

The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo

The product of technology is not a function of a mutual context of making and use. It works to make invisible the labor that produced it, to appear as its own object, and thus to be self-perpetuating. Both the electric toaster and *Finnegans Wake* turn their makers into absent and invisible fictions.

—Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

—Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES have landed in Egypt. They stowed away on children's athletic shoes from Asia, clinging for dear life to the tongues and uppers, and emerged finally from their cardboard rafts into the bright sunlight of popular markets in the Muski, near Bab Zuweila, and elsewhere, competing for attention with vegetable hawkers, kitchen hardware, falafel carts, memorabilia of the national weightlifting team, and the perpetual, doomed honking of geese.

The popularity of the superterraps in Egypt matches that in the United States. There is an entire store in the upscale suburb of Muhandisin that sells nothing but Ninja Turtle paraphernalia: clothing, toys, posters, videos. One wonders whether the shop was established as a revolving door for fads, metamorphosing every few months as some new wave of popular culture disembarks at Suez or Port Said.

Having crossed innumerable international borders, the Ninja Turtles have also crossed an important internal boundary: they have crossed from the regime of mass production to the regime of craft production. On Shari' Muhammad 'Ali a couple of blocks northwest of the old

southern gate of the medieval city of Cairo, someone has chalked a portrait of one of the Ninja Turtles on a gray stone alley wall. It stares across the street at a row of shops crowned with the protective formula "Allah, nur al-samawati wa al-ard" ("God, Light of the Heavens and the Earth"), painted by hand across the facade.

This is the semiotically crowded environment into which new manufacturing technologies, a renewed reli-



Figure 1

At a downtown hotel, the Audio 9 Disco and Kasr al-Nil Health Club advertise above an Arabic sign announcing "Exhibition of the Glorious Qur'an and Islamic Books" at a bookstore several floors below.

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Figure 2

In a downtown shop window, surrounded by a porcelain Santa Claus and reproduction 18th-century French figurines (imported from Asia), a set of small collector's plates from Japan. The plate on the left says "Muhammad," the one on the right "Allah," and between them is a porcelain Qur'an open to the "Fatiha," the opening chapter.

religious consciousness, and the open borders of a privatizing, consumerist economic policy have brought an explosion of Islamic religious commodities, both mass-produced and handmade, imported and domestic (Figures 1 and 2). In many ways the economy of these commodities is a mirror image of the Ninja Turtles: the foreign commercial superheroes are now chalked on walls, while protective formulas once chalked on walls now emerge, mass-produced, from print shops and factories, trucked across the country to be sold from book shops, department stores, and street carts manned by rowdy 13-year-olds.

I would like to argue that the change from craft production to mass production of religious commodities has been accompanied by a further series of cultural changes that have altered Egyptian attitudes toward the

public display of sacred writing. The variety of religious commodities has expanded as a result of the innovation required by a market-driven economy. At the same time, economic changes have increased demand for these commodities and shaped three ideal categories of producers and consumers: first, those whose consumption of religious commodities is motivated by their instrumental qualities as powerful objects; second, the traditional state-supported religious establishment, for whom these commodities are status markers that need to be controlled and protected from threats to their integrity; and third, a secular elite of religious intellectuals and capitalists who are beginning to resist the use of traditional religious commodities as display objects in favor of creating new types to be used as pedagogical tools.

What Is a Religious Commodity?

Qur'ans, prayer beads, skullcaps, and rugs are only the beginning. Spend a day in Cairo and you can find bumper stickers, keychains, posters, board games, jigsaw puzzles, coloring books, fans, clocks, framed Qur'anic verses, banners, greeting cards, decorative items in ceramic, brass, wood, cloth, and paper, cassette tapes and videos, paper models of mosques, miniature plates in ceramic and plastic, apotropaic devices of various sorts, gigantic strings of prayer beads as big as your fist, and the ultimate in Egyptian syncretism: Qur'anic verses hand-painted on papyrus or fired in blue ceramic to resemble the ancient faience found in pharaonic tombs. What characterizes these diverse items as religious is either a direct association with acts of worship, as with prayer beads, or, more commonly, their bearing of sacred images or writing, often only the single word "Allah" or "Muhammad."

Such commodities may have uses not always apparent from their outward form. A copy of the Qur'an, or *mushaf* (pl. *masahif*), for example, is used ideally for reading and study, but just as commonly finds itself encased—still in its original shrink-wrap—in a velvet box and set in the back window of an automobile to protect the vehicle's occupants from misfortune and to indicate that the car is owned by a Muslim rather than a Christian. The same effects can be achieved through the use of bumper stickers, window decals, copies of *du'a al-safr* (the traveler's prayer) suspended from the rearview mirror, or other display items. Egyptians from most walks of life profess confidence in the efficacy of these objects and use them as a matter of course.

But students of material culture, from Mary Douglas (1979) and Pierre Bourdieu (1983, 1986) to Jean Baudrillard (1988[1968], 1988[1970], 1988[1972], 1988[1973]), and post-processual archaeologists such as Christopher Tilley (1989, 1990) and Roland Fletcher (1989), agree that objects are meaningful not in their individual relations to human purpose, but in their collective consumption, their relations to other objects as a field of signifiers. Insofar, then, as religious commodities are to be understood as material things, they have two networks of signification in which they can act as markers of difference: first, with regard to other objects defined as religious, and second, with regard to the field of commodities as a whole.

We will proceed from Marx's basic insight that production, rather than innate human requirements, generates the need for material goods:

Production . . . creates the consumer. Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material. . . . The object of art—like every other product—creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. . . . Thus production produces consumption (1) by creating the material for it; (2) by determining the manner of consump-

tion; and (3) by creating the products, initially posited by it as objects, in the form of a need felt by the consumer. [1857:230]

Bourdieu and his colleagues have recognized a parallel process operating through systems of pedagogy that "consecrat[e] religious or cultural goods of salvation as worthy of being pursued, and . . . produc[e] the need for these goods by the mere fact of imposing their consumption" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:38). The two sorts of commodities, one ideological and the other material, are intimately related.

Given different places in the organization of production, Egyptians give different explanations of the efficacious mechanism of religious commodities such as Qur'anic verses printed on cards, posters, or stickers. Laborers, street vendors, and small shopkeepers attribute the protective value of Qur'anic verses to their innate power as utterances of God, who will benefit those who display His word in their residences or places of business, or who keep it on their persons. God has promised to protect His word, and so will protect it wherever it is found. When invoked in this way, divine action is assumed to take one of three forms: the conferral of success and prosperity; the prevention of misfortune; and protection from the envy of others. The owner of a sundries shop explains:

God blesses those who remember him, and keeps them from harm. These verses bring happiness to the shop or the home, and if you put them in your car they will keep misfortunes from happening. If you walk away from here, do you know if you'll live past the first step? Of course not. Only God knows. You may get hit by a car. Or something could fall on you. Do you know what kind of diseases might be progressing inside your body right now? No, you don't know that, either. But these things protect us from misfortune, because God will send his blessing and help. That's why I always carry a verse on a card in my pocket. [pp. 98–99]¹

This being the case, we would expect the largest demand for these products to be from those at greatest risk for misfortune: the poor, the liminal, and the marginally successful who live always on the edge of downward mobility. Fieldwork from rural Egypt (Ghosh 1983) has shown that misfortune due to the evil eye of the envious strikes specifically at capital equipment (particularly productive animals), property that could grant its owners greater prosperity and potentially some upward mobility. In urban areas it is shops, taxicabs, and peddler's carts that most frequently bear protective slogans or figures (whether purchased or handmade), known as *higab*, or covering. As female covering participates in the economy of honor and shame, marking its wearer as above reproach, so the covering of the divine word participates in the material economy, socializing productive activity as nonthreatening. When someone enjoys a modicum of success, he can trade the protective *higab* for the printed

declaration, “hadha min fadl rabbi” (“This is a boon of my Lord”), stressing that the success was unearned, a gift from God and not an attempt to transcend his place. Unpredictable economic environments in which sudden mobility in either direction is possible encourage the consumption of protective objects.

Seasons of Demand

One of the largest single markets for periaptic religious commodities is students preparing for the end-of-year examinations that will determine what kind of secondary or postsecondary school they can enter. June is an anxious period for Egyptian families as children cram for several days’ worth of tests. Possessing a pocket calendar printed with Qur’anic verses “is like having a mushaf in the house” (p. 56), according to the mother of a student seeking entrance to college. God sends his blessings in the form of ease, prosperity, increase, and success. For students, God sends *baraka* (blessing) in the form of being able to remember answers quickly on examinations.

This creates a strong seasonal pattern of demand. On my most recent trip to Cairo, in early July 1993, I was at first hard-pressed to find much of the inexpensive religious paraphernalia that had been so widely available on previous trips. Finally, after half a day searching back streets in the older part of the city, I located a small cart stocked with cheap eight-by-ten-inch cardboard photographs and pocket calendars depicting the singer ‘Abd al-Halim Hafez, film star Bruce Lee, and Egyptian soccer and bodybuilding teams. A single religious pocket calendar—the 99 names of God—remained, and the vendor explained that his stock had been wiped out by students the previous month. Now there was simultaneously no supply and no market. Summer is the time for fantasies of power—martial prowess, athletic victory, and the glamour of stardom—rather than the anxious realities of institutional trials for which one seeks God’s help.

But summertime also brings real displays of worldly success associated first with the return of Egyptian workers from the gulf on their annual visit home, and later, the convergence of vacationing Gulf Arabs themselves, who provide the city’s more exclusive shops with customers for top-end handcrafted religious artwork and books.

This solar and institutional seasonality of demand coexists with a lunar and sacred seasonality of demand. The two feast periods of *‘Id al-Fitr*, marking the end of Ramadan, and *‘Id al-Adha*, marking the climax of the pilgrimage season, draw millions of potential customers to the long row of religious bookshops facing Midan Hussein, the public square fronting the nation’s chief

congregational mosque and just across the street from the mosque-university of al-Azhar. The owner of a religious goods shop explains:

There’s always much more activity down here during holidays, and the more activity, the more sales. So when you get a religious holiday like Ramadan or the Prophet’s Birthday, people flock over here and sales go up. Or even for holidays like Mother’s Day. People also buy these things as gifts. If you’ve got a sick friend, or someone’s in the hospital, a mushaf makes a wonderful gift. A bunch of flowers is pretty, but it wilts in a few days and there’s nothing left. But a mushaf or a plaque lasts, and people like them. [p. 91]

Here we see that the economy of religious commodities is marked by yet another schedule of demand: the elasticity of the life cycle, whose sicknesses, crises, and transitions mobilize both strong individual emotions and the social networks of material exchange. A different merchant in the same row of shops extolled the virtues of his hand-tooled brass Qur’anic knick-knacks (wall plaques and desk plates, many in the shape of fruits or peacocks, inscribed with Qur’anic verses or the names of God) with a similar pitch:

These things are a blessing . . . because wherever the word of God is, there is goodness. They’re great gifts, too, especially if you’re going to visit someone who’s sick, these are much better than a box of chocolates. [p. 94]

Comparisons to flowers and chocolate show the extent to which religious commodities are interchangeable with other categories of goods. It is their permanence, a material quality, rather than solely their spiritual content, that makes them desirable as gifts (Figure 3).

Finally, somewhat less predictable than routine life crises are the crisis events in the life of the nation and long-term secular changes in religious interest. Both of these trigger fluctuations in demand for religious commodities. The first merchant continues:

To tell you the truth—although it’s certainly not to approve of the incidents themselves—the current wave of terrorism is helping business, too. People—all kinds of people, men and women and young people—they come in here asking for trustworthy books, wanting to know what Islam really says about these things. Even children’s books are selling well. It used to be that we’d buy our kids books with Mickey Mouse, and Minnie, and so on. But the other day a man came in here asking for children’s books, and I said, “What kind?” “Religious, of course,” he said. So I showed him these [reaching into a box on a low shelf behind the counter, and producing two paper-wrapped packets of pamphlets]. These things are great, because they’re good, simple, and cheap: 20 piasters [about six cents] per volume, and there are volumes on everything—all the prophets, and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and stories of Islamic history; there’s even a set here about the Arabs in Europe, the Muslims in Europe in history. [pp. 91–92]

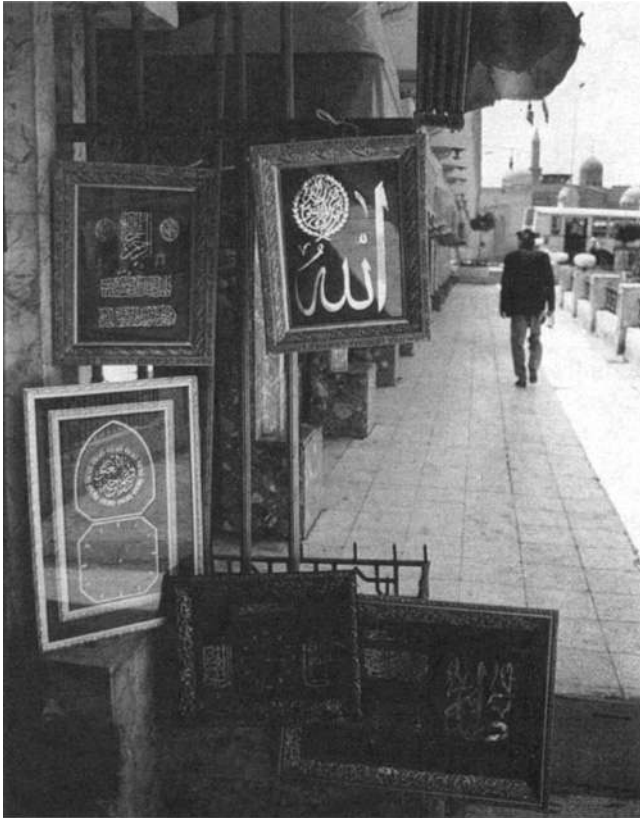


Figure 3

Barawiz, or frames, with Qur'anic verses at a shop near one of Cairo's principal mosques. The two at the lower left are clocks.

Sacred Niches: Comparative Demand

The first assembly line, a technique of manufacture which in a series of set steps produces identical complex objects made of replaceable parts, was not one which produced stoves or shoes or weaponry but one which produced the printed book. [Ong 1982:118]

Thinking about books as a category of religious commodity forces us to attend to the book as a physical object. Particularly with respect to children's literature, the line between books and non-books (such as coloring books, flash cards, and puzzles) is a thin one. Looking at books and periodicals also provides us an opportunity to examine the comparative demand for religious items relative to

other alternatives. Books and magazines are the only Egyptian religious commodities for which statistics on distribution are available, and although these statistics may not be a good indicator of the circulation of religious objects of other types, they deserve some attention.

During the mid-1980s, Egypt's export of both public and private sector serials declined. Domestically, though, the story is quite different. For the private sector, the number of titles and the total domestic circulation of religious periodicals far outstrips the public sector—in 1983, by almost 50 times. However, private sector activity has remained relatively stable over the five-year period (see Table 1), while the circulation of public sector titles jumped by more than 400 percent (see Table 2), one manifestation of the Mubarak government's two-pronged reaction to the nation's "Islamic Trend" (it should be noted that all Egyptian serials are printed and distributed by public-sector presses and distribution companies). In addition to an energetic program of investigations, arrests, and prosecutions of suspected Islamic radical groups, the state has directed its cultural policy at quieting—or at least refocusing—the intellectual debate on questions such as the codification and application of Islamic law (Nafi' 1993:6).

Part of this strategy is to enter the marketplace with state-sponsored Islamic literature such as the ruling National Democratic Party's *al-Liwa' al-Islami* (*The Islamic Standard*) and *al-Muslim al-Saghir* (*The Little Muslim*), a children's monthly from the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Compared with other public sector periodicals, religious titles rank third in terms of total annual circulation, after journals in the social sciences and arts. But in terms of average circulation per title per issue, religious periodicals are in first place. For the private sector, religious periodicals are first in total annual circulation, and sixth out of eight categories in circulation per title per issue (CAPMAS 1983:28–37; 1988:27–36). Figures for book production are similar, with Arabic-language religious books surpassing all other subjects, including literature, history, and social sciences, in both number of titles published annually, and total distribution (CAPMAS 1987).

There is little information for either books or magazines about total readership, and we remain horribly ignorant of the way printed material is actually used by readers

Table 1
Egyptian Religious Periodicals in Arabic: Private Sector (CAPMAS 1983, 1988).

	Domestic		Export	
	1983	1988	1983	1988
Number of titles	31	32	13	12
Annual distribution	8,983,000	8,525,000	134,000	87,000

Table 2
Egyptian Religious Periodicals in Arabic: Public Sector (CAPMAS 1983, 1988).

	Domestic		Export	
	1983	1988	1983	1988
Number of titles	4	5	2	2
Annual distribution	181,000	902,000	81,000	35,000

in the contemporary Middle East (Eickelman 1992). The government feels, however, that publication policy is a potentially effective weapon against the current Islamic opposition movement, and it has embarked on programs to reprint and distribute cheap subsidized copies of classic works of Islamic—and secular—philosophy, distributing them sometimes solely through public-sector unions, youth and sporting clubs, sometimes on the market.

Such programs are always controversial. A series published in 1993 by the General Egyptian Book Organization (GEBO), called the *Muwajaha* (Confrontation) series, was publicly criticized by officials at the Islamic university of al-Azhar for reissuing volumes by Muslim scholars such as 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, who proposed in 1925 that Egypt become a secular state like Turkey. When first published, the book was condemned by al-Azhar and 'Abd al-Raziq was denounced as unfit to hold public position (Hourani 1983:189). Other volumes in the series are reprints of classic works by Egyptian authors Taha Hussein, Qasim Amin, and the famous turn-of-the-century reformer Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, as well as works by contemporary authors examining Islam from moderate, liberal, and leftist perspectives (Khalil 1993:1).

From the other side, the GEBO was faulted by secular intellectuals for ineffective distribution of the series. Difficulty in finding the books for sale on the street led to rumors that the series had been withdrawn due to al-Azhar's criticism; others claimed the series simply had sold out, while some held that it was being marketed at so low a price that distributors were hoarding them. Mahmud Abdel-Mun'im Murad, Chairman of the Egyptian Publisher's Organization, accused distributors of purchasing mass quantities from the government at low prices and keeping them to sell later at normal rates. While merchants compare religious commodities with flowers and candy, intellectuals have other comparisons for cultural goods: Murad reasons that "the idea that books will sell better if they are cheap is fundamentally flawed, because books are a special commodity, like medicine, which people buy not because they are bargains but because they feel the need for them" (Murad 1993:9). Intended as medicine for an ill and troubled society, the *Muwajaha* series has become a focus of public debate about the role of high culture in national politics, whether or not it has

actually attracted any readers. But before addressing at greater length the creation of need for intellectual goods, let us return to the matter of marketing.

Position Effects

"But," said I, "this is an ode written to be chanted for the amusement of persons who take pleasure in unlawful indulgences: and see here, when I close the leaves, the page which celebrates a debauch comes in contact, face to face, with that upon which are written the names of the Deity: the commemoration of the pleasures of sin is placed upon the prayer for forgiveness." "That is nonsense," replied my [Egyptian] friend: "turn the book over: place that side upwards which is now downwards; and then the case will be the reverse; sin covered by forgiveness. . . ." [Lane 1860:286]

In any system of commodity distribution and consumption, the temporal ordering of demand has a spatial counterpart in the ordering of display. Western marketing specialists know that the spatial position of a product in a display of merchandise exerts an unconscious influence on consumers. Presented, for example, with a series of identical products, consumers forced to express a preference or choose the "best" item tend to choose the item on the far right end of the series. For Egyptians, position is an important *conscious* feature in the spatial placement of religious commodities once brought into the home. Religious objects should enjoy pride of place with respect to other objects. They should be placed in a protected space, preferably on a wall or high shelf where they are immune from disturbance and have maximum visibility. I was once gently scolded by a security guard checking my briefcase for having a mushaf at the bottom of the bag, underneath notebook and camera. Nothing should be placed above or on top of the sacred item, implying higher importance. If a shelf holds a series of objects, the religious item should be on the right if there are an even number of objects, or in the center if there are an odd number. There are also implicit restrictions on what sorts of objects can bear sacred writing. Few utilitarian items bear Qur'anic verses or the name of God. Clocks may be decorated with Qur'anic verses, but pots and pans may not, since they are designed to be touched by fire,



Figure 4

At a popular market near the Sayyida Zeinab mosque, religious commodities are sold amid toy drums, animals, and incense. At the lower left, Qur'ans for sale (some in velvet boxes); in the crates on either side of the dark incense wedges, there are pocket-sized religious pamphlets and selected chapters from the Qur'an. At the far right are sets of large wooden prayer beads.

a potentially blasphemous act. When I asked a young bearded shop clerk about inscribing verses on pots and pans, he reacted with the same shock that greeted Edward Lane in the 1830s when he asked an acquaintance named Ahmad (one of the names of the Prophet) why he did not inscribe his own name on the tobacco pipes he crafted (Lane 1860:288).

Historically, the brass platters and ceramic ware used for communal meals were routinely inscribed or painted with sacred verses to confer baraka on the food, and Qur'anic inscriptions were made on the insides of drinking cups, a common cure for illness being to drink water that had been in contact with—or contained the dissolved ink from—sacred writing. Since these were not used in cooking, the writing was protected from assault. Currently,

brass platters are manufactured as tourist or decorative art rather than for utilitarian domestic use, and sacred writing is generally not found on dinnerware. Instead, phrases such as “al-hamdu li-llah” (“praise God”), “Allah,” and “Muhammad” are found on tiny, expensive (45 Egyptian pounds, about \$15, for three) ceramic collector's plates imported from Japan (Figure 2), and cheap plastic ones manufactured in Alexandria (one Egyptian pound for three plates, or about \$.10 apiece). “Use value is transformed into display value here” (Stewart 1984:62); the original items are replaced by foreign counterparts and then by simulacra of the latter, a recapitulation of the decline in craft production and the consequent competition between foreign and domestic manufacturing industries.



Figure 5

At a housewares shop in the medieval section of the city, domestically handmade clocks decorated with Qur'anic verses (center) are sold with mass-produced plastic ones imported from Taiwan. Behind the patron's head is a golden clock in the shape of a mosque, with minarets; it was probably intended originally for the Southeast Asian market.

Jewelry can bear Qur'anic verses, but clothing may not, since it gets dirty and is exposed to all of the everyday impurities encountered by its wearer. Clothing might also come into contact with dirt when washed with other clothes. Hence, the young shop clerk who disapproved of sacred writing on pots and pans also reacted negatively to my suggestion of sacred writing on T-shirts, otherwise a ubiquitous feature of Cairo's tourist markets. "I don't know about people in *bilad al-shayatin* [the lands of Satan, that is, non-Islamic countries], but here we know how to protect the word of God" (p. 98).² Even jewelry should be removed before the wearer uses the bathroom, to avoid potential contact with impurity.

The few exceptions to the rule that utilitarian objects should not bear sacred writing reveal the implicit assumption that it is the end use of objects and not their temporary conditions of storage or manipulation that make them fit or unfit to be religiously marked. For example, despite the fact that keychains with religious inscriptions are kept in the pocket or purse, covered and potentially

jumbled up with other objects of unpredictable purity, once the key is stuck in the ignition lock of an automobile, the keychain becomes *higab* for the vehicle, suspended from the steering column or dashboard just as other *higab* devices might be suspended from the rearview mirror.³

This assumption appears to explain a puzzling feature of the marketing of religious commodities in all except specialized shops: a haphazard arrangement of merchandise that appears to violate all rules of precedence and placement. Most religious commodities are sold in general-purpose shops. One is as likely to find *masahif* for sale in a housewares or stationery shop, or from a pushcart surrounded by cheap plastic toys, as in a bookstore (Figure 4). Clocks or *barawiz* (frames) with Qur'anic verses on them are sold in hardware stores (Figure 5). Pocket calendars and religious pamphlets are peddled on the sidewalk or on buses along with packets of Kleenex and disposable lighters (and using the same techniques: once on a bus I found a young peddler announcing his wares—an armful of religious posters, cards, and stickers—with the singsong appeal, "Asma' Allah al-husni bi-nuss ig-gneh! Asma' Allah al-husni bi-nuss ig-gneh!" ["The 99 names of God for half-a-pound!"]). Bumper stickers bearing the *basmallah* ("In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate") are mixed indiscriminately with decals announcing "Toyota #1" and "I love Lebanon" and displaying knockoff Disney characters. In one stand next to the main post office at 'Ataba Square in Cairo, religious commodities are displayed above, below, behind, and next to pharaonic papyrus designs (Figure 6). Stacks of posters are arranged randomly, so that the names of God, a family tree of Muhammad or a chart of the succession of Muslim prophets are in the same stack with—and often placed behind or underneath—photographs of Pacific Island beach paradises and painted depictions of the infant Hindu deity Krsna.

Lane noted this apparent contradiction when he discussed with his Egyptian friend how the same volume of Arabic verse could contain "an ode to love and wine" on one page and a prayer on the next, the two coming into physical contact when the leaves of the book were closed. In view of the care Muslims take to protect and properly display the Divine name, how could this be allowed to happen? His friend's reply, recapitulating in spatial terms the sequential ordering of party and prayer, shows how Lane was both correct in principle (positioning is significant), and mistaken in his application of the principle. Because the prayer for forgiveness was made *after* the debauch, it covered it, annulled it. The original temporal ordering of events had to be preserved when their representation juxtaposed them in spatial terms.

Using a different reading frame—a temporal and teleological one in which the presupposition of certain future events affects the meaning of a visual display—helps us understand the peculiar carelessness with which religious

commodities are displayed for sale. Religious commodities are only religious once they cease being commodities, once they have passed out of the commodity phase into the consumption phase of their social life (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Ideally, their position in the commodity state is temporary, and they exist in that state only in order to be removed from it. As signifiers, religious commodities prior to the sale transaction signify differences in taste rather than differences in absolute worth. A mushaf is comparable to a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolate for some purposes. A papyrus bearing the “Fatiha,” the opening chapter of the Qur’an, is comparable to a papyrus showing Pharaoh on his war chariot. It thus makes little sense for a merchant to take special precautions in the placement of religious commodities relative to other commodities. The relevant reading frame for the marketing display is that of the functional differences between commodities rather than of their surface design characteristics.

In fact, the same holds for religious commodities in specialized shops. Specialized merchants of religious commodities are hardly likely to feel safer or more fortunate than their colleagues merely by virtue of the volume of sacred writing around them. Swamped with signifiers of blessing, the differences that generate meaning are absent. By forming the whole of the microenvironment, religious commodities lose all specific meaning and revert, again, to the situation of mere commodities, “in which [their] exchangeability . . . [is their] socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 1986:13). They are activated as religious objects only when taken out of the shop.

Crossing the Threshold

If human beings activate religious objects by removing them from the commodity situation, it is also the case that religious objects ideally activate and influence human beings. Educated, middle-class Egyptians often deny that the use of religious commodities has anything to do with guiding divine favor or offering protection from misfortune. Although some merchants justify their sale of such material on Qur’anic grounds (chapter 113 of *al-Falaq*, “The Dawn,” asks refuge in God from the envy of the envious, justifying steps taken to avoid the evil eye), others see such things as forbidden charms.

For example, the ancient and ubiquitous *xamsa xamis* (hand of Fatima) or *kaff* (pl. *kufuf*) (palm of the hand) is often found on the wall or around the door of a shop in the form of a handprint in mud or paint. It is intended to protect the establishment from the evil eye of envy. But handmade or mass-produced *kufuf* occasionally bear inscriptions of the name of Allah or of a Qur’anic verse, or proclaim salvation by the Lord of the Throne



Figure 6

Pharaonic papyrus designs surrounded by Islamic banners, posters, cards, and gifts.

(from the Qur’an 2:255) (Figure 7). A Muslim playwright explains:

The *kaff* is actually the name of God, each finger representing a letter: A L L H. But used as people use it, it’s a *tamima* [charm], and we’re not supposed to have amulets like that. People *write* the name of Allah on them so [they think] they’ll be OK! [pp. 122–123; emphasis in original]

Writing the name of God on a visual symbol that already represents the name of God appears to the educated as a semiotic redundancy, an accumulation of markers of legitimacy intended to overcome a questionable utilization. But the boundary between what the educated middle classes see as “truly Islamic” and the “base superstitions” of the masses is not hard and fast. Understandings of efficacy exist along a continuum from a straightforward faith that God will protect his word wherever it is found, to the belief that the display of sacred writing will please God when he sees it and cause him to bless those who have thus remembered him, to far more personalistic explanations stressing the psychological value of God’s word. Moreover, attributions of efficacy are likely to vary from one situation to another, and the

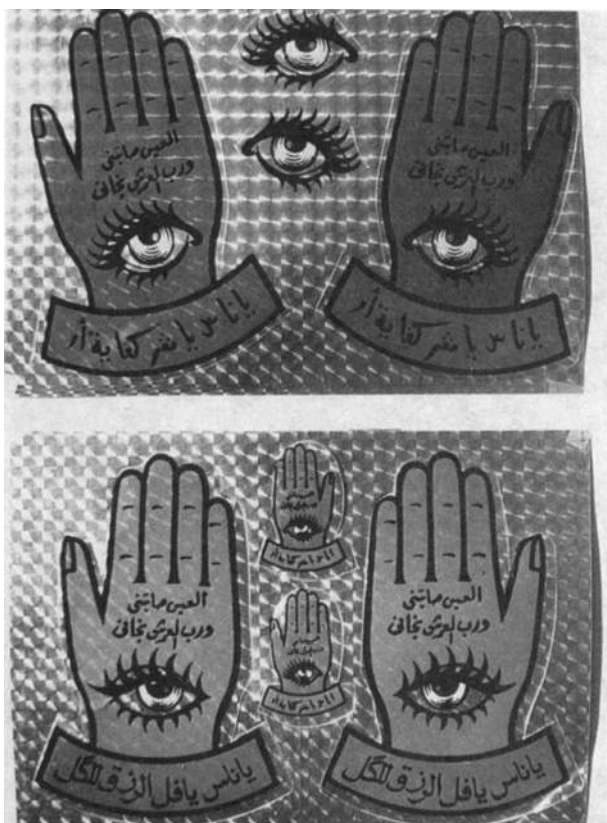


Figure 7

Stickers printed locally on imported rainbow refracting vinyl. These are intended to protect objects (automobiles, food carts) from the evil eye. In the center of each palm is the phrase "The [Evil] Eye struck me, but the Lord of the Throne Saved Me." On the cuff of the top pair, "Ya nas, ya sharr, kifayit 'arr," "O people, O evil, enough gossip" (since gossip is one mechanism by which the evil eye strikes). On the cuff of the bottom pair, "Ya nas, ya full, al-rizq lil-kull," "O people, O jasmine, to each his rightful sustenance," implying that envy is pointless.

informal idiom in which people compare religious commodities may contradict more reflective statements.

Members of the educated middle classes do acknowledge that the word of God has power as a display item, and they sometimes compare display commodities with the type specimen of powerful objects, the mushaf. For example, although most merchants of larger-than-standard prayer beads deny that they are for anything other than decoration, one merchant explained their purpose by comparing them with Qur'anic displays: "They're for putting on a wall of a room, just like a verse from the Qur'an on the wall. . . . when those beads are on your wall, it lets people know they've come to an Arab room. . . . Those beads are just like having a mushaf on the table. They're *juz' al-mushaf* [part of the mushaf, a play on the use of the word *juz'* to designate one of the 30 traditional portions into which the Qur'an is divided for purposes of memorization]" (p. 12). An Egyptian-American Arabic

teacher told me that "big prayer beads on the wall are for the same thing [as displays of Qur'anic verse]. They make you feel at home. They're just decoration, like the Qur'anic verses on the wall, or like the mushaf" (p. 12).

The implication that Qur'anic verses are "just decoration" forces us to look closely at the complex meanings of sacred display. For Muslim intellectuals, the power of religious objects derives from the fact that they can have both spiritual and cognitive functions. Whereas standard prayer beads have purely spiritual functions, being used to remember God and build a feeling of closeness with him, writing is more flexible. The creative director of an Islamic publishing house explains:

A verse from the Qur'an on the wall can be spiritual or cultural, depending on what it says. For example, there are verses that say that all men will meet death. This is something we have to know, because it will hopefully affect our behavior: we'll work in this world for success in the next, because we know that this life is not all there is. . . . Look: if you have a Qur'an, a copy of the Qur'an on your shelf, even if you just look at it, it has a spiritual function, because it's the word of God. It has baraka, it makes you remember God and think of God. But if you *open it up*, it has cultural and cognitive functions as well, because the Qur'an is full of information, social and spiritual and scientific, and political, and so on. No matter how you use the Qur'an, it has an effect, a purpose, a function. [pp. 17-18; emphasis in original]

With this in mind, we can begin to construct an idea of what baraka means to the educated middle classes. Baraka is the quality of objects that "makes you remember God and think of God." The ontological efficacy ascribed to Qur'anic displays by the working class is individualized, internalized, and psychologized among the educated. The Egyptian-American Arabic teacher elaborates:

[The mushaf] protects the house because it protects people from themselves. It keeps them calm, keeps their minds in the right place, makes them feel secure. It's a kind of therapy. My husband says, "you're making our house look like a mosque with all this [religious] stuff," but it's in his interest that when I'm upset there's something there to calm me down. . . . You know, it's not right that some people just have the Qur'an there and never read it, because we should all have some of it in our hearts. But just having it there on the shelf lifts your mind up and makes you remember God and all the help he can give you. Of course God won't do anything for you if you just sit there; you can't depend on him to do your work for you, but if you depend on him you will have more self-confidence and know you can do what you need to, even at times when the world seems to be upside down. [p. 12]

And the playwright continues:

As for Qur'anic verses on the wall, they are used for two reasons. First, they are our form of art. We don't allow pictorial representation usually, so the use of writing has taken the place of pictures as decorative art, as a way to beautify our dwellings and public places. And secondly, it is a mark of our

identity. It displays our identity as Muslims. . . . They may do other things, of course. The shopkeeper who has a verse on his wall may be getting angry at someone, then he'll turn around and see the verse, and it might calm him down. [pp. 123–124]

I once questioned a cab driver whose vehicle was festooned with prayer plaques and Qur'anic verses on vinyl stickers, as to whether and how they were effective. After repeating the idea that they kept the driver safe from harm, he said that they also give one a good feeling, and that they keep one's mind running in the right direction. Upon pressing him for the third or fourth time whether these Qur'anic verses were actually, really, honestly and truly effective, he blurted, exasperated, "Ahsan min surit il-bint!" ("Well, they're better than a picture of a girl!") (p. 99). Again one finds the articulation of a contrast set including religious objects as one of its terms. Just as a picture of a girl would lead one to think about the wrong things, a Qur'anic verse will lead one's mind in the right direction. The role of sacred writing is to influence the psyche and behavior of the beholder, rather than directly to invoke divine power.

Such influence can be stereotyped, or it can be highly personal. The playwright I cited above described for me some of the objects in his crowded study:

These remembrances never fade into the background, because each one holds a memory for me: each one was chosen by me or was a gift. The little *Allahu akbar* [God is great] on my desk, for example, although it's store bought, is from my niece. The basmallah embroidery there behind the desk was my father's, and it's over 100 years old. It was sewn by a very well-known member of my family.

The pictures behind you of Khalid al-Islambuli and his co-defendants [in the case of Sadat's assassination]—I still look at that. It's been 11 years now, but it still brings memories. You see that I wrote some things from the Qur'an there: "Of the believers are men who are true to the covenant which they made with Allah; so of them is he who accomplished his vow" [33:23], and also "And we strengthened their hearts with patience" [18:14]. That was to strengthen them in the ordeal that they faced after being sentenced to death. I still look at that picture, and at the picture of Sayyid Qutb down there, and remember them.

Some Muslims won't pray in this room, because of all the photographs. But most of them are just photographs of my family. Then of course there's the painting back there that's supposed to evoke mosques. Even a sculpture of a mosque there with—not a clock—but with a barometer in it. I think it's from Palestine. Behind me there's this painting—it's not very artistic, but it's very old, that's why I keep it. It belonged to my grandfather, and it's either from Iran or from the area around Karbala and Kufa [it shows 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, face veiled in white, holding his double-pointed sword, flanked by Hassan and Hussein, also veiled, and two other companions]. Below that is a photograph of Jerusalem. [pp. 125–127]

He also wrote Qur'anic verses, usually in pencil, on the unfinished wood sides of his bookcases. The unusual profusion of pictorial art, handcrafted items, and personal mementos did not keep him from using "typical" manufactured objects, like the clear plastic *shahada* decal ("There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Apostle") on the front door of the apartment, nor was one type of object necessarily inferior to the others:

Really, what they do is act as constant reminders to us. Having these things is *dhikr* [remembrance or devotion], because when you see them, you *read* them, and by reading them you're doing *dhikr*. They are constant reminders of God's presence. These things are *maftuh* [open]: for if we believe in angels, we know that they're being recited even if the room is empty. They proclaim *themselves* perpetually. [p. 124; emphasis in original]⁴

The Arabic word used to denote a verse of the Qur'an is *ayah* (pl. *ayat*), which can also mean "miracle," reminding Muslims that the primary miracle of Islam is the inimitable Qur'an itself. But *ayah* can also mean any sign by which God makes himself known to humans in the world. The alternation of day and night, the natural beauty of creation, the forces of nature, the historical record of the punishment of the wicked: all are *ayat* testifying to God's existence, power, and intent. If every time we cross a doorstep we find ourselves silently reading the phrase written above the door, "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate," we become witnesses to the signs of God. The consumption of religious commodities is an automatic trigger of devotional acts. These objects prompt us to respond to them as the physical manifestations of God's presence in the universe. Transferred from the world of factory machinery to the world of manufactured commodities, Marx's famous description of alienation becomes literally true: we become servants to the objects we create (Marx 1857:279).

Outside In

If devotional acts are automatically triggered in the human encounter with religious commodities, it might seem surprising that some Muslims are opposed not only to the use of Qur'anic verses as *tamima*, or amulets, but to their quotidian sale and display on decals, signs, posters, or in the form of the ubiquitous *mushaf* in the rear windows of automobiles. A local executive with Exxon Oil states his view:

Let me tell you something. That's a very bad habit, a very bad habit. The Qur'an is for reading only. If you're not reading it, you shouldn't have it around. It's not just to have around. Even in my own home, I'm not supposed to have more than a single *mushaf*. Just one. What's the use of more? . . . they're useless in my possession, and I should give them away to someone, or donate them to a mosque. In the car, look what happens:

everything collects dust, and it gets dirty, and so on.

As for stickers, they're also a very bad habit. There are only certain things that are allowable to put in the car, and only if they're there temporarily, and from the Qur'an. For example, there's a short prayer for travellers, and if a driver doesn't know it by heart, he can put that on the dashboard to read it before he drives, but that's it. It's not for show, it's for *saying*. If it's not *said*, there's no point, so why just have the sticker there?

Saying the prayer asks God to protect the driver, but it's not a preventative measure, it's a measure of devotion. God sends us accidents as tests, and the more he loves us, the more he tests us. . . .

Besides, if I had stickers or something on the car, or a mushaf on the dashboard, what if I had just had sex with my girlfriend? . . . The Qur'an specifically says that after you've had sex you're not supposed to be touching or getting near the mushaf until you're pure. . . . Or if I had a sticker there on the dashboard, my girlfriend could be sitting over there picking at its edges or something, and it would be getting dusty and dirty and so on. . . . I can *say tasbih* [using prayer beads], thanking and praising God with my voice all I want, but the *sibha* [prayer beads] hanging from the mirror is pointless. It's not *used*. [pp. 72–74; emphasis in original]

Similar concerns are occasionally raised in the press. On May 26, 1989, *al-Wafd*, Egypt's major opposition daily newspaper, ran a story, entitled "The Sale of Qur'anic Printed Matter in the Streets: Forbidden," by Mahmud Shakir, which criticized the sale of objects bearing Qur'anic verses: "For because the Glorious Qur'an has a holiness and a sacredness, these printings need prudent supervision and detailed inspection, because some errors have, through ignorance or negligence, crept into them." Reciprocal dangers face the Qur'an itself and the prospective users of commercially available products. While the Qur'an is distorted and even literally dismembered, the hapless consumer is fatally misled:

As for what some presses are undertaking in terms of printing verses from the Qur'an, and their distribution through peddlers, this is a question that turns on intention; but it is worth mentioning that some people neglect the validity of the Qur'an and turn it into brazen commerce, putting verses in places unbecoming for them, and some rip apart the mushaf and take from it amulets and charms and little pamphlets in the form of individual chapters.

According to the article, Egyptian law forbids the commercialization of the Qur'an, which itself explicitly warns humankind: "And do not sell my signs for a small price, and fear Me alone. [2:30]" For the university-based and government religious scholars quoted in the article, the important thing about the Qur'an is an understanding of its meaning rather than its use as art, slogan, or charm. The article quotes Shaykh Mansur al-Rifa'i, Director of Mosques in the Ministry of Religious Endowments, pleading:

Whoever prints Qur'anic verses or chapters and has not subjected their production to precise inspection, and errors or omissions in the process of printing have occurred, he produces defects in the meaning. We appeal to every citizen to fear God, and to ensure when purchasing these printings that they are true and clear. And those who carry these printed verses and use them in alms-taking in public thoroughfares or in front of mosques, and those who put the Qur'an in inappropriate circumstances, should escape the humiliation of begging and make their living by useful employment, and leave the sale of Qur'anic and religious printing—in a general sense—to public bookstores, for these are subject to supervision and inspection, and the Muslim needs to buy a perfect mushaf to find in it everything he needs.

Such distortion is a powerful fear with deep social roots. The religious employees of a socialist government place the deformation of the word of God squarely in the hands of petty capitalists and despised beggars, while warning against "brazen commerce" in sacred things. Here the contradictions and tensions surrounding the Egyptian government's accelerating campaign to privatize public sector industries (Lofgren 1993) have been transformed into fears about the commercialization of the Qur'an, the ultimate public good. As state enterprises are sold, the scholarly elite attempt to protect part of Egypt's "symbolic inventory" as an expression of their own position (Bourdieu 1986; Kopytoff 1986:73).

Fears born of the homology between economic privatization and the commoditization of the Qur'an are joined by fears that the Qur'an is threatened from outside the body politic as well (see Deringil 1993). The fact that the privatization campaign is partially the result of negotiations with agencies like the International Monetary Fund and the United States Agency for International Development (Sullivan 1990) brings with it suspicion of foreign conspiracy. Recently, the left-wing newspaper *al-Ahali* accused Islamic radical groups of conspiring with foreign governments over a case of Qur'an tampering:

Americans have also come under suspicion [in the recent series of terrorist bombings in Cairo.] *Al-Ahali* of 24 June quoted an unnamed Washington agency that a squad of four Americans connected to U.S. national security entered Egypt in May to meet the Gami'at [Islamic radical groups] and offer them weapons, money, and training, in revenge for the [Egyptian] government's arrest of U.S. citizen Robert Pakingham, charged with distributing Korans adulterated with biblical verses. [*Middle East Times-Egypt*, June 29–July 5, 1993:1]

In any case, whether from domestic profiteers, foreign missionaries, or careless superstition, the integrity of the Qur'an is perceived as subject to serious threats. Official efforts to ensure the correctness of printed Qur'anic verses are joined by the more radical move of restricting their public appearance. Instead of plastering an automobile with religious decals, one memorizes and recites the phrases, which is their true purpose. External stimuli are

unnecessary, since the truly pious will remember to do dhikr without prompting. The verb meaning memorization, *hifdh*, also means “to protect,” by internalizing and preserving. By discouraging the practice of using religious commodities for display, one emphasizes the process of internalization and spiritual devotion rather than external marking. “There are so many bad customs and habits here because everything is so *mixed*,” said the Exxon employee:

So many of these people are Muslim, but they're ignorant of real Islam, they don't read or study what Islam is about. That's not to say that anyone who reads about the religion is automatically the best Muslim. . . . Those women wearing bright veils know that the religion is calling for something, but they're ignorant about the reason for veiling. These are not the people you ask about Islam. . . . There are levels. When you see men in the street with beards, those are the really pious Muslims, the really religious ones with a lot of devotion. Not all of them, of course, because anyone can grow a beard; you can't rely on the forms you see around you; they can fool you. You have to look *inside* to find whether they're part of the small community of real Muslims, who are defined by their great efforts to help each other regardless of who you are. [pp. 69–70; emphasis in original]

External form is misleading. Like the inside of a religious goods shop, the public environment is so swamped with religious symbols that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious. Piety is measured by behavior but created and deepened by study, placing a premium on the understanding rather than the mere memorization of the Qur'an, the core of the traditional model of religious pedagogy throughout the Muslim world.

Institutions in both the public and the private sector stress the importance of understanding rather than merely displaying (either visually or orally) the Qur'an. For example, one young private sector publishing house produces religious material specifically for children, using Western pedagogical techniques. According to their directors, books about Islam should pay attention to the special psychological nature of children and rely on *tabait mafahim al-islam*, the simplification of Islamic concepts, by involving children in activities, like games. “I saw children playing some of the games of the kind you have had in America,” the creative director told me, “and how they concentrated on them and learned from playing them. That was the beginning of games like Battles of the Prophet,” one of the board games the company produces. He continued:

The child's capacity for memorization is much greater than his capacity for understanding. The memorization of the Qur'an can do a lot of things. It can improve pronunciation and diction, it can provide a basis for *adab* [etiquette]. But one thing that the memorization of the Qur'an cannot do, is to change your behavior or your comportment by itself. Because

even if it's memorized, it's not understood, and the explanation of the meaning of the Qur'an requires a lot of work. What modern methods do is to explain the context of the Qur'an in simple terms by breaking it down into principles and dwelling on those. So by the use both of memorization—and I myself have never memorized the Qur'an—and modern methods, we can fulfill all the aims we seek. [pp. 569 (1989)]

Body and Soul

In *Natural Symbols*, Mary Douglas attempts to explain why some religious traditions—including most of contemporary European Christianity—reject ritual as a proper form of devotion, emphasizing the creation of inner spiritual states rather than the outward form of ritual communication:

When I ask my clerical friends why the new forms [of worship] are held superior, I am answered by a Teilhardist evolutionism which assumes that a rational, verbally explicit, personal commitment to God is self-evidently more evolved and better than its alleged contrary, formal, ritualistic conformity. [Douglas 1973:22]

She argues that the tendency to view ritual—the visible expression of values—in a positive light is a result of certain types of social structure, and that “people at different historic periods are more or less sensitive to signs as such. Some people are deaf or blind to non-verbal signals. I argue that the perception of symbols in general . . . is socially determined” (pp. 27–28). According to her theory, “the most important determinant of ritualism is the experience of closed social groups” (p. 33), while the lack of sensitivity to condensed, visible ritual symbols goes along with a highly developed division of labor, a loosening of personal forms of social control and “a general preoccupation with lack of meaning” (p. 41). The two polar types of social structure even display different patterns of communication, closed groups maintaining social control through appeals to the status of individuals, more open groups maintaining control by attempting to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of their members (p. 48).

If we think about consumption as the collective and systematic manipulation of signs (Baudrillard 1988[1968]: 22), we can treat it as Douglas treats ritual in looking at the different attitudes with which Egyptians approach the meaning of religious commodities. The official Egyptian religious establishment still expresses itself through outward signs of status backed by a traditionally trained class of Muslim scholars, the *Ulama*, who press for the centralized supervision of the sacred word, emphasizing the threats posed to the Qur'an through intentional or unintentional errors in production. The sale of religious commodities is legitimate when conducted by appropriate public institutions and intended for the enlightenment of the buyer. Therefore posters illustrating the family tree of

the Prophet, compasses for determining the direction of Mecca, and cassette tapes of famous Qur'an reciters are all worthwhile commodities provided that they are produced and used properly.

But the line between commerce and commercialization is a thin one. The 'Ulama complain of "brazen commerce," while even secularists are beginning to complain that the public competition between the official religious establishment and the Islamic opposition movement has resulted in a cheapening of religious sentiment through the flooding of public culture with religious symbols. An Egyptian employee of a European research center in Cairo explains:

It's getting so you can't talk about anything these days without dropping religion into it. . . . I mean, I believe in some religious values, but it's so commercialized now, all over everything, and the more it spreads, when it gets so commercialized, it has a dwindling moral value, really. It becomes part of the background rather than something you really pay attention to.

Like this thing about listening to the Qur'an all the time. When the Qur'an is being recited, you're supposed to sit and really listen to it and pay attention to what it says. But I've been to three or four memorial services lately where they've been playing tapes of the Qur'an, and people were sitting there gossiping with each other the whole time! "Oh, did you see her," and "what did he say," and so on. In the past when they had a guy there in person reciting, he would pause and rest, and at that time people would talk, but now with the tapes, and even when people have a reciter come and recite, people talk and gossip the whole time. Qur'an has become like background music. It's in taxis, and in homes, and everywhere, so now you've got three choices, basically, do you want to listen to pop, or classical, or Qur'an?

I asked my cousin about this, because she said once, "Oh, I only listen to Qur'an, not music." But when I asked how she could have the Qur'an on all day while she was doing her chores rather than listening to it, she said, "I read Qur'an *every day*, so I do pay attention to it," as if that excuses using tapes as accompaniment to her chores! It's like I said, just wearing the veil makes people think that they can continue to do everything just as they did before, but now with an "Islamic" content. It's very much on the surface, commercialized. [pp. 25-26]

In this example the surface forms of devotion are portrayed not only as misleading, but as misled. The commercialization of religion has contributed to a cheapening of moral sentiment and the transfer of behavior from the commercial sphere (gossiping while listening to taped music as background) into that of the legitimately sacred (gossiping while listening to live Qur'an recitation at memorial services).

I would argue that this concern arises from a perception that the commodity situation of religious objects has become a permanent rather than a temporary feature. Egyptians are coming to perceive such objects as integrated horizontally in networks of signification containing

other commodities, rather than vertically through society in a generally set and recognizable system of hierarchical purity relationships (which Douglas identified as the communicative context of public ritual). Religious commodities are part of a more general regime of consumption just as religious studies have become just another part of the required school curriculum (Starrett 1991). The economic paradigm has subsumed the religious, dissolving its internal structure of signification.

Hence the effort to protect sacred writing from public display's potential effacement and damage, not merely to ensure its correctness. The power of the word is internal, and it needs to be internalized in order to work. Mere display will do nothing except expose sacred writing to danger. The notion that these symbols are powerful in themselves is downplayed; the traditional assertion of the healing power of the ink from sacred writing is denied. The physical incorporation of the sacred word in older healing rituals is replaced by the psychological incorporation of the word, first through its memorization, but more importantly through its study and comprehension.

At the same time, physical objects used for religious ends become tools of child socialization rather than adult utility. Personality formation rather than external status marking becomes the goal, just as in Douglas's examples from contemporary Europe. To this end the written word is first joined, and then eclipsed, by the use of nonverbal images in children's coloring and activity books, models, and posters—all of which present images of sacred environments or places. These, as explicitly human creations, are not subject to the same threats as the word of God, and are amenable to instrumental manipulation and intervention, consonant with an emphasis on the importance of self-confidence, motivation, and individual action to secure God's blessing. Jigsaw puzzles show drawings of the Ka'ba in Mecca surrounded by pilgrims (cover photo); coloring books illustrate the ideal Muslim family; activity books have the child take pencil in hand to aid an Arab soldier through a maze to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

If it is true that use value is an epiphenomenon of exchange value (Baudrillard 1988[1970]:42), then the difference between the display utility of religious commodities and their pedagogical utility can be characterized not as a class difference—for the wealthy as well as the poor use them for their protective value—but a difference in position relative to the means of intellectual production. Historically, the commissioning of a pilgrimage mural (Campo 1987), the purchase of a written amulet or charm, or the acquisition of a mushaf created or played on direct relationships between the illiterate and the literate. Today, the purchase of a bumper sticker or a printed Qur'an plays on relationships between consumers, merchants, banks, designers, publishing houses and paper importers, international monetary organizations, Asian shipping

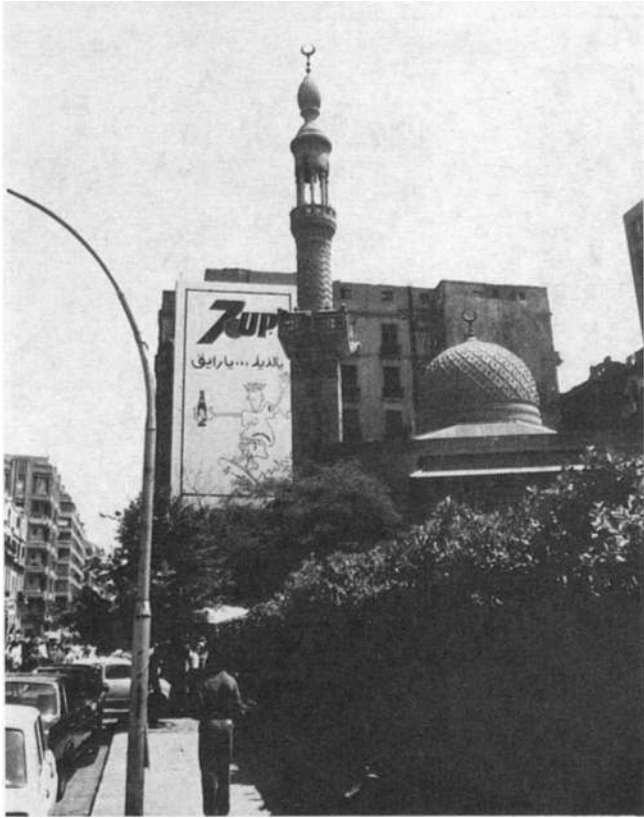


Figure 8

A mural advertisement for 7-Up soft drink. Although a very few Egyptian youth have recently begun to wear shorts in public, I have never seen a skateboard in the country.

firms and petrochemical factories, government religious scholars, and customs inspectors. The production of the modern economy creates the consumer of religious commodities in two ways. First, it creates consumers of protective commodities by creating the vast differences in life possibilities that generate envy and require its prevention. Since the oil boom of the early 1970s and the opening of economic borders in the late 1970s, inequalities of wealth in Egypt, always quite spectacular, have worsened. The extraordinary influx of imported consumer goods over the last 15 years, along with economic privatization and the establishment of a culture of advertising, has radically altered Cairo's public environment (Figure 8). Relative differences in poverty and wealth have become visually as well as structurally aggressive. This being the case, the upwardly mobile require protection from envy, the marginal and downwardly mobile cling ever more fiercely to the hope of God's blessing, and both turn to the aid of commodities produced by the very system that creates the need for them. At the same time, exchange value creates another use value—the need for intellectually useful commodities—because these commodities allow their consumers to partake in the field of Islamic adab (manners,

cultivation), a fashion contest for the spiritually mobile. Signaling one's entry into Cairo's latest social competition, the consumption of intellectual goods like religious cassette tapes and books is even more effective than pious dress, which is merely outward form. As with the consumption of material commodities, the consumption of intellectual objects, according to Baudrillard, is "not a need for a particular object as much as it is a need for difference" (1988[1970]:45). One can gain access through the consumption of these commodities to Islamic credentials transmitted in novel media by the new class of secular religious intellectuals and businessmen, who obviate the need for their customers to seek entry to Islamic learning through "traditional" means of socialization which are state-controlled (Eickelman 1985:168). What should be stressed here is that patterns of consumption do not merely serve marking functions visibly differentiating groups from one another, they literally "induce" the groups themselves (Baudrillard 1988[1968]:16).

Conclusions

This preliminary survey of the growing mass commoditization of the Islamic tradition in Egypt has tried to provide some idea of how the consumption of new types of commodities is structured socially, and how their meaning is constructed, contested, and negotiated. The dialectic of display and internalization, the commoditization of intellectual work, and the tensions between different loci of production and authority make religious commodities particularly sensitive markers of cultural transformation. Further anthropological attention in the field of religious commodities should be paid to three issues. First, because of the importance of writing in defining Islamic religious goods, we need to investigate further the physical and semiotic complexity of objects bearing writing or drawing, not only "hard goods" like barawiz, but intellectual goods like documents and books (Messick 1993; Moore 1994), or newspaper cartoons and posters (Douglas and Malti-Douglas 1994; Fischer and Abedi 1990:341–382). This is not to mention newer commodities like computer software that alter traditional forms of communication. The American tabloid *Muslim Journal* runs advertisements for Islamic databases such as "The Alim" ("Use Your Computer to Unleash the Power of Islam!") and "QuranBase":

The complete Quran in a simple to use, completely menu-driven, blazing fast text retrieval program. . . . It can search the entire Quran in seconds. Search by word, combination of words, subject index or the chapter index. You can do complex searches using boolean commands. QuranBase is completely hypertext. . . . [August 20, 1993:19]

If these are not currently in use in Egypt and other majority Muslim countries, they soon will be and will have a

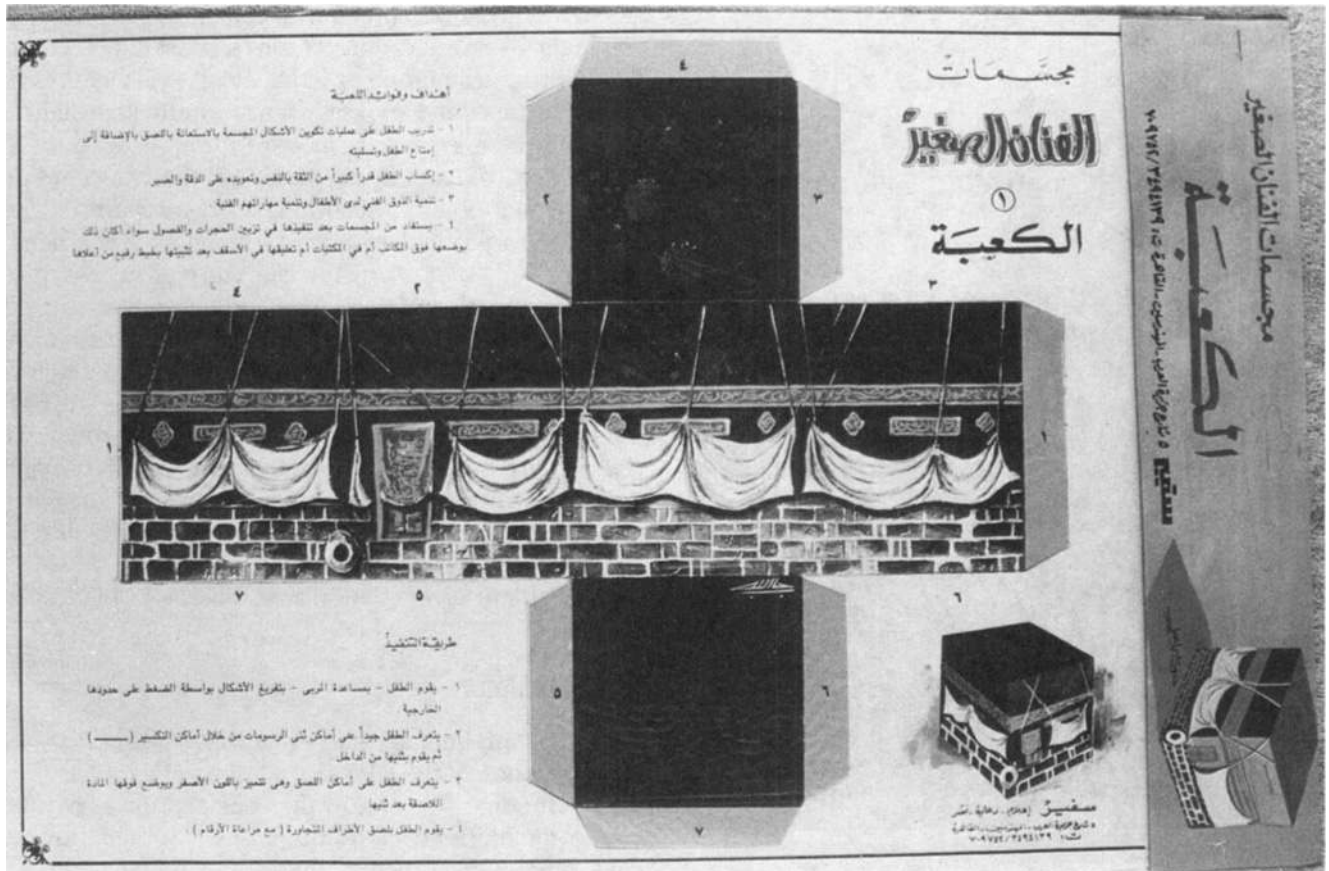


Figure 9
A paper model of the Ka'ba in Mecca, to stimulate children's interest in the pilgrimage.

revolutionary effect in furthering competition between the 'Ulama and new intellectual classes over the production of Islamic knowledge (Lyotard 1984).

Second, we need to look further at questions of genre and scale. What are the repercussions of the introduction of representational art (for example, in children's coloring books) to religious traditions like Islam and Judaism, which have tended to favor verbal representation of the sacred? What is the significance of paper models of the Ka'ba (Figure 9), brass plaques reproducing the calligraphy on its doors, Qur'ans written in microscopic script, and prayer beads enlarged to unmanageable size? Stewart's (1984) fascinating investigation of the meaning of representation and scale in Europe and America never suggests that the meaning inhering in differences of scale might vary cross-culturally (or intraculturally).

Finally, a comparative framework studying religious commodities in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of the Indian subcontinent and East Asia, promises theoretical illumination of the relationships among religious authority, the moral economy of public display, and the dynamics of capitalist penetration. At the same time, considering transnational flows of styles, genres, and objects (particularly given that

many of the world production and distribution networks appear to be centered in East Asia) provides a convenient case study of the globalization of markets in cultural goods.

Research on mass-produced religious commodities provides an unparalleled opportunity to develop our understanding of how economic, political, and ideological systems interact through the field of cultural production.

Notes

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1. Page citations for interviews refer to my field notes from 1993, except as otherwise indicated.

2. Remember, for example, the protests that greeted the McDonald's fast-food restaurant chain during its promotion of the 1994 World Cup Soccer games. Having printed the flags of many nations—including that of Saudi Arabia, which bears the shahada—on its disposable paper bags, McDonald's was informed by Muslims that one does not crumple up and dispose of the name of God ("Printing Scripture on Throwaway Bag Offends Muslims," *Charlotte Observer*, June 8, 1994:2A). During the same week, a PepsiCo promotion was criticized for committing the reverse sacrilege: shining a Pepsi logo on the tower of the Anglican cathedral in Liverpool (Dirk Beveridge, "One Shining Moment Decried," *Charlotte Observer*, June 11, 1994:1D).

3. I owe this insight to Kathryn Johnson.

4. When he gets a new copy of the Qur'an, he literally "opens" it by reading a few verses before putting it away, so that it has been used and is not just a display item.

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