***Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*. The moral turn—from sufi sheikhs to Facebook groups?**

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This article aims to pose a question and state a hypothesis rather than to come with a conclusive answer. I wish to draw attention to some interesting parallels that may be observed when comparing a number of core features of early modern Muslim reform movements to the structural impact of present-day Internet use in the Muslim world. The significance of these parallels — whether they are coincidental, or indicative of a trajectory — needs to be discussed using further evidence and examples from different contexts than what I can provide in this essay. My aim here is primarily to outline these parallels, in order to ask whether it is possible to speak of a “moral turn” as part of a dynamics that changed the Muslim world profoundly over the past two to three centuries. This dynamics, I hypothesize, led to expanding practical responsibility for moral control of behaviour, in principle, to every individual in the “crowd” of believers, eroding the hierarchy of religious specialists. Ideal-typically, one might say that the divide between *al-khāṣṣa* (the learned elite) and *al-‘amma* (the masses of commoners) was abolished; the *‘amma* obtained the same rights as the *khāṣṣa*. This must of course not be over-stated or misinterpreted as a dissolution of religious authority; nevertheless, it seems indicative that the use of the *khāṣṣa/‘amma*-divide has fallen out of favour in the period under consideration. The dynamics I seek to identify here may be compared to processes often associated with “modernisation”, and may thus be an element in a much larger investigation of the roots of “modernity” in the Muslim world.¹

Nouvelle cuisine

My theoretical starting point is that reality is socially constructed,² and that this social construction concerns (1) our minds and ideas, our memories and cultural traditions, our means and modes of building knowledge and normative systems; (2) our bodies and the ways we conceive of them, shape

¹ For another take on this issue, see also Hofheinz, “A history”.

² Berger and Luckman, *Social construction*.

them, display them, and discipline them; and (3) our ways of relating to others, of bonding and forming groups, communities and networks.

Bodies, minds, communities — or to play on the Latin root, *corps*, *corpus*, and *corporation*—are three keywords that lay out useful dimensions to reflect on the social construction of human realities including, of course, Muslim realities. Occasionally — but perhaps less rarely than we are inclined to think — this may lead to surprising results:

Fig. 1: alaa pink's “art of cooking” certificate (screenshot, 2008)

In this particular construction, published in 2007 on a discussion forum on BramjneT.com, long one of the most popular Arabic internet sites, we see the black salafi-jihadi flag popularised at the time by “the Islamic State of Iraq” (*Dawlat al-ʿIrāq al-Islāmiyya*, originally an umbrella for a number of jihadist groups in Iraq that acted as a front end for al-Qaida before mutating into what they in June 2014 began to call *al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya*, “the Islamic State”). This jihadi flag flies over a “certificate of appreciation” to “alaa pink”³ for his contributions to the “art of cooking section”. The collage was published on the site’s “Islamic software, books and CDs section” (*qism al-barāmij wa-l-kutub wa-l-*

³ ‘alaa pink’ is a Muslim Egyptian who on 4 March 2011 opened a Facebook account (<http://fb.com/sana.oula.matbakh>) that presents him as nothing else than a Muslim Egyptian interested in the art of cooking.

CD-hāt), in a thread entitled “10 commandments of martyr Ḥasan al-Bannā” (*10 waṣāyā li-l-shahīd Ḥasan al-Bannā*) opened by someone who had uploaded a file-sharing link to these “Ten commandments” (*al-waṣāyā l-‘ashr*) (more on them below).

It is unclear why this collage was cooked up; for all I know, there never was a “cooking section” on BramjneT.com, a site that owes its popularity to its heavy focus on providing free download links to software. But the point of presenting this particular example here is that sometimes, what we produce in our reality kitchens turns out to be quite new and original, even if we use familiar ingredients that are not so new in themselves. As Ernst Bloch wrote, in critical reaction to the biblical adage that there is nothing new under the sun: “Alles Gescheite mag schon siebenmal gedacht worden sein. Aber wenn es wieder gedacht wurde, in anderer Zeit und Lage, war es nicht mehr dasselbe. Nicht nur sein Denker, sondern vor allem das zu Bedenkende hat sich unterdessen geändert”.⁴

Disciplining the body

In the following, I shall explore the three dimensions — the body, the corpus, and the corporate — to investigate the parallels mentioned above between early modern reform movements and present-day internet use in the Muslim world. To illustrate the first pole, I shall use the case of Muḥammad Majdhūb (1210/1795-96-1247/1831), a Sudanese religious teacher (*murshid*) and leader (*shaykh*) of a Sufi brotherhood (*ṭarīqa*) in the Shādhilī tradition.⁵ The most prolific Sudanese author up to his time, he was an important representative of socio-religious reform movements that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries aimed to spread Islamic knowledge and responsible Islamic practice beyond the traditional confines of the urban scholar-jurists (*‘ulamā’*) — i.e., to extend both socially and geographically the internal boundaries of the influence of a scripturalist understanding of Islam. After eight years in the urban centres of Mecca and Medina where he pursued studies in the scholastic disciplines (*fiqh*), in Prophetic Tradition (*ḥadīth*), and in Sufism, Majdhūb returned to the Sudan and established a lodge (*zāwiya*) in the port of Suakin where he preached norms and knowledge derived from the scholastic tradition among people who previously had been only

⁴ Bloch, *Avicenna*, 9. Cf. *Eccl.*, 1: 9.

⁵ Hofheinz, *Internalising Islam*. What follows is a very condensed sketch based in particular on p. 516-42.

peripherally influenced by this tradition. In what may be called an “inner mission”, Majdhūb laid great emphasis on morality in everyday life, in particular his followers’ individual responsibility for their acts. In other words, he worked his followers to make them internalise core behavioural norms derived from the scriptural, scholastic tradition. Through internalising these norms into their super-egos, people not only learned of them in the first place, but became responsible agents of control, responsible for monitoring and controlling their own behaviour and adjusting it to these norms.

Sexual morality was the foremost concern of the moral campaign that our shaykh waged. Stories focusing on the need to mend one’s ways and bring one’s sex life — and gender relations in general — in line with scriptural norms take prime of place in shaykh Majdhūb’s hagiography;⁶ they are put ahead of all other accounts of Majdhūb’s deeds and receive as much attention as all other social ills taken together if we count what the Shaykh told people to “repent” of. “Repentance” (*tawba*) was an act of recognising that one’s behaviour fell short of the Islamic norms that Majdhūb preached, and of sincerely committing oneself to observe these norms in the future. In other words, promising to discipline oneself, and first and foremost, one’s body.

This focus on morality in everyday life not only meant that the *spiritual* aspects of the Sufi tradition (*al-taṣawwuf alladhī li-l-taḥaqquq*) were deemphasised in practice in favour of its *ethical* aspects (*al-taṣawwuf alladhī li-l-takhalluq*).⁷ Beyond that, it also meant a turn away from a legalist understanding of the norms derived from the Scriptures. Grabbing the buttocks of a neighbour’s slave became just as reprehensible as *zinā* (illicit intercourse) — but then, *zinā* was not punished by lashing or stoning, as the jurists would have it, but by a stern look from the omniscient father-shaykh, a look so threatening that the offender literally would pee into his pants.⁸

This moralisation of the understanding of Islam was characteristic of many reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it became one important element in pushing back the role of scholastic jurisprudence in the construction of the meaning of Islam.⁹ On the level of agency, this moralised understanding of Islam and the internalisation of scriptural norms are closely linked aspects of the same dynamics whereby the individual believer assumes full responsibility for controlling his or her behaviour.

⁶ Majdhūb, *al-Wasīla*.

⁷ See further Hofheinz, *Internalising Islam*, 18-19.

⁸ Majdhūb, *al-Wasīla*, 123; for details, see Hofheinz, *Internalising Islam*, 532.

⁹ Cf. Johansen, “Die sündige”; Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte*; Reichmuth, “Islam”, “Muslimische Gesellschaften”.

The classic definition of “proper behaviour” (*iḥsān*) in Islam is that you should obey God as if you see Him, for even if you don’t see Him, He does see you (*u’bud Allāh ka-annaka tarāh, fa-in lam takun tarāhu fa-innahū yarāk*). But there is a catch to this. Even if scholars have transmitted this Prophetic Tradition for centuries, the omniscient God remained too far from many ordinary people’s everyday lives to actually make them change their ways. This is where the shaykh comes in. To begin with, he is physically present and visible, and in an atmosphere of love and familiarity, in innocent yet consistent ways, he builds up in his followers the conviction that he is familiar with all their affairs. In other words, he sets himself up as an omniscient father figure who knows everything that his children are doing. And since he “knows”, it does not help hiding, or travelling out of town. You will see him again tomorrow, and he will have that stern look on his face, and you will find yourself urinating into your pants or being exposed otherwise. In this way, the shaykh shamed his followers into obeying and internalising the norms he preached: even if people found it hard to stop visiting prostitutes or grabbing buttocks, they no longer dared, because the omniscient shaykh eventually became detached from his physical presence and turned into an instrument of self-control supplementing and replacing external social control. Now you had to “Obey God—because, you know!!”

Making every individual believer — and not only a scholarly or spiritual elite — conscious of God’s norms and responsible for putting them into practice has been at the core of the moral mission of many Islamic reform movements since the eighteenth century. And as in the case of Majdhūb’s mission, it appears that gender relations and sexual morality/self-discipline often played a central role in these reform movements and continue to be paradigmatically important to this day. Let us look at the hit list of the most frequently downloaded books from *Ṣayd al-Fawā’id* (saaaid.net), long one of the most popular salafi sites on the internet.¹⁰ In 2008, three out of the top five works here were concerned with morality: nr. 2 was a collection of homilies and exhortations on manners and morality (*khuṭab wa-ḥikam wa-aḥkām wa-mawā’iz wa-ādāb wa-akhlāq*);¹¹ nr. 3 was a work clearing Prophet Joseph of the accusation of having nourished immoral thoughts towards

¹⁰ *Ṣayd al-Fawā’id* was established in 2001 in Saudi Arabia; it toes a pro-regime line. Data here were originally collected on 28 October 2008, and compared with data as of 19 May 2014 and 1 October 2014. Popularity data were systematically collected from Alexa.com throughout the period 2000-2010, before Alexa restricted free access to its data.

¹¹ Al-Salmān, *Mawārid al-ḥam’ān*.

the wife of his Egyptian master;¹² and nr. 5 was a “practical guide to overcoming the secret habit”, i.e. masturbation.¹³

Six years later, on 1 October 2014, the anti-masturbation manual still was number 5 on the list,¹⁴ while the most popular work now was “Mastering life”¹⁵ by a young writer from the United Arab Emirates whose motto on Facebook is, “My God, I seek refuge with Thee from immorality in acts and thoughts”.¹⁶ The work is an Islamic self-help and self-improvement book written, as its author admits in the preface, because this kind of books is bestselling next to the Qur’an.

The masturbation issue was similarly prominent on *Ṭarīq al-Islām* (IslamWay.com), which for years (ca. 2005-10) was the most popular Islamic website of all.¹⁷ *Ṭarīq al-Islām* was established in 1998 by Wael Ghonim¹⁸ (b. 1980, a pious middle-class Egyptian software engineer who later took fame for standing behind the Facebook group *Kullinā Khālīd Saʿīd*¹⁹ that played an important role in the January 25, 2011 Revolution in Egypt); in June 2001, Wael donated *Ṭarīq al-Islām* — which had become too big for him to manage on his own — to the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), one of the largest Muslim organisations in the US and one that maintains strong ties to Saudi Arabia. The selection of material made available on *Ṭarīq al-Islām* clearly reflects the salafi slant of those running the site. In 2008, the anti-masturbation *al-ʿĀda al-sayyiʿa* by noted salafi preacher Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid (b. 1960) was number 11 on the list of most downloaded books here; nr. 1-10 were dominated by Qur’an, pious biographies and prayer compilations, and the comprehensive handbook on Islamic “creed, manners, ethics, worship, and human interaction”

¹² Muḥammad Ḥamid Ibrāhīm, *al-Qawl al-faṣl*.

¹³ Al-Khiḍr, *al-Intiṣār*. Nr. 1 was a book explaining that the proper meaning of being salafi is to follow the pious forebears (*salaf*), not to belong to a “salafi party” (al-ʿUṣaymī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*); nr. 4 was tearful stories about “our female prisoners” (al-Yaḥyā, *Dumūʿ al-sijīnāt*).

¹⁴ On 19 May 2014, the anti-masturbation manual had risen to nr. 4 on the list.

¹⁵ al-Shamlān, *Mahārāt al-ḥayāt*. The list of the most frequently accessed books is at <http://saaaid.net/book/menu.php?action=top>. On 1 Oct. 2014, nr. 2 was a collection of sayings by the pious forebears (Maʾmū, *Min rawāʾiʿ*); nr. 3 the work on the pious forebears that had topped the list in 2008 (al-ʿUṣaymī); nr. 4 a manual for memorising the Qur’an (Bādaḥdaḥ, *Kayfa taḥfāz*).

¹⁶ “Allāhumma innī aʿūdhu bika min munkarāt al-akhlāq wa-l-aʿmāl wa-l-ahwāʾ”, <http://fb.com/ibrahimshamlam>.

¹⁷ In recent years, IslamWay.com was overtaken in popularity by the Qatari General Directorate of Endowment’s IslamWeb.net, which long had offered only a limited amount of books and no popularity count. By 2014, IslamWeb.net had expanded its library to offer primarily classical books of the Sunni scholastic tradition for online reading (not downloading). On October 3, 2014, the list of the twenty most visited books there consisted overwhelmingly of Prophetic Tradition, Qur’anic exegesis, biographies of the pious forebears, juridical compendia, and the Arabic lexicon *Lisān al-ʿArab*.

¹⁸ Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*, 15.

¹⁹ [Http://fb.com/ElShaheed](http://fb.com/ElShaheed).

(*Minhāj al-Muslim: Kitāb ‘aqā’id wa-ādāb wa-akhlāq wa-‘ibādāt wa-mu‘āmalāt*) by the Medina-based Abū Bakr al-Jazā’irī (b. 1921).²⁰

So in short, it appears that once one looks beyond the scholarly establishment, the self-conscious Muslim public on the internet is most interested — in roughly this sequence — in the scriptures, in pious attitude, in morality, and in particular, in sexual morality.

That *everyone* should take the basic rules of Islam and Islamic morality to heart and implement them in everyday life has been of great concern to Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, who gave his followers a set of behavioural rules known in Arabic as “The ten commandments” (*al-Waṣāyā al-‘ashr*). Whether this title is inspired by the biblical Decalogue remains a matter of conjecture, but in any case, al-Bannā’s ten commandments are catalogue of very practical recommendations for how a pious Muslim should conduct his life. It can be found on the walls of many a Muslim home and is of course now also spread on the internet.²¹ Here is an English translation:

- “1. Offer prayer whenever you hear the call whatever may be the circumstances.
2. Recite Quran, look into it or listen to it, remembering Almighty Allah. Do not expend your time on useless matters.
3. Work diligently to speak [standard] Arabic, this is one of the Islamic duties.
4. Do not laugh too much, the heart which is related to Allah is calm and reverent.
5. Do not argue too much in any matter, whatever it is, showing off does not bring any benefits.
6. Do not engage in frivolous playfulness, the struggling nation knows nothing except seriousness.
7. Do not speak louder than what suffices your listener, because that would be thoughtless and irritating.

²⁰ The full list of the most downloaded books in October 2008 was as follows (number of downloads in brackets): (1) *al-Maktaba al-shāmila* (217,860); (2) Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* (92,718); (3) *Muṣḥaf al-Madīna* (69,059); (4) *al-Qur’ān al-karīm ma’a l-tafsīr* (68,156); (5) *al-Qur’ān al-karīm bi-l-rasm al-‘Uthmānī* (64,123); (6) al-Mubārakfūrī, *al-Raḥīq* (58,394); (7) al-Qaḥṭānī, *Ḥiṣn al-muslim* (54,171); (8) Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (41,283); (9) al-Albānī, *Maktaba* (36,956); (10) al-Jazā’irī, *Minhāj al-muslim* (33,814); (11) al-Munajjid, *al-‘Āda l-sayyī’a* (30,847). By October 2014, the list of top downloads on *Ṭarīq al-Islām* (<http://ar.islamway.net/books/top>) was no longer ordered by frequency and showed some inconsistencies, but overall, it contained many of the same works as in 2008.

²¹ For an example, see Ikhwan Wiki, *al-Waṣāyā l-‘ashr*.

8. Avoid backbiting individuals, do not speak scornfully about organizations unjustly. Speak nothing but that which is good.
9. Get acquainted with whomever you meet of the Brethren, even if he does not take the initiative, because our ideology rest [*sic*] upon pillars of love and acquaintance.
10. Consider obligations more important than time. Help another to benefit from his time, and when you have a job to do, complete it.”²²

“Read—think—work!” (*iqraʿ, wa-tadabbar, wa-ʿmal*) is the proem to this decalogue: every pious Muslim should read this, himself; should wrap his mind around it to understand and internalise it; and then put it into practice. On the one hand, this triad is clearly related to the old definition of *islām*, *īmān*, and *iḥsān* as formulated in the famous “Hadith of Gabriel”, which has become central to defining the core of what it means to be a follower of God’s revelation. Al-Bannā’s catalogue, however, is much more direct and concrete. The injunction to read here is not an injunction to an elite, to recite God’s Book, but an admonition for every believer to read and understand and put into daily practice a catalogue of moral directives that are not only quite down to earth but also strike one as almost “petit bourgeois”: fulfil your obligations, be conscientious and considerate, don’t waste your time, be punctual, control your body’s unrefined instincts.

Even more concrete and down-to-earth instructions were the focus of a series of moral campaigns (*ḥamla*)²³ under the title “*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*” (“I’m rising [progressing/reaching a high standard] with/through my morality”) that were run by Muslim Brotherhood students in Egypt, first during the academic year 2008-2009, and that have since inspired sister campaigns in other Arab countries. The original campaign was launched on 28 October 2008, at the beginning of the academic year, at the Azhar University, and then at twelve other Egyptian universities. On campuses, students ran a five-week intensive campaign with rallies, posters, and exhibitions to promote the idea of “I commit myself, in public, to improve myself and to live up to high moral standards”. On the internet, the campaign was supported by blogs²⁴ and Facebook pages; the original one²⁵ attracted over 2,000 new

²² Posted by Bilal Mahmud, “The Ten Commandments”.

²³ Anon., “Inṭilāq”; Shakhābīṭ ṭālib, *Taṣmūmāt*.

²⁴ *Rāqī bi-akhlāqī: al-ḥamla al-miṣriyya li-kull al-ġāmiʿāt al-miṣriyya*, <http://akhlaqi2008.blogspot.com>, 29 Oct. 2008-15 Feb. 2009; *Mudawwanat Rāqī bi-akhlāqī: al-ḥamla al-dhahabiyya li-l-irtiqāʾ bi-l-akhlāq*, <http://akhlakna.blogspot.com> (1 Nov. 2008-4 Sep. 2009)

²⁵ *Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*, <http://fb.com/groups/32373616234>.

members every week in the beginning and quickly spread beyond Egypt; by May 2014, it had over 70,000 members.²⁶ It was quickly followed by other Facebook groups²⁷ but spread not only on the internet, but also in “real life”. “*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*” campaigns were run by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood also in later years, for example in 2012 and 2013.²⁸ And the Egyptian model inspired similar moves elsewhere, for example in 2009-2010 in Oman²⁹; in 2010, 2012, and 2013 in Saudi Arabia³⁰; in 2010, 2013 and 2014 in Yemen³¹; and in 2011 and 2014 in Gaza³² (launched by *Rābiṭat ‘Ulamā’ Filasṭīn*, which is close to Ḥamās). On Twitter, user @raagy_bakhlagy, who posts several moralist maxims every day, became active on 24 Oct. 2012; two years later, he had over 320,000 followers. And the hashtag #irfa‘shi‘ār Rāqī bi-Akhlāqī³³, first used on 20 May 2014, was very much alive on Twitter in mid-October the same year.

The content of the campaign is evident from its posters.³⁴ “Be yourself, not someone else” (*kun nafṣak — lā takun ghayrak*). “Don’t be a lackey (*imma’a*)³⁵ [by imitating imported fads and the depraved habits of Western youth]”. “I follow my religion; I pray — I don’t imitate (*taqlīd*) others”. “*Laysa minnā man tashabbaha bi-ghayrinā: ma’an ḍidd al-taqlīd*”. In particular, posters were made against silly and immoral Western clothing, sagging trousers, bandanas, long hair and jewellery for men. “God sees everything I do” (*lastu waḥdī—Allāh yarānī*). “Repent” (*tūbū*)! Guard your tongue against foul language; speak Arabic, not foreign languages. “With our morality, we enlighten our university” (*bi-akhlāqinā nunawwir jāmī‘atanā*) and with it, “we will reach high” (*nasmū*; illustrated

²⁶ The “*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*” campaign was followed in Egypt by a new campaign, “*Bādirhum*” (later simply: “*Bādir*”), for the academic year 2009-2010; their motto was: “*Qaddim khayrak ... anfi’ ghayrak*”; their Facebook page: <http://fb.com/groups/145200973609>. By 11 Oct. 2014, these two Facebook groups were no longer visible in their old form under these URLs; notably, they had lost the detailed self-description of the campaigns and almost all their members. Meanwhile, other Facebook pages had been created under the same name, the most popular one on 11 April 2010 by a UAE-citizen (<http://fb.com/Raagy.Bakhlagy>; 57,564 followers on 16 Oct. 2014); at the same time, the most popular Egyptian Facebook group under the name was at <http://fb.com/groups/1464055837143220> (15,937 members).

²⁷ On 14 Oct. 2014, a Facebook search found 70 groups named “*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*”. The slogan can also be traced on Twitter, both as a user name (e.g., @raagy_bakhlagy) and as a hashtag.

²⁸ Madrasat Shuhā, “*Ṣuwar*”; Fāṭima ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, “*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*”.

²⁹ al-Mazrū‘iyya, “*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*”.

³⁰ Anon., “*Qism mahārāt*”; anon., Ḥamlat Rāqī bi-akhlāqī, *Mutawassīṭat ‘Ātika bt. Zayd*; Madrasat al-Qarn, *Ḥamlat*; al-Thaqafi, «*Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*».

³¹ Anon., “*Ḥamlat (Rāqī bi-Akhlāqī)*”; anon., “*Munazzamat LCE*”; anon., “*Ḥamlat Rāqī bi-akhlāqī*”; anon., *Ṣunnā’ al-ibtisāmā*. While campaigners in Egypt were harassed by Mubarak’s security personnel, in Saudi Arabia and in Yemen the campaigns were run by university authorities.

³² Anon., “*Bad’ ḥamlat*”; anon., “*Ghazza*”; anon., “*Masjid Amān*”.

³³ <http://is.gd/L5uB3t>.

³⁴ A large collection of the campaign’s posters was published on <http://akhlaqizoo8.blogspot.com>.

³⁵ *Lā yakun aḥadukum imma’a*: a widespread rendering of the Prophetic saying *Lā takūnū imma’a* (reported by Tirmidhī; Wensinck, *al-Mu‘jam*, 1:105).

by a very American-looking young man in a tennis shirt, photographed in typical winner pose from a low angle against a blue sky). “Think positive” (for negativism leads to failure: *al-salbiyya ‘unwān al-fashal*). “Be on good terms and cooperate with your brethren”. “Don’t spy on each other!” “Lower your gaze when you meet another woman!” Many of Ḥasan al-Bannā’s commandments are recognisable here, but they have been specified, not least with the help of images, into even more concrete injunctions.

Fig. 2: Poster from the original (2008) *Rāqī bi-akhlāqī* campaign

Beyond the Muslim Brotherhood, the so-called “new preachers” (*al-du‘āt al-ġudud*) also heavily focused on moral matters. ‘Amr Khālīd for example, Islam’s premier televangelist, made it a cornerstone of his mission to spread the idea that every individual believer should take responsibility for sorting out his or her own life and behaviour in line with Islamic values and thus become a role model inspiring others to do the same, a so-called “Life Maker” and volunteer in a big movement of “Life Makers” (*Ṣunnā‘ al-Ḥayāt*) who no longer are mere passive recipients of orders by out-dated authorities but who have made the true Islamic values their own. “I’m a maker, not a taker”, a slogan used by the movement (in English, reflecting global modernity), expresses this

attitude most clearly, a move from a recipient to an active mode, from being a follower to becoming a responsible person taking things into one's own hands.³⁶

There are countless Facebook pages founded by Muslim individuals that are devoted to promoting behavioural advice in an Islamic guise, holding up the Prophet as a model to be imitated, in reference to the Qur'anic (68: 4) "*wa-innaka la-'alā khuluqin 'azīm*".³⁷ Often, the advice given there is very much in parallel with or inspired by self-improvement books that have spread from the USA over the past few decades. More specifically Islamic admonitions (perform your ritual prayers; pray on the Prophet; read a portion of the Qur'an every day) are interspersed with other, more "secular" injunctions (take a 10-30 minute walk every day; set off fixed times for work and recreation; sleep for 7-8 hours a day; etc.), often in such a way that no particular hierarchy is recognisable between them.³⁸ They all become part of a self-improvement project where the individual is urged to take charge of his or her own behavioural discipline.

While some of the forms of expression of this project may be inspired by recent and external influences, the core moral message that such Facebook pages proclaim and that is also prominent on the internet elsewhere shows clear parallels to what Islamic reform movements since the eighteenth century were concerned with: an attempt to expand Islam's internal boundaries socially and psychologically. Every single believer should internalise Islamic norms and discipline his or her behaviour accordingly.

Simplifying the corpus

To spread this message of morality, Muslim inner missionaries like Majdhūb changed the corpus of relevant literature as well. This leads us to the second of our three dimensions. Majdhūb the

³⁶ For further details, see Hofheinz, "The Internet", 90-91.

³⁷ One example is *Bank ma'lūmāt il-bēyt bētak* (<http://fb.com/BnkMlwmatAlbytBytk>), founded 24 Aug. 2012, with 153,944 likes on 17 Oct. 2014.

³⁸ An example is the list of *Naṣā'ih taṣāḥiqq al-nashr wa-al-iṭṭilā' 'alayhā* (sic) posted by Mohamed Abdelmageed on several Facebook pages, incl. *Rāqī bi-akhlāqī* and on *Ḥayātī kulluhā li-llāh*, a page with a salafi pietistic orientation that has attracted close to 1.5 million likes by October 2014 (<http://fb.com/My.Life.For.Allah/posts/10152101518155180>, 6 Dec. 2013). This list (which Google found on 335,000 web pages in October 2014) is directly translated from a list of "40 Tips for a Happy Life" that is being shared in several different versions on the internet, e.g. at <http://allwomenstalk.com/40-tips-for-a-happy-life> (interestingly, in October 2014 Google only had about 77,100 hits for the English version of the list) (in both cases, I searched for the first phrase of advice). Among the many repostings on Facebook and on Arabic discussion forums is one by a fan of the vastly popular salafi preacher Muḥammad Ḥassān, <http://fb.com/mohamed.hassan.lover/posts/400553383384108>, 14 Aug. 2013.

missionary was the most prolific writer his country had known until his time,³⁹ and this outpour was chiefly due to brief tracts, pamphlets and poems that did away not only with the scholarly apparatus and methods of classical *fiqh* but also with the more intricate mystical ideas of classical Sufism. Majdhūb drew on classical texts to an extent that borders on plagiarism, but a comparison between his versions and the originals shows that he consistently simplified the texts, cut out elaborate reasoning, and focused on a clear, behavioural and moral message. In this way, he composed for his followers a complete set of pamphlets designed to summarize for everyone the essentials of obligatory religious practice (“*mā lā budda li-kull aḥadin min al-‘amali bih*”).⁴⁰ And in this he was not alone; he is a good example for a wider trend that became evident across many regions of the Muslim world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not least in the “peripheries” of Africa or Southeast and Central Asia.⁴¹ Often, this trend was linked to the emergence and wide spread of new forms of Sufi brotherhoods, or, if we look at the texts, to the use of vernacular languages that started to play a more noticeable role in writing at that time, obviously related in turn to the aim of making the message easier to understand by the ordinary everybody.

In this process, the scholastic ways of constructing knowledge were largely thrown overboard. Qur’an and Prophetic Tradition became much more prominent as references than they had been before — in the seventeenth century, one could become a *fiqh* teacher in the Sudan without having read the whole Qur’an,⁴² and when Majdhūb drew on older texts for composing his manuals, he deleted most every reference other than Qur’an and Hadith.⁴³ And apart from simply becoming prime references, Qur’an and Sunna were used to argue against *taqlīd*, against the validity of the *madhāhib*, the established schools of law or knowledge construction. “We are not interested in what Mālik or al-Shāfi‘ī said, but in what the Prophet said” — that was the attitude that increasingly spread since the eighteenth century, and that threatened the role and position of the scholarly establishment. No wonder then that this establishment reacted dismissively, and sarcastically claimed that the new missionaries wanted to give the right to interpret Islam to each and every one, “even to a boorish bedouin!” (*wa-law a‘rābiyyan jilfan*).⁴⁴ At the time this was uttered (by an Azhar

³⁹ For details, see Hofheinz, *Internalising*, 317 ff.

⁴⁰ Majdhūb, *Qurrat a‘yun*, 1.

⁴¹ Cf. Bang, “Authority”, “Pondering”; Chih et al. eds., *Sufism*; Hofheinz, “What”; Hunwick et al., eds., *Arabic Literature*.

⁴² Ibn Ḍayf Allāh, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 77; Hofheinz, *Internalising*, 32.

⁴³ Hofheinz, *Internalising*, 338-342.

⁴⁴ Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār, *Risāla fi l-ijtihād*; see Hofheinz, *Internalising*, 554.

scholar in the early nineteenth century) this was an exaggeration, but nevertheless it hit a nail: in principle, doing away with the scholastic construction of knowledge and the scholastic corpus opened up the doors of understanding and of interpreting Islam to each and every believer who could read the Qur'an — and perhaps one of the pamphlets on "How to pray" or on the "Simplified Principles of Faith"⁴⁵ that are lining the path to every mosque in the Muslim world today.

The simplified canon made possible an individualised access to what are, at any given point, considered the sources of knowledge, and it led to a flattened hierarchy of knowledge construction that contrasts clearly with the scholastic model. This has not done away with scholars and shaykhs, but it has changed their role; they have become guides the individual believer can consult when trying to understand the basic texts and make sense of "Islam", rather than absolute authorities that simple believers have to follow unquestioningly. The story of a young man I interviewed on Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011 is illustrative here. He was wearing jeans and no beard, but identified himself as salafi. When I asked him what he meant by that, he explained, "It means that I only follow the example (*qudwa*) of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Pious Predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). My allegiance is not to any party, but only to this country [he pointed to the ground]." When I told him about the stereotype image of salafis wearing long white robes and sporting henna-coloured beards, he replied, "This is only *sunna* (voluntary supererogatory practice)." "But," I said, "according to my stereotype, a salafi is someone who tries to follow the *qudwa* and the *sunna* of the Prophet in every detail. So why do you insist on calling yourself a salafi?" — "All Muslims are salafis," he answered. "It's the same thing. Muslims love the Prophet, and go by the example of the Prophet. I go by the example of the Prophet." — "But are you an *ʿālim* (a scholar)?" I asked. "How can you be sure to understand correctly what exactly this example means?" — "No, I'm not an *ʿālim*, but I only follow people I trust (*athiq fihum*)."

"So can you name someone you trust?" I asked. "For example Muḥammad Ḥassān," he replied. "So you do follow him, and not only the Prophet", I objected. "No, I don't simply accept what he says; he brings proof from the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition (*dalā'il min al-Qur'ān wa-l-Sunna*), and I follow him if I am convinced by that."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ al-Ḥusaynī, *al-'Aqida l-muyassara*; al-Qāḍī, *al-'Aqida l-muyassara*; anon., *al-Fiqh al-muyassar*. There exist too many similar works with such titles to list them all; a simple internet search suffices to retrieve them.

⁴⁶ Interview, Cairo, 20 Nov. 2011. Muḥammad Ḥassān (b. 1962; <http://www.mohamedhassan.org>) is one of the most prominent salafi preachers in Egypt. That "all Muslims are Salafis" because they all follow the example of the Prophet is something I was told repeatedly in Egypt in autumn 2011, by both "stereotypical" salafis and other Muslims.

Fig. 3: Scholastic vs. individualised access to knowledge

This story exemplifies a central feat of the dynamics at work here. The simplification of the corpus, evident in the exploding literary production since the eighteenth century⁴⁷ as well as on the sidewalks of Cairo or the download sections of internet forums, raised the practical significance of Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition, brought the Prophet closer to the believer as a model to be imitated in detail in all walks of life, eroded the scholastic, *madhhab*-based system of knowledge construction (*fiqh*), and opened up access to the primary and (conceived of as “the Scriptures”, *al-Naṣṣ*) only “real” textual sources of knowledge to every individual. The individual believer thereby acquired not only the right, but also the obligation to understand these primary sources, and to understand what “Islam” means, what “the Shari'a” says, and to judge shaykhs and scholars by this yardstick. Developments in Sufism are telling here: from the twelfth century onwards, Sufi adepts had to be “in the hands of their shaykh like a corpse in the hands of the one who washes it”,⁴⁸ and obey the shaykh even if he ordered something ostensibly contrary to the shari'a — since after all, he had greater knowledge. This unquestioning submission to the master's authority began to be criticised from the sixteenth century onwards, for example by Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624), and there is

⁴⁷ This is based on a quantitative analysis of literary production in eastern and central Sudanic Africa; cf. Hunwick et al., eds., *Arabic literature*; Hofheinz, “What”.

⁴⁸ The saying “*Kun bayna yaday shaykhika kal-jasad/al-mayyit bayn yaday al-ghāsil/al-mughsil*” (and variants thereof) is sometimes attributed to 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī (1077/8-1166), but is mostly quoted as an adage without reference. Earlier Sufis like Sahl al-Tustarī (818-896) used this image to define the believer's relation not to the *shaykh* but to God in *tawakkul*, abandonment of one's will and ways to God (al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*; pace Geoffroy, “Direction”).

increasing evidence from the eighteenth century of reformers trying to change this paradigm. Henceforth, these reformers taught, one was no longer allowed to obey orders contradicting the Scriptures.⁴⁹ The believer was given the right and duty to judge the teacher by the shari‘a, and thereby, the Shari‘a was turned into a generalised norm accessible, in principle, to all. Ironically, “in our days [...] the *shaykh* has become before the *murīd* like the corpse in the hands of the one who washes it”, as the current head of the Moroccan Būdshīshiyya, Ḥamza b. al-‘Abbās (b. 1922), is on record to have said.⁵⁰

This change may not necessarily have focused on new ideas; in fact, those involved in it often self-consciously denied coming with new ideas. But what appeared to be old ideas could well, in new contexts and for new publics, transport or express new meanings. In passing, we should note here the re-evaluation of the literary heritage that happened on a more “learned” level as a consequence of the introduction of printing in the nineteenth century: which works were selected for printing, and which not, led to a re-arrangement of the canon, a process as yet insufficiently studied⁵¹ and which is equally important to that other effect of printing, namely, making books more accessible, and thereby extend their reach to new publics beyond the old scholarly classes. The print revolution, however, was preceded by the move to simplify the canonical corpus that inner missionaries and cultural brokers like Majdhūb worked with at the peripheries of Islamic literary culture, in an effort to extend the internal (and sometimes also the external) boundaries of the validity of Islamic norms. The canon was simplified to make it more accessible to a wider audience, enabling, eventually, individualised access to the canonical sources of knowledge. To avoid misunderstandings, it should be noted that individualised access to the generalised norm must not be confused with, and does not necessarily imply, an individualisation of understanding. The dominant attitude instilled in the audience was not one of critical but of imitative thought. But imitation was the path to appropriation, and appropriation by new publics would lead, at a time

⁴⁹ For details incl. further sources, see Hofheinz, *Internalising*, 343-4; Meier, “Ḥurāsān”.

⁵⁰ Lakhlāfa, “Hal tataḥawwal”.

⁵¹ For a survey and critical appraisal of extant research, see Roper, “Printing press” and his anthology, *History of the book*. R. Schulze was among the earliest and most provocative scholars to focus on changes to the canon effected by the spread of print; see his “Mass culture” and “Birth of tradition”. Of particular interest among more recent studies of print and its relation to cultural change in Muslim societies are Green, “The uses of books” and the collection edited by Chih et al., eds., *Sufism, literary production, and printing*.

where the old scholastic hierarchies had lost their hegemony, to the rise of what internet-age Muslims came to call, "My Islam".⁵²

Re-constructing the community

Let us now turn to the third dimension: the community — and here specifically, efforts to re-construct the community of the faithful that went parallel to the moralising efforts to have every individual internalise normative discipline, and to simplify access to the sources of normativity in order to broaden the number of those who would take responsibility to implement this in practice. These developments were closely linked to the spread of new forms of Sufi brotherhoods since the eighteenth century. Of course, it was not only Sufi but also other reform movements at the time that turned against previously dominant modes of the construction of knowledge and normative systems. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792) and Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (c. 1760-1839) are but two names that readily come to mind. The Sufi reform movements did, however, play a vital role in spreading the new ways socially. As the study of Majdhūb and the way he built his community shows, a paradigmatic shift took place whereby the believers were asked to make an individual decision to turn around and leave their former ways and join a new voluntary association based on faith and individual moral commitment instead of merely following the community into which they were born (in German, one could speak of "überzeugte" instead of "gezeugte" Gemeinschaften). Ideal-typically, we may say that in this process, faith-based association supersedes ethnically-based community.

Of course, such communities of commitment have emerged throughout history. Since the eighteenth century, however, efforts to create and sustain them increasingly and successfully took on a mass dimension aiming to spread to all corners of the globe and to all social strata and to include, in principle, everyone, not least those who had hitherto remained at the periphery.

⁵² Nasr, *My Isl@m*. For an earlier (2001) example, cf. this statement: "Don't blame me by saying 'I couldn't believe that one of 'us' would see this the same way', because I am simply following the EXACT rules of Islam. The TRUE Islam as in the message by prophet Mohammad, not the Islam of the Taliban, Khomeini or the Brotherhood. The DOCUMENTED Hadeeth (7adeeth sa7ee7) mentioned the prophet saying support your brother when he is right or wrong. This is the part you are speaking of, but DISREGARDING that it has a continuation. When he was asked, he continued that supporting him when wrong is by stopping and opposing him and preventing him from his evil. Islam NEVER said that I support a Moslem in his evil doings. At least MY Islam never said that" (Arab, "Re: To all Palestinian").

The new communities that were being constructed were often given new types of names that are indicative of their different horizon. Among the Sufis, the “Mohammedan Path” (*al-ṭarīqa l-Muḥammadiyya*) was propagated instead of — or rather: to complete, amplify and supersede (“überhöhen”) — the path of a particular shaykh.⁵³ In the twentieth century, new faith-focused communities got names like “the brethren” (*al-ikhwān*), the “Muslim Brothers”, “the community” (*al-jamā‘a*), and increasingly, talk of “the umma”, “the Muslims”, or simply, “Islam” (*al-islām*) gained currency. The super-committed and supra-national jihadists are yet another expression of this reconstruction of Islam as a globalising movement of believers who say, each and everyone, *anā l-muslim*, “I [am] the Muslim”⁵⁴ and I act accordingly.

But while the acts of jihadist fighters propelling themselves to paradise attract most media attention, Egyptian televangelist ‘Amr Khālīd’s (b. 1967) “Life Makers” (*Ṣunnā‘ al-Ḥayāt* <http://lifemakers.org>) have attracted many more souls, hundreds of thousands of people who have chosen the “better side”, abandoned drugs, put on decent clothes, and gone out to improve themselves and others. ‘Amr Khālīd launched *Ṣunnā‘ al-Ḥayāt* in 2003 out of a TV programme he was hosting 2003-05 on the Islamic (Saudi financed) *Iqra’* satellite channel, and soon after formalised it as a civil society organisation tasked with transforming Muslim youth’s attitudes so that they can become positive, creative, and productive individuals taking charge of improving their own lives and the well-being of their community. The fundamental idea was “development through faith” (*al-tanmiya bi-l-īmān*). During the 2000s, ‘Amr Khālīd became the most successful of many so-called ‘new preachers’ (*al-du‘āt al-ḡudud*) in Egypt and beyond; his website (<http://amrkhaled.net>, est. 2002) in 2004-2005 even surpassed IslamOnline.net (est. 1997) as not only the leading Islamic but the most popular religious web site worldwide. On 1 January 2008, ‘Amr Khālīd’s official Facebook page was launched (<http://fb.com/AmrKhaled>); by December 2015, it counted a whopping 19.5 million likes. The website’s popularity had reached its peak in September 2010, after which ‘Amr Khālīd’s star began to sink. Following the January 25 revolution, he engaged himself in campaigns to “build Egypt”, to strengthen Egyptian production and “buy Egyptian” (*Ḡum‘at “ishtarī*

⁵³ For a brief summary, see Wright, *Path*, 39-44.

⁵⁴ *Shabakat Anā l-Muslim li-l-ḥiwār al-islāmī* (<http://www.muslim.org/vb/>) has for over a decade (it was created in 2000) been one of the most popular Islamist activist web forums. Based in Mecca, it is run under a jihadist banner (a knight carrying the black flag) and regularly visited by jihadists, but also “serves as an ideological battlefield” for a wider spectrum of Muslims. Since it is an accepted forum for jihadi-oriented Muslims, it has also been used as a “venue for organized attempts at [...] counter-argumentation against jihadis”. (Ramsay, *Jihadi culture*, 107).

maṣrī”, 16 Dec. 2011), and on 30 May 2012, he founded a political party, *Ḥizb Miṣr (al-Mustaqbal)*. After the military coup in July 2013, he resigned as leader of this party and announced he would focus on his religious preaching, aloof from politics. A month later, a video produced by the Egyptian army’s Department of Morale Affairs was leaked on YouTube in which ‘Amr Khālīd exhorted Egyptian soldiers to perform their duty to God and the nation; this video was allegedly used to boost conscripts’ morale in preparation for the bloody dispersal of the anti-coup sit-ins on Rābi’a and al-Nahḍa Squares. This video contributed much to harming ‘Amr Khālīd’s reputation. In October 2014, in the context of intense pressure on Egyptian NGOs to disassociate themselves from religious affiliation and from foreign funding, ‘Amr Khālīd was removed from *Ṣunnā’ al-Ḥayāt*’s board of trustees and replaced by former army general and governor of Alexandria, ‘Abd al-Salām al-Mahjūb (b. 1935).⁵⁵

As different as these new communities — Sufi and Salafi reform movements, Muslim Brothers, anti-establishment jihadists, quietist pietists — may be in political outlook, they share a number of common elements:

- 1) As pointed out above, they are first of all based on individual voluntary adhesion rather than primordial ethnic affiliation.
- 2) They find their first adherents often in the social or geographical periphery, and often among younger people and among those with an educational background different from that of the dominant classes. The new communities provide these people with networks and ideas that help them to become more visible and audible and to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the classes that hitherto had been dominant.⁵⁶

In Majdhūb’s case, his followers came from among semi-urban settlers on the periphery of the Sudan’s main trading port who were competing socio-economically with the older trading classes. Following Majdhūb’s call for moral reform allowed them to present themselves as “better Muslims” than those older ones who were accused of not really practising the teachings of Islam.⁵⁷ The same

⁵⁵ ‘Amr Khālīd, “*Bayān*”; Anon., *Ṣunnā’ al-Ḥayāh taṭrud ‘Amr Khālīd*»; Haenni, *L’islam de marché*; al-Ḥarb al-Elektrōniyya, *al-Shu’ūn al-Ma’nawīyya*; Høigilt, *Islamist rhetoric*; al-Qāḍī, “*Maḡlis umanā*”; Wā’il Luṭfi, *al-Du’āt al-ḡudud*; Wise, “*Words*”.

⁵⁶ It goes without saying that these are characteristic traits for these groups as *new* communities, not for when they themselves have become socially well-established.

⁵⁷ For a detailed socio-economic study of where Majdhūb found his main audience, see Hofheinz, *Internalising*, esp. 247-67 & 540-2.

pattern proved useful in many other cases; in the Sudan, another example is provided by the followers of Ḥasan al-Turābī (b. 1932) and their efforts to oust the so-called “sectarian” parties — linked to the old Mahdist and Khatmi elites — from power and market dominance. Jurjī Zaydān’s (1861-1914) “*al-ṭabaqāt al-wuṣṭā*”, with their *adab* « qui différencie le vrai civilisé du faux »;⁵⁸ the Najdī Ikhwān (c. 1910-30); the American “Muslim Students Organizations” formed since the 1960s; the “European Muslims”;⁵⁹ the teenage girls idolising the accountant ‘Amr Khālīd; the disorientingly many internet groups that are arising by the day and that leave older institutions and authorities scrambling to keep up — the list of “new” communities springing up in the periphery and presenting themselves as “better” or more committed Muslims to make a mark against the old establishment could easily be prolonged.

3) Many of these communities adopt new types of discourses that draw upon a variety of heterogeneous sources often reflecting the fact that they have a background different from the dominant classes; and they remix and fuse these heterogeneous elements and turn them into distinctive new languages of their own to such an extent that they no longer can be reduced to their constitutive elements. To describe Majdhūb’s discourse as a mixture of his Shāfi‘ī learning and Prophetic trance visions would miss the essence of his mission. To try to disassemble Sayyid Quṭb (1906-66) or Ḥasan al-Turābī along the lines of their “Western” and their “Islamic” education and readings would do complete injustice to them as social and ideological phenomena. And Muslim rappers from Berlin or Beirut could not care less if their music comes from east or west as long as they feel it expresses their living reality. This is why what Jon Anderson has pointed out is so appropriate: the new discourse communities are not “hybrids”, but “creoles” — languages that have developed a life of their own independent of whatever their origins may be.⁶⁰

Rāqī bi-akhlāqī: Moralised individuals en masse

So let me try to come to a conclusion and draw out some common elements. *Tawba* — to repent, turn around and mend one’s life in accordance with “Islamic” norms — was a central element in Majdhūb’s mission; it was Sufi-inspired and aimed at the heart of the individual believer; and it had to be a *tawba ṣādiqa*, an honest and upright turn-around, not mere lip-service as could be sufficient

⁵⁸ See Dupont, « Un adab de classes moyennes », 288.

⁵⁹ Ramadan, *Musulman européen*.

⁶⁰ Jon Anderson borrowed the term ‘creole’ from B. Anderson, *Imagined communities* as early as 1995 (“Cybarites”).

for the jurists. This *tawba*, this moral turnaround was the doorway to joining the new community of the faithful, and the emphasis on upright, individual turn-around and practical change has been a cornerstone of later reform movements as well. The practical outcome of this change may lead in a variety of directions — and lest we misunderstand: *tawba* is preached on jihadist internet forums just as well as by ‘Amr Khālīd the pietist.⁶¹

The emphasis on individual *tawba* goes hand in hand with what today also is a consumer and marketing focus on the individual and the individual’s concerns: “Live, Love & Success... with Islam”. Again, it often is futile to try to disentangle the elements that make up this new reality, where, as in the example here, “The Real Muslim Man” represents himself on the cover of an imaginary magazine, with no lack of self confidence despite what some might deride as a lack of a decent education, with the idea of being special and better than the others and with the missionary urge to tell others — in simple slogans in a new medium — how to behave properly to build a better community: “Muslim man is a stranger in the Middle East now. To build a better nation Muslim man have to rise the woman not let her down! Man & a child & a woman & his support: this is the equation!”⁶²

⁶¹ For an example from a leading jihadist forum, see Muslim ‘Arabī, “Kayfa atūb?”.

⁶² Aly Fahmy, *Muslim man*.

Fig. 4: One of the covers of the imaginary “Muslim Man” magazine (2008)

This new reality is one where I and ME and MINE, MY understanding and MY self-representation become the constantly mirrored framework for the construction of the “Real Muslim”. Some may go to extremes, such as the renegade Egyptian blogger Karīm ‘Āmir who proclaimed: “*Lā ābah li-aḥad illā li-nafsī*” (“I don’t care about/listen to anyone but myself”) and “I return to writing: not for others, but for myself, for only her, my self, is worth that I write to or about.”⁶³ But they are merely the tip of

⁶³ “*Sa-a’ūdu ilā l-kitāba, sa-aktubu li-nafsī ‘an naḥsī, fa-lā aḥada yastahiqq an aktuba lahu aw ‘anhu siwāhā!*” (Karīm ‘Āmir, “Mir’āt ghurūr”).

a far bigger iceberg. When Hoseyn Derakhshān, the “father of Persian blogging”, created his weblog in 2001, he called it “Editor: Myself”⁶⁴; over the following few years, tens of thousands of blogs flourished in Iran in what became known as “Blogestan”.⁶⁵ This heightened focus on “myself” as a mass phenomenon may be something that is more evident on the internet than in earlier media, but studies such as that of the dynamics around Majdhūb and his mission suggest that it may have roots stretching back to the eighteenth century.

Fig. 5: Screenshot (2008) of the Flickr set “Muslim Man”

Fig. 6: Karīm ‘Āmir’s “mirror of self-conceit”

⁶⁴ Derakhshān, *Sardabūr: Khodam*.

⁶⁵ The flourishing blogestan was first introduced to a wider Western public by Alavi, *We are Iran*. For a recent reappraisal, see Giacobini et al., eds., *Wither blogestan*. The Persian blogosphere’s golden years were 2002-2008; Arabic blogs took off in 2005. After 2008, both blogospheres were displaced by Facebook and Twitter as the leading forums for online publication and debate.

Fig. 7: Hoseyn Derakhshān's weblog banner: “Editor: Myself”

To sum up: In all three of the dimensions I laid out here, we can recognise an increasing role for and significance of the individual — but “increasing” only if we take this seriously as a “mass” phenomenon. Individuals have internalised Islamic norms since the birth of Islam; in the eighteenth century, however, reform movements began in earnest to work to and to be successful in spreading the idea that *everybody* had to understand Islam and act accordingly. And since not everybody could become a scholar, the body of learning had to be adjusted accordingly, to allow every believer access to what everybody needs to know and act upon. These individuals came together in new kinds of communities, based on individual faith rather than ethnic affiliation inherited from one's forefathers, and these communities became moral institutions (“*moralische Anstalten*”) that helped to spread the moralised concept of individual responsibility to ever more people.

Can what I have outlined here be conceived of as a historical development, a “process of civilisation”, without falling into the trap of teleology? This remains an open question, but I believe part of the answer may be found in the self-reinforcing dynamics of the use of new media over the past two to three centuries, and the formative impact they have had on bodies, corpus, and communities.⁶⁶ After the explosion of writing since the eighteenth century, linked to the missionary zeal to expand Islam's internal boundaries, the following technologies readily come to mind: the growing significance of vernaculars in written communication, which served to include hitherto peripheral groups in the audience; printing and its role in the re-construction of the canonical

⁶⁶ Technology was, of course, not the only factor in affecting this development. The modern state's penetration into people's daily lives, through education, military service, and the control public information channels played a crucial role in reconfiguring people's relations with and attitudes to traditional authorities. Greater mobility, urbanization and migration contributed to weakening social control by the immediate community (village or quarter) while opening individuals' horizons to new ideas. These dimensions have been well-studied (Eickelman; Mitchell; Roy). My point here is rather to remind us that (a) technologies constitute ‘architectural’ or ‘encoding’ frames that impact, facilitate or limit, specific ways of engagement, including intellectual engagement; and (b) to embed current considerations on the role of the internet into a wider historical dimension.

corpus; printed fiction and its heightened focus on self-consciousness; the creating and reshaping of mass audiences and their culture through newspapers, radio, cinema, TV, or cassette tapes; the emphasis on mass mission evident in the market for Islamic booklets and pamphlets; satellite TV and the erosion of state control over electronic media; mobile phones and the emancipation of personal communication from family control; and the individualisation of access to information offered by the internet.

Arguably, since the eighteenth century new media have helped to widen the reach of a moralised version of Islam addressing and trying to include ever more people, and new media have helped to strengthen the possibilities of ever more people to participate in the construction of the meaning of Islam in a public way, and they have strengthened their self-consciousness and their feeling that their individual choice and their own judgement do matter.

This is what I call “individualisation” — an individualisation primarily of access, not necessarily of attitude. I do think that there are indications allowing us to conceive of this as a long-term process, a process that goes back at least 250 years and that has since accelerated partly through the effects of new media. If we look at each individual case, at the details of each individual new *ṭarīqa* for example, or the dynamics of internet discussion forums or Facebook networks, we will find counter-tendencies at work as well, we will find that bodies are inert and often slow to move, we will find that old established patterns are tenacious and that new structures need to be grounded in existing terrain and will in part reflect these foundations, we will find that old bodies can be stiff-necked or reinvigorate themselves, often themselves using newly invented technologies—but nevertheless, it is intriguing to look closer at a dynamics where a moralised vision of Islam, focusing on the individual’s responsibility to understand and act, is spread to ever more people, using a variety of what in any given context were and are new media, and to investigate how the corpus of relevant authoritative sources changes in this process, how new groups and communities emerge that incorporate and carry these new visions, and how all these dimensions mutually influence each other in a myriad of ways that nevertheless may be seen to have a synergetic effect in the long run.

The *imitatio Mohammedi*, the *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya* propagated by the Sufi reformers was an important precondition for the individualisation of access to and interpretation of Islamic order and the “Islamic way of life” (*sharīʿa*). The conflation of love and knowledge personified in the shaykh, the personal guide, exemplified a personalised model of “Mohammedan” order where

emotional and rational access to the Truth became one. At the same time, the shaykh who for centuries had been an unquestioned mediator between the individual and Truth, was now subjected to the common order which was conceived of as in principle accessible to every true believer.

This dialectic between a generalised concept of order and an individualised concept of understanding this order seems to me an important characteristic of “modernity”. The internet may be the current mirror and multiplier of this dialectic, but eighteenth-century Sufi movements already display its strong roots.

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