From Audiotapes to Videoblogs:

the Delocalization of Authority in Islam

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Thirty-three-year-old Ali Ardekani's popular religious video blog, *Ask Baba Ali* always begins with this jingle: "If you're looking all confused, ask Baba Ali. If you don't know what to do, ask Baba Ali. If you want advice from a friendly funny guy, ask Baba Ali." Once a week Ardekani, an Iranian-born American web designer, tapes short videos from his tiny apartment in Los Angeles and uploads them on YouTube. With a unique witty humor, Ardekani offers advice on topics ranging from flying as a Muslim, getting married, racism, friendship, and dealing with non-Muslim co-workers. His earlier show on YouTube, a series of videoblogs on the vagaries of the Muslim experience in the West, became an instant hit getting a total of 2.5 million views and securing him some airtime on the UK-based Islamic Channel, the first satellite Islamic television channel in English accessible in 132 countries. Ardekani's videos have been translated into many languages, and viewers from as far as Paris, Berlin, and Istanbul have left thousands of comments both lauding and ridiculing this digital da'wa (invitation to Islam) forum.

Thirty-year-old Moez Masoud is an Egyptian advertising producer and a part-time preacher who appears frequently on Iqra'[1], one of the 27 satellite channels in Arabic entirely dedicated to Islamic programming. His show *A-tareeq A-ssah* (*The Right Path)*, a 20-part slick television series in which he tours the streets of London, Cairo, Jeddah, Al Madinah, and Istanbul interviewing Muslims and non-Muslims about spirituality, romance, homosexuality, drugs, and veiling, was closely watched by millions of viewers across the Arab world, and more than 1.5 million episodes were recently downloaded from Youtube. Masoud, an economics graduate of the American University in Cairo and a popular singer[2], believes young Muslims who grew up immersed in a media and consumer culture saturated with secular Americana prefer an Islam that is less punitive and more embracing "of the contemporary world in which Muslims live today."

Masoud's fame as a successful television preacher was paved by another popular religious personality whose first appearance on Iqra' in 2005 revolutionized Islamic preaching much in the same way Al-Jazeera has impacted the news culture in the Middle East. Amr Khaled, a forty-year-old former accountant from Egypt, pioneered a creative breed of religious programming with an effective mix of religion and entrepreneurship through his first show *Sunae al hayat (Life Makers)*. His impressive oratorical skills and his accessible explanations of the Quran and the Hadith using colloquial Arabic have gained him an unprecedented following among Arab viewers. Unlike traditional religious discourse, Khaled's preaching sounds excessively fresh as he passionately pleads with Arab youth, both male and female, to open their hearts to a loving, forgiving God who will help them fulfill their dreams and set the example for their people and for the West.

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[1] Iqra', a Saudi-owned channel created in 1996, is the first satellite Islamic television station.
[2] His song, "Will You Marry Me" topped the charts in Egypt and opened a fierce debate on the applicability of Islam and its legal customs to contemporary culture.

His message sounds soothing to young middle class Muslims when he tells them that God does not want them to give up their interests like music, films, sport or wanting to become rich as long as they don't clash with Muslim values. Khaled is currently the director of entertainment programming at Al-Risalah[3], another popular Islamic satellite channel, where along with a new wave of religious media producers he has introduced a new line of Islamic broadcasting, which includes reality television, talk shows, game contests, and cartoons.

This new generation of spokespersons of Islam has been loosely labeled the "Islamic televangelists," the "preachers of air-conditioned Islam," or the "face of cool Islam"(Haenni and Tammam 2003; Boubekeur 2005). Inherent in these labels is a conviction that this contemporary mediation of Islam is simply a mimicking or an effortless importation of a religious performance genre that helped popularize American evangelical Christianity through the adoption of modern mass media. Implicitly, this conceptual reductionism, endorsed increasingly within traditional circles of religious and state authority, dissociates this emerging trend of da'wa media personalities from "pure" Islamic da'wa practice and relegates it to a dangerous downturn where lay interpreters of scriptural texts challenge the legitimacy of learned scholars of the rigorous Islamic fiqh (jurisprudence).

It is fair to compare the current mediation of Islam through popular media forms such as television, film, music, cartoons, and Internet Websites to mediation trends within evangelical Christianity, but the adoption of these media technologies for the service of Islam needs not be understood as absolute, as if mediation were foreign to Muslims.

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[3] Al-Risalah, the first Islamic entertainment channel, was created in 2006 by Saudi Prince Waleed Bin-Talal to fend off the rise of religious extremism.

Historically, Muslim preachers have been remarkably attuned to the potential of mediation in reaching and swaying their audience, and extremely careful about the stylistic guidelines in performing their sermons. As Charles Hirschkind (2006) discovered in his seminal ethnography of cassette sermons in Egypt since the 1960s, "the tonal qualities of voice, modulations of affect… the rhythmic structure… the musicality of a sermon discourse, with its crescendos, andantes, and sotto voce passages" can supersede the importance of persuasion and argumentative soundness (12). Form as a defining characteristic of mediation has always regimented the way Islam has been preached, and for a long time modern mass media such as audiocassettes have been embraced marginally for a political instrumentalization of Islam, but mostly as a space for improving individual piety and correcting religious practice. To a large extent, contemporary da'ias such as Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, and Ali Ardekani incorporate the same rigor in their preaching styles and are quite cognizant of the importance of a passionate delivery which they believe could be amplified by media forms such as television and video blogs.

Khaled, Masoud, and Ardekani represent an emerging generation of Muslims who, in the face of a crisis of authority in Islam and a climate of semantic disarray, are creating public deliberative spaces to revalorize their religion and redirect individual energies in the service of an Islamic revivalism (al-Nahda) that is not concerned with the militancy of political Islam but more with the Islamicization of modernity. This is indeed the face of a rising popular Islam that uses the oratorical passion of sermonizing to encourage public participation, civic engagement, and eventually asks Muslims to shed the sternness of punitive religious discourse and embrace the permissiveness of a

forgiving and life-relevant Islam. This civic militancy, at least discursively, clashes not only with what is increasingly perceived as the irrelevance of an archaic religious establishment both state-legitimated and otherwise, but also with the inaction of the state's political apparatus and its incapacity to solve pressing social and economic problems.

This is also the face of a transnational Islam that navigates through porous borders via satellite television airwaves and Internet Websites, which makes it impossible to contain or regulate by states. The cosmopolitan status of the representatives of this Islam forces its audience, at least discursively, to re-imagine their social interactions in a more global context and eventually engage in alternative forms of identification, particularly with an increasingly closer Muslim Umma. The declining political and religious legitimacy of the nation-state, a direct impact of globalization, forces Muslims to seek new public spaces where they could articulate and construct political and religious identities. Not that the nation-state is no longer relevant –in fact it still is as we shall see later in my discussion of how these da'ias indirectly continue to inscribe their advice and action within the framework of the nation and also in how states try to regain control over religious authority- but its governance over how religious identities are shaped has been seriously eroded (Meyers and Moors, 2006).

The purpose of this article is twofold: 1) to probe the claims of these new Da'ias that their emerging media spaces are deliberative and empowering for individual Muslims and 2) to examine whether the transantionalism of this mediated da'wa necessarily cancels out the nation-state as a critical and meaningful terrain of action. Manuel Castells (2007) describes new media as the arena where power relations and

control over meaning will be vehemently contested. He says the public sphere in the network era has moved from the institutional realm to the communicative space and individuals are better equipped in this new space to intervene and resist existing power relations. But given the commercial nature of Islamic media today and their close ties with the world of entertainment, how genuinely deliberative can this space really be?

Unlike in Hirschkind's case of cassette sermons, a media form mostly popular among lower class Muslims and a practice that was seldom conceived as a commercial venture by its practitioners, the new mediation of Islam through television and the Internet is clearly more of a middle and upper class trend with a more elaborate production base that follows the logic of the market and its competitive forces. The commodification of da'wa as a result of this mediation has far reaching implications for the nature of religious discourse, the representation of religion, and the potential for religion to play a central role as a force of social change. As I will argue in this article, states welcome the depoliticization of Islam and generally don't mind the entertainment value of new religious programming, but they remain cautious about two things: that an Islamicization of civic duty and peaceful social change, as in the case of Amr Khaled's calls for a "civic jihad," might invalidate their secular political structure; and that the transnationalization of religious authority, as da'ias come from a wide range of countries, might weaken their grip on a nationally-defined Islam and its ideological orientation in religious interpretation. The ensuing conflict over religious authority among states and their religious establishment, old non-statist da'ias, and the new market celebrity da'ias requires special attention if we are to understand the dynamic and complex linkages between Islam, media discourses, community, and identity in contemporary Muslim

society.

The Gentrification of Da'wa and its New Political Economy

The perception of Da'wa today, much like anything else in the Islamic tradition, is dominated by the narrow purview of militant ideologies, and quite often it becomes associated with violent strands of Jihad or the sinister world of West-bashing propaganda. Here is how Da'wa appears in the writings of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), a Washington-based organization that monitors and translates only what it perceives as expressions of Islamic Jihad on Arab and Persian media:

> The online indoctrination and da'wa activities are regarded by the [Islamic] organizations as an integral part of jihad, and as another front of jihad in addition to its military, economic, and political fronts. In fact, they characterize online media or informational activity as a type of jihad that can be carried out by those who cannot participate in the fighting on the battlefield. They call this kind of jihad "the media jihad" (al-jihad al-i'lami) or "the da'wa jihad" (al-jihad al-da'awi) (2007)

Other alarmist media reports about Islam's silent stride to take over the West often mention Websites that promote da'wa as part of Jihad like *dawanet.com*, a grassroots network of Canadian Muslims which features articles like "How to Make America an Islamic Nation" and "Da'wa in Public Schools," in which it identifies schools as a good space for the dissemination of Islamic values.[4] My point here is not to deny the existence of groups of Muslims who understand Da'wa solely as the proselytizing of non-Muslims or that da'wa never has political motives; but the obsessive focus in public discourse on this spurious relationship between da'wa and radicalism obscures our understanding of the general use of da'wa by Muslims as a complex project concerned mainly with the

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[4] Some of the recommendations of this organization include tips on how to deal with your children's teachers and make sure they understand and accommodate Muslim students' needs and religious backgrounds. What some can read as Muslims hell-bent on proselytizing America, others can read it as a reaction to the aggressive vilification of Islam in public discourse and the rampant ignorance of Islam's basic tenets among the general public.

improvement of pious behavior and civic responsibility.

Many scholars have called for an objective academic study of Islam away from the self-interest of Western scholars to once understand the colonial subject and today penetrate the intricate mind of the Muslim terrorist (Mahmood 2005; Ramadan 2008; Arkoun 1994; Esposito and Burgat 2003; Hirschkind 2006). Much of this concern in contemporary Islam is indeed propelled by the raucous ascent of Islam on the international stage since the Iranian revolution and following the events of 9/11 and now "the war on terror." The threat theme that hovers above this kind of re-actionary research often reduces, as Ramadan says, "several centuries of Islam's legal heritage, philosophy, mystical thought, and social and political vitality to a subsidiary position" (2008). Not only does the discussion of Islam become ahistorical, but it is equally ignorant of the intricate lifeworld with its rich discourses, socio-cultural forces, and local-global tensions that informs the construction of contemporary Muslim identity. The amplified mediation of da'wa today and its impact on the nature of topics, the stylistic features, and the mobility of practitioners of this vital Islamic practice is a fertile ground to study contemporary articulations of Islam, including those mediated through popular culture, beyond the conceptually debilitating dualities of tradition-modernity or West-East.

The concept of da'wa has a range of theological, historical, and political connotations, and for much of the history of Islam it was understood as a prerogative incumbent on all Muslims to perform whether through charitable actions, building mosques, organizing Quran explanation sessions, or simply reminding your fellow Muslims of the right moral path. Much of this da'wa activity, however, had been rather private and performed in smaller circles that included friends, neighbors, family

members, and co-workers. The more public da'wa through the mosque and later audiocassettes was strictly the domain of state-legitimated imams or a coterie of "rebel da'ias" – both known for their theological know-how - whose preaching was either heavily monitored by the state or whose access to wider audiences was limited by the underground nature of the media they used and the topics they chose to address[5]. Today, the digitization of da'wa is continuing, rather aggressively, an unprecedented trend of subjecting private concerns over piety through such intimate topics as dress, listening to music, sports, friendship, and marriage to public scrutiny where everyone independent of their religious capital feels welcome to participate.

What is perhaps most striking about this mediated da'wa is its conspicuous gentrification by conjoining spirituality and market consumption. As mentioned earlier, the older generation of da'ias across the Muslim world have always distributed their sermons through pamphlets, books, audiocassettes and even videotapes, but they seldom engage in lucrative business deals with their publishing companies. In fact, many of their literature is copied, or borrowed, and few would complain about copyright infringement since da'wa is meant to reap divine blessings and the more people benefit from it, the more this ideal is concretized. Conversely, today's da'ias have become media entrepreneurs with share holdings in Islamic banks and religious media, popular television shows, agents to book their speaking engagements, and elaborate Websites with their own "religious workers" fielding visitors' questions and demands of fatwas on a variety of topics. Mohamed Abu-Haiba[6], a successful 39-year-old Egyptian media

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[5] Many of the topics in these underground audiocassettes dealt with eschatological issues with fear and divine retribution featuring quite prominently in the narrative.

[6] Abu-Haiba was also a bureau chief at the popular Islamic channel, Al-Risalah before he raised millions of dollars from Saudi investors to start his *4 Shabab* satellite channel. He is considered by many as the mastermind behind the popularization of Islam in entertainment media.

producer and a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, works with some of the most famous da'ias today and helps them build their small media empires. He thinks the only way Islam will survive amidst the powerful iconography of Western images and capitalism is by turning da'wa into a media product itself and lifting Islam from its depressing associations in the mind of Muslims. The latter have little use, he says, of a majestic recitation of the Quran or an inanimate sheikh on a television show: "The Islamic media was so poor, so traditional. It wasn't television. It was televised radio, a man in front of a camera speaking for hours and hours about obscure religious texts with no appeal…Words with nothing connected to life" (Fleishman, 2008.) After creating and producing some of the most popular shows on Islamic television, including Amr Khaled's first program, Abu-Haiba recently launched the first Islamic music video channel, 4 Shabab (For the Young) which he hopes will compete with some raunchy music networks in the region, particularly the Saudi-owned Rotana, the Christian Lebanese LBC, and more recently the Arab MTV.

Amr Khaled, the quintessential epitome of this transition in da'wa pratice into the realm of popular media, is credited with popularizing Islam and moving da'wa away from its habitually humble social milieu into the more affluent world of middle and upper class Arab Muslim youth (Haenni 2005; Echchaibi 2008; Wise 2006). Khaled is as careful about his look as he is about the content of his shows. He has no beard, wears a well-trimmed moustache, basks in his fashionable clothes of haute couture, and carries an iPod with music and podcasts he's willing to share with his fans online. His television shows have become a staple of religious broadcasting in many Arab households both in the Middle East and in diaspora, and his DVDs and books are quick sell-outs through a

Website recently ranked as one of the most visited on the Web.

Moez Masoud takes much of his cues of commercial success from Khaled's dexterous navigation of the lucrative media industry. He has convinced Saudi investors behind some of the most prominent Islamic television networks today to create hard-hitting shows that would resonate with the same audience that watches Western-style entertainment programming. His show, *The Right Path,* begins with a song he himself wrote and sung as a reaction to recent fatwas in Egypt and elsewhere that music is forbidden in Islam. In fact, his singing has become so popular that now he is more and more identified as both da'ia and singer, a title that has earned him extreme contempt from some radical imams who have called for Muslims to boycott his excessive permissiveness. Like Khaled who commands hefty cheques reaching up to $50,000 per month, Masoud also gets paid generously for his television shows and his appearances in lecture halls and sports arenas across the Arab world. The world of religious satellite media has indeed become a lucrative business based on lavish advertising revenues and competitive audience ratings thanks to their new religious celebrities (Zaied, 2008).

The commercialization of da'wa may be expected to be less virulent on the Internet because of the lack of the same market pressures of the television industry. In fact, a number of Muslims, boosted by the simplicity and interactivity of the technology, have started thousands of websites as a way to heed the call for collective da'wa which is now widely understood as an imperative upon every individual in the face of a vapid secular modernity and the distortions Islam has been subjected to since 9/11. But the amount of Islamic products one can buy on the Internet today from a litany of commercial websites – and all in the name of da'wa - can be dizzying. From Halal meats

and Muslim iPods to Islamic banks and fashionable hijab wear, the Web has indeed become an ideal marketplace for the commodification of religion. Never has Islamic paraphernalia been as easy to buy and eclectic in its appeal to a wide array of audiences from those looking for software to search for Quranic words to those seeking more fashionable ways to dress without forsaking their piety.

The videoblog of Ali Ardekani mentioned at the beginning of this article is a good case in point. Ardekani's initial videoblog was called the Reminder Series, a comedic line of videos in which he reminds his fellow Muslims of vital Islamic virtues like good neighboring, faithful friendship, and filial piety. But his more recent videos are all preceded by a commercial from an endorsing company of halal foods or Islamic banking. In fact, Ardekani's business mentality is easy to detect, albeit inscribed in a spirit of da'wa. Along with a friend, he founded a small film company called *Ummah Films*, which is currently raising money from individuals and corporations to create a series of Muslim-minded feature films. He also created the first Muslim board game, *From Mecca to Medina* in which players amass resources in the form of knowledge about Islamic tenets, history, and geography in order to reach the maximum number of trading routes. In my personal conversation with Ardekani, it became clear that he has bigger aspirations for his da'wa, and one of his most cherished projects, on which he continues to work despite multiple rejections, is to convince some prominent US television network to "throw him inside a conservative American family for three months" in the form of a reality television show. He remains convinced the show would be a historic moment in American television (my interview, 2008).

This elaborate evolution of da'wa and its close ties to the market is indeed a far

cry from the benevolence of old-style audiocassette da'ias like Adel Hamid Kishk, who

despite his wide popularity fighting for social injustice across the Arab world and his

great sense of humor, died in poverty in 1996. Writing about the early manifestations of

television da'ias in the Muslim world, Armando Salvatore (1998) highlighted the need

for these new religious actors to learn how to navigate the culture of the market if they

wish to remain relevant:

> Actors within the religious field organize their interests, fulfill their functions,
> acquire their cultural capital and social prestige and reinvest them in the culture
> market according to dynamics that increasingly involve stakes of public definition
> along with skilled crafting and marketing of religious services and products. This
> is not a "free market" but a highly oligopolistic one, however, as the new religious
> media star (like Mustafa Mahmud or Shaykh Sha'rawi, who migrate through
> different print and electronic media and are well-established TV celebrities)
> resembles a media notable who chases after market shares at the same time as
> having to make show of personal virtue, or a charismatic energy that is still
> comparable with the one shaykhs have to use in order to check the loyalty of
> adepts and clients (104).

With satellite television and the Internet, media-savvy da'ias are indeed walking a much

finer line trying to balance their marketability with their religious expertise than Salvatore

describes in this passage. But should the marketization and gentrification of da'wa, as I

described here, necessarily diminish the value of this religious practice as an agent of

social change, public deliberation, and participation? Isn't the democratization of da'wa

today a direct consequence of these same market forces that have enabled individuals to

take part in a religious discourse which had been all too often dominated and regimented

by the state or an archaically institutional Islam? And shouldn't the opening of these

gates of religious interpretation among a wider public be considered more important than

the reams of cash the new da'ias are collecting? Does market mediation and the focus on

piety through consumption by definition mean abandoning the political? In other words,

is an Armani suit-wearing, Mercedes-riding, and soft-speaking da'ia like Amr Khaled an automatic act of selling out?

The least I am advocating here is ignoring the consequences of the new political economy of da'wa in Islam today, but I wish to concern myself more with the conspicuous signs of individual agency, which this new trend of celebrity da'ias are promoting and exemplifying through their da'wa entrepreneurship. Here, I call on the concept of agency among young Muslims as part of a larger context of a progressive and alternative discourse in Islam, which is produced and animated outside the liberal expectations of the Western public sphere.

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TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Amr Khaled

Moez Masoud

New Da'wa and Muslim Agency

The actions of Muslims have often been inscribed in a cultural and political discourse that cast them in subordinate terms as traditional, inward-looking, and fatalist. Re-instituting faith in a culture that sees itself mostly at the receiving end of a powerful imported secular culture, no matter how liberating it might be, is squarely considered regressive and anti-democratic by those who see no emancipation in the dogmas of the religious. As I will argue in this section, despite their "modern" outlook and the daring nature of their actions, the new da'ias will appear only mildly resistant to structures of oppression to those looking for signs of normative freedom and autonomy. As Saba Mahmood (2005) rightly points out in her ethnography of a grassroots women's mosque movement in Egypt, liberalist Western thought imposes crucial elisions of actions or resistance within the structures of power:

> Does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power—a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms (9).

Much like the Muslim women in Mahmood's ethnography who had to create new spaces like the home and mosque lessons to recuperate a morality that is no longer publicly upheld and debated, the new da'ias are aggressively using the media, including the Internet, to inculcate in the individual Muslim the need to align their public life with their religious beliefs. Ardekani's videoblog Ask Baba Ali is a rare window for a young Western Muslim audience which finds little value in the vague and archaic Islam of their parents to ask questions about how to reconcile their religion with the pressures of life in the West. Questions vary from dating before marriage, obeying a non-Muslim parent, attending a Christmas party with co-workers, to irrelevant and repetitious imams in the mosque. Answering a question by "a worried aging Muslim sister from Cambridge, Mass." who needs advice on how to find a husband, and after much self-deprecating humor about Muslim culture Ardekani responds this way:

> There are many halal ways of getting your message across and getting noticed…
> Did [Khadija, Prophet Muhammad's wife] just sit there and wait for him and hope
> that some day somehow some way he'll come and mysteriously know that she's
> interested in him? No. She notified him through some friends that she's interested
> in marriage (2008).

The fact that a woman can ask an anonymous question to a friendly da'ia without going through the judgmental angst if she had to ask the same question to a traditional mosque imam is a significant act in and of itself. Eventually, the answer might not be as deeply layered with theological explanations – and in the case of Ardekani it might be more loaded with folkloric imagery and discussion – but that is exactly the source of appeal for this kind of audience which seeks to deliberate and debate such life important issues.

Many scholars have written recently about the objectification of Islam and how aided by improving literacy rates in the Muslim world and the proliferation of religious

media, Muslims are more self-reflexive about their own religious beliefs and no longer perceive interpretations in ossified terms (Salvatore 1998; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Mahmood 2005). In one of the early episodes of his first show, Khaled reminds his viewers that Islam is a religion of self reflection by showing the many times in which words like "insight", "perception", "consider" and "contemplate" appear in the Quran. Obviously, Khaled is not the first or only one to have discovered the importance of critical exhortation in Islam, but unlike many da'ias his contemplation is perceived as practical and relevant to everyday life.

I agree with the objectification argument of Islam, particularly in a post 9/11 world as Muslims have become confronted with a barrage of questions regarding their understanding of topical questions like "What is Jihad?" "Is suicide bombing halal?" "Is befriending a non-Muslim part of da'wa?" or the more day-to-day questions about music, television, or dating. But there is an important causal relationship between this objectification and the availability of media spaces that is seldom recognized. This is not to say that Muslims never asked questions about their religion before the advent of satellite media or the Internet, but the rapid proliferation of these platforms along with the vernacularization of Islamic discourse, or what Eickelman and Anderson (2003) call the "reintellectualization of the Islamic doctrine" (12), have contributed to this objectification.

Ali Ardekani's graphic banner of his series, *Ask Baba Ali*

New media da'ias have also added a new standard in acquiring religious authority: real life experience and a good grasp of life's daily pressures. Ardekani, Masoud and Khaled all remind their viewers that "they've done it all and now they're back on the right path." Ardekani became a Muslim only when he was 20 years old after many years of partying, dating, and other dangerous adventures he never discloses. Masoud comes from a non-religious family, and after years of drug use, bad company and even a close encounter with death he can now devote his life to da'wa. Khaled's narrative is quite similar. He dated, partied, drank alcohol and found no value in pursuing a life away from God. This life experience lends ample credibility to the new da'ia who is then perceived as fallible and more capable of conjoining the scriptural text and the daily challenges all people face.

Amr Khaled's episode on the veil during his now historic television show "Sunae Al-hayat" used debate format and the life experience of his guests to convince scores of women to veil. There are no statistics to show a clear connection between women donning the veil and Khaled's memorable episode on manners and his tours talking about the importance of veiling across the Arab world, but the percentage of veiled women in many Arab countries has risen considerably since 2005[7], the year he started his veiling

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campaign. Many veiled women I talked to refer me to Khaled's famous episode as an attempt to seal the argument in favor of veiling. It is not so much the self-empowerment arguments that Khaled used that might have been convincing for the women who followed his request – in fact much of what he said in this regard was not particularly original – but the fact that this episode of the veil was part of a larger project of Islamic revivalism created a powerful association between a woman's modesty and the need for Islam to become an alternative modernity for Muslims and non Muslims alike. Veiling in this sense was more inscribed in a narrative of civic responsibility, as a conscious effort to rebuild the nation, eventually the Muslim Umma, on solid moral grounds. As Emma Tarlo (2007) points out in her analysis of hijab in London, the connection between veiling and the community is stronger than the connection with reconstructing the self:

> Some women informed me that the hijab actually prevents marital breakdown, stopping men from being led astray, preventing women from leading them astray and saving taxpayers' money in social services bills as a result!... In a multimedia screensaver entitled, *Hijab*,… verses celebrating the virtues of a hijab wearer are intermingled with messages concerning the power of hijab to protect women from exploitation, bring psychological peace to men and women, improve the moral character of society, guard women from the lustful looks of men, prevent people from being distracted from constructive social work, prevent social corruption and immorality, bring confidence in social participation as a human being rather than a sexual commodity and save time and money by preventing people from flaunting themselves and worrying about clothes (143).

In similar ways Khaled effectively drew a picture of the veiled woman as a successful and highly productive member of the new Islamic nation. A few weeks after his show ended, a number of former prominent Egyptian actresses made their appearance on religious satellite television where they hosted new talk shows on women's issues with colorful veils covering their hair for the first time. Veiling, therefore, has afforded pious women a public space in which they too can not only participate but argue with

men over interpretations of the texts. Men still dominate the world of media da'ias, but there are many women da'ias on satellite television today and some of them host primetime television shows well followed by Muslim audiences.[8]

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are needed to see this picture.

Mona Abdel-Ghani, host of *Hur Addunia* on Al-Resalah satellite channel

It is this very act of publicness and the widening of the religious circle from the traditional mosque to the airwaves that empowers a bigger audience not only to act as a receiver, but an active producer of religious meaning. Here, unlike the political field, the religious field allows for more individual autonomy and maneuvering of existing structures. This, in a politically restraining environment as in the case of many Arab countries, comes as a big relief and more than just a consolation for the lack of political agency. Men and women feel summoned in this mediated da'wa to fulfill their citizenship and participate fully in the moral and civic reconstruction of their communities and by extension their Muslim Umma.

Da'wa Wars? The Nation-State and the New Da'ias

It is safe to argue that the religious and the political in the context of mediated Islam merge rather well in the sense that the da'ias' overwhelming focus on moral

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[8] Heba Qotb's show "Big Talk" on sex matters has been a successful show since its beginning in 2006. Qotb is a 41-year-old sexologist for whom all questions are fair. Hers is the first show on Arab television treating sexuality.

conduct and individual action indirectly exposes the state's incapacity to guarantee its

citizens the rights promised under a secular democracy. The very fact that these da'ias

define what the pious is in terms of religious symbols, wear, and civic action sets a

political struggle over what Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) call "boundary setting." The

question of what should divide the public from private and eventually religion from

politics is bound to generate acute tensions between political and religious players.

Obviously, the desire to challenge and push these boundaries in the case of public Islam

is not new: in the underground da'wa movement that preceded the wave of new mediated

da'wa, rebel da'ias were jailed, tortured, and exiled for what was considered insurgent

preaching through pamphlets and audiocassettes (Hirschkind, 2006). State intervention in

this case proved relatively effective in containing the movement and keeping it restricted

among low-class masses. Satellite and new media technologies have, however, curtailed

the state's power to control the flow of the religious message within its own borders.

Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, an extremely influential octogenarian Islamic scholar, was

imprisoned by the Egyptian state in 1954 because of his links to the Muslim Brotherhood

and his desire to politicize the student body of Al-Azhar University from which he

graduated. He left Egypt shortly after and never returned since then (Schaebler and

Stenberg, 2004). As a strong critic of state-sponsored Islam, Al-Qaradawi has become

one of the Muslim world's most respected scholars and da'ias. From his base university

in Qatar where he has been heading the department of sharia for the last thirty years, he

helped launch IslamOnline.net, a popular Website where a team of sharia scholars and

academics from sociology, political science, psychology, medicine and economics issue

daily fatwas (Graf, 2008). Al-Qaradawi's sophisticated sense of the importance of the

media for da'wa purposes became clearer when he teamed up with Al-Jazeera to create his own weekly television show, *Sharia wa al-hayat* (Sharia and Life). The fact that his show is carried to Arab audiences on a satellite television network like the groundbreaking Al-Jazeera eloquently speaks in favor of the fragmentation of state-legitimated narratives of religion and the erosion not only of the Egyptian government's but all other governments' (Muslim or non-Muslim) ability to control and contain undesirable religious messages.

Initially, Amr Khaled was also barred by authorities from performing his sermons in clubs around the posh neighborhoods of Cairo before he became a media celebrity. The Egyptian government thought his targeting of a culturally disillusioned youth of the middle class was too dangerous since the people involved included the children of government officials and members of Egypt's elite. Khaled's comeback to Egypt through satellite television and the Internet has been more effective and the state's harassment certainly contributed to his image of a renegade da'ia. But Khaled's and other new da'ias' biggest challenge to Muslim governments, despite the entertainment value of their da'wa, is their push for action and civic responsibility. Khaled insists Muslims must regain a sense of *ijabiyya (*positive thinking) and shed debilitating feelings of victimization and blame. In his show "Sunaa al-Hayat," he asked his viewers to write down personal goals and develop a plan to fulfill them.

It is this kind of mobilization that makes governments cringe despite the fact that Khaled's programs help create a more responsible citizenry. Arab governments do not appreciate too much civic engagement and when they do, they'd rather be or feel at the helm of such initiatives. Many governments have felt compelled to respond to this

unprecedented popularity of religious personalities like Khaled or less known role models on the Internet by creating their own religious media and training a new wave of young da'ias to either tone down the discourse or change its direction. In 2006 and with great publicity, the Moroccan government announced the graduation of the first women da'ias from its state-run seminary. The *Mourshidat* (female guides), as it calls them, are deployed to schools, hospitals, prisons, and mosques where they are tasked with offering advice on contentious issues like sexuality and women's rights. Other Muslim countries, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, are considering similar programs where women could be used discreetly against religious extremism. Egypt Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa, who is appointed by the Egyptian state, declared recently that a higher authority in Islam should institute global unified standards for issuing fatwas to stem the chaos and misinformation the media circulate about religion (Abdel-Tawab 2007). Other attempts to consolidate religious authority by Muslim states include the establishment of 69 regional or provincial councils of ulemas (scholars) by the Moroccan government to ensure "spiritual security" and maintain "tolerant Sunni Islam." In the hope of flooding the airwaves with the "correct Islam," governments and investors close to them have also been eager to launch their own Islamic satellite television channels. Larbi Nasra, a Tunisian investor known for his close ties to president Ben Ali, recently launched Tunisia's first 24-hour religious channel, Hannibal TV, and according to the first audience surveys, some of its programs came in second after a Turkish series which has dominated television screens across the Arab world. Moroccan King, Mohamed VI, created Assadissa (The Sixth Channel), the country's first religious television channel "based on a commitment to true Moroccan values and the uniqueness of the Maliki faith

and rite." One of its founding journalists was keen to point out during the inauguration in 2005 that Assadissa does not deal with the relationship between politics and religion.

In France, the government also felt the need to institutionalize Islamic discourse by creating the French Council of the Muslim Faith, a non-profit organization meant to unify one of Europe's biggest Muslim communities. Despite the fact that the organization has failed in its mission to bring Muslims together because of deep ideological rifts at its foundation, French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, continues to use it politically as the "moderate" voice of the French Muslim community. Obviously, the issue of religious authority and state intervention has been a staple in Islamic history, but its importance becomes particularly more pronounced in the context of proliferating religious media and the fragmentation of the traditional anchors of Islamic interpretation.

It would be exaggerated to argue that nation-states no longer matter in the religious experience of Muslims, but it is safe to say that new actors in the religious field matter more because in their bold mediation of Islam, they help reconfigure not only the way the religious message is communicated, but also its significance for social action and participation. Also, by virtue of their focus on what modern nation-states like to treat as private choices of citizens (dress, gender issues) new da'ias, as Hirschkind (2006) points out, re-politicize "those choices, subjecting them to a public scrutiny oriented around the task of establishing the conditions for the practice of Islamic virtues" (39).

Another challenge the new da'ias seemingly pose to nation-states is the impact their da'wa might have on solidifying an identification among lay Muslims with the Umma, or the transnational community of believers. But is the da'wa project, as enacted by these new religious actors, a political exercise that seeks to nullify the significance of

the nation-state as a field for civic action? Does loyalty to the Umma trump all other loyalties?

The Umma and Mediated Da'wa

Da'wa in the Quran refers primarily to a divine order to all Muslims to spread God's message to all mankind and help enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong within the Muslim Umma and beyond (Amr bil ma'rouf wa nahy a'ni al'munkar). The principle Quranic premise behind a Muslim collective identity is rooted in religion; not politics, national, or ethnic belonging. In fact, the Quran never emphasized the Arabness of the people of Arabia and addressed them generally not as a tribe but rather as part of larger religious Umma dedicated to fulfilling a universal divine will (Al Faruqi 2005). The unity of the umma is measured by its adherence to religious beliefs; not to political structures. The kind of faith-based activism promoted by the new da'ias and their followers deploys a religious understanding of the Umma and distances itself from Islamist aspirations of setting up an Islamic state.

At a time when the debate over the Umma is fraught with political tensions and suspicions about the loyalty of Muslims to their nation-states, it is important to locate and analyze the variety of narratives about the Umma in alternative media spaces. Such an analysis would reveal how the concept of the Umma is reconfigured in a globalized world, characterized by a multidirectional flow of religious discourses. The strength and source of unity of the transnational Umma today, and this is spearheaded not only by the new da'ias, but also by a new wave of progressive Muslim intellectuals across the Islamic world and in diaspora, lies in a critical belief that Muslims must take their religion and its texts in their hands and no longer rely on traditional scripturalist interpretations that have

little bearing on their contemporary lives. The underlying zeal that animates this individual, idiosyncratic Islam is the fact that a personal critical engagement (Ijtihad) with the religious text is a desirable spiritual exercise that reinforces personal faith and constantly revalidates the teachings of Islam in modern contexts. Certainly, new media like satellite television and the Internet make this invitation to individual ijtihad much easier as interactive religious shows and searchable databases of the Quran and the hadith enable Muslims to ask questions and compare answers. This engagement with religion and the diffusion of the loci of Islamic authority are contributing to the expansion of the religious experience through space and time. An increasing number of Muslims visit Islamic websites that specialize in fatwas on a wide range of topics. A site like Islamicity.com in Los Angeles, for example, responds to fatwa queries from many countries using muftis in India, the Middle East and the United States. Whereas in the past, an ordinary Muslim's experience with the Umma was limited to an abstract identification with a transnational community, current media technologies make the Umma appear more concrete and potentially realizable. But ultimately and despite the transnational nature of this heavily-mediated da'wa, both the reception and the intentions of its practitioners remain primarily inscribed in the context of the nation and how to improve it. The modern Muslim subject these da'ias address is invited to reflect on the role Islam should play in the building of a stronger moral society and act responsibly to counter the destructive actions of militant Islamists which threaten the unity and well-being of their nations. Khaled's da'wa has convinced many young Muslims around the world to set up more than 12,000 LifeMakers clubs as grassroots organizations dedicated to local individual and social reform as the first seeds of the Islamic *Nahda*

(Renaissance), but their projects are primarily attempts to solidify a sense of national community dedicated to ensuring prosperity and moral piety within their own national contexts. By providing an alternative route within the religious field for community and nation building, Khaled and other da'ias are not only creating distinct spaces for political discourse and action, but they are also helping their followers imagine new pathways to fulfill their roles as virtuous citizens within the framework of the nation. Like Khaled, Masoud and Ardekani are aware the context of their reception is more transnational, but their advice and calls for 'civic jihad' are informed both in their production and reception by the need to mend the damaged spiritual and socio-economic fabric of individual Muslim nations and local Muslim communities living in the West.

Conclusion

My aim in writing about the new da'ias in Islam and their impact on contemporary religious discourse is to trace an accelerated and different effort to contest and rearticulate the meanings of Islam today. Accelerated because the pace of contestation has increased dramatically thanks to changes in communication technologies and production processes. Different because, unlike in previous historical episodes of religious change or reform, those leading this effort are not only Muslim intellectuals but also ordinary Muslims who claim to have more affinity with their publics. Different also because the visual and interactive components of new media help da'ias combine the eloquence of speech with the powerful affective aesthetics of visualization and the immediacy of participation. The intensification of da'wa has also had an unprecedented effect of dispersing the centers of religious authority beyond the traditional sources such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and generating new producers and locales of religious

meaning in Dubai, London, and Los Angeles. Even if some of the most prominent television da'ias today come from Egypt, many of them work from a variety of locales including Amr Khaled who commutes between London, Cairo, and Dubai where he tapes his shows. Dubai is home to many of the satellite Islamic channels and has in a sense become the capital of the entrepreneurial Arab da'ia. Masoud's bilingual education and ease in traveling around the globe to address Muslim and non-Muslim audiences contribute to his image as a cosmopolitan da'ia who navigates different realities and bases his da'wa on an eclectic understanding of religion. His shows inhabit a transnational space and force his audience to imagine themselves as part of a global Muslim youth facing different challenges but sharing a common goal of lifting their countries to a modernity inspired by religion . Ardekani's focus on Western Muslims and his minimal reliance on a formal aesthetic of preaching make him a meaningful authority for a young Muslim audience that feels little affinity with the "village Islam" of their parents. His videoblog has pioneered a new genre of religious debate and negotiation of the Muslim experience in the West.

The moral and political reconstruction of the state and the umma for this new generation of da'ias can no longer be entrusted with secular bureaucrats, nor can it be left to religious extremists. Technological innovations allow for a wider and more equitable participation of the individual in this critical process. Both satellite television and the Internet have reshaped the terms of religious debate and recast Islam as a new field of contestation by ordinary Muslims. The popularity of da'ias and the wordly nature of their topics also indicate a desire in Muslim publics to shift discussion away from detached morality to practical religiosity. The commercialization of da'wa may be seen as an

attempt to empty religion of its critical and political potential, but in the case of Muslims, whether those living under repressive political regimes and closed religious spaces or those living in diaspora and facing massive discrimination, commodification enables a critical space where Islam is experienced under alternative protocols of sociability. As Tareq Al-Suwaidan, the director of the Islamic channel, Al-Resalah, a motivational speaker on Islamic entrepreneurship, and a famous da'ia himself, said in response to critics of mediated Islam: "Satellite TV is the most powerful weapon in the hands of the Islamic revival today."

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