The power of God. Four proposals for an anthropological engagement

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
In the name of the All-Merciful God

In most Muslim-majority contexts in the world, this pious formula is the customary way to begin a speech, a work, or a transaction. This is so also in Egypt, which I know better than other contexts. But in the world of academia (including parts of the Egyptian scene),[1] speaking and writing in the name of God can be seen as odd. Although many academics do have a relation of faith with the monotheist God of the Qur'an, He appears out of place in an academic text.

Islam without the subject of human submission and worship, the One God, makes as little sense as Christianity without Christ the Son of God. There is no doubt that anthropologists and other social scientists are fully aware of the God-centredness of Muslim faith and lives. And yet a quick glance at recent articles, books, conferences and funded projects shows a clear prevalence of »Islam« and »Muslim« and the relative rarity of »God« or »Allah« (the Arabic name of the One God) as key-

words.[2] The ethnographic works that I have consulted (see footnote 1) show that their authors are well aware of the role of God in the lives of the people they converse with and write about. God is present in ethnographies conducted among Muslims, but until recently has not been the focus of anthropological debates and theories about Islam or those about the lives of Muslims. This absence is the more striking since other disciplines such as theologies, religious studies, and intellectual history do not have a comparable blind spot regarding the divine. A similar absence or marginality has been noted by Jon Bialecki (2014) in anthropologies of Christianity, although God became a topic of enquiry earlier in that field. More recently, the One God of the Qur'an has become the subject of more systematic reflections by anthropologists. I return to these reflections below, but first we need to ask why it is that God, so central to monotheist faiths and so present in ethnographic encounters, has until recently been so difficult to

[1] In fact, my experience of teaching and publishing in Arabic in Egypt has influenced my reasoning in this article. Some lectures are opened in the name of God, others are not, and the lines of division are complex and sometimes unpredictable. At least in some protected intellectual spaces, the incommensurability of different ways of reasoning is a productive friction rather than a fundamental obstacle. In a study circle I taught from 2014 to 2017 at the Alexandria Library, people with secularist and Islamist-leaning theories and commitments could fit not only into one lecture room but also around one coffeehouse table afterwards. The dividing lines that were more difficult to cross were those between supporters and opponents of the regime, and also those between attempts to understand social dynamics in their own right on the one hand, and a developmentalist epistemology of dividing the social world into negative and positive aspects on the other.

[2] I have checked the indexes of thirteen English-language anthropological monographs that address Muslim faiths and lives, and have been influential for my work. Eight (Abu-Lughod 2013, Agrama 2012, Asad 2003, Deeb 2006, Gilsenan 1982, Hafez 2011, Hirschkind 2006 and Marsden 2005) do not have »God« or Allah as index entries. Only Bowen 1993, Ghannam 2013, Khan 2012, and Mittermaier 2011 do feature »God« as index entry. Mahmood 2005 features »Fear of God«. In contrast, »Foucault« or »Foucault, Michel« is indexed in nine books – only Abu-Lughod 2013, Gilsenan 1982, Khan 2012 and Marsden 2005 do not have him in the index. In a recent critical review of the anthropology of Islam and everyday life (Fadil and Fernando 2015), the words »Muslim« and »Muslims« appear 124 times, including title and references. »Islam« appears 148 times, including the references. »God« only appears 7 times, and only in citations from texts by others. In comparison, introductions and textbooks on the anthropology of Islam feature better: All three that I consulted index either »Allah« (Marranci 2008; Kreinath 2012) or »God« (Bowen 2012) as keywords.

include more systematically in anthropological theories. I do not mean metaphysical speculation or theological arguments about the existence, nature and essence of God. I am also hesitant to claim a phenomenological knowledge of other people's knowledge of God. Rather, I am referring to the quite tangible acts and presence of God in relations among humans whom anthropologists try to understand.

There is evidently politics involved. It is more urgent to speak about Islam and Muslims when they are the subject of Western policies and nationalist fears in a way that God is not. It is easier to talk about religion than about God when secularism is the hegemonic political framework. Positionality matters. In a Western context, somebody who has a relationship of faith with the One God of the Qur'an, absurdly enough, is more likely to be dismissed as biased when speaking about Him than somebody who follows a competing monotheist faith or who is speaking from a position of non-faith or unbelief (in Muslim-majority contexts, the opposite is often the case).

But there is no unbiased position. Rather, each bias facilitates the perception of some things or aspects better than others. As somebody who grew up in the materialist faith of Marxist-Leninist communism (I lost the faith at around the age of seventeen, but it still structures my identity and sensibilities), I have learned to understand God as a human artefact. But as an anthropologist, I have also come to recognise that this does not make Him any less important and powerful for people who have a relation of faith with Him and who understand that humans are God's creation. In this article, I draw on the ways in which people I know in Egypt relate with the God of the Qur'an and reflect on their relation. I also draw on the ways in which I have been involved in those reflections as somebody who does not share the faith but can learn to perform some of its expressions.

This particular positionality and bias inform my key argument, namely that relations between humans and God can be understood and studied as a multitude of relationships of power. They also inspire my aspiration to think about God beyond the ontology debate in anthropology. Anthropologists should recognise theistic ontologies in their own right. But they can also consider that some of God's powers may be effective regardless of one's ontological standpoint, no matter if we see in Him our Creator or our creation, or something altogether different.

This compels me to question whether the well-proven scientific imperative of methodological atheism is always helpful. Considering perceivable, knowable causes before considering not perceivable, unknown ones has undeniably been good for scientific progress. But in social sciences, avoiding God can result in a situation where we invent new unseen entities – which goes against the principle of Ockham's razor, that is, the imperative to prefer explanations with few speculative assumptions over those that have many speculative assumptions. Methodologically, we are trained not to reckon with God, while we habitually engage with modernity, society, economy, the state, the individual, religion, traditions, neoliberalism, the secular and so on; yet none of these entities, as it were, exist in the same way that, say, a schoolteacher or a marketplace exists. In fact, they are often highly elusive, even mystified beings.

Jon Bialecki (2014) has argued that it is possible to account for God as a social actor while maintaining the imperative of methodological atheism by means of understanding Him as the effect of a hybrid network of objects. This is an important proposal, but I wonder if it is possible to follow it in a systematic manner without slipping into an unacknowledged theological (or atheological) judgement, namely one that ecxcludes the possibility that God speaks to the evangelical Christians studied by Bialecki because they in fact are His chosen people. Yasmin Moll (2018) has argued vis-à-vis Bialecki that although anthropologists should take talk about God seriously, they should not become involved in theological debates. Anthropological theories and debates may echo theological ones, and anthropologists can definitely learn a great deal from theological debates;[3] but theologies are normative, even judgemental disciplines by definition, and anthropology should better maintain a position of agnostic indecision towards them. On a different note, Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr (2018) have called attention to the unsettling experiences of »leaps of faith« that anthropologists have faced in their fieldwork, and which we should not try to rationalise away. Mayanthi Fernando (2017) has gone a step further and proposes that we should take spirits seriously as a potential or actual part of a »supernatureculture« world. Drawing on the work of Taha Abdelrahmane, Amin El-Yousfi (forthcoming) proposes to ground the study of Islamic ethics in a theological philosophy of divine trusteeship, which implies replacing anthropology's methodological relativism with an approach that integrates commitment and analysis. I find Fernando's and El-Yousfi's proposals interesting to think with, but I hesitate to follow them. Taking intentional beings (animal, human, divine or spiritual) seriously in a full sense implies entering relations such as faith, trust, help, fear, enmity, agreement or disagreement with them.

3 In my own work, for example, I have found Sunni Muslim theologies of freedom and predestination insightful to understand what it means to act as a human in a world ruled by greater powers.

Abandoning methodological relativism and taking seriously claims about the reality of things implies an open-ended engagement with them that may result in affirming or rejecting them as true or false, helpful or dangerous, or in searching to revise and improve them. For pragmatic reasons, I prefer not to take that step. I tend to agree with Moll as well as Willerslev and Suhr, and propose that instead of methodological atheism (or methodological theism or animism, for that matter), one may, as a social scientist of any faith, also adopt a position of methodological indecision and openness, and study the presence and power of God and other unseen beings in human interactions, without having to decide *how* that reality comes to be.

In this article, I make four proposals about how anthropologists may account for the monotheist God as a social reality, embodying and enacting a form of power that makes us, and through which we make ourselves, in manifold and also contrary ways. The *first proposal* is to pay ethnographic attention to the way in which different specific powers of God are present in human interactions through linguistic references and the search for guidance and sustenance. The *second proposal* is to consider more systematically the forms of relational or relationship power that God commands over humans. The *third proposal* is to pay attention to the productive tensions and conflicts that arise from encounters with a God who is both harshly punishing and merciful, disciplining and sustaining, the Life-giver and the Death-bringer. The *fourth proposal* is to think of secularity or »the secular« as a reconfiguration of the human–God relationship in which humans are empowered, and whereby a triadic relationship in which God acts as supreme mediator between humans is weakened, transformed or partially replaced by separate relationships.

These proposals are by no means exhaustive, and the overall argument I put forward is not new. It is largely common sense in the Middle East. It is also no news to scholars in theologies, religious studies and intellectual histories who have a major record of thinking about God in various ways – so major that I cannot engage with it in the limited framework of this article, which acknowledgedly has a social scientific tunnel vision. Also Western philosophy and sociology have a record of taking God seriously. Anthropology, in contrast, has a strong record of accounting for spirits, ancestors, saints and other unseen companions, but only more recently also the monotheist God.

Anthropologies of Christianity have had a head start in thinking about God, perhaps thanks to greater attention on materiality (Meyer 2015), relationality (Orsi 2004) and the theoretical influence of Bruno Latour (1993; see, e.g., Keane 2007; Luhrmann 2012; Bialecki 2014). Anthropologies

of Islam have given comparably more attention to ethics, politics and identity, and have been more informed by the work of Michel Foucault (1984). This has often contributed to a primarily this-worldly analysis of discursive power, whereby the authors of discourse (whether divine or human) and the otherworldly horizons of ethical action were, initially at least, not the primary focus of attention. In a critical engagement with that line of study (Schielke 2010), I have in the past argued (among other things) that too much focus on Islam results in attributing to a conceptual entity power that properly speaking is God's. That part of my argument remained marginal, however, in a debate about how to understand ethics and everyday life. I cannot go into the details of that debate here (see Fadil and Fernando 2015; Schielke 2015; Deeb 2015), but it is worth pointing out that while the debate brought up different understandings of everyday life and ethical becoming, it also less explicitly points at a shared interest in including the unseen and superhuman in the analysis. In her rejoinder to the debate, Nadia Fadil (2015) argues:

> Furthermore, what is not the everyday? It is indeed hard to imagine any situation mediated by human interaction that would not be part of the everyday. Are objects part of everyday life? Animals? Plants? Angels? Miracles? (Fadil 2015, 98)

We seem to differ on the everyday. In my understanding, everyday is not a class of situations or objects. Everyday is an attribute, a qualifier that characterises the recurring, goes-without-saying, undramatic, pragmatic and regular livelihood-related qualities of actions, situations, experiences and ways of reasoning vis-à-vis their potential extraordinary, dramatic, liminal, systematically reflected qualities. Nearly all things and situations mediated by human interaction that can be everyday can *also* be exceptional and extraordinary. So in contrast to Fadil, I would argue that situations mediated by human interaction that are not everyday are manifold and easy to imagine: revolutions, weddings, accidents, romantic encounters, pilgrimages; and yet all of them can be made everyday when they become routinised, such as in established revolutionary regimes, in the work of ambulance drivers and wedding photographers or in the lives of inhabitants of Mecca.

However, in another regard our concerns show an important convergence. Fadil mentions miracles (which are extraordinary by definition but for people serving a pilgrimage site can become routine) and angels (who can indeed be everyday companions, just as their interventions might also be extraordinary), and thinking along that line of

thought I would add Resurrection Day, Paradise, Hell and most importantly God. Resurrection Day as an anticipated event is the liminal moment of ultimate truth par excellence, neither routine nor ordinary. But the anticipation of judgement can of course be routine and ordinary; and making that anticipation part of one's ordinary routines is a central aim of the Islamic revival. I think that Fadil and I agree on that. This is also true of God. The power of God is inseparable from everyday living when His commandments are cultivated as part of one's life and moral being, when He is included in conversations by means of invocations and when His gifts bear fruits as material livelihood (themes to which I return in the next section). But none of this would have the compelling power of authority and promise if it weren't for the transcendent reality and truth over and above ordinary existence He claims. Ritual practice often involves searching contact with His transcendent otherworldly reality, without this conflicting with the same practice's more or less ethically formative effect in this world. God's immanent presence as a close companion dialectically coexists with His transcendent supremacy as well as the transcendent supremacy of His revelation.

This is something that Liza Debevec and I (2012) were approaching in our book *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes* – but we did not yet include God in our thinking, which is a main shortcoming of the book. »Schemes« tend to be systemic, ideolog-ical or idealistic more than personal. Some ways of speaking about »Islam«, »the Church« or »true religion« do have that quality, but even when they do they are also about the relationships that humans have with God, prophets and saints. Just like a theory of ethics that knows of nothing outside the everyday misses something important, so does a theory of religion that deals with schemes but not with God and prophets.

Luckily, many recent anthropological contributions have come up with textured understandings of how humans live with the God of the Qur'an. Contributions that have inspired this essay include dream visions and the elsewhere (Mittermaier 2011), livelihood (Nevola 2015a; Gaibazzi 2015), destiny (Elliot 2016; Menin 2015; Menin and Elliot 2018), death and resurrection (Hirschkind 2006), moral relations that involve God (Schaeublin 2016), the striving for paradise (Mittermaier 2019), theological talk about God (Moll 2018) and encounters with transcendence (Abenante and Vicini 2017). »Towards an Ethnography of God« was the title of a panel organised by Amira Mittermaier and Omri Elisha at the 2016 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. This emerging body of work also builds on and intertwines with longer-standing enquiries into invisible realms (Drieskens 2008; Suhr 2015; Doostdar 2018), and the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad (Mahmood 2009) and Muslim saints (Abu-Zahra 1997).

Figure 1: »Don't forget to say the name God.« Sticker in a barber shop in northern Egypt, 2016.

Figure 2: »Oh God, heal our sick and have mercy upon our dead.« Cairo, March 2010.

Figure 3: »My hijab is religion, not fashion. Hijab that pleases the Merciful, or fashion that pleases Satan. God is great, Praise to God.« Poster by the Muslim Brotherhood (unsigned but recognisable by design and slogan) in northern Egypt, February 2010.

Figure 4: »In the name of the All-Merciful God {Whatever good things you may have, it is from God} This is the true speech of the Mighty God«. Part of a Qur'anic verse (16:53) that is associated with the provision by God of material goods and blessings (ni'ma) and livelihood (rizq), painted on the wall of a café in Alexandria, February 2014.
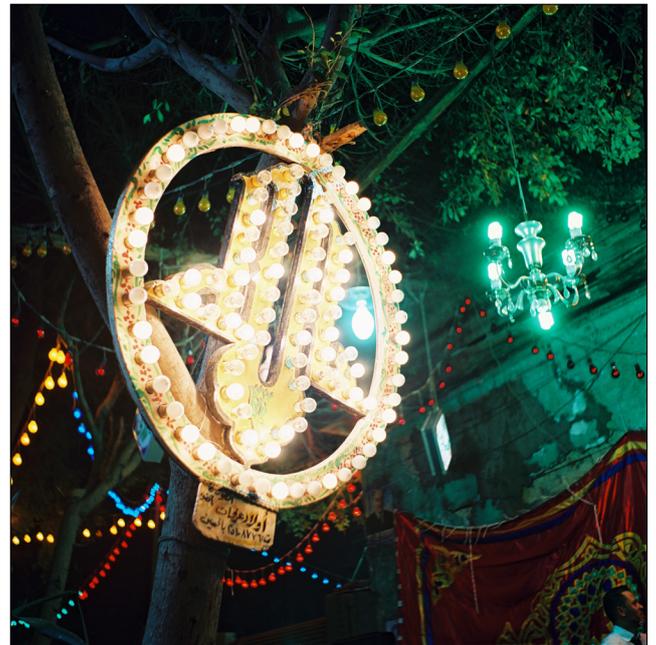

Figure 5: »Allah«. Transportable name of God made of electric lights at the annual festival (mulid) of al-Sayyida Fatima al-Nabawiya in Cairo, March 2008.

With this essay, I follow in the footsteps of those contributions, and reflect on the power of the monotheist God as it is recognised and reckoned by Muslim Egyptians I have worked and lived with during the past two decades. This article is not based on dedicated fieldwork about God, but instead on the accumulated knowledge of many years of fieldwork and friendship in various contexts with Egyptians from different walks of life. I have learned much in situations that were not understood to be research encounters by the people involved. Some people I know in Egypt consider their relationship with God to be a highly private and intimate matter, so parts of this article are intentionally vague in their references to specific people and contexts. However, three people make an explicit appearance. Because much of my field-

work in the past seven years has been in literary circles in Alexandria, two of them are poets, and the third is a master of improvised poetic expression in conversations. The role of poetic language and poetry is not only a fieldwork contingency. Language is a key means (but of course not the only one) of communication with and about God. Poetic language can make God's presence tangible among humans. At times it can also be involved in a heretical rethinking of that presence.

Don't forget to say the name of God

The most difficult part of learning Arabic for me was to learn to speak with older people in the village in northern Egypt where I began to conduct fieldwork in 2006. One part of the difficulty I encountered was the local dialect, which is different

from the Arabic spoken in Egyptian cities. But the part that required the longer learning process, and one that I have still not mastered well, was understanding that so much communication among humans has God as a third party.

Islamic traditions of pious speech do not share the Biblical taboo against taking »the name of the Lord thy God in vain« (Exodus 20,7). The Qur'an repeatedly urges the faithful to remember and mention (*udhkuru*) God. Stickers and graffiti with the message »Say the name of God« (*Udhkur illah*) proliferate in vehicles, homes, streets and shops around Egypt (Figure 1). The name and words of God are present – and in the wake of the Islamic revival have become more so – in the sound of the Qur'an and sermons and in visible public writing (Hirschkind 2006; Starrett 1995). The presence they generate highlights different aspects of God's power over humans, such as healing and forgiving (Figure 2), disciplining (Figure 3; see also Figure 6 further below), livelihood (Figure 4) and confirming His presence and inviting experience (Figure 5).

While learning Arabic, I soon understood that answering »God willing« (*in sha' Allah*) to a question could be a polite way to say yes, a polite way to say no or a polite way to avoid saying either yes or no – depending on context and intonation. Later I understood that for many speakers the propositional thrust of »God willing« was not about saying yes or no in the first place, but about recognising that either way it is up to the will of God. I also learned that the answer to »how are you?« was »praise to God« (*al-hamdu lillah*), which means that praise is always to God, no matter how one is doing. (Sometimes, the word of praise is spoken in a defeated, depressed voice that indicates one is not well at all.) Again, it took me longer to understand that the main point of the phrase is not telling how one is doing, but expressing contentedness with the will of God – a major virtue that God has promised to reward well.[4] Although these expressions are Islamic in origin, they are also used by Arabic-speaking Christians. Even people who have little faith in God use them routinely. Their pervasive power is based on their being both a conventional linguistic performance between humans and an act of faith that will be heard and rewarded by God. They thrive on the open-endedness of a triadic relation between human-oriented politeness and God-oriented faith, whereby the human or the divine dimension may be more pronounced depending on speaker and context.

People with whom I learned to speak better Arabic in the village use these expressions often, but they do not satisfy themselves with simply reiterating them. Especially among women born before the 1970's, I have often encountered an eloquent and poetic flow of invocations to God that He may protect, care, help, guide, sustain, heal, reconcile, console, retaliate, forbid… I, too, have learned a few phrases that feature God, often referred to as »our Lord« (*rabbina*) or by one of His ninety-nine canonic names or other attributes. For example: *Allah yusluh halkum* – May God make your condition well (a general wish for well-being); *Rabbina yikhallihumlak* – May our Lord keep them for you (said to somebody about their children or family); *Rabbina yikfik sharr al-marad, ya rabb*! – May our Lord keep the evil of sickness away from you, oh Lord; *Allah yigawwik* – May God give you strength; *Rabbina yihdik* - May our Lord guide you (meaning you're stupid, foolish or crazy; it can also be an appreciation of someone's piety); *Allah yisamhak* – May God forgive you (meaning you're wrong and should apologise, sometimes also used jokingly); *Allah yarhamha* – May God have mercy on her (said about deceased people); *Rabbina yakhduh* – May our Lord take him (meaning I hope he drops dead; this is not said in jest); *Ya Satir* – Oh Protector (said in the face of danger); *Ya Musahhil* – Oh Who Makes Things Easy (said in the face of problems); and *Ya Latif* – Oh Kind One (said when in pain).

I have never learned to use these and other expressions with the poetic eloquence of the people I learned them from. But over the years, I have learned how to speak and reply with invocations in return, and thereby I have, however imperfectly, learned to embody the position of a person who puts their trust in God, who addresses God for help and guidance, and whose relations with other humans involve God as a third party. Such learning is a case in point for the ethical power of acts and utterances that Saba Mahmood (2005) argued for, but it also reminds that such ethical power is open ended, that intention makes a difference, and that communicating and acting with others is key to moral and ethical practices.

People with whom I have learned to speak Arabic in the presence of God have followed various paths in their lives. Some have more and others less consistently tried to follow His commandments (that is, the Shari'a, which is not the same as law) in their worship of God (*'ibada*) and their interaction with other humans (*mu'amala*). All have been searching for their *rizq*, legitimate worldly income or sustenance provided by God. They have faced at times lucky, at times devastating turns of *nasib*, the materialisation of God's predestined decree or what from a materialist point of view is called luck. Some among them have at times reflected to me about *din* (approximately »religion«) as a moral, political, ritual and metaphysical frame-

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4 For example, in Surat Ibrahim (14,7): »If you are grateful, I will certainly give to you more« (*la'in shakartum la-azidannakum*). Ritual prayer (*salat*) includes the line »God listens to those who praise Him« (*sami'a llahu li-man hamidahu*), based on prophetic practice.

work.[5] Some people I know have been for some periods of time very keen to gain a knowledge of God – not so much in the sense of the Shari'a-based disciplinary knowledge of right and wrong, but more in the sense of Sufi Muslim traditions that have a long history of highlighting the search for an experience and encounter with the transcendent.[6] All of them have also been committed to some other strivings that they have not framed in terms of *din*/religion. In the course of their strivings and setbacks alike, they have all been cultivating relationships of trust, hope, guidance, support or encounters with God in a wider sense that both includes and exceeds *din*/religion in the limited sense of normative doctrine and practice.

Few among the people who are younger than me, however, express these relations with the eloquence that I have encountered among many people above my age.

Born in the late 1950s, al-Hajja Z is the widowed mother of three and grandmother of seven by the most recent count. She radiates motherly authority, has a good sense of humour and can be sharp if needed. She belongs to the first generation of girls in the village who attended school. Her style of expression stands on the generational threshold between the verbal eloquence of a society where most people could not read, and the increasingly textual references and communications learned by many among the younger generations. Like most women of her generation and social background, she puts her trust in God and is religious by any account. Unlike most women of her age and social milieu, she is also very interested in politics and has outspoken political views.

In spring 2012, Mukhtar Shehata and I recorded with her an interview where she told of her hopes and confusions regarding the 2011 revolution, the outcome of which was not yet apparent. After opening with »In the name of the All-Merciful God«, she started to tell us of the joy she felt about the outbreak of the revolution, and related it to the injustices that she and her two sons had faced owing to a property conflict in the village and oppressive employers in Saudi Arabia, where her sons were

working in low-income jobs. In the course of the interview, she occasionally included God in her account in different capacities. With regard to the property conflict, she addressed Him as the Provider (*al-Raziq*):

I would give him [the lawyer] 100 pounds every month,[7] and keep the 200 pounds [remaining of her widow's rent]; our Lord alone knows that they're gone the next day. I don't know how I live the rest of the month. Our sublime and exalted Lord (*rabbina subhanahu wa-ta'ala*) provides (*byurzug*).

When talking about her hope for security and justice for ordinary people, she addressed God as the initiator of conscience:

I pray (*bad'i*) to our sublime and exalted Lord that He gives everybody their conscience, in every position, whether officer or civilian. There is only our sublime and exalted Lord from whom we ask, because He can change the hearts; the hearts are in the hand of our sublime and exalted Lord. [...] Because if people see our Lord, the entire country will be just (*tit'idil*).

She went on to address the need to educate people (she has a keen sense of not knowing enough and a desire to know more) about what human rights are, and to provide the moral and professional foundations on which the development of the country can proceed. This brought her back to the situation of Egyptian migrant workers abroad, who often have to endure grave injustices – something she knew all too well from her sons:

We say »Oh Lord« and He shall reward us (*yijazina*): but those who demand justice must ... those who demand justice (*'adala*) and equality (*musawah*), if only they also looked after these people.

Towards the end of the interview, God became more present in her speech, as she wove together her hope for change, her trust in God's predetermined decree, her sense of the urgency and necessity of taking action, her frustration and confusion about the situation in general, and a moral admonition towards those committing injustice:

Z: So if I had the means to go to that square, or if it were close to me, or if somebody could take me there, I would have joined them, because I believe that our sublime and exalted Lord *does not change the condition of a people until they*

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5 »Religion« as a social scientific concept and *din* as an Islamic theological concept are not quite the same, the latter being more encompassing and, most importantly, normative and exclusive. It is commonly claimed that only Islam, Christianity and Judaism qualify as being a *din*, and also that only Islam is the proper *din* authorised by God. In both ordinary and academic language, *din* is distinguished from *tadayyun*, »religiosity«, which describes the actual ways in which humans follow a religion/*din*. As a social scientist, I would in Arabic claim to study *tadayyun*, not *din*.

6 As Amira Mittermaier (2011), Paola Abenante and Fabio Vicini (2017) have pointed out, the Sufi search for communication with God seldom shares an ontology of authentic individuality, and instead focuses on the capacity and experience of being subject to God's immense power on an invisible (*batin*) level.

7 In 2011, 100 Egyptian pounds was equivalent to about 12 to 13 euros.

change what is in themselves.[8] So if I [unclear]; what happens is that we escape from God's pre-destined decree to God's predestined decree (*min qada' illah li-qada' illah*). If I'm inside the house, it will also hit me. But I do something I can meet God with, that I can say to Him: I did, oh Lord. All I did was praying (*bad'i*) to Him, I was standing in front of them [meaning the demonstrators she saw on television]; changing and switching channels on television. But I feel that they don't say the truth. They say one eighth of the truth! I don't feel... There is a channel that makes me feel frustrated, and another channel... I don't know which one to believe!

Mukhtar: Last word, Hajja. How do you see tomorrow?

Z: Tomorrow will be good, God willing (*in sha' Allah*), with the commandment of God (*bi-amr illah*) because He commands. Our sublime and exalted Lord, the hearts of the people are pure. You say: Oh Lord! It will not make you shy, Mukhtar. Our sublime and exalted Lord will not let anyone go to waste. We have lived... I'm 53 years old, I have lived my life and lacked nothing. If I get a thousand [pounds] I will live on them, if I get three hundreds I will live on them. Either way, I will live on them. I won't die for them. But I'm defeated (*maghura*) because those people who made sacrifices [in the revolution] still don't stand on their feet. I'm not defeated because of myself, but because of everybody. I say to our Lord: Oh Lord, let everyone find their conscience, and know that they stand in front of a Generous Lord, [the pitch of her voice increases and she raises her hand for emphasis] and they will be alone in the grave, and they will be questioned! There will be a day when they stand alone in isolation and darkness; nobody will stand by them, and no money and nothing else will work. And nobody will get more than is written (*maktub*) for them.

An interview was not an everyday speech situation for al-Hajja Z. She had prepared carefully, and the outcome was quite unlike the rapid exchanges of words and phrases that she entertains in more conversational settings. But the way she concluded her account (that otherwise mentioned God only occasionally) with a series of invocations and admonitions reminds me of the use of invocations to conclude one's speech in everyday contexts.

The political theme of the interview let her emphasise matters of justice, conscience, the ultimate responsibility one has for one's acts and the inevitability of divine predestination. Other conversations might have had a different focus. And yet it is remarkable in how many different capacities God became part of the conversation: as a provider, as the one who listens to prayers, as the one who can instil in hearts a will for the right and good, as the judge after death and the one who writes destinies, and the ultimate witness of justice and injustice between humans. Because of the political focus, yet other dimensions such as worship, proper ritual action or health and sickness did not arise, although al-Hajja Z would certainly affirm them if asked. Remarkably, she did not speak about religion/*din* or Islam even once. And while she is sympathetic of Salafi preachers and Islamist political movements (albeit with some doubts and misgivings), she articulated the future improvement of Egypt that she envisioned in rather unspecified terms of an increase of knowledge and responsible behaviour. The moral problem she addressed was not a meticulous ethical enquiry about the correct shape of human interaction with each other and their worship of God, but rather the need to put an end to blatant and obvious injustice and oppression.

Al-Hajja Z helps us to understand how God emerges as a constitutive third party of relations among humans in communication and interaction. Furthermore, her focus on justice, responsibility and destiny reminds us that speaking with God is usually not about establishing coherence (which it might be if she had tried to formulate a correct doctrinal understanding of what is and what is not justice, or how exactly responsibility and predestination come together),[9] but about getting to the point, and firmly so.

Al-Hajja Z also helps us to think of God's power as a moral authority in a way that exceeds (but does not contradict) the disciplinary mode of moral enquiry that has been perhaps the most productive theme in the anthropology of Islam under the keywords ethics and piety. The first wave of piety and ethics studies highlighted Islam's this-worldly continuity as a discursive tradition, and the ways in which pious Muslims worked towards crafting a God-fearing self. Authors of the first wave of ethics and piety studies were well aware of the role of God in the process, as they were of the ultimate aim of Paradise after death that motivates ethical practice in this world (e.g. Mahmood 2005, 140–145; Hirschkind 2006, 173–204). And yet God and the afterworld remained marginal to a theory that focuses on traditions of debate, pedagogies of conduct and ethical becoming in this world. In al-Hajja Z's speech, in comparison, God is the focal point of moral trust, conscience is a divine gift to

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8 This is a citation from the Qur'an, 13,11: *inna llaha la yu-ghayyiru bi-qawmin hatta yughayiru ma bi-anfusihim.*

9 Such questions have inspired sophisticated intellectual, theological, and political debates over the centuries, and do so also today. See, e.g. al-Ash'ari 1980; Vasalou 2008; Fahmy 2018.

be accepted and the key moment of enquiry comes after death. How may these and other dimensions be thought together?

Studying *zakat* (almsgiving) and voluntary giving for God (*sadaqa*) in Nablus, Palestine, Emanuel Schaeublin (2016) has highlighted the triadic form of the moral relationship of giving, which always involves God as a supreme third party and guarantor. In her work on charity in Cairo, Amira Mittermaier (2014; 2019) has addressed different modalities of giving and exchange between humans and God, such as those expressed by the concepts of *thawab* (reward) and *baraka* (blessing), where the first is earned by humans for good deeds, while the second is a form of unconditional generosity by God. Laura Menin (2015) and Alice Elliot (2016) have drawn attention to destiny as an intimate part of love relations, flirtation and the search for a marital partner in Morocco. The active search to find one's destiny, Menin and Elliot (2018) argue, is about openness and receptivity towards the supreme agency and authorship of God – in line with the currently mainstream Ash'ari theology of destiny, whereby the power or potency (*qadar*) to create action is only God's, but humans actualise or acquire (the theological concept is *kasb*, acquisition) their predetermined destiny from their own will and with full responsibility (Al-Ash'ari 1980, 538-542; Bhat 2006). Paolo Gaibazzi (2015) has shown how Gambian men who search for wealth through migration, diamond mining and trade trust that God has predetermined for each of them their own share of »luck«, the English translation used in the Gambia for the Islamic concept of *rizq*. Working in northern Yemen, Luca Nevola (2015b) has argued that *rizq* and destiny are powerful, God-centred »models of« (Geertz 1973) that describe how the world is and works for the pious and the impious alike. They have a descriptive power that differs from the prescriptive power of ideals of ethical and moral becoming that work as »models for«, to follow Geertz's language.

For al-Hajja Z, these capacities go hand in hand. Some other people I know have given more or less emphasis to some capacities over others. Learning Arabic in the village thus meant for me not only the acknowledgement and involvement of God as a third party in human interactions, but also to realise that His involvement and power may be of different kinds in different situations and require different cultivated skills and attitudes by humans. Cultivation of a relationship with God involves both active as well as receptive attitudes by humans: proactively striving, working and worshipping, recognising and hoping for divine gifts and inspiration, accepting destiny as it comes. It may involve different temporal horizons: more afterworldly when it comes to justice and ethical discipline, more this-worldly when it comes to the search for *rizq*. Powers of God can be experienced as the immanent substance of ordinary life, approached as a transcendent truth of theological enquiry or encountered in the path of mystical search.

I do not aim to provide a systematic exposition. There are other dimensions that I have not addressed or am not aware of, and in any case the search for guidance, coherence, sustenance and experience are evidently not mutually exclusive. They reinforce each other much of the time, but they are also not necessarily mutually dependent.

However, because these relations – whatever their emphasis – almost always involve an acknowledgement of His immense power, it does make sense to think of the human–God relationship as a power relation; or, more specifically, as relational power.

Relational and relationship power

The most compelling theory of relational power remains the one developed and elaborated by Michel Foucault, especially in his later work on biopower (the power of discourses to shape and regulate the lives of the populace) and governmentality (2007). For the sake of a thought experiment, we might try to understand the power of God along the lines drawn by Foucault as a relationship that constitutes and structures communal and individual moral trajectories. However, this would not be a binary this-worldly relationship between a discourse and a subject, but a triadic relationship where God (along with the Apostle of God and, in some versions of the relationship, the friends of God) connects humans in this world and the afterworld alike (Salvatore 2008; Schaeublin 2016). We might also think about His power in terms of what it produces: conditions of human life, thriving, reproduction, well-being, success – but also their limits: sickness, failure, death. In that sense God could be seen to be involved in biopower, which importantly includes necropower (Mbembe 2003), the power over life's end. God of the Qur'an is both the Life-giver (*al-Muhyi*) and the Death-bringer (*al-Mumit*). As much as His power is personal, intimate and suggestive of affects, it also involves some very Clausewitzian domination by direct force. And it is evidently strategic, involving an omniscient master plan that humans encounter in the shape of destiny. In any case – and this would accord with Foucault's work on human biopower – the power of God is not limiting but productive. It is creation.

But although the power of God has aspects that resemble biopower, I do not propose to study it in that framework. For one thing, God does not deal with populations in Foucault's sense. The relation of power involved is more intimate and personal. The monotheist God does not create populations made up of individualised subjects; He creates communities of humans bound by moral ties in a

triadic relation with one another and God (Salvatore 2008, Schaeublin 2016). Furthermore, in contrast to the discursive procedures that Foucault's work relied on, His »procedures« are invisible and beyond human knowledge.

What one *can* study as an anthropologist – regardless of one's theological or atheological judgement, belief or faith – is how the power of God emerges as something tangible when it is addressed, anticipated and enacted in human interaction. Above, I gave an example that highlights conversation and language, but God's power can also emerge and be communicated through other senses, bodily practices, objects and mediated images. Birgit Meyer (2015) has addressed the often quite tangible materiality of the Divine in human interaction: the invisible other world, in order to be accessed by humans, needs material mediation in the shape of media productions, objects, architectures, scripts and more.

In her work on Northern Irish Pentecostals, Hilary Foye (2015) uses Bruno Latour's idea about human and non-human »hybrid networks« to understand how humans position themselves in relation to God. In fact it may be to a large measure thanks to Latour that social scientists have recently become more easy-going about their distinctions between humans and things, intentional subjects and consequential objects. With Latour, we can recognise that humans are not that special and unique, and that agentic power is embodied by all kinds of beings in complex networks. Latour points out that his approach also allows us to bring God back into social scientific analysis:

> Do we need to add that the crossed-out God, in this new Constitution, turns out to be liberated from the unworthy position to which He had been relegated? The question of God is reopened, and the nonmoderns no longer have to try to generalize the improbable metaphysics of the moderns that forced them to believe in belief. (Latour 1993, 142)

No wonder that some anthropologists of Christianity (see also Bialecki 2014; Luhrmann 2012; Keane 2007) in particular have found Latour good to think with. Important tensions remain, however. Latour's vision is an animist one, which may work well with spirits, saints, science and technology, and non-human living beings. Monotheism and animism, in contrast, do not make good bedfellows. Latour proposes a »parliament of things« (1993, 142-145). But the God of the Bible and the Qur'an is an absolutist autocrat who doesn't share power with republican institutions. Latour's ontology is flat, monotheism's is hierarchical.

James Laidlaw (2013, 185) has pointed out that Latour's actors in network lack one crucial part of what makes something or somebody an actor:

the expectation of moral responsibility. Responsibility, in turn, requires intention and moral accountability. This, Laidlaw says, is not the case in actor-networks. And yet at least some of Latour's non-humans *are* commonly treated by humans as responsible actors in Laidlaw's sense. Intention and responsibility are an intuitive and therefore also in practice very compelling basis for human interaction. Humans do not generally try to verify whether they are dealing with an intentional being unless they have a specific reason to do so. Instead, intention and responsibility seem to be the taken-for-granted default assumption. This can be a compelling and sensible way to act with non-humans too. That is what animism is all about, and it is also what nationalism is about, and it is how leftists often speak of capitalism. Social scientists commonly treat concepts and abstractions as intentional beings: »neo-liberalism«, »the state«, »the secular«, »Islam« and others often appear as remarkably conscious beings who aim, attempt and strive – and may be held accountable.

Of all non-humans, divine beings are among the most explicitly intentional – and the most powerful. The monotheist God of the Bible and the Qur'an in particular builds strong moral and emotional relations with humans. This is relational power in a different sense to Foucault's. It comes closer to the contemporary English vernacular use of »relationships« as intimate bonds. Such bonds connect not only humans who share a life in this world; they also link »heaven and earth«, as shown by Robert Orsi (2005) in his work on the American Catholics he grew up with. This kind of »relationship power« is effective by means of intimate, emotional bonds of friendship, enmity, love, anger, fear, trust, help, guidance and importantly gratefulness.

A power to which one can be grateful – this seems to be a crucial part of the human–God relationship known as Islam. And this was the key point about learning to speak Arabic with God as third party in conversations.

At least among the Muslim Egyptians I know, the possibility of and search for gratefulness goes along with a strong emotional taboo against anger and ungratefulness towards God. The Arabic concept for unbelief, *kufr*, etymologically means ungratefulness. There are elaborate techniques to not express anger or blame towards God. Theologically, Satan is identified as the source of evil – often as a semi-internal force who drives one to act in immoral ways.[10] In Arabic poetry, existential laments conventionally address *dunya*, »this

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10 Remarkably, Satan is even more absent than God in anthropologies of Islam. On ways in which Satan takes responsibility for deeds and desires that otherwise might be attributed to oneself or to God, see Gregg 2007; al-'Azm 1969, 55–87.

world«, for its cruelty and injustice in order not to place blame on God.[11] As Saba Mahmood (2015) has shown in her work on piety activists, cultivation of the fear of God and His punishment is a key part of the work of becoming a pious person in the framework of the Islamic revival. Piety, a free translation of the Arabic *taqwa,* is the quality of somebody who unites fear of God and trust in God, and who has internalised His commandments. It is ideally a state of peace of mind (*itmi'nan*), and I have encountered a few (often older) people who appeared to embody it. But often, striving for that condition is marked by a cultivated anxiety about the state of one's heart and acts, whether one's deeds are accepted and rewarded or not by God.

Such anxious and hopeful cultivation is today the most visible and politically most contested way to relate to the God of the Qur'an, but not to the exclusion of other ways. Moreover, people who do not actively or consistently cultivate the fear of God often ask Him for a kind of support for which they may be grateful. During sickness and other crises, otherwise rather impious people may speak in invocations or call others to join them in asking for God's help: *id'i li* »call upon God for me«. Social media has become an important medium for such requests, and online calls for invocations for the sick and announcements about friends and relatives passing away result in lengthy comment sections with invocations for healing and success, and for God's mercy to the dead. They are another case of triadic communication where invocation (*du'a'*) is a way of showing mutual support and solidarity among humans by means of collectively asking God to grant His help and protection.

The issue of healing and sickness is also helpful in understanding the coexistence of God-centred and other ontologies in lived practice. The ontological turn in anthropology has been helpful in understanding human–God relations, although perhaps not in the sense of self-containing islands as in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2003) famous »conceptual, I mean ontological, self-determination of people. Or peoples to be more exact.« With the universalist, expansive drive of monotheist faiths and with the translocal connectedness of the Middle Eastern region, such insular self-determination has not been the case in Egypt for a very long time. In Egypt today, health, sickness and healing in particular are the site of lively ontological pluralism. People searching for healing in times of illness make use of coexisting yet different ontologies: the molecular ontology of biomedical therapies, which people I know in Egypt tend to trust more than some people in my social circles in Western Europe;[12] the divine ontology of God's power over life, healing and death, which motivates patients and their families to pray, sacrifice, call others to pray, consult spiritual healers and act out the virtues of patience and contentedness with the will of God; and the ontology of humoural medicine in the tradition of Hellenic and Islamic techniques of healing (Hamdy 2009; Tabishat 2014). One rarely encounters in Egypt the sense that these are alternatives; rather, they coexist almost seamlessly.

God punishes harshly, and He is forgiving and merciful

The coexistence of different forms of power, even different ontologies, is also inherent to the human–God relationship known as Islam. This is well exemplified in the ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God, a list of divine attributes mentioned in the Qur'an that in Egypt is often displayed as printed calligraphy in homes and shops, and performed as an introductory song (composed by the influential twentieth-century popular musician Sayyid Makkawi) at weddings. Most of the ninety-nine names are also human attributes, and when they come together in a human being they might be considered a contradiction or a form of ambivalence.

In the Qur'an, God says: اعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ. *I'lamu anna llaha shadidu l-'iqab wa-anna llaha ghafurun rahim.* »Know that God is severe in punishment; and that God is forgiving and merciful« (Surat al-Ma'ida, 5,98).

My attention was turned to this verse in June 2016, during Ramadan, when a friend of mine whom I call B cited it on his Facebook page. Ramadan is a time when Muslims generally give more attention to God and worship, so it did not surprise me that B, who otherwise would publish sarcastic aphorisms, political and social critique, and existentialist love poetry on social media, would now be citing the Qur'an. But the verse struck me, as it did a few others who left their comments underneath. They noted that the same verse had made them stop and reflect. I asked B how he understood the verse. He replied:

By God, my brother in God Samuli,[13] this verse is for me the confirmation that the aspect of forgiving with its reality and necessity does not deny the existence of the aspect of punishment, and that's natural because the divine subject (*al-dhat al-ilahiya*) in Islamic religion is the subject that carries all human attributes (*sifat*) in full divine power/extent (*qadr*), and which God

put into the human with his limited human power/extent, because He breathed into him His spirit. And [the verse is a confirmation] that the difference of the qualities themselves is apparent in the Beautiful Names of God, where it says that the god (*al-ilah*) is the First (al-Awwal) and at the same time the Last (al-Akhir). And he is the Visible (al-Zahir) and the Invisible (al-Batin). That also confirms and explains the difference of the qualities humans have. Note: this is a personal interpretation that may be right or wrong.

In a private message, I then asked B for permission to quote his interpretation of the verse in a research article. He replied and clarified:

Of course, I have no problem. But Our Lord doesn't have schizophrenia. Only we do 😂😂

Then we went on to politely ask how each of us and our families were doing. He answered:

B: I'm fine. Fasting is getting tough on me, you lucky bastards 😀

Samuli: May God give you patience, and may your fasting be accepted.

In his replies, B addressed the fundamental tension between God's capacity to unite all human qualities and the human incapacity to find a balance between them. There is a fundamental ambiguity involved in being subject to the power God: it is biopolitics and necropolitics at once, for God is the Life-giver and the Death-bringer in one person. It is pastoral and it is repressive, for God is forgiving and caring, punishing and severe. It makes sense for God, but humans try to be one or the other, and the unity of life and death, reward and punishment, visible and invisible can result in a schizophrenic experience of incommensurability in us.[14]

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14 I am aware of the potential misunderstandings involved in the metaphorical use of a pathological term borrowed from psychology. In the metaphorical use by B and me in this article, schizophrenia is not a pathology, but a feature of human understanding. »Incommensurability« implies that some discourses, ideas and practices cannot fit together in a coherent account or system. Describing an experience or knowledge as schizophrenic in a metaphorical sense, in contrast, implies that the things we try to know may very well exist together, but for various reasons we find it difficult or disturbing to think them together, and therefore treat them in a compartmentalised fashion as incommensurable, and may shift between one and the other. I also prefer in this context »schizophrenic« to »ambiguous« or »ambivalent«, because the latter attributes do not describe limits of human understanding: on the contrary, ambiguous language and ambivalent affects may at times quite comfortably bring together things that otherwise might appear as incommensurables.

This tension appears productive for lives that are lived in the guidance of the God of the Qur'an. It is not a one-dimensional force, as anybody even a little bit aware of the manifold and rich history and present of Muslim lands and peoples knows (see Ahmed 2016). Rather, this tension is among those productive dialectics that compel humans to take a stance – in one way or another – towards the forgiving and punishing, the visible and invisible, the disciplining and the sustaining, the closed and the open-ended dimensions of God's relation with His creatures. As a relationship, the power of God requires that humans act in anticipation of it, thus actualising one attribute or another of the divine subject, living out the resulting tensions in one way or another.

B unites some irreverent views about God and humans, decidedly leftist and secularist politics and a consistent practice of worship. Additionally to fasting in Ramadan, he prays regularly, which is visible by a dark spot on his forehead. His idiosyncratic ways also show in our online conversation. There is some irony in that I used the pious and polite language of invocations in reply to B, who jokingly complained about the difficulty of fasting in summer heat and envied non-Muslims who do not have to fast. And rather than trying to present a »correct« (that is, authorised) understanding of the verse, he insisted that his interpretation of the verse was his own and as such was subject to error.

B's way of being both pious and irreverent has a political, societal and historical context. It is linked to his upbringing in a communist family between a village and a major city, his educational and economic resources as a young, male, white-collar employee in a private company, and his generational socialisation during the Islamic revival that in Egypt had successfully reconfigured parts of the human–God relation by the time he came of age in the 2000s. This context has provided him with a societal and spiritual mainstream in which he is at home yet not at ease, as well as specific resources to search for an alternative position.

When God–human relations shift, so do human–human relations, and vice versa. While the monotheist God does not share power with the parliament of things, He does delegate some tasks to humans. Despite the Qur'an's strict monotheism, all Muslim traditions involve some human intermediaries. Expressing faith in both God and his Messenger is the bare minimum of Islamic creed. For Muslims worldwide, God is the primary addressee of their prayers, but the Prophet Muhammad provides the ideal model for how to live and a very powerful focus of emotional attachment (Mahmood 2009). The Shi'a tradition gives enormous importance to the spiritual leadership of Muhammad's descendants. Sufi movements within the wider Sunni tradition have generated expansive networks and chains

of friends of God (or saints for the sake of an im-precise translation), who in turn are spiritually and genealogically connected with the Prophet Muhammad (Mayeur-Jaouen 2005). Supporters of Salafi-oriented reform movements in the Sunni tradition commonly reject the Sufi veneration of friends of God and often consider Shia Muslims not to be Muslims at all. Foregrounding the demand to live as precisely as possible by the Shari'a (the teachings about how to worship God and interact with humans), they emphasise the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, who thus are reinforced in their position of privileged inter-mediaries.

In Egypt, the twentieth century witnessed a shift in theological hegemony from Sufi hierarchies and chains of sainthood on the one hand and religious learning based on traditions of scholarly authority on the other, to a reformist emphasis on discipline and a direct access to scripture. There has been a shift in emphasis from a more personally mediat-ed and distributed relationship with God towards one that is more textually mediated and unity ori-ented. This shift also resonates with the individu-alistic tendency of neoliberal capitalism, whereby some (but not all) of the moral thrust of following God's commandments has shifted from communal discipline to self-discipline (Karlsson-Mignanti 2007; Abenante 2014). It has also gone hand in hand with increased sectarian tension between Muslims and Christians. Different configurations of triadic trust and solidarity, and correspondingly different sensibilities towards difference within and across traditions, faiths and identities seem to be at play here. In short, major political and societal strug-gles are related to the question about how to live such relations.

Talal Asad (1986) has pointed out that struggles, debates and critique are an inherent constituent of a tradition (see also Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Khan 2012; Aishima 2016; Ahmad 2017). At least in my reading of Asad, orthodoxy is not a given posi-tion, but a relationship of power where one side in a debate is able to establish its way of relat-ing to God as the correct, accepted and authori-tative way. Connecting Asad's insight with that of B, orthodoxy is the currently victorious version of one aspect or another of humans' schizophrenic inability to understand the unity of contrary quali-ties in God.

B's call to consider both mercy as well as pun-ishment, and – implicitly – both love as well as fear stands in the context of such struggles. His vision is not encompassing either: he clearly leans to-wards mercy and love rather than punishment and fear. He also clearly positions himself in societal struggles by identifying himself as a leftist and a believer with his own ideas about faith. Others who disagree with his views might call him a her-etic.

Poetry, secularity, heresy

B is also a poet. In spring 2017, his first collection of colloquial poems was published by a public sec-tor press. He told me that his collection fell victim to what he saw as narrow-minded fearfulness of the societal mainstream. Before publication, the collection passed an editorial board which recom-mended it for publication, with two reservations. The first was that it was very subjective in tone (which B happily admitted). The second was that some poems contained »insults on the Islamic re-ligion.«. He was asked to either revise or remove those poems, and he decided to remove them from the collection.

Among the poems that were removed was one that opened with the line يا سبحان التي أسرت بقلبي وخلته مشتاق *Ya subhan allati asrat bi-qalbi w-khallituh mushtaq.* »Exalted is she who took my heart and made it longing.«

The verse contains a direct intertextual ref-erence to the widely cited Qur'anic verse (Surat al-Isra', 17,1) about Prophet Muhammad's night-time journey to Jerusalem and heaven that begins *Subhan alladhi asra bi-'abdihi laylan min al-masjidi l-harami ila l-masjidi l-aqsa …* »Exalted is He who took His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque (in Mecca) to the Remote Mosque (in Jerusalem)…« It also uses the female gender together with the word *subhan* reserved for God, and that in a love poem. This was unacceptable for the editors. Addi-tionally to poems with provocative religious refer-ences, B also had to remove poems that addressed the revolutionary events from 2011 to 2013. The collection was originally titled *Memoirs of a Re-tired Prophet*, but the publishing editor crossed out »prophet« and replaced it with »saint«, using the word *qiddis* that is reserved for Christian saints, thus avoiding any association with Islam. Eventu-ally, the collection was published with an entirely different title that had no religious reference.

B told me about the fate of his collection when we met in a coffee house in downtown Alexandria in February 2017. He complained about what he described as the sensitivity of people, »including people who in practice are not religious«, towards discussing religious matters in ways that depart from the *musallamat* (accepted, taken-for-granted axioms):

They fear such different thinking about faith and religion (*din*) more than outright atheism. Atheism is something outside the framework and can be left on its own; different thinking is more dangerous.

B actively cultivates thinking and speaking against the grain of religious, political and soci-etal *musallamat*, and considers the increase in such speech one of the few successes of the defeated rev-olution of 2011 (in which he actively participated).

I translate speaking against the grain of authorised *musallamat* within a tradition as heresy (Arabic *zandaqa*).[15] In my reading, B's manuscript was a potentially heretic and on occasions politically radical work that could have offended important sensibilities about both God and the state. But after it was censored by the editorial board, B's published collection became something quite different: it now avoids addressing God directly and relegates religion to a position of indirect, limited relevance.

The published version fits strikingly well into a theory of the secular that has been developed by Khaled Furani (2012) and Michael Allan (2016) in regard to contemporary Arabic literature. The secular, they argue, is not just about people being more or less religious, but rather about the creation of autonomous fields and forms of language that relegate religion to the position of a separate field. Their work is inspired by the work of Talal Asad (2003) and others (e.g. Asad et al. 2009, Agrama 2012) who argue that »the secular« is pri-

Figure 6: »God alone is the Lawmaker.« Poster on the wall of a mosque in Alexandria, October 2011.

marily about religion becoming problematised and compartmentalised as a subject of the sovereign state, and religious lives therefore policed and disciplined as part of secular governmentality. Especially in regard to the establishment of autonomous fields (such as literature) and their separation from »religion«, this theory works well for the published volume. But what about the original manuscript? The editors did not censor it in order to keep religion in its right place, but because it related to God, His word and His prophets in a way

15 My field notes do not reveal whether or not I discussed the term »heresy« with him explicitly, but he approved the draft of this chapter that I sent to him in spring 2018.

that is seen as wrong and threatening by a vast societal mainstream in Egypt. Publishing such work might cause legal and other trouble not only for the author but also for the editors.

While B is a declared political secularist, his poetry and many of the views he expressed point at another dimension that also has something to do with secularity but in Egypt is more often addressed in relation to faith – that is, correct faith.

Supporters of Islamist movements often propose a theory of secularism that is explicitly related to faith and the authority God ought to have over the affairs of the faithful. Posters distributed by the Salafi movement in Alexandria in spring 2011 declared »The separation of religion and politics is the shortest path to unbelief« and »God alone is the Lawmaker.« (Figure 6). This was at a time when some secularist supporters of the revolution were (unsuccessfully) challenging the second article of the Egyptian constitution which states that Islamic Shari'a is the main source of positive law.

Three years later, in spring 2014, after the revolution had given way to a military-led counter-revolution supported by secularists and Salafis alike, I had a similar discussion with H, a poet, school teacher and a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his forties, who at that time was enthusiastically protesting against what he saw as a military coup against Egypt's legitimate president. H argued to me that the reason why leftist and liberal revolutionaries would not join the movement against the military coup was a matter of faith. In Egypt, he explained, emancipatory (*taharruri*) ideas have been united with Islamic faith, which gives them an enormous force of determination. As a Muslim he knows that his existence is eternal, proceeding in three stages: *dunya* (this world), *barzakh* (an in-between state after death and before resurrection) and *akhira* (the afterworld). This ground of faith, H argued, gave the protesters the willingness to die as martyrs, which meant that they and seventy persons of their family will go directly to paradise. »If I get caught by a bullet, it is just one hit and I pass to the next world«, H told me; and he went on to argue that the leftists and liberals have a weaker ground of faith, which is why they cling harder to this-worldly life and come up with ideological differences with the Muslim Brotherhood as a pretext for their lack of courage.

H's claim does not account for the many proponents of a separation of religion and politics, among them B, who do have a strong relation of faith with God. It is also unfair towards the courage and strength that followers of other than Islamist movements in Egypt showed during the revolutionary uprising that began in 2011. And yet it is not entirely mistaken, insofar that it points at the need to understand secularism as a reconfiguration of the power relation between humans and God

– a reconfiguration that concerns both this world as well as the invisible realm and the hereafter.

In what was sadly her last book, Saba Mahmood (2016) develops Asad's theory of secularism further to think systematically about both the governmental power of secularism, as well as its groundings in relations of human and divine power, or what she calls »secularity – the shared set of background assumptions, attitudes, and dispositions that imbue secular society and subjectivity«. (Mahmood 2016, 181). In that move, the power relation between humans and God becomes an explicit issue, and much of the vagueness of preceding theorisations about the secular is overcome. In her final chapter, Mahmood takes up the controversy regarding Youssef Ziedan's bestselling novel *Azazeel* (2012). In Mahmood's reading, the novel not only depicts Jesus as human (which would be entirely in line with Muslim narratives), but effectively also God and religion as human creation: We can perhaps at this point begin to

> get a sense of the different meanings of the term *humanity* in Christological debates and in *Azazeel*: in the former, the humanity of Jesus is a medium for God's Word, whereas in the latter, the humanity of Jesus is a symbol of man's capacity to create truth and meaning. *The second view wrests power from God and locates it in man*. This secular-humanist conception of religion offends Bishoy (as it would Muslims of similar sensibility) because it fundamentally reverses the epistemological basis of religion: *it is not God who creates us, but we who create him*. (Mahmood 2016, 204, my emphases)

This is a helpful point, even if somewhat too binary. Mahmood argues that there are two

> incommensurable understandings of religion: one in which humanity itself provides the values and models of human flourishing against which the contributions of religious tradition are to be measured and judged; and another wherein human existence must be molded in accord with the dictates of a transcendent god (Mahmood 2016, 182).

I hope to add that there are not only two but many understandings of the human–God relationship, which may or may not appear partly or fully incommensurable. If we stick to a binary model, we end up equating secularity with H's critical view of secularists as people who lack faith in life after death. After all, the claim that humans create God is substantially an atheist one, although Mahmood for some reason abstains from making that point. I would agree with H that *some* secularism (or secularity, to follow Mahmood) indeed is a cover for having faith in humans instead of

God – but only some. I disagree with his claim that this is generally true of secularists or secularism. It is definitely not true of B's secularism. It is also not true of the secularism of the Egyptian state. Following the lead offered by H and Mahmood, I therefore argue that a focus on human and divine power invites an analysis of various secularities, rather than one.

The question is not simply an either/or of divine or human power. We need to look at different configurations of the relationship. The secularist demand that religion ought to be a private matter implies reconfiguring *triadic relations* where human communities always have God as a third, constituent party, towards *binary relations* where individual humans may entertain a constituent relation with God, but interaction among humans is not always mediated by God as a third party. Sometimes this is a cover for an atheist call for a *disempowerment* of God that cannot be voiced openly in Egypt except in protected societal niches. But more often, people who demand faith to be an intimate rather than societal relationship do entertain a relation of faith with the One God, and do wish to maintain some triadic relations but maybe not others.

In the triadic relations, not only does God have power over how humans interact, but also humans have power over the ways in which each other relate to God. The possibility of enforcing certain ways to relate to God rather than others gives religious traditions their recognisable continuity, much in line with Asad's (1986) understanding of orthodoxy. And yet secular regimes also enforce or at least encourage some triadic relations of power rather than others (for example, they quite systematically favour theologies with apolitical or loyalist tendencies against politically oppositional ones). The preference for strong triadic, weak triadic or binary relations between humans and God is thus not just a formal question; it is about *what* God wants, and what humans want to realise with His aid.

The historical emergence of secularism in many places around the world has been directed not so much against public religion as such (if there is such a thing) and rather against specific moral values and relations of power embodied and authorised by the orthodoxies of respective religious traditions – such as the alliance of the church and the crown in defence of established class hierarchies that were being challenged by socialist movements in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe (e.g. Jokinen 1906). Today, left-wing proponents of privatised faith in the Middle East or Western Europe may object against God being involved in gender relations in favour of men and heteronormative sexuality. But they may entirely agree when communities under God are involved in assisting refugees, homeless and hungry people, and others in need. More right-wing proponents of

privatised faith may object against religious political movements that challenge the nationalist and militarist foundations of the state they identify with, but they will enthusiastically call upon God to support and unite the nation in wars against its enemies. And it is often the case that proponents of privatised faith articulate both left- and right-wing visions in combination. Secularisms share the same schizophrenia that according to B marks human faith in God.

Privatisation of the human–God relationship is a controversial stance in Egypt where not only Islamist movements but also the wider conservative societal mainstream (including many government functionaries who execute secular policies) are committed to God's role as the guarantor of moral and societal bonds between humans. Removing the communal, societally constitutive role of faith in God means from the point of view of conservative Egyptians a moral chaos where children will not know their fathers, trust among humans has no foundation, debauchery and injustice prevail, and the path to Paradise is blocked. This is why publicly identifying as »secularist« (*'almani*) invites the accusation of actually being an atheist and an unbeliever, or at least a morally depraved person. Again, the accusation is unfair but not entirely misplaced: the privatisation of the human–God relationship opens the door to a wide variety of unauthorised ways of relating to God, and among them is the possibility of a godless life.

But not every secular reconfiguration of the power relation between humans and God constitutes such a threat. There are less radical reconfigurations of the triadic relations between God and humans that are widely accepted, even consensual in Egypt. The influential Egyptian social theorist Abdelwahhab El-Messiri (2002) distinguishes between »partial« and »comprehensive« secularism or secularity.[16] Partial secularism only concerns the relation of religion with public life and the state.

Comprehensive secularism involves the separation of all human, moral, and religious values not only from the state but from the nature and from the life of humans in its private and public dimensions alike, whereby sacredness is removed from the world which transforms into a useful material that can be employed by the strongest (El-Messiri 2002, 16).

El-Messiri is evidently not a supporter of comprehensive secularism, but he considers partial secularism inevitable and useful in contemporary society. Partial secularism is a softer reconfigu-

ration of the human–God relationship, whereby God not only maintains individual relations with humans but also holds some triadic power in matters of moral or identitarian importance, and yet may not intervene in many other matters of the common good. Unsurprisingly, El-Messiri's theory resonates well with common sense in Egypt, and his work has been inspirational for the so-called post-Islamist current in Egypt (Kinitz 2016, 160–187).

Importantly, El-Messiri's partial secularism is also largely congruent with the actually existing secular power (in Asad's sense) of the Egyptian state, which has to reckon with divine certainties and cannot manipulate them at will, but possesses power to demarcate and govern them, and can selectively translate God's commands into secular positive law. Such *governmental secularism*, as it may be called, is prevalent and established in Egypt, and rarely challenges the power of God as a constituent of moral and societal bonds. Instead, it is a useful means to turn Him into an ally of state power very much along the lines analysed by Asad (2003), Agrama (2012) and others. Subordinating religion to politics on a governmental level means not confronting head-on key sensibilities of the human–God relationship that the imposition of state power over that relationship may infringe upon. But it also generates conflicts and legitimises state violence. It shapes rather than overcomes existing sectarian conflicts (Mahmood 2016), and it reinforces the supremacy of the security state over the lives and deaths of its citizens.[17]

What may be called *life-worldly secularism*, in contrast, is closer to Mahmood's notion of secularity but in a non-binary way: it entails various

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16 Arabic *'almaniya* can be translated in English as both »secularism« and »secularity«.

17 I am grateful to Mayanthi Fernando for pointing out that this can be understood as a shift of sovereignty from God to humans and/or the nation state. I agree that some secularisms involve such a shift of sovereignty. However, at least in the Egyptian context, state sovereignty does not appear to replace divine sovereignty, and Arabic speakers may not use the same word for the two sovereignties. Older Middle Eastern traditions and vocabularies of statecraft provide a clue: they involve a soft division between the divinely grounded competence of *shari'a* and justice that was exercised by sometimes remarkably independent experts, and the political power (*siyasa*) of the court (*diwan*) that had partly different sources of authority and commanded greater means of violence. The Arabic word of human governmental leadership and sovereignty, *siyada*, is derived from *sayyid*, »master, lord«, which in the historical record of classical Arabic dictionaries is explained as a human attribute endowed by God (see, e.g., *Almaany* online dictionary's entry on *siyada*, especially point 14, citing the classical dictionary *Lisan al-'Arab*: https://www.almaany.com/ar/dict/ar-ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9/). Followers of a twentieth-century radical Islamist theory of divine political sovereignty speak not of *siyada* but of *hakimiya*, derived from the verb *hakama* that can mean both »to judge« and »to rule« and thus unites the historical competencies of *shari'a*-based judgement and *siyasa*-based rule.

reconfigurations of the intimate relations of discipline, sustenance and exploration that come to appear as negotiable to some degree. This may – but does not have to – come along with one formulation or another of a secular concept of humanity. Such life-worldly secularism is heretical and threatening in Egypt except in a few urban milieus, in the sense that it involves unauthorised ways to relate to God that challenge authorised, societally constitutive ways to relate to Him, and empower humans to individually renegotiate their position vis-à-vis God and, by extension, with other humans. This includes not only the few assertive atheists and the somewhat more numerous (but also few) irreligious people in Egypt. B's poetry and the way he relates to God and the religiosity of people around him are a case in point of a pious version of life-worldly secularism.

Where there is a struggle for authorisation and authorised orthodoxy, there is also unauthorised heresy. In other words, heresy is an unauthorised relationship with God. But whether having a privatised relationship with the monotheist God (or even none at all) is heretical or not depends on the context. In most societal contexts in Western Europe, a privatised human–God relationship is hegemonic and orthodox, and triadic relations are uncontested only in certain social fields (such as charity and welfare). In many contexts in the Middle East, a privatised relationship with God can be heretic and experienced as a societal threat. This is also why anthropological analyses about Muslim lives and divine and secular powers that are very fitting and true about one place may not be helpful to understand other places.

About a good life

Living a life with the God of the Qur'an is crucially about living a good life under the guidance and sustenance of an ultimately benevolent Creator. Goodness, righteousness, ultimate justice, mercy and reward are central to monotheist faith. Goodness in this world is linked with even better rewards in the afterlife. And moral goodness is not separate from material goods. Livelihood, well-being, health, wealth and offspring are among God's generous gifts or blessings (*baraka*, see Mittermaier 2014) to humans.

I am unable, and perhaps unwilling, to provide an account of what exactly such a good life entails, because such an account would already be caught in the schizophrenic inability to perceive the multitude of powers, goods and lives in combination. Followers of different faiths and also of different interpretations of the same faith often have different ideas about what counts as good and right. Good in what way? By whose standards? In this life or in the Hereafter? Life in what sense? Is good life potentially abundant like *baraka*, or is our possible share in *rizq* and moral goodness ultimately limited by the ecological foundations of our and other species' existence? What if the major problem humans face in 21st century is not good life but survival?

The difficulty of providing a conclusive account also seems to be a key characteristic of the different senses of good life I have touched upon in this essay: they involve a striving for or at least a recognition of ultimate truth, unity, a final arbiter over right and wrong, one who knows for sure. At the same time, they have space for one way or another, various degrees of intensity, discipline, sustenance, exploration and more – and they involve dimensions that are difficult to combine from a human point of view. The power of God seems therefore to lie crucially in His encompassing capacity; that is, His ability to unite contrary capacities and qualities and thereby to create productive tensions and contradictions that structure and guide human lives by promising clear guidance, certain trust and ultimate hope.

It is possible, even attractive, to claim an encompassing social scientific theory of Islam (as has been done by Asad 1986, Ahmed 2016 and others). However, I lean more towards a recognition of the schizophrenic limits of social scientific knowledge. God invites us to follow lines of guidance, lines of sustenance, lines of experience and exploration, lines of politics and others. What we learn from following some of these lines may not be, and may not have to be, resolvable with what we learn from others.

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