

The Revolution Within: Islamic Media and the Struggle for a New Egypt

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In the last two decades, debates within the anthropology of Islam have been invigorated by ethnographies set in Egypt – from Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* and Charles Hirschkind’s *The Ethical Soundscape*, to Amira Mittermaier’s *Dreams that Matter* and Samuli Schielke’s *Egypt in the Future Tense*. In conversation with these influential texts, anthropologists studying Muslims have delved into issues like the relationship between interiority, exteriority, and ritual; the normative and analytical distinctions made between piety and impiety; the political valences of public religiosity; and the entanglements of the religious and the secular. Yasmin Moll’s *The Revolution Within* explores all these questions and more through an investigation of how Sunni Egyptian Muslims embody diverse orientations towards piety and politics in their struggles to build a New Egypt.

Moll’s ethnography revolves around the preachers who rose to prominence on Iqraa, the world’s first Islamic satellite television channel, established in 1998 by a Saudi media mogul. With their pioneering

preaching style and innovative series, the New Preachers, as they were dubbed, captivated Muslim audiences within Egypt and abroad—they were also spurned “as neoliberal apologists by leftists, as stealth Islamists by liberals, as secret liberals by Islamists, and as Westernizing sellouts by Salafis” (5). Figures like Amr Khaled, Mustafa Hosny, and Moez Masoud – household names since the 2000s – reshaped ideas about “proper” Islamic practice, offering believers a path towards piety that diverged from the Salafi one perceived to be dominating Egypt’s Islamic landscape in the decades prior. Debates around what it meant to be a pious Muslim became especially charged during the revolutionary period of 2010-2013, during which Moll conducted fieldwork, with these channels and their stars greatly shaping how a large swath of the population imagined Egypt’s future.

Moll’s ethnography deftly interweaves observations made in the series’ production rooms; interviews with New Preachers and their production teams, funders, and fans; and analyses of the series’ episodes and the online social media discussions they spark. Showing how “pietists’ debates about the forms and ends of Islamic media intertwined with those about the forms and ends of a New Egypt” (252), Moll highlights the theological and political stakes inherent to media debates. This is perhaps the book’s most valuable intervention: showing, in practice, how theological disputes can (and must) be studied in relation to disagreements in media and politics, and vice versa – how contestations surrounding the shape that media and politics take are inherently theological. In tracing “the social life of theology” (19) thus, Moll demonstrates how, today, theology is found not in the abstract exchanges penned by out-of-touch scholars in dusty books. Rather, theology materializes in sound bites creatively produced for the screen by media-savvy professionals, and is consumed by modern believers faced with a range of secular and Salafi alternatives vying for their souls. Stoked by fluctuating social and political circumstances, Iqraa’s media producers and viewers engage in intense theological reflection in their efforts to pursue a godly life.

By meticulously analyzing how theology is mediated – through screens, preachers, producers, and political events – Moll makes an excellent contribution to the anthropology of media and mediation. Her other

crucial intervention lies within the anthropology of Islam. In the preface, Moll immediately counterposes her approach to the two paradigms that have structured the discipline in recent years. Most staunchly, Moll sets herself apart from the field's "Asadians," who have deployed Talal Asad's conceptualization of Islam as a discursive tradition to denaturalize the universalisms of Western liberalism and secularism. According to Moll, this approach erroneously takes Salafism as the normative form of Islam and glosses over intra-Muslim contestation to it – as when Moll's interlocutors decry Salafi religiosity as unnatural, unrealistic, or even repugnant. At the same time, Moll challenges those who have critiqued Asadian accounts by normatively asserting a secular humanism that venerates ethical inconsistency and imperfection as universal traits. Critical of both orientations, Moll continually illustrates how her interlocutors provincialize both Salafism *and* secularism in their attempts to be good Muslims. Espousing the polemic of her interlocutors, Moll does not use their narratives to bridge the divide that has marked the anthropology of Islam, but to undermine both its camps simultaneously. This approach gives the text a slightly incendiary tone, which may ire loyalists on either side.

Readers who manage to approach the text judiciously and engage it on the strength of its arguments will find the book's five chapters replete with ways to think beyond the impasses that have marked the anthropological study of Muslims. Chapters 1-3 examine how the aesthetic and technical innovations Iqraa's producers utilized started "the revolution within" the media industry and inspired novel forms of piety among the channel's young, middle-class viewers. Chapters 4-5 analyze how "the revolution within" the Islamic satellite television industry mattered for how Iqraa's producers and viewers understood and engaged the turbulent revolutionary period of 2011-13. Each chapter revolves around a single theological concept that structures how Moll's interlocutor's produce Islamic media, embody distinct forms of piety, and picture the future of the nation.

Chapter 1 explores how Iqraa's producers work towards the calibration (*dabt*) of capital and media toward moral ends. The makers of Iqraa's series are invested in producing content that is both "professional,"

meeting the media industry's quality standards, and ethical, seeking alignment with divine decrees. They must privilege piety over profits, while also attracting the large viewership needed for making a deep and sustained impact. Examining the everyday practices of media production oriented toward ethical goals, Moll illustrates how properly calibrating Islamic media demands its makers negotiate and synthesize these two endeavors, illuminating the political economy of Islamic media beyond a focus on a channel's funders.

Moll continuously emphasizes how debates around the form and content of *Islamic media* are also debates about *Islam*, something chapter 2 tackles in depth. It foregrounds how New Preachers distinguished themselves from Salafis through a positive valuation of the innovation (*bid'a*) crucial to successful media production. Recognizing "the role of human mediation in relation to revelation" (93), New Preachers and their production teams take an active role in making Islamic content accessible, relatable, and exciting to their audiences. Innovation was seen as a key element to the Islamic tradition's dynamism and persistence, something reflected in Iqraa's programming and the iterations of Islam it propagated.

By opposing the secular and Salafi ethical models available to Egyptians, New Preachers reflectively engage and demarcate between the religious and the secular; in chapter 3, Moll demonstrates how a theology of moderation (*wasatiyya*) guides these efforts. Moderation is not about being "lukewarmly attached to living as a Muslim" or "rendering religion as a matter of individual, private belief" (132), as post 9/11 US foreign policy has sought to establish. Grounded within Ash'ari theology, the moderation undergirding Iqraa's programming entails understanding disagreement as inherent to the Islamic tradition and fostering balanced forms of piety accordingly. This includes the "judicious avoidance of the extremes of *ghuluw*, a righteous excessiveness that leads to fanatical rigidity, and *ghafla*, a heedlessness toward divine parameters that leads to moral degeneracy" (131). Moll does an excellent job in demonstrating how, for her interlocutors, "ambiguity and pluralism were Islamic, not secular" (151).

Having explained how religious immoderation can arise from the “Salafi stress on devotional rituals over interactional ethics” (146), in chapter 4, Moll considers how her interlocutors prioritize the “affective, ethical, and material care” (172) of one another through the theological notion of impact (*i‘mar*). Questioning the idea that self-cultivation starts and ends with the self – a shortcoming of Salafi and neoliberal approaches, but also academic analyses of them – Moll highlights how the New Preachers and their fans reorient self-help imperatives outward. This other-oriented ethic is critical to imagining and establishing a New Egypt as the revolution unfolds, and in its aftermath.

Thinking about what it means to live a godly life in relation to others, and not only with oneself or God, is an inherently political question that chapter 5 foregrounds. It features debates about the theological meaning and significance of coexistence (*ta‘ayush*) which became prominent among Iqraa’s preachers and producers during and after the revolution. For Iqraa’s preachers and producers, the coexistence that was foundational to life in a peaceful and pluralistic Egypt emerged neither through secularizing Islam nor in claims to Islamic exclusivism. Rather, it necessitated recognizing difference as divine decree and seeking lessons for how it was managed in Islamic history.

Repeatedly and convincingly, Moll shows how her interlocutors locate Islamic precedents and rationales for what their rivals (both Salafi and secular) deem external to the Islamic tradition. In so doing, Moll offers a powerful corrective to binaries that have been naturalized within the anthropology of Islam. At the same time, in deeming Salafism and secularism the New Preachers’ key opponents, Moll overlooks another influential current in Egyptian Islam: Sufism. While Sufi figures and practices receive an occasional mention (as in chapter 3’s discussion of self-help), for the most part, both historical and contemporary Sufi iterations of Islam are absent in Moll’s account. It may be due to the fact that Moll’s interlocutors view Sufi contenders as less threatening to their own message – perhaps because Sufi practices are less abhorrent than Salafi ones, or maybe because Sufis are seen as appealing to a different audience than the New Preachers’ middle-class viewers, namely less

educated working-class believers. These are only guesses, as it remains unclear why Sufism does not mark the Islamic media landscape in Moll's telling, particularly when it has greatly impacted how Egyptians of many backgrounds have rethought Islam after the revolution.

While some more attention to intra-Muslim debates beyond the battle of New Preachers and Salafis (and secularists) could have added further nuance to the book's interventions, overall, *The Revolution Within* is a brilliant contribution to anthropology and Middle East studies. Its chapters are theoretically refined, ethnographically rich, and enjoyable to read. It brings the reader into the heart of the affective experiences and theological reflections that ordinary Egyptians undertook as they sought to envisage a New Egypt, and illustrates how, by creating content for this New Egypt, media producers tried to create it themselves.

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