted to dressing modestly during fasting hours and then more fashionably after the *iftar* meal. Others have opted to retain a modest dress-style and behavior throughout the holy month and then revert back to their pre-Ramadan lifestyle once the month is over. Generally, the vast majority of upper-class women have chosen to purchase those outfits that are modest in style yet fashionable.

6. **Why a Pious Image is important in Contemporary Times**

There is an ever-growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the Western world in contemporary times. Popular surveys in the West ascertain that many people feel that Islam will be a threat to democracy in the coming time (Ahmed and Donnan, 1994). In turn, some Muslims feel that the suffering of their Muslim community in, for example, Bosnia, Palestine and Kashmir, is overlooked by the world because of hostility to Islam. Most of the participants in my research share the view that their religion was being disrespected and scorned by the Western media and people. Consequently, some Muslim respondents speak of the need for *jihad*. For almost all informants, a *jihad* does not mean military action, but rather intensification of religious activities to pray for God to safeguard the future of Islam (as described in the previous chapter) and, most importantly, to strive to provide a ‘good’ public image of how Islam is to be lived. Since Ramadan is known to be the ideal time for Islam, all Muslims are expected to be at their best behavior.

Below is an interesting quote from an interview I had with a young female informant (Leila) who expressed her utmost rage against a cousin of hers for taking an American-Muslim friend to a *khaymat Ramadan*:

---

191 The ongoing wars in Iraq, Palestine and the recent upheavals that arose in Muslim countries after the incident of the Pope Benedict XVI, who delivered a lecture in September 2006 where he used an analogy to link Islam to violence and criticized the Prophet Muhammed, and the satirical cartoons of Prophet Muhammed published in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten (September 2005), have caused much resentment among Egyptians.
A relative of mine made the ultimate mistake by taking a newly Muslim convert to *khaymat* Ramadan. When the girl (convert) saw people dancing and laughing loudly she looked at my cousin and said ‘I thought Ramadan is all about spirituality?’ I blamed my cousin for giving such negative impression of Ramadan to the girl. I told her (cousin) she should have instead taken the girl to the mosque for *tarawih* prayers. The atmosphere there is overwhelming spiritual. This is the spirit of Ramadan. Not dancing, music, *shisha* smoking and other useless things you find in *kheyam* Ramadan…..now she (American girl) will go back to her home country saying that Muslims celebrate their holy month with dancing and smoking…..

For Leila, Muslims who ‘mis-live’ the holy month contribute to the problem on how Islam is negatively conceptualized in the Western world. Leila elaborated on that point by stating that Muslims are the ones mainly responsible for giving the ‘correct image on Islam’ which is free from materialism and profanities. This concern for providing the ‘correct image’ of Islam is understandable with the new trend or ‘crusade’, as Leila defined it, against Muslims in the Western media.

In this view, those Muslims who fail to keep up a pious appearance in public, particularly in Ramadan, are criticized for giving a false image of Islam. Muslims fear that this false image may be employed by the Western media or other entities to defame Islam and its followers. For this reason some people whom I interviewed were highly suspicious of my research project, fearing that it may be part of a plot to portray Ramadan as part of a violent or irrational religion. People continuously stressed that the essence of Ramadan is not profane recreation but charity, forgiveness and social cohesion. Some informants also blamed the Western world for having introduced commercialization, and subsequently undermining the holiness of the month.

Finally, it is important to stress that public piety is subject to wider controversies relative to private religious practices concealed within domestic domains. The image of Islam and Ramadan in the eyes of Western foreigners is indeed a great concern for many people, but it is that piety that is expressed in the public sphere that reflects that image. In one particular incident during fieldwork, an elderly man from Boulaq refused to sit for an interview once he found out that I am a student enrolled at a Dutch university. When I asked him why he did not want to sit with me he said ‘Why? You want to scandalize us?! What CNN has done is enough!’ For the man, anything Dutch, European or Western was viewed as a threat that would devalue Islam. Another informant, also residing in Boulaq and who witnessed the incident, explained that the first man meant to make reference to a
popular incident that occurred in the 1990s involving CNN. CNN cameras taped the ‘gruesome’ circumcision ritual of a young Egyptian girl. The surgery is usually done in secrecy within the private domains of homes. However, by having a global television network tape the surgery and air it on television, the matter became a public scandal. This incident caused public embarrassment for Egyptians who were quick to respond that that female genital mutilation is non-Islamic tradition.

To sum up, how piety is depicted in the public sphere is of utmost important to Egyptian Muslims. For many it is important to provide a good image of Islam and Ramadan to counter the anti-Muslim sentiment or Islamophobia trend, a prejudice or discrimination towards Muslims that is believed to be growing in the Western world. Women in Muslim societies appear to be the ones mainly responsible for providing that credible image of their religion through their expression and attainment of piety within the public sphere.

7. Conclusion

Consumerism plays a major role in both undermining and underscoring piety as observed in Ramadan. Since the open-door policy by late president Sadat, commercialization and Western culture values permeate Egyptian society more and more. As a result, the boundaries between the sacred and profane tend to be blurred which ignites wide debates among Egyptians.

The market culture is believed to have transformed religious motifs and practices, related to Ramadan, into commodities that are evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value. One key implication of the increase of consumerism is the folklorization of religious objects (example, *fanus* Ramadan) and `*ibadat* into what lower-middle classes view as mere ‘customs’ that are believed to undermine ‘true religiosity’.

Moreover, in the process of commercialization, marketers resort to strategies that are believed to distract one’s attention from religious acts. In the effort of attracting consumers, many television shows and advertisements include sexual content that are highly opposed by a large proportion of the Muslim public. The wide availability of profane recreation facilities in Ramadan, either through television shows or public leisure
venues (example, *kheyam Ramadan*), and their adoption of a consumerist culture, were also held responsible for diverting people’s attention from religious obligations.

The prevalence of the consumer culture has also made matters related to piety ambiguous. Morality in a consumer society is less certain because many issues are presented as variations in lifestyle in the Western media. I argue that upper-middle class Egyptian youth’s wide exposure to Western media is slowly shifting their attitudes towards morality in terms of adhering to a ‘freedom to choose’ perspective in relation to modesty and overall expressions of piety. Such freedom in how to adhere to modesty is depicted in how women in contemporary Cairo dress. Some females choose not to wear the *hijab*, others abide to the *niqab* and finally there are many of those that combine the *hijab* with trendy outfits.

From a different perspective, commercialization and modern technology can be interpreted as re-affirming religious values and traditions. Contrary to the secularization thesis that envisaged religion would become more a private matter, in this chapter I argued that at least in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, religion is becoming more visible in the public sphere. The popularity of Islamic commodities, television and internet have supported the spread of religious ideas and symbols. During Ramadan in particular, the television is the main medium used by religious preachers to propagate Islamic knowledge, in addition, marketers launch advertising campaigns whereby religious icons and motifs are integrated. Moreover, many leisure places such as *kheyam Ramadan*, decorate their venues with Islamic scriptures, play religious songs as background music and sometimes welcome donations for charity purposes.

As a matter of fact, upper-middle class women’s realization and expression of piety is highly dependent on their consumption of cosmopolitan Islamic commodities. The consumption of these commodities does not only complement the consumerist lifestyles that women lead, but are also a way for them to construct and experience a religious self. The usage of modified religious product may therefore fulfill their quest for a religious identity, highly pursued in the holy month.

One obvious explanation for the fact why the commercialization and folklorization of Ramadan is criticized, by mainly lower-class Egyptians is that such patterns of consumption are not available to them. They are painfully aware that the life
style of the well-to-do is unattainable to them and enhances new differential markers of social class rather than accentuating the spirit of a unifying umma during Ramadan as will be exemplified in the next chapter.

Regardless of social class, piety is believed to be attained through cultivation of religious values and practices that will endure for a lifetime. The holy month is viewed as the primarily time of the year where people should train themselves to behave according to established standards of religious conduct. For the upper-middle class informants, to be able to habitualise religious `ibadat they have to understand religious knowledge in relation to their consumerist and modern lifestyles they lead. Young women expressed preference towards those preachers that discuss religious `ibadat in relation to its applicability and usefulness in their lives. Also those preachers that use everyday colloquial Arabic, or even English, were highly favored among the affluent youth.

Finally, how women express piety within the public sphere is of crucial concern to the entire Muslim community. Women are viewed as the ‘gatekeepers’ of piety and ‘mothers of future generations ’who are expected to raise their children on the ‘correct’ moral code of Islam. However, with the prevalence of the commercial culture, women’s adherence to a ‘modest’ dress-style and behavior is challenged. Young women’s high consumption of non-modest Western fashion and desires to look physically attractive may undermine their pious appearance in the public sphere. This may in turn cause fitna or public disorder which is particularly not tolerated during fasting hours.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how these gender narratives and other limitations imposed on women’s access to public spaces are part of men’s attempts to reproduce their power and to reinforce gender distinctions. These male-dominated endeavors are motivated by a desire to control, not only women’s bodies, but also their minds and the knowledge that they may acquire outside the home domain. I will pay particular attention to how the context of Ramadan may empower Muslim women, and other social groups, through encouraging their leisure participation in the public sphere.