



RELIGIOUS AFTERLIVES OF A REVOLUTION

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Mona has short hair and a contagious smile. In a coffeeshop in downtown Cairo, against the backdrop of live music, she recalls her experiences at Tahrir Square during the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Although eight years have passed since then, Mona, now in her mid-twenties, brings Tahrir Square back to life. Speaking in English, she tells me, “The revolution was a trippy spiritual experience. For eighteen days this was God manifesting in the *mīdān* [square], and you could feel it like there was no escape.” On the fourth or fifth day of the uprising, she recalls, she felt the presence of angels:

I felt like there is this blanket of light, and I was like, man, God is so merciful, like there are atheists and nonbelievers and Christians and Muslims and liars and givers and haters and lovers . . . this *mīdān* at this moment contains everyone who believes in one thing, and they all have hope in something that’s outside of them. . . . This is “holy” or whatever you want to call it. This is not human. I felt it go through [the crowd]. I was like “how [on earth] am I supposed to undo it?”

“Why would you want to undo it?” I ask.

“Because it’s so heavy, so intense! How can you live after that?”

Drawing on interviews and conversations with upper-middle-class Egyptians who participated in the 2011 uprising, this article delves into Mona's question: How can one live after a revolution?¹ What does it mean to return to one's mundane life after having experienced the holiness of Tahrir Square? What happened to the atheists, non-believers, Christians, and Muslims who had gathered at the square? How has the "trippy spiritual experience" of the revolution affected them? What worlds has it brought into existence?



Figure 1. Tahrir Square. Photo by Amira Mittermaier.

Reading the revolution as an ongoing and world-making event, I build on a growing body of literature on the afterlives of revolutions. Whereas anthropology has long had an interest in studying protest and resistance, research on revolutions used to be dominated by political scientists, political sociologists, and historians (Thomassen 2012). This is changing—not least because of the so-called Arab Spring, a series of revolutions that burst into the scene at a time when few people believed in the idea of revolution (Bayat 2017). Several recent publications address the topic of revolutions (e.g., Cherstich 2020; Elyachar and Winegar 2012) and ruptures (Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019). Going beyond the question of whether a particular revolution failed or succeeded, anthropologists inquire into revolutions' aftermaths (Navaro 2020), afterlives (Al-Khalili,

Ansari, Lamrani, and Uzel 2023), and traces (Napolitano 2015). They describe the long-lasting effects of revolutions in places like Oman, Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Serbia (Elyachar 2014; Greenberg 2014; Lamrani 2021; Wilson 2023). They uncover recursions—“partial reinscriptions, modified displacements, and amplified recuperations” (Stoler 2016, 27; Guyer 2017)—occurring in the wake of revolutions.

As terms like *post-Cold War*, *post-socialist*, or *postcolonial* have taught us, *post* never implies a clean break—turning a page, something ending, and something new beginning. Whatever is joined to the *post* by a hyphen shapes and haunts the supposedly new state. To appreciate revolutions in their indeterminacy and longevity, we therefore need to follow them beyond the moment when protesters pack up and return to their seemingly ordinary lives. We need to look at, and listen to, how aspirations, belongings, and subjectivities are transformed in the wake of revolutions, and how former revolutionaries posit or contest continuities with the revolutionary experience. We need to ask, with Mona, what it means to “live after that.”

Much ethnographic work on revolutions’ afterlives shifts the focus from political parties, elections, counterrevolutions, and military coups to embodied subjectivities, sensibilities, socialities, and imaginations. Studying revolutions as inconclusive occurrences helps direct our attention to how revolutionary uprisings “linger and ripple through people’s intimate and collective lives” (Lamrani 2021, 2), how “reverberations of radical political projects extend into the present and the future” (Al-Khalili, Ansari, Lamrani, and Uzel 2023, 4), and how revolutions are “processes of societal transformation that penetrate deeply into the fabric of people’s lives, unfolding and refolding the coordinates of human existence” (Cherstich 2020). Charlotte Al-Khalili (2023, 16) describes the Syrian revolution’s ripple effects at the social, intimate, and cosmological level. “Rather than looking at the epicentre of revolutionary action—protests, occupations and political organizations,” she explores “what is often seen as peripheral and apolitical: everyday life, kinship relations, religious imaginations, and spatio-temporal practices.” Similarly, Alice Wilson (2023) highlights the ways in which an armed uprising in southern Oman, expunged from official historical narratives, lives on in social relations, and how people deliberately keep alive revolutionary values in their everyday lives.

The Egyptian uprising, too, percolates in the post-revolutionary present even while its legacy is contested and its physical traces erased. The uprising gave rise to alternative education initiatives (Mossallam 2017; Dorio, Abdou, and Moheyeldine

2019) and feminist countercultures (Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021), and it inspired city-dwellers to learn about self-sufficiency farming (as some of my interlocutors tell me). Approaching the Egyptian uprising as a “life-altering experience,” Youssef El Chazli (2020) points to the unintended consequences that participation in mass protests had on the private sphere. Individuals, he writes, “experience revolutionary events as personal awakenings.” What previously might have been an unquestioned “adult checklist”—finding a job, getting married, enjoying consumer goods, and having children—after the revolution no longer held the same self-evident importance (El Chazli 2020, 5). Life projects and future horizons were rethought and remade, both individually and in community. The absence of people from the streets does not mean that the revolution is over.



Figure 2. Traces of a revolution. Photo by Amira Mittermaier.

Zooming in on the revolution’s *religious* afterlives, this article examines how former revolutionaries like Mona have remade and rethought their relationship to Islam and to God. Several interlocutors of mine described the Tahrir protests

as not only a political or social event but also as one with spiritual and religious significance. Starting from the idea of God at Tahrir Square, I delve into the religious experimentation that unfolded in the years following the 2011 uprising. I draw on interviews with upper-middle-class Egyptians who were in their late teens or early twenties when the revolution happened.² Most of my interlocutors joined the protests at Tahrir Square; some were held back by their parents but still understand themselves as part of the revolution.³ All were shaken by the aftermath of the uprising, the return to military rule, and specifically the Rabaa massacre in August 2013, when police and military forces killed more than eight hundred Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Since then, my interlocutors have been trying to pick up the pieces and put their lives back together. For many, this process has involved a profound theological questioning and ongoing spiritual bricolage.⁴

Drawing on my interlocutors' stories, I highlight a widespread turn to Sufism and an increasing focus on a personal connection to God. Post-revolutionary Islam is reclaimed from the previous generation, decoupled from politics, and reinvented on yoga mats and in therapy sessions. The practices of self-care popular among urban post-revolutionaries—yoga, meditation, therapy—can easily bring to mind the wellness industry and the trend of dismantling public welfare resources and shifting the responsibility for care onto individual citizens. They could be read as yet another face of the neoliberalization of Islam (Atia 2013; Rudnyzckyj 2010) and as part of a broader global trend of declaring oneself “spiritual-but-not-religious.”⁵ The post-revolutionary turn to Sufism furthermore mirrors the Egyptian regime's embrace of Sufism as the peaceful alternative to Islamism. Without ignoring global forces, local inheritances, and uneasy convergences, I inquire into my interlocutors' own understanding of their spiritual-religious self-fashioning as an embodiment of the legacy of the revolution.

Following the Tahrir experience into the post-revolutionary present requires not jumping too quickly to the role of judge: deciding what is defeat and what resistance, what revolutionary and what conservative, what liberating and what neoliberal. As Jessica Greenberg (2014) argues for the Serbian context, the post-revolutionary era in Egypt is profoundly ambiguous, resulting not in “apolitical” resignation, but in a messy post-illusion politics beyond the binary of cynicism and hope. In Egypt, the revolution lives on not only in memories of Tahrir Square and remnants of utopian imaginings but also in Sufi yoga classes and in an intense grappling with, and ongoing rethinking of, God.

GOD AT TAHRIR SQUARE

Inspired by the street protests in Tunisia that led to the ousting of long-term president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in January 2011. The mass protests in Egypt built on previous social movements (Mossallam 2017), histories of revolt and revolution (El-yachar 2014), and specifically pro-Palestine activism (Abou-El-Fadl 2012), but many participants also emphasized their sense of surprise. The revolution was hoped-for and simultaneously unexpected, as maybe are all revolutions (Bayat 2017). Different groups of people converged at Tahrir Square, joining in from working-class and upper-class neighborhoods alike. The revolutionary masses, Youssef El Chazli (2012, 80, 96) writes, were “largely made up of ‘lay’ people” or “revolutionary apprentices.” The crowd was significantly more diverse than later representations of the “ideal revolutionary” (educated, tech-savvy, peaceful, globally connected) would have us believe (Mellor 2014).

Protests happened all over Egypt, but the most iconic manifestation of the uprising was the sit-in at Tahrir Square. Writing about the eighteen days at the square, anthropologists have referred to a “time out of time” (Sabea 2013), to *communitas* and liminality (Armbrust 2019). What tends to be missing from most accounts of Tahrir Square is religion (apart from the occasional mention of how Christians protected Muslims during prayer, and vice versa, usually read as signs of a newly found unity).⁶ But if we believe Mona, then Tahrir Square was filled not only with up to half a million people during the height of the protests but also with angels and divine presence.

Some scholars described the beginnings of the uprising as “asecular”—as unconcerned with the question of whether the revolution was “religious” or “secular” (Agrama 2011; Hirschkind 2012). Soon, however, religious players did get involved, and theological positions on the (il)legitimacy of protest against the ruler were formulated. The Coptic Orthodox Church took a firm stand against the revolution (Guirguis 2012), and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, the official voice of Sunni Islam, asked demonstrators to go home, declaring support for the demonstration a “sedition (*fitna*) that is forbidden by God and His Messenger” (Al-Anani 2012, 7).⁷ Al-Azhar was not united, however. Its official spokesperson resigned to join the protesters, and a former student from al-Azhar led Friday prayers at Tahrir Square (Zeghlal 2011). The Azhari cleric Shaykh Emad Effat, who came to be known as the “shaykh of the revolution,” died of gunshot wounds during clashes with the police in December 2011. Earlier he had told the main mufti of Egypt that the air at Tahrir Square during the protests was “purer than

the air around the Kaaba” (Hellyer 2021). ‘Amr Khaled, a well-known Muslim televangelist preacher, proclaimed on national Egyptian television that he had seen God at Tahrir Square (Moll 2013), and a Salafi preacher insisted that “God alone is behind this revolution” (Peterson 2015, 64). While some spokespeople for Islam denounced the protests, others allowed for the possibility that God might be the main force behind the uprising, or at least that God was univocally pro-revolution.



Figure 3. The “Shaykh of the Revolution.” Photo by Amira Mittermaier.

Ordinary protesters like Mona, too, grappled with God's presence at Tahrir Square. Mona describes Tahrir as a "trippy spiritual experience." Other interlocutors spoke of an "overwhelming feeling that God [was] supporting the revolutionaries," or they said, "I felt that God was definitely there; God was protecting us," or that God helped them get rid of long-term president Hosni Mubarak since "God is the Enabler of everything." As we strolled through Tahrir Square in the summer of 2011, at a time when the square was once again occupied by protesters, a friend told me that looking at the protesters' faces, to him, was like "looking at God." Others reported having dreamed of the Prophet Muhammad during the eighteen decisive days at Tahrir Square, with the Prophet shaking hands with the protesters, telling them to be patient (Mittermaier 2012).⁸

In Mona's account, the divine manifests as a blanket of light. This is Mona's recrafting of "God"—it is her very own connection to God. For her, experiencing the holy at the square triggered a profound reorientation in religious practice and, ultimately, a turn to Sufism. The Tahrir experience gave rise to a God who doesn't prescribe rules but is more akin to a force—a God quite different from the one Mona had grown up with.

Mona's mother is a political and religious activist, but she always let her daughter make her own decisions. After having veiled for three years in high school, Mona took off the veil after the uprising, having realized that it made her "feel turned off from God." She was tired of the image of "God with a stick" that had been dominant in the private Islamic schools she had attended, one of which asked parents to keep a record of the kids' prayers at home. Others of her generation similarly complained about the quantitative approach their parents and schools had taught them: prayer tables, keeping track of good and bad deeds, the logic of a checklist. In Mona's view, this approach turned religion into a competition and had the effect of severing her connection to Allah. Her mother's God, she finds, comes with too many rules attached. Sipping a cappuccino in that downtown Cairo coffeeshop, Mona says, "to hell with *that* God!"

NOT MY PARENTS' ISLAM

When describing their newly found God, my interlocutors often highlight a contrast to their parents' religiosity. Mona told me how, after rejecting her mother's God, she came to connect with the God of her grandmother, for whom praying isn't about fulfilling a ritual obligation but about "showing up for God."⁹ Turning their back on their parents' religiosity for Mona and others meant rejecting the Islamic Revival, or *sahwa* (awakening), which had reshaped Egypt's

religious landscapes since the 1970s. The Islamic Revival brought with it more visible performances of piety and a new appreciation for techniques of evoking fear (*tarhīb*) through graphic depictions of the tortures of hell (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2004). Rejecting the emphasis on fear, my interlocutors tend to resort to stereotypes when describing their parents' religiosity, sketching a stern, dogmatic form of Islam, or "God with a stick," as Mona puts it. Their own Islam is about an inner state and intimate connection to God.

It is quite possible that my interlocutors' parents would not agree with the ways in which their children portray their religiosity. What interests me here is not the (in)accuracy of these portrayals, but what my post-revolutionary interlocutors construct as "good religion." The emphasis on inner experience, as opposed to outward practice, echoes a modern Protestant-secular understanding of religion (Asad 1993; Sharf 1998). The emphasis on an intimately present God brings to mind a North American evangelical God who is always by your side, who speaks to you, and whom you can ask for advice in the most mundane matters (Luhmann 2012). But, as we will see shortly, the inward turn among revolutionaries can also find expression in embodied practices such as yoga or *hadras*, Sufi recitation gatherings. At the same time, in my interlocutors' eyes, while God is close-by, humans still depend on God in very fundamental ways. Whereas older God-images have come undone, the fundamental hierarchy between God and human has remained intact.

Like Mona, Layla grew up in a strict religious family. She, too, describes a sharp U-turn from her parents' religiosity, and like Mona, she eventually stopped veiling. She recalls how throughout her childhood she felt that "God [was] watching" and that she had to be perfect; there was a constant sense of guilt. Once, she recalls, she was playing in the living room, spilled a soda on the carpet, and went to the kitchen to get a rag. Her mother asked her what she had spilled. Water, she answered. The mother followed her and smelled the spot: "This is not water." Layla insisted that it was. Her mother responded, "Layla, don't lie; you know where liars go, they go to hell." Then, Layla recalls, the mother started beating her "like hell" and said, "any time you'll want to lie again, you'll remember this pain!"

The uprising made it possible for Layla to break with the God-image she had grown up with. The God of Tahrir Square, to her, was fundamentally linked to justice. More broadly, she has come to believe that God does not care about nitty-gritty details. God cares about the big things: whether you hurt yourself, whether you hurt others, whether you stand up for the oppressed. Trying to

consolidate her new theology, Layla started attending lessons at religious institutes that opened in Cairo after 2011.¹⁰ She also dabbled in Sufism but never joined a Sufi order. She started her own daily routine of recitations (*dhikr*), and during a visit to the Sufi shrine in the south of Egypt in which Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhli, a thirteenth-century Moroccan saint, is buried, she had a transformative experience, feeling “high” and talking to al-Shadhli for hours, feeling heard.

It wasn't easy for Layla to leave behind her mother's punishing God and make peace with God. She lost a friend to the Rabaa massacre, and she lost her younger brother when he went to Syria to join the fight against the Assad regime. The father wanted to hold him back, but the mother cited a verse from the Quran that she understood to mean that neither one's parents nor one's children should be dearer to the believer than Allah. “I can't hold him back,” the mother said; “I won't be able to face God on Judgement Day.” Layla's brother left and was killed in 2013. He was twenty years old.

Layla has struggled with severe depression that sometimes makes it difficult for her to get out of bed. After the revolution, therapy prompted a slow healing process that strengthened her connection to God, a process of self-discovery that resulted in “seeing God in a totally different way.” Layla says that through therapy she came to realize that God doesn't care about being known by us but wants us to know ourselves. She came to connect with the Prophet Muhammad's saying *man 'arafa nafsahu fa-qad 'arafa rabbahu* (the one who knows herself knows her Lord). Encouraged by her therapist, she realized that it was okay to be angry at God. Ultimately, however, she realized that she didn't have a problem with God, but with human authority: her parents, a coach who once humiliated her, the military, abusive shaykhs, and religious leaders who “kiss the ass of the government.”¹¹

Layla learned to stand up to her parents and to her coach. While questioning human authority, she actively reclaimed God but simultaneously came to accept that “God is the Lord [*rabb*] and I am His slave [*abd*].” Arriving at this conclusion wasn't easy. Layla tells me that, for a while after the revolution, she treated God “like an equal.” During a Ramadan healing workshop, she realized that the hardest thing for her is accepting that she isn't God but, rather, fundamentally depends on God. The healing workshop was run by an Egyptian-Cuban teacher who, Layla tells me, “used to be atheist until she found spirituality.”

Having come to accept God's power, Layla's favorite *dhikr* now is the phrase *lā hawl wa lā quwa illā billāh*, “there is no power and strength except with Allah.” Layla recalls how, leading up to a difficult confrontation with an ex-boss,

she recited the phrase nonstop for a few days. In submitting to God—and *only* God—Layla has kept alive the power of resistance. It has proved a long journey for her: away from her mother’s threatening God to questioning authority writ large and finally to the insight that God holds power but does not need to be a source of fear. Like Layla, many Egyptians have re-imagined God while grappling with the material effects of the revolution and counterrevolution.

GOD AT RABAA SQUARE

The first presidential elections after the uprising were won by Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate. After one year of Morsi’s presidency, the Egyptian military, riding on popular discontent, overthrew Morsi and re-instated an authoritarian military regime under the leadership of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Muslim Brotherhood supporters gathered at two big squares in Cairo to protest, and on August 14, 2013, the military and police violently cleared both camps, killing more than eight hundred people. This has come to be known as the Rabaa massacre. Like Layla, many of my interlocutors lost friends to the massacre, and even those who were not personally affected view it as one of the darkest moments of post-revolutionary history. Many struggled with the fact that Egypt’s main mufti, Ali Gomaa, supported the massacre. He called the protesters “dogs of hell” (Warren 2017, 458) and instructed the army to “shoot to kill” (Al-Azami 2022, 98).

The Rabaa massacre resulted in trauma (Matthies-Boon 2017), a disengagement from politics (Abdelgawad and Magued 2022), and a reawakening of long-standing questions about theodicy—why God permits evil (Quisay 2022). Where was God during the massacre, many wondered. As Mahmoud, a former revolutionary, put it:

[The Islamists] were very loyal to God, why couldn’t they take over? . . . Rabaa was so unjust. There cannot be someone up there watching all of this People after Rabaa started realizing that there is no God. Former Islamists have now disappeared. They have died, traveled, or are hiding. If there is a God who accepts that, then we need to talk. If there is a God, then he failed miserably.

By way of the conditional clause “if there is a God,” Mahmoud seems to be gesturing toward atheism. Along with agnosticism and non-religiosity (*la-dīniyya*), atheism has been on the rise in Egypt since before the uprising (Elsässer

2021; Franke 2021; Schielke 2012). But Mahmoud's position appears ambiguous: maybe God doesn't exist, or maybe God has failed. Like Mahmoud, many of my interlocutors didn't fully abandon their God-beliefs in the wake of the Rabaa massacre. They have continued asking hard questions about God—and *of* God. Mahmoud's God differs from the authoritative, inscrutable, punishing God that my interlocutors tend to associate with their parents. It is a God we need to hold accountable, with whom we can "have a word."

While Mahmoud contemplates the possibility of a weak or failing God, other interlocutors began wondering about God's cruelty. Ahmed, who joined the Muslim Brotherhood only one year before the Rabaa massacre, tells me how, after losing multiple friends at Rabaa, he started contemplating the possibility of God as a tyrant who enjoys tormenting his subjects. While for Layla, God's power eventually became a source of comfort, for Ahmed, God's power is a source of anger.

In post-revolutionary Egypt, theologies and theodicies are formulated every day in coffeeshops, among friends, in the privacy of homes, and in therapy sessions. New imaginaries emerge: God as light, a weak God, an abusive God. The religious ripple effects of the revolution live on in the counterrevolutionary present by way of this ongoing rethinking. My interlocutors don't abandon God, but neither are they willing to settle for conventional theological answers.

GOD VS. ISLAM

The post-revolutionary era has proved an inward-turned moment, and for many it has brought with it an inward-turned religiosity. In striking contrast to the politics of piety described by Saba Mahmood in the early 2000s, at the height of the Islamic Revival, when outward practices like veiling were thought to bring about an inner state of piety or "awareness-of-God" (*taqwa* in Arabic) (Mahmood 2004), recently unveiled Egyptian women report feeling *closer* to God since taking off the veil (van Nieuwkerk 2021). Instead of outward performances of piety, they emphasize an inner connection to God.

Sometimes not only the Islamic Revival is rejected but also Islam as a whole. Mona told me a "paradigm shift" occurred for her when she realized that one could "separate God from religion." Layla, too, described to me a process of slowly and carefully separating "God" from "Islam." For both, Islam is entangled with human claims to authority, social hierarchies, and patriarchy. God is the opposite: God is *not* human.

One interlocutor told me: “Islam is a tradition and an ideology. God is an energy.” Another realized, following many therapy sessions, that it was “religion—or rather our misinterpretations”—that prevented her from finding peace with herself. Another said: “I don’t have a problem with God. I have a problem with a system that was established and that people are blindly following while forcing it onto each other.” One former revolutionary, now in her thirties, explains that she respects al-Azhar for its historical role but doesn’t rely on al-Azhar’s rulings. When she feels confused, she prefers consulting her own heart (*istafiti qalbī*—literally, seeking fatwas from one’s heart).¹² What we have here is an inward-turned self—but not a secular, buffered self, isolated from a transcendent reality.¹³

A self-identified agnostic explained:

I realized I will never know if God exists or not. But sometimes I find myself making *du‘ā’* [speaking personalized prayers]. At whom? I don’t know. My brain is not certain whom I’m reaching out to. Is it energy? All I know is that the Islamic way of describing God is not correct. The Islamic description of God and the throne and heaven is superstitious.

Seemingly unafraid of the charge of blasphemy, another post-revolutionary said that the Quran was written by a smart military leader named Muhammad. She finds it a brilliant book: “It’s just not divine. I don’t believe that the Prophet was just sitting there, and God talked to him and told him to marry all those women.” Strikingly, she doesn’t believe in Muhammad as a prophet, but she does believe in God and considers herself (to some extent) a Muslim. Her belief in God is grounded in her knowledge of science (what she calls “the miracle of blood circulation,” for instance), and while she thinks that God does not control our lives, she believes in *baraka*, divine blessings. The God of *baraka* is not a Supreme Being who once upon a time sent down rules and warnings by way of a prophet but is more akin to a force intimately bound up with the world.

The process of separating God from Islam is sometimes triggered by exposure to other religious traditions. A young Egyptian man recalls how, during a visit to Germany, he met a woman from China—“a really good person without any connection to religion”—which made him rethink his assumptions about Islam’s superiority. A young Muslim woman from Cairo after the revolution lived in New York City for a while and went to church there every Sunday; she told me she enjoyed widening her horizons: “*Sayyidna ‘Isā* [Jesus] is badass, and *Sittina*

Mariam [Mary] is badass. [Jesus] was a rebel just as *Sayyidnā* [our Lord] Muhammad was a rebel.” Another young woman told me that, during a trip to India, she came to realize that the “33 million gods” in Hinduism are all manifestations of what Muslims call “Allah.”

My interlocutors eclectically draw on different religions, but that doesn’t mean they understand themselves to be fully in charge of their path. Mixed in with their accounts of self-making and bricolage is an element of surprise—and stories of divine interventions, big and small. Khalidah, for instance, got divorced from a husband simply too pious for her. (He prayed and read Quran even during their honeymoon on the Maldives.) She was worried that her divorce might anger God, but the day she got divorced, she heard the Quran on the radio, and what happened to be playing was the Surah *al-Talāq*, the “Surah of Divorce,” which reassured her. Another young woman described how God accepted her prayers for the first time. She had a biology exam, hadn’t studied much, and left a number of questions unanswered. She asked God for help and got an A. She felt that God had listened to her. Later she came to experience God’s seeming inaction as a blessing. When she learned that the man she hoped to marry had gotten engaged to someone else, she looked up to the sky and started blaming God. In hindsight, as she learned more about the man, she realized that, if God had accepted her prayers, she “would have been screwed.”

We see in these examples not a distant God who centuries ago revealed the Quran and set down a list of rules. Rather, this is a God who intervenes in people’s lives, one intimately present. This God has taken centerstage while Islam—interpreted as an ideology and as tied up with social hierarchies—has partially lost its hold. At the same time, for many, the search for an intimate, personal connection to God has brought with it a turn to Sufism.

THE TURN TO SUFISM

Shortly after Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011, Mona was walking by a mosque. A man on the sidewalk was selling *sibhas*, prayer beads, historically associated with Sufi practice. *Sibhas* had not formed part of Mona’s family’s religious repertoire; at best they were used as gifts. But that day, she felt a clear message in her heart: “Buy a *sibha*!” She did and used it to recite religious phrases, following her intuition. Soon thereafter, a friend introduced her to a Sufi order that at the time was welcoming many former revolutionaries. Mona joined and spent three years attending the weekly *hadra* (recitational gathering)

and lessons by a *murshid* (guide) from the order, as well as hanging out with the community throughout the week.

“It was like crack,” she says, “*God God God.*”



Figure 4. Prayer beads. Photo by Amira Mittermaier.

Sufism has a long history in Egypt, with seventy-seven Sufi orders registered, along with 15 million Sufi disciples (Ladjal and Bensaid 2015). Even more Egyptians temporarily enter the folds of Sufi devotion at the saint shrines and through saint day celebrations, or *mawlid*s. Many of my interlocutors never visited the shrines growing up. Their parents found Sufi devotion and saint visitation suspect—too close to *shirk*, polytheism—or they associated Sufi practice with the working classes and peasants. Yet after 2011, Sufism became a middle- and

upper-class trend (Futuh 2021), at the same time as the state endorsed it as the peaceful alternative to Islamism.

After the military coup in 2013, President El-Sisi declared the fight against Islamism the number one priority. That fight has involved the call for a “renewal of religious discourse,” the promotion of a reformed Islam, and an embrace of Sufism. Besides having Africa’s second-largest mosque (and the Middle East’s biggest cathedral) built in the New Administrative Capital, El-Sisi also ordered the renovation of the Cairo-based shrines of *ahl al-bayt*, the Prophet Muhammad’s saintly descendants, who stand at the heart of Egyptian Sufism (Hoffman-Ladd 1992). While saint shrines have been attacked by Islamist groups, El-Sisi emphasizes their “historical and spiritual nature” (Al-Shahawi 2015). Supported by donations from the Indian Bohra community, he has overseen the renovation of the popular mosques of Sayyida Nafisa, Sayyidna Al-Hussain, and Sayyida Zaynab. He claims Sufi sensibilities by way of his investment in the shrines and through frequent references in his speeches to speaking directly to God or receiving messages from God.

The post-revolutionaries did not discover Sufism by way of presidential speeches. They came to Sufism in their own ways, including through yoga or meditation retreats, or through time spent abroad, backpacking or studying, such as in Denmark, where Hind, a student in her early twenties, encountered mindfulness, or in Rishikesh, the Indian “yoga capital of the world,” where at least three of my interlocutors discovered their love for Sufism. Others spoke to me of a sense of void or depression after the defeat of the uprising, a darkness and emptiness from which Sufism rescued them. Put more positively, some noted how living in the counterrevolutionary present, where the best one can do is stay away from politics and keep one’s head down, has opened up the possibility of experimenting with other ways of being in the world. More rarely, drug experiences feature in stories I’ve heard, with acid and ayahuasca offering a first taste of altered states of consciousness. In line with a broader longing for immediacy, interlocutors compared acid trips to *dhikr*, Sufi recitation—a fully immersive experience, the “brain on fire,” the feeling of “dying several times,” of “meeting God.”

None of these elements—yoga, meditation, travel, drugs—have anything to do with Islam as such. Some are clear class markers and signs of privilege, such as the ability to travel. Others form part of a global world of spiritual bricolage, sometimes referred to as New Age. But all of them speak to an openness

toward change and experimentation that is, directly or indirectly, shaped by the revolution. Many post-revolutionaries who joined Sufi orders since 2011 note that just a few years ago they would have never dreamed of joining the Sufi path. Some were previously agnostic if not atheist. Many report having grown up without any real knowledge of Sufism. An artist recalls that, ironically, when he told his mother that he had joined a Sufi order, she was alarmed because she confused Sufism with Salafism. Many of my interlocutors are themselves surprised by their generation's discovery of Islam's mystical traditions. But they have come to accept, and embrace, the fact that life paths are rarely predictable—and that God can act in ways we don't always understand.

SUFI YOGA

If one is no longer exclusively bound to Islam, one is free to experiment with practices that stem from other traditions and places, such as reiki, crystal healing, tarot readings, mindfulness, or yoga (Chams 2018; El Fakhany 2021). Yoga has been around in Egypt since at least the 1990s, when a cultural exchange program between Egypt and India led to the establishment of an Indian cultural center in Cairo that offered language, art, and yoga classes.¹⁴ In 2004, the main mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa, issued a fatwa against yoga because of its association with Hinduism (Amini and Ouassini 2020). Unfazed by this verdict, Egypt's post-revolutionaries embrace yoga widely, sometimes in combination with Sufi rituals.

One leading figure in Egypt's Sufi yoga scene is Ali, also known as Yogi Ali. Ali was introduced to yoga at a YMCA when studying business administration at McGill University in Canada. During his teacher training in India, he picked up a small book on Rumi. For Ali, Rumi doesn't belong to Islam alone; Rumi speaks of a "formless God that is the one true reality." One day, after attending a Sufi recitation gathering in Cairo (Ali had moved back to Egypt in 2011), someone sent him the Quranic Surah *al-Sharh*, which he recognized immediately as speaking of the chakras. It all came together for him, and he eventually joined the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Today he hosts Rumi poetry circles, teaches a yoga class that includes *dhikr*, and runs yoga retreats in Konya, Rumi's birthplace, dubbed "the Kaaba of the heart." Ali changed the name of his classes to "yoga with *dhikr*" after realizing that the earlier name, "Sufi yoga," brought "the God police out of the woodworks."

Skeptical of those who insist on traditions' firm boundaries, he told me:

Ultimately, we seek to connect with Allah, to come back to God, to celebrate His Presence. At least that's my intention. So if I call him Allah or I call him Brahman . . . if I connect through one of the five prayers or through sun salutations or both, what does it matter? Isn't what's important the ultimate connection? People say "no, no, no, our religions set forth a certain way and we must follow this way," but a lot of people had been following this way for decades now, and they seem unsatisfied. I'm not saying that way doesn't work . . . but there are other ways.

Post-revolutionary Sufism is not confined to Cairo's saint shrines or *mawlid*s. It unfolds in upper-class neighborhoods like Maadi, Mohandeseen, Zamalek, and Shaykh Zayed. Nor is post-revolutionary Sufism necessarily guided by the Quran and sunna, or at least not only. The revolutionaries' discovery of Sufism emerged from broad and open-ended experimentation that disregards established boundaries, including the boundary between secular and spiritual self-care. My interlocutors refer to self-help books such as *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle or *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh, and to Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, published in 2009 and translated into Arabic in 2012. The historian [Mark Sedgwick \(2017\)](#) reads the latter as part of a broader global movement of "eclectic Sufism" or "New Age Sufism." A self-identified Turkish writer born in France and living mostly in London, Shafak wrote the novel while teaching at the University of Michigan, during a period in which she was, in her own words, "leftist, agnostic, nihilist, feminist, anarcho-pacifist, [and] environmentalist" ([Sedgwick 2017](#), 67). In writing the novel, she drew on Western scholars of Sufism (such as William Chittick and Annemarie Schimmel), and she infuses the classical Persian story of Shams and Rumi with New Age elements (such as the ability of the two main characters to see auras). Many post-revolutionary Sufis recommended the book to me. What the novel presents is a Rumi already packaged for a cosmopolitan readership—Rumi as a best-selling poet in the United States, presented as a mystic, saint, and Sufi but from whose poetry Islam has been erased ([Ali 2017](#); [El-Zein 2000](#)). In the global "mystical marketplace," Sufism tends to be "white-washed" ([Arjana 2020](#)).

Yet even if first passing through a commodified Rumi, many of my interlocutors eventually turn to classical Sufi writings and join long-standing Sufi communities. Some describe how their search for something spiritual-but-not-religious eventually led them back to a commitment to Islamic ritual practice, such

as the five daily prayers. Layla, as a result of her spiritual journey, eventually went back to veiling, but in a new style. In a context in which people juggle revolutionary impulses and divine sovereignty, bricolage is not simply about free play, individual creativity, or resistance. To my interlocutors, bricolage also emerges from God acting in unexpected ways. In the end, spiritual bricolage in post-revolutionary Egypt does not efface religions—it remakes them.



Figure 5. The Forty Rules of Love, dance performance in Cairo. Photo by Amira Mittermaier.

CONCLUSION

The personal revolution of those who took to the streets in 2011 turned some things upside down (the association we tend to have with the term *revolution*): “to hell with *that* God!” says Mona. But there is also the older meaning of *re-revolution* as in *re-volve* or *re-turn*—an apt description of how Mona rejected her mother’s God only to connect with the God of her grandmother, or of Layla temporarily not veiling only to return to a new style of veiling. This isn’t a linear story, and it isn’t a story of secularization, of an increasingly buffered self. It’s a story of fluid God-human relations.

Egyptian millennials have been putting back together their lives (and their religion) in a post-revolutionary world under dire political conditions. This is a world that Talal Asad (2015, 169) has described as not particularly hospitable to traditions, a world that makes it “difficult for certain kinds of embodiment, certain kinds of ethics, to flourish.” Yet in this very world—globalized, fragmented, authoritarian, neoliberal, and high-speed as it is—God-talk has found

new homes in Cairo coffeeshops, therapy sessions, and yoga classes. Despite an overarching sense of defeat, my interlocutors keep alive the spirit of Tahrir—its magic and holiness—through their religious experimentation and spiritual bricolage. To them, the uprising had a religious-spiritual dimension, and as such it also impacted their religious practice and their very understanding of “religion.” While shaking off the legacy of the Islamic Revival, most of my interlocutors have not resorted to atheism. They reclaim and remake Islam, trying to square liberal ideas of personal freedom with Islamic notions of divine sovereignty. Whether post-revolutionary experimentation will affect the Islamic tradition in any lasting ways remains to be seen. Regardless, the uprising’s religious afterlives deserve our attention—not just for what they say about Islam but also for what they can tell us about the long-term effects of revolutions.

Calling something “revolutionary” doesn’t mean it is divorced from longer histories. The religious bricolage I have described rides on class privilege, and it contains various traces: of reformist trends in Islam, Protestant-secular understandings of religion, a modern emphasis on experience, and globally circulating New Age spiritualities. It mirrors, at least partially, the state’s embrace of Sufism as the peaceful alternative to Islamism. It reproduces stereotypes of an outdated, stern, fear-infused Islam, reinscribing what [Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando \(2015\)](#) call the “impossibility of the ‘Salafi’ Muslim.” One could argue that the post-revolutionaries’ Islam is defeatist and apolitical, if not neoliberal and consumerist—keeping people busy with recrafting themselves instead of attending to politics. It is a religiosity obsessed with the self, an “introspective isolationism” ([Ladjal and Bensaid 2015](#)), with little attention paid to society or even to tradition as a communal project.

One can easily bring a critical and cynical perspective to bear on the religious afterlives of the revolution—one can explain and contextualize. As [Naisargi N. Davé \(2023, 65\)](#) notes, however, the call for context can function “to normalize, to exhaust, and to restore otherwise gestures to existing, familiar, lines of force.” By taking seriously my interlocutors’ accounts of how the Tahrir experience led them onto the Sufi path, and by dwelling on their own sense of surprise, experimentation, and discovery, I seek to honor the revolution’s indeterminacy. In the eyes of some, the uprising’s indeterminacy was its weakness: a lack of planning and vision ([Bayat 2017](#)). Because of its indeterminacy, the revolution can be co-opted by counterrevolutionary forces. It can whittle away—people can become so busy with yoga and therapy that these practices turn into ends in themselves and no longer carry traces of the uprising. But the

revolution's indeterminacy also means that it can live on in unexpected places, and that the revolution can be recuperated and re-emerge. As one interlocutor reminded me, "politics hasn't died, but it has been put on hold."

As I complete this article, Israel's war on Gaza has been raging for more than ten months. Unable to take to the streets because of Egypt's strict anti-protest laws, my interlocutors in Cairo have expressed solidarity with Palestinians within, and through, their seemingly apolitical religious and spiritual practices. Sufi communities hold *hadras* for Gaza; others recite specific litanies reserved for spiritual warfare. Ahmed, who contemplated God's cruelty in the wake of the Rabaa massacre, more recently declared God a coward. Sometimes he thinks—verging on blasphemy—that maybe God died after creating us. Yogi Ali offers sessions aimed at grounding oneself, explicitly recognizing the emotional toll the next-door genocide is taking on his community. Layla supports Gazan families who have made it to Cairo and boycotts Israeli products, at the same time calling on God's mercy for the people of Gaza. In its post-revolutionary forms, Islam offers a frame for political action that is neither Islamist nor easily recognizable from a secular, materialist perspective. For those who saw a blanket of light descend onto Tahrir Square, who saw God reflected in the protesters' faces, or who think that God is fundamentally about justice, the line between prayer and protest is never stable. The revolution can lie dormant and embed itself in quietist practices, but its fervor doesn't thereby go away—it can be reawakened.

ABSTRACT

When do revolutions end? How do revolutions live on in embodied affects, relationships, and horizons of aspiration? This article describes the remaking of religion among upper-middle-class Egyptians who participated in the 2011 uprising. It traces a widespread turn to Sufism, yoga, and meditation, along with the search for a personal connection to God. My interlocutors' spiritual bricolage could easily be read as an effect of political defeat, neoliberal self-care, or part of a global trend of declaring oneself "spiritual-but-not-religious." Yet such contextualizing moves fail to grasp the sense of newness, surprise, and experimentation that pervades my interlocutors' narratives. I suggest that the revolution's indeterminacy is kept alive through the ethos of experimentation. Post-revolutionary spiritual bricolage results in seemingly apolitical practices like Sufi yoga, but from these practices a revolutionary spark can re-emerge. [Egypt; revolution; aftermath; Islam; Sufism; spirituality; experimentation]

ملخص

متى تنتهي الثورات؟ وكيف تعيش الثورة بعد انتهائها وتستمر في المشاعر والأفكار والعلاقات والآفاق والأحلام؟ يصف هذا المقال إعادة تشكيل الدين بين المصريين من الطبقة المتوسطة العليا الذين شاركوا في ثورة 25 يناير. يتتبع المقال التحول نحو الصوفية واليوغا والتأمل، إلى جانب السعي للبحث عن اتصال شخصي بالله. يمكن تفسير هذا التحول نحو الروحانية بسهولة كنتيجة للهزيمة السياسية، أو كجزء من الفردانية النيوليبرالية، أو باعتباره جزءاً من الاتجاه العالمي المعروف بالانتماء إلى «الروحانية ولكن غير الدينية» ومع ذلك فإن التفسير من خلال هذا السياق قد يفشل في استيعاب روح المغامرة والمفاجأة والتجريب التي تبرز في روايات من حاورتهم. يقترح هذا المقال أن روح الثورة التجريبية كانت حية في تلك التجارب، وأن روح التخطيط والتجريب والإبداع ما بعد الثورات تنتج العديد من الممارسات غير المسييسة أو التي تتنافى مع الفعل السياسي، مثل اليوغا الصوفية وغيرها ولكن من بين هذه الممارسات قد تنبثق شرارة ثورية جديدة.

[مصر - الثورة - ما بعد - الإسلام - الصوفية - الروحانية - التجريب]

NOTES

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1. Social class in Egypt is a complex matter and rather unstable, especially in the wake of a recent currency devaluation. Most anthropological literature approaches class in Egypt via a lens of aspirations, rather than a purely economic lens. I use *upper-middle-class* as a somewhat loose marker to indicate a certain amount of privilege, to suggest relative safety from the effects of the ongoing erosion of the middle class, and to reflect the self-understanding of most interlocutors mentioned or quoted in this article.
2. I draw on intermittent fieldwork between 2013 and 2023, as well as on interviews that research assistants and I conducted in Cairo during that period. My larger project on post-revolutionary God-imaginaries in Egypt received approval from the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board.
3. The term *revolution*, or *thawra*, is contested (Moll 2020), and former revolutionaries are continuously rethinking whether the term makes sense (Abdelfattah 2022). I nevertheless call my interlocutors “revolutionaries” to reflect how most of them understand themselves.
4. Bricolage is the skill of using whatever is at hand and putting existing things together to create something new. Claude Lévi-Strauss used the term to describe mythical thinking. Through Michel de Certeau's work, the term came to be associated with improvisational tactics of the subaltern.
5. On the limits of a comparative spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR) lens, see Gür 2020. One difference between North American SBNR movements and my interlocutors in Egypt is that, whereas the former understand God generally as a non-interventionist power (Mercadante 2014), many of the latter continue to believe in a powerful God.

6. The prayers at Tahrir Square broke with tradition by having men and women pray shoulder to shoulder (Aslam 2017). A number of my interlocutors described the prayers at the square as deeply empowering.
7. Whereas the Coptic Orthodox Church opposed the protests, the Coptic Evangelical Church supported them (Guirguis 2012). On the broader religious-political playing field and the many parties that emerged after the uprising, see Al-Anani 2012. On religious afterlives of the revolution, see also Amin 2021a and 2021b.
8. The miraculous also showed up in other spaces of the revolution, such as during the Battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street (Ryzova 2020).
9. Mona's evocation of her grandmother brings to mind Talal Asad's (2020, 4) account of his mother's religiosity: "Her prayers, recitations, and fasting were intended neither for other people to decode nor for enhancing her own experience; they were addressed to her God." It also evokes the common trope of "old women" as bearers of an authentic form of religiosity (Lemons and Manoukian 2022).
10. Young Azharis founded these new institutes after the uprising as a counterspace to the official Azhari establishment. A main figure was Shaykh Anas Sultan, a former student of Emad Effat's. The two main institutes were closed under Abdel Fattah El-Sisi (Bano and Benadi 2019).
11. For a number of my interlocutors, televangelist preachers like 'Amr Khaled and Mustafa Hosni proved a formidable influence before the uprising. After 2011, many came to mistrust these preachers, feeling that they betrayed those standing up for justice.
12. The phrase *istafti qalbak* ("consult your heart") stems from one of al-Nawawi's forty hadiths.
13. On the buffered self, see Taylor 2007 and Krämer 2018. Islamic appropriations of self-help do not necessarily revolve around an isolated self but one connected to other selves and to God (Zarate 2019).
14. On more long-standing connections between yoga and Sufism, see Ernst 2005. Yogi Ali tells me that, under British occupation, a number of Egyptians took up different strands of yoga, including Vedanta and Hatha.

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