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**A Divine Cosmopolitanism?**  
**Religion, Media and Imagination in a Socially Divided Cairo.**

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**Abstract**

With a focus on young Egyptian women, this paper explores the different ways it becomes possible to reconcile a Muslim identity with a cosmopolitan openness towards the world. Informed primarily by transnational television, these women articulate a *divine cosmopolitan imagination* through which they form multiple allegiances to God, the nation and global culture simultaneously. Thus, a close analysis of their regular consumption of transnational television helps challenge linear and somewhat naturalized preconceptions of how Muslims articulate perceptions of self and others. In the articulation of both their cosmopolitan imagination and religious identities, young Egyptian women have become skilled negotiators, moving within and between mediated and non-mediated discourses. They move physically within a grounded place that sets the moral boundaries for bodily existence, yet shift subjectively between disembedded spaces of mediated representation, often providing new contexts for meaning and inclusivity. The result, for young Egyptian women, is a divine cosmopolitan imagination.

**Keywords**

Egypt   Islam   Television   Cosmopolitanism   Identity   Imagination   Women  
Class

## Introduction

### On Being Cosmopolitan and Religious

I remember once declaring to a group of acquaintances in London that I consider myself to be both very religious yet also cosmopolitan. I was unsure whether their surprised expressions and cynical reactions were caused by my association between being cosmopolitan and *religious* per se, or my admission to being cosmopolitan and my specific identity as a *Muslim*. As a young veiled woman who abstains from alcohol and follows the main teachings of my Islamic faith, perhaps they could not comprehend what exactly I considered to be 'cosmopolitan' about myself. The fact I was socialising with them (all non-Muslims representing three different countries) in a global café chain in London, speaking in English and discussing American foreign policy in the global south, did not detract from the fact that I am, underneath all this, still 'a Muslim'. In true Jihad vs McWorld style (Barber, 2003) Islam appeared to summon up images of parochial and intolerant groups, following the 'word of God' while closing themselves off from any other worldly forms of progress or development. In direct contrast, they equated being cosmopolitan with adopting an open and outward perspective; about being modern (secular?), globalized and hungry for cultural diversity. If such a binary outlook is taken for granted, then surely it presupposes that cosmopolitan and religious perspectives will remain segregated worlds, leaving the possibility of being a *cosmopolitan Muslim* no more than an unachievable oxymoron.

To challenge such a linear and somewhat naturalized preconception of how Muslims articulate perceptions of self and others, this paper demonstrates the complexities characterizing identities in a modern world of trans-temporality and intense mediated connectivity, and the ways in which identities are formed in layers (Georgiou, 2006) and informed by multiple attachments and connections 'of different types and at different levels' (Morley, 2000:232). Detailed ethnographic evidence from Egypt illustrates the ways in which young Muslim women negotiate their identities at the juxtaposition of age, class experiences, dominant discourses of gendered morality, religious values and a mediated articulation of global culture. As such, against a backdrop where mediated and non-mediated discourses represent inseparable spheres of influence in these women's lives, I analyze how an ongoing dialogue between the local and the global, self and others, distance and proximity, the secular and the religious coalesce both virtual routes and grounded roots through which they articulate a *divine cosmopolitan imagination*.

A comparative class-based analysis between the experiences of young working-class and lower-middle-class Egyptian women allows me to explore different ways it becomes possible to reconcile a religious and specifically Muslim identity with a cosmopolitan openness towards the world. I bring to the fore the centrality of transnational media as primary cultural resources through which these young women articulate and assess the world around them, both immediate and faraway. While almost every female participant in this study has never travelled outside of Egypt and, in many cases, does not even own a passport, they rely heavily on the media as their only 'passport' onto the outside world, expanding their imaginative horizons and exposing them to the possibility of alternative realities, lifestyles and modes of expression. I draw on Abu-Lughod's (1995) seminal and much celebrated analysis of female domestic servants' consumption of local televised serials in Egypt, and the ways in which the dramatic narrative became a reassuring private space in which these women could be excessively melodramatic, exploring other, more desirable situations and identities unavailable to them in their everyday lives. While broadening my own analysis to encompass transnational television, I bring to the fore evidence of how televised repertoires of globality function as dynamic multi-way channels of negotiation for my female informants that mutually-reinforce and shape both cosmopolitan *and* religious identities. On the one hand, Egyptian women's highly mediated cosmopolitan orientations are negotiated and filtered in relation to values and moralities that stem from very grounded religious identities. In turn, these religious identities themselves are being constantly weighed and re-assessed in light of a mediated exposure to diverse cultural happenings. For young Egyptian women, therefore, the question has never been whether it is possible for one to be a pious Muslim *and* modern cosmopolitan. For them, the dilemma is how such a delicate balance is best subjectively and physically balanced on the ground, allowing them to conform to the divine values of their religion and the moral boundaries of their society, while also making full use of the potentials offered by a diverse array of cross-cultural connections.

For many, the incompatibility between Islam and cosmopolitanism was compounded in July 2013 after the doomed fate of political Islam in Egypt was sealed when Mohammed Morsi – the country's first ever President to arise from an Islamic party – was ousted by the military after just one year in office following days of mass civilian protest. The sour collapse of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt has paved the way for numerous voices openly questioning whether Islam can ever be accommodating to modern, progressive and cosmopolitan ideals such as democracy and individual liberties (Nawara and Baban, 2014; Rakha, 2013). Crucially, although religion may have failed many

Egyptians in relation to electoral politics and democratic representation, this must not detract from the fact that Islam continues to capture the hearts and minds of ordinary Egyptian citizens, claiming a constant and very natural presence which is highly visible, manifest and inseparable from the fabric of daily life. This was illustrated in the fact that although millions of Egyptians went out onto the streets to demand the early exit of the Brotherhood from the seat of power in the summer of 2013, concurrently, the constitutional declaration that was announced soon thereafter responded to mass pressure to recognize Islam as the state's official religion, and for Islamic Sharia to be clearly pronounced as its main source of jurisprudence.

Mahmood (2005) captures how the discord between private and official articulations of religious discourse shaping Egypt's socio-political landscape is nothing new and dates back to the Islamic Revival of the 1970s. While a popular piety movement that developed in the 70s established religious knowledge as a vital means of organizing daily conduct for ordinary Egyptians, there were strong attempts to marginalize this under secular governance (Mahmood, 2005). In the light of such a complex and often contradictory political and social backdrop that has long plagued Egypt, and while recent post-uprising times involve struggles to (re)define how best to establish a modern nation-state both drawing on cosmopolitan democratic values while accommodating deep-seated religious principles, the timeliness of the discussion driving this paper is indisputable. I draw on nine months of rich ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cairo and completed in the crucial few months immediately prior to the 2011 revolution. With access to such unique data, I hope to transfer the debate about religion's place in Egypt from formal discussion tables and parliamentary houses to the Egyptian people themselves, and especially women, whose opinion continues to be marginalized in the Egyptian public sphere.

### **A Cosmopolitan Imagination and the Media in a Socially Divided Cairo**

The 2011 revolution was a very visible manifestation of the central role modern forms of media technology can play in helping shape the demands and social aspirations of Egypt's young generation. Women in particular emerged as central players within media space fuelling academic interest into the question of gender within the 'Arab Spring' and the ways prominent female activists played a central role in using their broad social media presence to mobilize and push for grassroots action. Enlightening as such research undeniably is, it often creates an artificial chasm between the media's seemingly insignificant and invisible role before 2011 and their substantial political

potentials that Egyptian women 'suddenly' discovered post-2011.<sup>1</sup> However, findings from my research illustrate that beyond the Internet's role within the immediate moment of radical revolutionary change, the more long-term, yet less glamorous, banal ordinariness associated with television consumption as a daily practice, should not disguise its potential as a vehicle often partly establishing the conditions for change or dissatisfaction. Such a thesis is supported by Morley (2006:104) in his argument that the impetus for political transformation often comes from the many 'micro instances of "pre-political" attitude change' articulated through long term media consumption. On that score, I suggest that although media use was much less politicized, radical or even noted in the Egyptian public sphere prior to 2011, it still played a vital role in the everyday lives of women, particularly functioning as vital tools enabling them to assess, understand, negotiate and critique the world around them.

Daily access to transnational television has allowed young women participating in this research to become increasingly globally interconnected and aware of the presence of the distant *other* within media space, allowing even those with the least means to be included within this reality of (virtual) interconnection (Schein, 1999; Silverstone, 2007; Ong, 2009). As 22-year-old Dalia told me:

We live in a society where everything is controlled, particularly if you're a woman. Your family control where you can go and how you should dress, and the state controls how you live and what you can say. But they forget that we are a generation who has grown up with the media and so we see and hear alternatives; we know that there are other places in the world where citizens are respected, regardless of their gender, colour or economic background. What stops us from being like them? Life in Egypt has become unbearable and it's almost like a pressure cooker- we *will* explode at any moment.

Eighteen months after this poignant assertion, Dalia and many young women who participated in this study, flooded Cairo's streets in a momentous revolution supported to a large extent by the media and underpinned by a demand for 'bread, freedom and social justice'. In this light, I use the term *cosmopolitan imagination* with reference to how cosmopolitanism, for these young women, takes the form of a dynamic subjective space driven by a sense of connection and belonging to the outside world. Primarily through the media, such an imagination expands the cultural horizons of young Egyptian women, allowing them to engage in a re-imagination of local particularities and to adopt a more reflexive understanding of limits placed on the self (Elsayed, 2010). As such, a cosmopolitan imagination in Cairo cannot be understood through linear categories of analysis often used in theories of cosmopolitanism that draw entirely on the experiences of Western secular and

liberal contexts. In a situation where their own realities are so dismal, characterized by poverty and state repression, young Egyptians' cosmopolitanism is not about an ethical concern for a distant other (Silverstone, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2008). In a context where the majority of participants I worked with have never travelled outside of Egypt, cosmopolitanism is not about physical mobility, patterns of global travel and first-hand experience of the world (Hannerz, 1996). Furthermore, the centrality of the nation to their daily experiences means cosmopolitanism in Cairo is not about a rootless form of identification with a 'universal' common humanity, attributed mainly to Kant and his Enlightenment ideologies (Kant, 2010; Nussbaum, 1994). Even within Middle Eastern scholarship, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been deeply impoverished and underdeveloped (Hanley, 2008) and has often become attributed solely to elite circles able to sustain exclusively Westernized lifestyles and secular forms of practice such as alcohol consumption (e.g. Zubaida, 2002).

In contrast to such predetermined categories that approach cosmopolitanism as a static or fixed criterion (Hanley, 2008), my understanding of cosmopolitanism arises out of sustained empirical work and ethnographic research. I argue that cosmopolitanism in Egypt is exercised through *internal heterogeneity* (Elsayed, 2010) where these young women embedded within the specificities of daily life in Cairo internalise national, religious and transnational discourses in unique ways that lead to new avenues for self-understanding. Thus, by shifting the emphasis away from what cosmopolitanism *should* be to what cosmopolitanism *actually* means to these women, I approach cosmopolitanism as an actually-existing, practiced and lived identity that although physically rooted in place, becomes a multi-node space where both inward and outward facing cultural connections are dialectically interlinked. I draw particularly on Beck who argues that a cosmopolitanism existing in the real world is not an idealistic vision associated with a 'glittering moral authority' (2004:135), but a *deformed* entity that organically takes shape in different forms in an everyday context. Indeed, in my engagement with young Egyptian women, I illustrate that even within the same national context cosmopolitanism takes on two different forms in relation to socio-economic differences.

Embarking from the above premise, it becomes possible to avoid positioning religious and cosmopolitan perspectives necessarily as dialogical counterpoints. Indeed, I argue how young Egyptian women's cosmopolitan imagination is not a way of abandoning or transcending local and religious ties, but in fact, as I illustrate below, these young women's religious identity is a fundamental springboard from where the negotiation of their cosmopolitan imagination commences, and a moral filter against which their understanding of the world is constantly

measured. This is similar to Diouf's (2000) investigation of the biography of a rural Senegalese Muslim Brotherhood network which engaged creatively with a governing Western colonial order in ways that corresponded to, complemented, and ultimately benefited their Islamic identity. The case of young Egyptian women illuminates how the media have provided creative spaces for the reevaluation and reflexive interpretation of local identities and particular experiences, thus giving them access to alternative routes through which they can be at once *modern Muslims* and *pious cosmopolitans*. For many, these may seem like contradictory pairings, but in a situation where the Koran and television set represent these women's two most important sources of information about the world, a divine cosmopolitan imagination could not be more natural.

### **Television Consumption amongst Women in Cairo**

This research is based on the responses of 32 Egyptian Muslim women between the ages of 18 to 25, equally split between the lower middle and working class. Extensive changes that have befallen Egypt's social, political and economic fabric over the last five decades have rendered the idea of a single homogenous middle-class stratum increasingly redundant (Abdel Mo'ti, 2006; De Koning, 2009; Amin, 2000). What was once a sizeable, relatively coherent urban middle class (Abaza, 2006; Ibrahim, 1982) formed under Nasser's 1960s communist government, soon began to divide after the introduction of liberal economic policies by Sadat in the 1970s. A small wealthy, privately educated upper middle class able to sustain standards of cultural and economic capital associated with free markets and a global modernity came into existence alongside a majority lower-middle class who remained acquainted with more humble lifestyles affiliated with localized forms of belonging such as a public education and/or government sector jobs (Abdel Mo'ti, 2006; De Koning, 2009; Amin, 2000). Though my original research from which this paper is drawn involves comparisons between the upper middle, lower middle and working class, due to space restrictions of this paper, the current discussion focuses on the latter two. Importantly, I draw on Ibrahim's (1982) model and approach class in Cairo as a complex socio-economic category defined through a range of interrelated indicators including income, education, occupation and lifestyle. Conscious of the fact that accurately defining social class categories in a complex society such as Egypt is a mammoth task (Abu-Isma'il and Sarangi, 2013; Beshay, 2014), education became a particularly vital indicator in my study and point of entry into the divergent lives of my two groups of women. Research has shown that *type* (public/private) as well as *level* (intermediate/higher) of education are effective measures of social class differences in Egypt as they underpin the distinct and segregated classed worlds of



young Egyptians (Gamal El Din, 1995; Haeri, 1997). Subsequently, I approached the working class through a further education college which offers intermediate diplomas in computing, and the lower middle class through the Faculty of Education at one of Cairo's public universities.

Respondents were split into four focus groups: two in the lower middle class and two in the working class, allowing me to cross-check the validity of each group session. The dynamic and interactive nature of the group discussions allowed me to become instantly aware of the centrality of the media to the daily lives of my young participants. Indeed, all the women I questioned admitted to having at least one television set in their household, while they all owned mobile phones and usually had indirect access to the internet through their friendship networks and frequent presence in internet cafes. In most cases, it was asserted –across both classes – that at least three hours of their daily time is dedicated to television consumption. As a result of their limited financial means and thus inability to entertain themselves outside the home, and in the case of the working-class –limited cultural capital acquired through basic education – it was clear to see how they depended greatly on television as an important vehicle of information, education and entertainment.

Both groups of women had access to satellite broadcasting in their households, and thus terrestrial television was usually shunned in favour of regional Arabic channels. The MBC package<sup>2</sup>, owned by prominent Saudi business tycoons, was especially well received. MBC2 – a 24-hour movie channel broadcasting contemporary Hollywood movies – and MBC4, dedicated entirely to the latest American serials and light entertainment programmes, were by far the most popular channels. Unsurprisingly, therefore, American movies and serials emerged as the two genres preferred the most across both classes, although Egyptian drama was also significantly popular. It was very interesting to learn how both groups of women stressed that they preferred to watch foreign movies on a regional broadcaster such as MBC rather than directly from a foreign source. This could be driven by the obvious fact that these women had little access to foreign channels in their households. Western (mainly American) channels in Egypt are predominantly available on exclusive satellite packages that carry a monthly subscription fee and, as such, are mainly accessible only to the wealthier upper classes. In contrast, most of my participants stated that they received the Eutelsat and Nilesat free-to-air satellites, which predominantly broadcast regional Arabic channels from across the Middle East at no ongoing monthly cost. Some of the women did mention that, occasionally, if a signal was strong enough, they were able to receive a limited number of European

channels. However, the usual presence of one television set in the home, located in a communal area such as the living room meant that their viewing practices were often monitored by parents and older (male) siblings and thus subject to censorship procedures that usually involved European channels being encrypted. One participant mentioned that her father referred to foreign channels as the 'devil' that annulled ones prayers and thus he felt forced to ban such channels to ensure that more vulnerable members of the household – particularly women and children – are protected from the 'corrupting influences' of uncensored Western material.

Other than the practicalities of access (or lack thereof) to foreign channels and the restrictions of monthly subscriptions, another two reasons drive these women's preference to follow Western programmes on regional Arabic broadcasters: firstly, translation services provided by MBC (either through subtitles or dubbing) mean these women can overcome their limited English-language abilities and enjoy movies in their native Arabic language. Secondly, nearly all women across both groups appreciated the censorship policies observed by MBC, and thus they felt much more comfortable watching these movies with the prior knowledge that any obscene language or overt sexual scenes would be removed. Indeed, being primarily owned by Saudi investors, and thus associated with 'one of the region's most tightly-controlled media environments' (BBC News Middle East, 2013) channels such as the MBC package are subject to strict self-censorship policies that avoid criticising the government or contradicting Saudi Arabia's ultraconservative Islamic Wahabi doctrine.

Another noteworthy point is that foreign genres such as American movies were especially central in conversations related to these women's religious identity. Both groups claimed that Islamic TV channels – which were very abundant and popular at the time – formed an important part of their television consumption practices. Nevertheless, what was interesting, was that their interaction with these religious channels was characterised by more targeted viewing practices e.g. they would view them to follow a particular theological discussion or to listen to a fatwa on a particular issue, such as gender segregation. However, more generally, to be exposed to different cultures, and to explore how to be confident Muslims in touch with the rapid changes of contemporary times, Western drama genres represented more comprehensive and broadly informative windows onto the outside world. Thus, in essence – and as will be discussed further below – these young women are using secular, foreign media formats to partly negotiate what are very religious and locally rooted identities. This is a strong indicator of how these women's divine cosmopolitan imagination is comprised of multiple identity layers that shift continuously and very smoothly between mediated

and non-mediated spheres of influence, allowing them to remain loyal to and observant of the moral boundaries of their faith, yet while reaping the benefits of an open and accessible transnational media network. I will expand upon these points in the remainder of this paper where I embark on a more focused class-specific discussion about the unique ways both groups of women merge religions and cosmopolitan perspectives.

### **Lower Middle Class Women**

In my conversations with lower middle class women, their religious identity was accorded a position of central importance and was a primary factor in defining their sense of self. It was particularly interesting to hear how religion for these women was almost synonymous with, or interchangeable with their sense of national identity; I was often told that patriotic sentiments cannot be divorced from the strength of ones devotion to their religion or connection to God. As 23-year-old Hadeel informed me:

To be a truly patriotic Egyptian, you firstly have to be a good Muslim who is well aware of their religion and its main ethos. Islam teaches people to live together despite their socio-economic or even religious differences, to respect their leader, to protect their nation against an enemy or intruder- and thus to be a loyal and respectful citizen.

Such a strong religious assertion, that spanned the lower middle class, was very often in dialogue with a global articulation of culture. Indeed, many of the lower-middle class women I engaged with, talked about Islam as being a religion that is by default cosmopolitan, its main ethos strongly predisposed towards cross-cultural integration. According to Rowayda, 18, although Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula, it obliges its followers to integrate with others of diverse backgrounds in order for its 'message of peace' to spread across the globe. Verses from the Koran were routinely quoted in proof of this, such as 'We have made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another' or 'Travel through the earth and see how Allah originated creation'. Despite this, the limited financial capabilities facing many of these women means the majority of them see little hope of travelling beyond Egypt. In this context, therefore, their ability to see the world and experience different cultures via television and in the comfort of their own home is vital. As 22 year old Nadine told me:

The world belongs to God; it is all His land and He has ordered us to travel, to integrate, to mingle and to explore. I believe that every Muslim should travel widely if they are able to do so as seeing first-hand the wonders of the world, the rich diversity characterizing different peoples and the beauty of this earth, will strengthen ones faith and love for God- who is ultimately the creator of all these miracles. In our modern times there is no excuse as television means we do not need to exert time, effort or money to go out to the world, but the world comes to us as we sit comfortably in our chairs.

This quote is indicative of a divine cosmopolitan imagination that although remains firmly grounded through an obligation to observe and fulfill very specific religious duties, is simultaneously driven by a reflexive desire to refashion such duties as being part of a worldly and outward looking perspective craving knowledge of and participation with the global other. Ironically, in what they experience as an organic fusion of the divine and the secular, a modern and mainly Western-inspired technological medium such as television – very often shunned by older Islamic scholars as being ‘sinful’ – has become these young women’s primary means of integrating with other cultures; thus fulfilling what they consider to be a deep-rooted religious obligation.

Importantly, television is not simply a means for these women to observe a faraway world, but I quickly learned how the knowledge they glean from these mediated encounters becomes an intimate part of their self-assessment and the way they perceive, assess and make sense of their religion. The majority of these women were very keen to challenge the general misconception – usually amongst Muslims themselves – that the purpose of their religion is reduced to fulfilling specific duties such as praying or fasting. For them, Islam is a more wholesome religion that extends far beyond the mosque or prayer mat. Being a Muslim is about being a productive member of society, having a strong work ethic, and treating those around you with respect. According to my female informants, such a holistic understanding of religion that encourages one to be better human being is where most Muslims fail, and where there is a vast need to learn from the experiences of other more developed cultures. As a result, the Western world – accessed predominantly through television - was considered to be a rich cultural fountain, and represented an important reference and point of comparison against which local and religious particularities were being routinely measured. In particular, the West’s commitment to basic cosmopolitan and humanitarian values such as individuality, democracy and women’s rights is something that they respect deeply and wish for in Egypt. As 23 year old Asmaa told me:

The sad reality today is that it is the “unreligious” Western countries which respect and uphold basic human morals and values, while the Muslim world is a shame to us all. We have a lot we can learn from them (Western countries) and therefore as long as you have the right intention, the media represent important tools that generations before us never had, allowing us to engage directly and learn from the model of these more developed cultures, thus always pushing ourselves to become better Muslims.

This was illustrated in a long discussion I once had with a group of these informants about the unsatisfactory way a raped woman is dealt with in Egypt. When I probed them in order to discover what had provoked such intense and critical opinions about a matter considered to be taboo in Egypt, I discovered, to my surprise, that it was an episode of the American teen drama 90210 broadcast on the regional MBC4 channel (discussed above) and accompanied by written Arabic translation. In the few weeks prior to our discussion, there was a key storyline where a lead female character was allegedly raped by a school teacher, and this created much interest amongst my female informants. Twenty-two year-old Amany was particularly impressed at how the raped victim within the dramatic scenario was treated respectfully and sensitively by those around her, while in Egypt, she believes:

The girl would have been told to stay quiet as not to lose the reputation of herself and her family. The sad thing is, even though we are a Muslim country, our response is very un-Islamic in its disrespect for the victim. However, by having insight into how other cultures deal with such a situation, we might one day learn to adopt their humility and dignity.

In light of the above, although television only provides women such as Amany with a selective representation of Western culture – usually fictional – it still is a powerful tool allowing them to confidently engage in reflexive cross-national comparisons. Differences are often pointed out between their own tangible and everyday experiences of corruption and dishonesty in Egypt, and between scenes in a film or serial, which they perceive to point to the transparency and integrity of Western culture. This point was confirmed by 21 year old Seham who said that regular exposure to such media often makes her feel ‘disappointed and upset’ as it discloses the true extent of the dire reality of life in Egypt and the situation of Muslims. Nevertheless she is willing to endure such temporary feelings in order to reap the ‘long term benefits’ of the media. In her words: ‘Without the media we would be closed up on ourselves with no insight into alternative ways of life or what it could mean to be better people and better Muslims.

If this was the case, would we ever have anything to strive towards'?

What we can observe so far is a situation where these young women are undergoing a dynamic and imaginative engagement with a mediated Western culture as an attempt to negotiate for themselves a position as worldly, humanitarian and culturally sophisticated Muslims. Importantly, articulating their understandings of the world primarily through the lens of religion means that although lower middle class women accept the West as an important fountain of cultural advancement in many aspects, they simultaneously acknowledge it to be a potential source of immorality and religious laxness. What they have learned of Western culture through the media often confirms to them the 'spiritual ignorance' of Westerners, which has resulted in what they consider to be their excessive materialism, objectification of women and sexual promiscuity. According to 18 year old Nesma, the West may be wealthy and scientifically advanced, but they remain 'spiritually poor' and thus a potential danger of transnational media is that Egyptian youth may learn to be 'headonistic' like Westerners, 'becoming slaves to money and consumer objects rather than a higher divine order'. As a result, Nesma concludes that 'one must equip themselves with strong faith to ensure that they are well aware of their moral boundaries and a sense of what external values are acceptable or not to adopt.'

It seems, therefore, that by including the West in a backwardness which involves a disregard for religiosity, these women confidently reverse common perceptions of religious people as being ignorant, stagnant and unprogressive (Elsayed, 2010). Thus, what these female informants display is a hybrid form of cosmopolitanism that blends a fascination with the West with a critical attitude. Although many of these women believe that what they are able to learn about the outside world through the media can help them to be more productive, worldly and sophisticated Muslims, they also consider themselves in a superior position to teach the Western world a vital lesson: the significance of faith and piety. Hence, for these young women, the world does not involve a set of one-way connections from the West to the rest, but is a more complex shared space we all *mutually* make and influence (Gable, 2010). According to Heba, in a world of open and instant communication, Egyptians and Muslims need to avoid always being passive receivers of what other people choose to send, and instead, should 'strive to become active instigators and senders of their own media messages as this is the best way to educate the world about the beauty and mercy of our religion'. The internet especially was considered to be important in this respect as it enables them to create their own messages – through blogs, websites or tweets – that can then be broadcast uncensored onto millions of other users across the globe. Heba discussed how she volunteers

for an English-language website called Islam Online, which aims to promote a modern, youthful and moderate image of Islam. In the context of the above discussion, therefore, while religion acts as a filter as to how these women's cosmopolitan orientations take shape and the contours of its moral boundaries, their religious identity in turn becomes more fluid, adapting and changing in relation to their exposure to the wider world. The end result is a divine cosmopolitanism that is not static, but dynamic and constantly evolving as grounded religious and mediated secular spheres of influence remain in close dialogue and interaction.

### **Working Class Women**

My discussions with working-class women revealed a discourse heavily reflective of a strong religious identification that placed great emphasis on the centrality of Islam to their daily lives. Beyond a verbal assertion of religious devoutness, however, I felt they were not comfortable with me probing too much into the details of Islamic discourse or teachings. Being a Muslim myself, I was able to comfortably talk to both groups about religious matters, and I discovered that unlike the lower middle class, the working class' knowledge of fundamental Islamic teachings was often underdeveloped. Obviously, one's religious knowledge is associated with cultural capital and education. In a context where the majority of these young women have basic literacy and education skills, it should be no surprise that their familiarity with religious texts and their personal knowledge of Islamic discourse is often poor. Thus, it quickly became clear how their relationship to religion is based primarily on teachings and traditions passed down from their parents. In contrast, for the lower middle class, their educational capital has allowed them to comfortably engage with religious texts, so that through their own efforts of increasing religious understanding and perception, they are able to make more informed and reflexive decisions regarding religious practice. Perhaps here it is fitting to use Deeb's (2006) distinction between an 'authenticated Islam' (2006:21) that persons may experience based on piety and personal understanding, and an unreflexive relationship to Islam underpinned by a conformity to religious folklore and heritage passed down through generations. This premise is succinctly captured by Mahmood's (2005) female interlocutors, who formed part of the Egyptian women's mosque movement she was studying in the 1990s. According to these women, a 'popular religiosity' (Mahmood, 2005: 45) which has become rife amongst ordinary Egyptians has reduced Islamic knowledge to a 'system of abstract values' (ibid.) that functions mainly

as a public marker of a socially-desirable 'religio-cultural identity' (ibid.:48) rather than a true and honest realization of 'piety in the entirety of one's life' (ibid.:48).

Importantly, I do not aspire to make any judgments regarding which class is more religious or whose faith is more powerful. This is neither my place, nor does it fall within my research aims. What I am trying to say, however, is that while Islam is undeniably central to the lives of both groups, they have developed very different understandings of how religious discourse informs and shapes different aspects of their everyday lives. For the working-class, I observed a strong need to abide by familial expectations and hegemonic social structures that impose Islamic discourse as a strict set of divine values defining the limits of acceptable conduct and physical appearance. In this context, submission to Islamic principles becomes an overbearing moral framework for ensuring inclusion and social conformity and to uphold what their immediate society dictates is a 'respectable' and 'honourable' reputation for women. This is particularly illustrated in the way the veil takes centre stage within working-class locales as a highly visible and public expression of these women's 'embodied piety' and 'well preserved' honour.

As my rapport with these women increased, they often discussed that although their faith is a vital part of their self-identity and the ways they made sense of the world, they still felt fervently bitter at the way their parents very often imposed aspects of religion upon them in a very didactic way without making any effort to actually teach them the fundamental principles of Islam. In this context, I was often told how they felt the media to play a central role in allowing them to undergo a process of self-exploration regarding what it means to be a young Muslim in the modern world. As 22 year old Kariman told me:

Women like me are led like sheep - you don't really have much control over your life. Every aspect of your existence is under the spotlight if you're a woman in Egypt- what you wear, how you walk, how you talk to men. The more religious you "appear" to be, the better your reputation will be and thus your marriage opportunities. However, our parents make little effort beyond this to actually educate us about our religion or its main ethos. As I struggle to read a religious book, television makes it much easier for me to increase my knowledge and awareness, especially when there are so many available channels.

This quote highlights the significance of television as a cheap and readily accessible medium allowing Egyptians like these young informants, especially those with basic literacy skills, to depend on it for education, information and entertainment. This was confirmed by another participant, Zeinab, who



mentioned how she too sees television as a highly informative tool for education that helps broaden her horizons and knowledge about both worldly and religious matters. Zeinab discusses how she turns to religious channels in order to listen to fatwas or the opinions of prominent Islamic scholars on specific issues of importance to her such as praying or giving charity to the poor. However, simultaneously, a large part of Zeinab's viewing practices are also dedicated to regularly watching American movies and sitcoms. Zeinab focused particularly on the fact that although she wears her 'veil with pride' she also wants to be a 'smart, modern and fashionable Muslim woman,' and thus enjoys Western entertainment, particularly movies, as a means to remain in touch with the latest global fashion developments. In her own words: 'I watch and observe and then only take what suits me and complements my identity as a Muslim. My parents believe I'm too heavily influenced by what I see in the media, but I know my boundaries very well'.

Zeinab's underlying assertion that the different values these women are exposed to in the media often create a tension with the existing ideals of the older generation appeared to be a very common sentiment. Adding to this conversation, Mariam argues how women in Egypt only have to read the newspaper or switch on their television to be exposed to stories of women in the Western world taking up important social and political roles as prime ministers, judges and scientists. 'Meanwhile' she continued 'our parents ban us from even talking to men!' (Elsayed, in press: 6). This demonstrates that, for working-class women, a feeling that their conduct is highly controlled by rigid parental expectations can be strengthened through their exposure to the media and an ability to witness alternative representations of gender roles. For Mariam, there is no contradiction between being a pious and devout woman as her religion dictates, whilst also being a 'modern' career-focused and fashion-conscious woman as is often the norm in the Western societies she observes on screen. The issue, according to Mariam and many of the other women, harks back to parents' narrow and parochial interpretation of religion.

The previous section highlighted how the lower middle class have developed a very reflexive, rational and almost intellectual fusion between religious obligations and a cosmopolitan outlook. As we have seen, the working class experience more of a generational struggle to negotiate for themselves a third space within which they are able to conform to the essential teachings of their religion, yet while also challenging parental expectations through adapting and internalizing cosmopolitan principles they are exposed to in the media. Interestingly, many women in the working class discussed how television – particularly Western programmes - became the source of numerous

clashes between them and their parents. As touched on above, this often resulted in foreign channels being encrypted, television viewing being censored by family members, or even as far as TV being banned in the home in a few cases. This generational chasm was confirmed very aptly in a discussion I once had with these women about pre-marital relationships. According to one of the participants, while she sees her parents as occupying a very sheltered, static, and inward-looking existence, she affiliates herself to a 'new' more culturally-mobile generation who, although remain pious, are exposed to the outside world through the media and thus far more versed in contemporary ways of life. Consequently, young women in Egypt have come to formulate very different needs to their parents, particularly demanding love and romance as pre-conditions to marriage. For an older generation, however, who continue to regard wedlock as the only legitimate and permitted form of contact between a man and a woman, dating becomes an immoral 'Western' concept their daughters internalize through an unregulated exposure to media which are at odds with the essential values of their faith and society.

I have argued elsewhere (Elsayed, in press) how transnational media become important catalysts fuelling a generationally-specific 'subcultural imagination' driving these young people to question and subvert hegemonic ideologies at the local level. In acquainting them with the possibility of alternative realities and ways of being:

the media allow young Egyptians to develop a reflexive awareness of different sets of moralities informing social roles. Thus, in their encounter with a mediated outside world, young Egyptians' sense of morality and self-righteousness of dominant codes of practice in the nation come to be discussed, addressed and, as we will see, physically challenged (Elsayed, in press: 4).

In essence, for the older generation – represented by parents, societal norms and traditional Islamic scholars - a mediated globalisation often becomes an uncontrollable culprit, synonymous with excessive Westernization, and thus primarily to blame for what they consider youths' lack of attachment to their religion. For these young women living in age of intense mediation and global connectivity, the boundaries between the 'religious' and 'unreligious' are much more fluid and interchangeable, and thus television becomes a vital tool for exploring, defining and negotiating their identity as young Muslims in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. From an adult or outsider perspective it may appear that youth are caught between multiple contradicting cultural or religious repertoires (Nilan and Feixa, 2006). For a generation of technologically-competent and media-savvy youth, the media

are naturally embedded within their processes of self-understanding and part of a daily struggle to grasp and make sense of a highly complex, interconnected and rapidly changing world.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored some of the many and complex ways youth identities - in a Global South context - are being articulated within a world of increased cultural interdependence and highly mediated cross-national connections. As documented by the case of Egyptian women, mediation of everyday life that expands the horizons of their cultural repertoires beyond national space, makes distant systems of meaning relevant to their lives, and to their religious and national identities. In a situation where local affiliations and the particularities of geographical space remain central to these young women's identities, I have demonstrated how religious beliefs and national sentiment are not antithetic to cosmopolitanism. Instead, informed primarily by transnational television, these young women articulate a divine cosmopolitan imagination through which they form multiple allegiances to God, the nation and global culture simultaneously. The multi-layered nature of these young women's identities is captured in the way they display an intricate set of preferences towards the diverse media they have access to. As we have seen, such preferences do not fall neatly within a linear cultural proximity framework (Straubhaar, 1991), which assumes an automatic preference for local and national media.

In a more recent reworking of this theory, Straubhaar and La Pastina (2005) maintain that media preferences must be recognized as more complex, taking place at multiple levels that conform to the different religious, cultural and political aspects that shape people's multilayered identities. As discussed in this paper, young Egyptian women's media preferences centre around the content and values represented by particular genres and programmes, rather than being reduced to the cultural origins of the media. We have seen this in the way secular Western media formats such as American movies become central to how these women negotiate their relationship to religion. In this context, in the articulation of both their cosmopolitan imagination and religious identities, young Egyptians have become skilled negotiators, moving within and between mediated and non-mediated discourses. They move physically within a grounded place that sets the moral boundaries for bodily existence, yet shift subjectively between disembedded spaces of mediated representation, often providing new contexts for meaning and inclusivity. In light of this dialectical interplay between proximity and distance, television, in exposing young Egyptians to representations of different

cultural worlds, often provides a sense of detachment from the immediate, although not as a way of transcending the local or the religious, but in providing a new lens and context for imagining and re-imagining proximate social experiences. The result, for young Egyptian women, is a divine cosmopolitan imagination.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi (2011) offer an excellent discussion on how the fashionable question of 'women's' role within the Egyptian revolution almost assumes they were a passive mass prior to 2011 with little influence on political activism. See references for detail

<sup>2</sup> MBC group is the first regional, Arabic-language, private free-to-air satellite broadcasting company, which was launched in London in 1991. MBC Group includes 10 television channels, nine of which are entertainment based, broadcasting contemporary movies, drama serials and light entertainment, with the tenth being a news channel

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