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Religious Islamic Satellite Channels: A Screen That Leads You To Heaven

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Introduction

Over the past couple of decades the Arab world has witnessed an unprecedented boom in the number of international television services. The Arab satellite television industry began in the early 1990s in the wake of the first Gulf War. Arab entrepreneurs and governments then became interested in launching regional Arabic-language satellite channels, the former in pursuit of financial gain, the latter in search of regional influence over editorial lines, programmes, and pan-Arab public opinion.¹

This wave of establishing satellite channels in the Arab world began with the launching in 1991 of the Egyptian Space Channel (ESC), which was soon followed by the creation of the Saudi Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), the Kuwaiti Space Channel (KSC), the Jordanian Arab Space Channel (JASC), the Space Network of Dubai, Tunisia TV7, Moroccan Satellite Channel, Oman TV, and United Arab Emirates TV. Hundreds of other national and local television channels were later put on ARABSAT for direct-to-home reception across the Arab world. The Arab region has also witnessed for the first time the birth of private specialised international television services in the 1990s,

¹ Paula Chakravartty & Yuezhi Zhad, *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2008), p. 191.

such as Arab Radio and Television (ART), and the Orbit television package that include mainly entertainment and sports channels.

Obviously, the primary objective for the development of these satellite services is that many an Arab country desired to project a favourable image of its society and government to the rest of the Arab world. Another secondary objective is to broadcast programmes in Arabic to Arab nationals living abroad, for the majority of these channels are transmitting via satellites covering different parts of the world, given that there are estimated over 5 million Arabs living in Europe and more than 2 million in America.

The second half of the first decade of the Arab satellite television industry is also marked by a transformation from single channels to multi-channel networks. Many specialised channels grouped under one name, providing complementary services that range from general family stations to sports and entertainment channels. Amid these flourishing circumstances and a specialisation trend, Islamic religious satellite channels emerged in the last part of the 1990s. The establishment of the first Sunni Islamic religious satellite channel in the Arab world, *Iqraa*^{*}, as part of the Arabic Radio and Television Network (ART), owned by the Arab Media Company (AMC), in 1998 paved the way for a proliferation in the number of similar channels in the Arab world in the following years. Today, while this research was being written, there are estimated 30 specialised religious

* The word “Iqraa” in Arabic means “Read” which constitutes the first verse in the Holy Quran.

Islamic satellite channels transmitting via many satellites covering the entire Arab world and other parts of the world as well.

This research is intended to give an overview of the history of Sunni Islamic religious satellite channels, their missions, and their *raison d'être*. I will also provide a critical analysis of their content, the kind of Islam they promote, programme formats, and the religious scholars they host. Despite the fact that precious few pieces of information about the means of financing these channels are available, I will try to outline the business models adopted by these channels for them to survive in what is becoming a highly competitive, expanding market of religious satellite media bordering on full saturation. And in light of a lack in official and independent statistics about the number of audience of these channels as well as limited resources, the research will not tackle the impact of these channels on audience, which could be the theme of a PhD thesis.

The research divides religious Islamic satellite channels into two main types: Salafi and “moderate” stations. This general classification is based on the type of content and the kind of Islam offered by these channels: the former broadcast puritanical form of Islam, and the latter provides a relatively moderate version of religion. There are a number of religious channels that only broadcasts recitals of the Holy Quran, *Hadith* (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), Islamic lyrics. The focus will be on the type of programmes in Iqraa and Al-Resala channels as representatives of non-Salafi channels on one hand, and on one of the Salafi

stations, *Al-Nas*, which is headquartered in Egypt and believed to be the most popular among Egyptian viewers.³

³ According to fifteen interviews with loyal viewers of religious channels in Egypt in addition to many an analysis published in Arabic by respected Egyptian media experts, *Al-Nas* proved to be the most watched religious channel by Egyptians.

Chapter One

The Emergence of Religious Islamic Satellite Channels

“For many years we have yearned to see a channel that caters for our religious needs and through which we can interactively communicate with our favourite sheikhs,” said an Egyptian heavy-bearded young man who has been a loyal viewer of most of the religious Islamic satellite channels since their inception in late 1990s. For decades, religious preaching in the Egyptian media has been confined to precious few specialised religious newspapers and magazines that were mostly issued by state-affiliated establishments like Al-Azhar, and programmes aired by the state-run Holy Quran Radio Station, or cassette audio- and video-tapes containing religious sermons given by Islamic scholars and lay preachers, in addition to a small number of TV shows aired on official TV channels. However, with the proliferation in the number of satellite channels in the Arab world in the 1990s – which hit more than 300 channels in 2009 and are mostly owned by businessmen – and as “Arab satellite broadcasting offered unparalleled opportunities for media businesses and advertisers”¹ broadcasters began to think about launching specialised religious channels to cater to a growing number of religious people in the Arab world.

The proliferation in the number of satellite channels in the Arab world can not be separated from the fact that 300

¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, Arab Satellite Television Between Regionalization and Globalization, *Global Media Journal*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Fall 2002

million Arab people were ideal targets for corporations wishing to shape consumer loyalties. This regionalist approach adopted by broadcasters cashed in on the fact that the Arab audience is united by language, and, to a large extent, by religion, which makes standardised advertising viable.² In addition, the satellite revolution that took place in the Arab world could also be attributed to the convergence of three factors, with global and regional dimensions: relative political liberalisation, economic privatisation, and the acquisition of new communication technologies. As a result, the satellite industry has changed parameters of television production, control and reception. Private companies pumped huge investments into establishing satellite channels, having lavishly spent on TV shows. Meanwhile, satellite dishes and receivers became more and more affordable for the majority of people.

Amid this satellite revolution emerged a business opportunity for Arab entrepreneurs to cash in on a growing trend of religiosity in the Arab world that gained pace with the rise of the oil wealth in the conservative Arab Gulf countries starting from the 1970s. Millions of citizens from poor Arab countries, especially from Egypt, emigrated to the Gulf countries in pursuit of better job opportunities, where they were susceptible to a puritanical version of Islam – Wahabism.* Many of those who came back to their

² Ibid.

* A strictly orthodox version of Sunni Islam founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd El-Wahhab (1703–92). It advocates a return to the early Islam of the Quran and Sunna, rejecting later innovations; this type of Islam is still the predominant religious force in Saudi Arabia.

countries stuck to the practices of Wahabism and conveyed them to their families and acquaintances.

Amidst these favourable circumstances, a host of religious channels came to existence over the last decade. The most popular three religious Islamic channels were launched by Saudi businessmen: the first religious Islamic channel, Iqraa, was launched by the Saudi billionaire Saleh Kamel in 1998 as part of the ART satellite television network, then Saudi businessman Prince Walid bin Talal launched Al-Resala station in 2006 as part of Rotana satellite network. The launching of Al-Resala could also be attributed to the fact that the Saudi royal family, to which Prince Al-Walid bin Talal belongs, wanted to promote a moderate version of Islam to counterweigh the influence of radical Islamists like that of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his followers. Tareq Al-Suwaidan, producer of the channel, argued that “so many people are spreading hate and fighting, that we feel we should spread peace and love by means of the true message of Islam. We only represent moderate and modern Islam”.³ Al-Suwaidan pointed out that the goals of Al-Resala is to “show that being Muslim also means appreciating beauty; as Muslims we can enjoy ourselves, live in peace and love everyone.”⁴

Afterwards, Saudi businessman Mansour bin Kadsa followed suit in the same year by launching Al-Nas station in 2006, which started as an entertainment channel broadcasting

³ Daniela Conte, “Islamic and yet modern television”, *Dialogues on Civilizations*, 5 Feb. 2008

⁴ Ibid.

Arabic pop songs, interpretation of dreams, and shortly afterwards converted to be a religious channel. The popularity of Al-Nas as a religious channel lured the businessman into converting another entertainment channel that he owns, Al-Khalijia, into a religious station.⁵

Over the past three years, over 27 new religious Islamic satellite channels were set up. This burst in the number of channels appearing within a short period of time led analysts and observers to reflect on what is dubbed “the phenomenon of religious channels”. Analysts and media experts, in fact, attribute the proliferation in the number of religious channels to three factors:

a) Mass media in the Arab world have turned from an industry with a mission in the twentieth century into a big profitable business in the 21st century. With the fall of the Pan-Arabism movement championed by late Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser who used the media (newspapers, radio, and TV) in rallying support for his Pan-Arab dream, and the rise of the influence of oil-rich Gulf countries, businessmen wanted to capitalise on a growing trend of economic liberalisation in the Arab world;

b) Social changes that began to permeate through the Arab middle classes that are turning to be religious, especially after emigrating to conservative Arab Gulf countries and being susceptible to an austere version of Islam; and

⁵ Hossam Tammam, “Religious Satellite Channels and the Making of New Preachers”, <http://islamyoon.islamonline.net> , 24 October 2009

c) Conflict over the interpretation of Islam and who are entitled to speak in its name. There has been an ongoing battle between traditional Islamic bodies like Al-Azhar and other Islamist movements over the interpretation of the doctrines of Islam. Al-Azhar scholars regularly criticise the content broadcasted by religious channels that depend mainly on non-Azhar or lay preachers.

But it must be stressed that the Islamic Revival has affected the Arab world's media industry, in particular its twentieth-century capital, Egypt, in a number of different ways. With the failure of Pan-Arabism championed by Arab leaders in the 1950s and 1960s and the rise in the political, cultural and economic influence of the religiously conservative Gulf states due to the surplus in petrodollars, there has been a growing tendency among the general public in Arab countries, and in Egypt in particular, to show their piety, and the religious channels cater to their religious needs. Therefore, the flourishing of religious satellite channels could also be attributed to the increasing presence of religion in public life in Arab countries and in Egypt in particular. Egyptians, for example, were considered by a recent Gallup Poll to be the most religious people in the world, as 100% of the interviewees said that religion played an important role in their life.⁶

The emergence of the religious satellite channels could also be seen as an attempt by Saudi businessmen to capitalize on

⁶ "A poll conducted by Gallup Shows Egyptians Are the Most Religious People in the World", www.almasry-alyoum.com, 12 Feb. 2009

the unmistakably growing tide of *Salafism*^{*} in the Arab world. With a growing number of Salafists who do not have a media platform – other than sermons given at mosques, which are then included in cassette tapes or books – that provides them with the Salafist dose they always cherished. The religious discourse that was prevalent in the media - represented by Al-Azhar scholars who appear on the official terrestrial and satellite channels, or new, Western-looking preachers or the platforms of the Muslim Brotherhood - did not meet the Salafist audience demand¹.

Another fact that is believed to have contributed to the wide spread of religious channels is the fact that satellite dishes and receivers have become affordable for the vast majority in the Arab world, and particularly in Egypt, the most populated Arab country. There were only perhaps 50 dishes in all of Egypt in 1990 compared to the several million there today, and as many or more dishes throughout the rest of the Arab world. However, the number of those viewers who have access to satellite channels is much bigger than the number of dishes available for households, for in the poor neighbourhoods and villages of Egypt and Lebanon video pirates download satellite signals and retransmit by cable systems to clusters of buildings or even entire

^{*} The term refers to those who want contemporary Arab society to be reordered based on the model set by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions – the *Salaf*. Salafism has come to describe a more puritanical version of Islam that emphasizes the study of the Qur'an and scrupulous imitation of the personal characteristics of the Salaf. It is far more interested in textualism, focused on Islam for its own sake, and much more concerned with external manifestations of religious practice. It also has a much more rigid view of gender relations and the symbolic aspects of religion.

neighbourhoods, at fees that undercut the costs of dishes and satellite receivers, not to mention in many cases, pay-TV charges.⁷ This system includes both pay-TV stations like Orbit and ART network channels as well as free stations like the news channel *Al-Jazeera* and religious channels like Al-Nas, Iqraa and Al-Resala.

This demand on the side of the Salafist audience coincided with a desire by famous Salafist preachers, who gained wide popularity through their sermons held at mosques over a long period of time, to reach out to a base of audience wider than that of followers who attend their sermons at mosques. The Salafist preachers, in fact, have been benefiting from modern media platforms, starting from the cassette tapes that carried their sermons to millions of people in the Arab world, to the use of the Internet as a far-reaching platform. According to expert in Islamic movements Hossam Tammam, “Salafists took great interest in satellite media as one of the most effective platforms that are capable of building a direct relationship with their audience where the image interacts with the language producing a high level of communication”.⁸

For the owners of the channels, those preachers served as a golden tool to attract great numbers of viewers to their religious channels, for they already enjoyed popularity

⁷ Seib, Philip, *New Media and the New Middle East*, Journal of Islamic Studies 2009 20(1):146-151; doi:10.1093/jis/etn084.

⁸ Tammam, The Salafist Satellite Channels in Egypt, *Weghat Nazar* magazine, May 2009 issue.

before appearing on these stations.⁹ But despite the fact that the content of the religious satellite channels is of a Salafist “missionary” nature, Salafist satellite channels were established as a business aimed at making profits by cashing in on a wide base of audience who have already converted to Salafism or beginning to convert to this current. These channels should be viewed less as a platform aimed at advocating Salafism.

Religious Islamic satellite channels and the rise of the phenomenon of new lay preachers who appear on their screens are also widely seen as a product of the free market economy. This is best reflected in the variety of religious treatments that gives many choices to viewers to choose their own reference version of Islam, thus embodying the supply-demand concept, which is intrinsic to the free market economy. This is also reflected in the emergence of an attempt by preachers to protect their intellectual rights, an unprecedented step in Islamic preaching history. Some of the preachers, especially the popular ones, are also bound by exclusive contracts with the channels by virtue of which he/she is not allowed to appear on any other channel.

Nevertheless, there are many analysts who believe that one of the factors that led to the wide spread of religious satellite channels, many of whose headquarters are in Egypt and transmit via the Egyptian state-owned NileSat, is that the regime in Egypt seeks to encourage the Salafist current to become a counterbalance to the country’s biggest Islamist

⁹ Ibid.

opposition movement Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood). “Since the Egyptian government does not allow the more politically-active Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) to base their own satellite stations in the country, some critics believe that this is part of a strategy to cultivate Salafism as a counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Egyptian novelist and cultural commentator Alaa Al-Aswany, ‘the political quietism of the Salafis and their injunctions to always obey the ruler are too good an opportunity for established Arab rulers to pass up,’ adding that Salafism is “a kind of Christmas present for the dictators because now they can rule with both the army and the religion.”¹⁰

The missions of the religious satellite channels are nearly indistinguishable. In their mission statement, almost all the channels mentioned the “spreading of moderate Islam” and “forming contemporary Islamic society who firmly believe in Allah and His Messenger [Prophet Muhammad] and the Holy Quran and the teachings of the Prophet by adopting Islam in all aspects of life”.¹¹ They also share the same goals: displaying the true Sunni image of Islam, stressing the “tolerant” Islamic identity, “spreading religious knowledge” among Muslims and non-Muslims all over the world, defending the Islamic nation, “clarifying the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah (the people who follow the Prophet’s way of life and adhere to his companions) and responding to destructive thoughts” and “discussing the false

¹⁰ Nathan Field and Ahmed Hamam, *Salafi TV in Egypt*, Arab Media & Society, Spring 2009

¹¹ www.iqraa-tv.net

interpretations of the Sunni approach in a positive scientific manner”¹². Some channels, like Mecca station, have taken upon their shoulders taking Islam to a universal audience by broadcasting in foreign languages like Russian or adding English subtitles to its programmes. But channels like Al-Resala say that its mission is to “correct wrong principles” by adopting “moderate Islamic thought”. Some of these channels, like Al-Majd channels group which are specialised in either broadcasting recitals of the Holy Quran or Sayings of the Prophet (*Hadith*), adopt a mission of “creating a permanent link between the audience and the Holy Quran by airing recitals of its verses 24/7.”¹³

Other channels, like Al-Umma, adopt a mission focused on “defending the Prophet by replying to those who fiercely attack him”¹⁴, or “glorifying the Prophet” by broadcasting songs and series of programmes praising him like Sahour channel.

¹² www.taiba.tv

¹³ www.almajd.tv

¹⁴ www.alomma.tv

Chapter Two

Business Model: A Ringtone that will Lead you to Heaven

When it comes to business models, the Islamic satellite channels vary one from another. The first model, represented by Iqraa and Al-Risala, is counting mainly on lavish financing from their Saudi billionaire owners Saleh Kamel and Al-Walid bin Talal. Despite the fact that they air commercials, the officials responsible for these channels state that the profits generated from them do not meet the expenditures.¹ These two channels are believed to have been launched by the owners of these diversified networks either to just complete the package of channels they already have (sports, entertainment, drama, soap operas...etc.) or to counterbalance extremist religious currents, rather than seeking profit. Nevertheless, they accept sponsorships of talk shows and commercials.

The second type of channels, like Sahour, depends on donations from wealthy people, charitable organisations, or political figures.²

The third type of business model adopted by the majority of

¹ Interview with Mohamed Hammam, general director of Iqraa, Egypt, www.islamonline.net, 9 Jan. 2005

² Sahour receives financial support from President Omar Al-Bashir, according to a paper prepared by it's director Abdallah Al-Taher published in a conference in Khartoum, <http://csicw.org/mypdf/ic7.pdf>

channels is based on spending the minimum on the operation of the channel and making the most of commercials and other revenue-generating tools. The majority of preachers appearing on this type of religious satellite channel, like the Cairo-based Al-Nas, have moderate demands as far as payment is concerned, which served as a golden opportunity for the owners of the channels, for they proved to be cost-effective for them. Many of the channels host unpaid lay preachers whose ultimate desire is to have a media platform to get their message across.

The adopters of this type of cost-effective business model cash in on the fact that the nature of conventional Islamic preaching in mosques does not call for extravagant decorations, which, in their opinion, contradicts the emphasis placed by the Islamic religion on modesty and unpretentiousness in appearance. Consequently, the studios of the majority of these channels – except for those of Iqraa and Al-Risala – are poorly equipped and decorated. All these factors, as a matter of fact, have helped make launching and operating a religious satellite channel economically viable.

Generally speaking, religious Islamic satellite channels generate money by adopting five methods:

- a) Revenues generated from the SMS and call-ins services for which viewers are paying extra charges: a given satellite channel concludes an agreement with mobile phone operators and landline telephone companies in

many Arab countries to assign a given phone number via which the audience can send an SMS that includes a *fatwa* (religious edict) request, comment, congratulations, prayers etc. Channels share the profit generated from these SMS and call-in services with the mobile or landline operators. According to professor of sociology at Cairo University Ahmed Al-Majdoub, who conducted a study on the religious satellite channels, “these channels are making profits from phone calls coming from viewers around the world asking about religious edicts in what has been [ironically] dubbed ‘fatwa delivery’.”³ He argues that “the more controversial the fatwa, the more call-ins and SMSs flood the channel, the more the profit.”

- b) Revenues generated from commercials: Some of the channels, like Al-Nas, run commercials that take as long as an hour. Tickers bearing pieces of information about a variety of products are also seen at the bottom of the screens of most of these channels. In fact, this commercials-oriented approach has been the subject of scathing criticism levelled by viewers and analysts as well. They believe that “the majority of Islamic satellite channels are interested in generating profits from mawkish commercials and SMSs” and that they “ earmark more than 12 hours a day for commercials about crystal vessels, luxurious sheets, cups, chinaware, mobile phones...etc.” This profit-oriented approach, in fact, led some to accuse the religious channels of

³ Nelly Youssef, *Religious Islamic Satellite Channels: Mission or Business*, <http://ar.qantara.de>

“commoditising religion and tarnishing its image”.⁴

- c) Sponsorships of programmes: Almost all the religious satellite channels accept sponsorships of shows and programmes. Perhaps the most sponsored TV show was Amr Khaled’s shows that were hosted by Iqraa for many years.
- d) Revenues generated from interactive services like downloading ringtones and logos: Most of the channels put a multi-purpose ticker at the bottom of their screens. These tickers display phone numbers that a viewer can call to download “religious” ringtones. Al-Nas channel, for example, went as far as using the voices of its preachers while saying prayers and transformed them into ringtones that could be downloaded for a certain charge. “A ringtone that will lead you to enter Heaven” was the selling line of the ringtones.
- e) Selling the content produced by channels in audio and video forms (DVD) for the public in order to generate additional income.

⁴ Awad Ibrahim Awad, “*Islamic Satellite Channels, An Assessment*”

Chapter Three

A Critical Analysis of the Content of Religious Islamic Satellite Channels

Apart from the profit-oriented approach adopted by the majority of religious Islamic satellite channels, the content of programmes and shows aired by these channels remain the subject of controversy among media and academic circles. Although the mission statements of the majority of the channels stress that they promote “moderate” Islam, there are obviously two types of content with varying degrees: the relatively moderate and the puritanical Salafist content. There are also a number of channels, like Al-Majd Quran and Al-Majd Hadith, that present recitals of the Holy Quran and Sayings of the Prophet round-the-clock without airing any programmes.

3.1 Diverse Content for Diverse Audience

Religious channels present two types of lay preachers: one that is relatively moderate aimed at providing a dose of religion to the middle, upper middle and upper classes; and another type of hard-line, Salafist preachers who are popular among the uneducated and poorly educated who constitute the majority of the poor in Egypt. Both types of preaching are apolitical and concentrate on changing people’s approach to life by calling upon them to stick to the rules and teachings of the Islamic religion. The relatively “moderate” satellite channels host “modern” preachers who

call for a modern approach to religiosity by concentrating on refining people's moral ethics, rather than putting emphasis on disputes over beliefs.

The first type of content is represented by both Iqraa and Al-Risala channels. On those two channels, the traditional staid, bearded and turbaned sheikh – who always appears on state-run channels – has been largely replaced by young, stylish beardless men and colourfully-veiled women, most of whom were formerly unveiled Egyptian movie stars. The two channels feature a sophisticated line of entertainment programming that ranges from engaging talk shows, cooking shows inspired by the prophet Muhammad's culinary habits, sleek game shows, intricate soap operas, to reality television contests where young entrepreneurs devise plans without a budget to help charitable causes from Darfur to Kosovo.¹ Programmes broadcast by these two channels seek a simpler, more moderate message that rebukes radicalism and makes religion “cool”. This kind of content is relatively different from the customary calls of divine retribution viewers hear from fulminating sheikhs at the mosque, on cassette tapes, and on television. However, the channel also feature heavy-bearded sheikhs wearing traditional galabiya (gown) who present programmes of prayers.

This moderate approach was formulated by managers of these channels who either lived and studied abroad or by “Westernised” non-bearded preachers who wear snappy suits and ties and speak in colloquial Arabic. The first

¹ Nabil Echchaibi, From the pulpit to the studio: Islam's internal battle

category could be represented by the general manager of Al-Resalah, Tareq Al-Suwaydan, a 46-year-old Kuwaiti television celebrity and a motivational speaker who teaches young Muslims how to become effective business leaders. During his 17 years in the United States as a student, Al-Suwaydan was heavily influenced by Western entrepreneurial approach to life promoted by motivational works such as Steven Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and religious literature such as Norman Peale's work on the power of positive thinking and faith. Upon his return to Kuwait, he adapted this literature by making Islam a success formula for spiritual self-fulfillment and material achievement.²

Being at the helm of Al-Resala, Al-Suwaydan pointed out that he wants to make the medium the message. "So many people are spreading hate and fighting, that we feel we should spread peace and love by means of the true message of Islam. We only represent moderate and modern Islam" he was quoted as saying.³ Islam, he says, is not supposed to be dull and irrelevant. Islamic values of self-piety, hard work, filial piety, helping the poor can be embedded more effectively in reality TV shows, soap operas, game shows, cartoons, and even music videos. For him, Al-Resala is a marriage of tradition and modernity.⁴ Since its launch in March 2006, Al-Resalah has been the subject of both praise and criticism. The detractors of the channel see its mixing of religion and secular content as bordering on heresy, while

² Ibid

³ Interview with Daniela Conte, <http://www.resetdoc.org/EN/Suwaitan-Conte.php>

⁴ Echchaibi, From the pulpit to the studio

others believe that by promoting this combination the Muslim world can get rid of forces of religious extremism. Just like its regular use of graphics and studio sets, Al-Resalah's programmes could be described as innovative and modern. This is could also be said of the programmes and shows aired by the channel which deal with some daily life issues like children and women abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, divorce, corruption, and romance.

3.2 Moderatism vs. Traditionalism

Unlike the channels that are considered purely Salafi, some of the programmes of Al-Resala feature moderately veiled women as hostesses and interviewees. And despite the fact that female hostesses are usually assigned to discuss family issues, some of these women issue fatwas, a function strictly reserved for male sheikhs in Salafi channels.

What sets Al-Resala and Iqraa apart from the rest of religious Islamic satellite channels is the fact that the main defining feature of those two channels seems to be this tension between modernity and tradition, an attempt to understand modernisation in Arab and Muslim culture. For example, they broadcast pop songs that either praise God, the Prophet and his companions, or Islam in general. For example, on Al-Resalah's first day of broadcast it featured a song by singer Sami Yusuf, a 26-year-old British singer of Azeri origins who has been a sensation around the Muslim world for many years now. The channel's use of Yusuf's upbeat western-influenced rhythms and captivating Islamic

lyrics showed that it opted for a different, modern concept of Islamic broadcasting. In addition to the praise of the God and the Prophet, Yusuf's songs centre on pleas to revive the united Islamic nation. His sophisticated use of music videos and his moderate Islamic message are seen by some as "a new balance for Muslim youth who feel equally estranged by the moral bankruptcy of pop culture and the excessive austerity of religious extremism."⁵

Iqraa and Al-Resala, as a matter of fact, have a lot in common. They feature former actors and actresses who gave up acting and let their beards loose or began to wear a veil as a sign of becoming religious. They hosted Egyptian actresses like Abeer Sabri, Mona Abdel-Ghani, Sabreen, and Wagdi Ghoneim. They all work as presenters who moderate dialogues between clerics and viewers.

Like Al-Resala, Iqraa for many years hosted the most popular Islamic show – Amr Khaled's series of shows for which the channel has played host for over eight years: Sunnaa Al-Haya (Life Makers), Qasas Al-Anbiaa (Stories of Prophets), Ala Khota Al-Habib (Following in the Footsteps of the Beloved Prophet), Al-Janna fi Biutina (Paradise at Our Homes), Bismak Nahya (By your name we live), Wa Nalqa Al-Ahiba (We Meet Our Beloved Mohamed and His Companions), Khawater Qurania (Quranic Thoughts), and Hatta Yoghairou ma bi Anfusihim (Unless They Change Themselves). A veritable sensation and a media phenomenon both in the Middle East and among the Muslim diaspora in the West, Khaled's sermons

⁵ Ibid.

broadcasted on Iqraa has arguably kept millions of viewers glued to their TV screens. Khaled's television show quite literally seems to "replace the mosque" by lifting the religious sermon out of its traditional environs and placing it in a much more flexible and abstract area, where genders mix (but within decent limits) and the pulpit is a shared space, and a shared microphone.

Perhaps what makes Khaled's shows on Iqraa very popular is his charismatic style that combines the trendiness of Arab pop singers with the unpretentious missionary appeal of Western televangelist Billy Graham, and the self-help wisdom of popular American TV psychologist Dr. Phil. However, Khaled's sermons on Iqraa decline to tackle domestic politics, preferring to emphasize emotion, God's love, and issues of personal piety, such as dating, family relationships, veiling, hygiene, manners, Internet use, and leisure. But it is his style of preaching on TV – in a talk show format featuring audience participation and testimonials from both ordinary and famous people – that sets Khaled apart and makes him such a favourite with privileged youth and women. His faithful viewers say he looks like them, speaks their language and makes their religion relevant to their lives without shouting at them about fire and brimstone in incomprehensible Classical Arabic. All Islamists agree that preaching should be done in classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, but some, such as Amr Khalid, make greater use of the colloquial dialect to reach a wider audience.

Another popular show aired by Iqraa in 2000 was Khaled's

debut (*kalam min al-Alb*) (Words from the Heart). Due to the lavish funding of the channel, its use of graphics and visual effects is remarkable, in sharp contrast with poorly equipped Salafi channels. For example, in Khaled's show a viewer can watch the stylised Arabic words *kalam min al-Alb* drift across the screen as emotive synthesized music sounds, reminiscent of a soundtrack to one of Egypt's soap operas. Khaled's face looms in a corner, tinted in pastel colors, his mouth silently moving in slow motion as the music plays on. Afterwards, his image is followed by the face of Sohair El-Babali, an Egyptian star comedy actress, now wearing a conservative *hijab* consisting of black robes and veil. She nods her head in slow motion with her eyes closed and filled with tears. Next comes a mixture of different faces, most of them young, all of them demonstrating a wide range of emotions in their features as the music ebbs and swells and credits for set design, music, concept, etc., run alongside. One can see a young man smiling, a group of veiled girls with their hands over their faces, an unveiled girl speaking passionately into a handheld microphone.

As Khaled rises and emerges from the studio audience, there is a change in the camera angle and the viewer sees the entire set. The camera quickly pans to smiling faces of the young audience attending the sermon, both men and women, sitting together on bleachers. They are subtly separated by gender in alternating rows, but otherwise give the appearance of a blended group.

Iqraa, and Al-Resala, host lay preachers who speak colloquial languages in sharp contrast to other Salafi

channels that mainly host lay preachers who speak mostly classical Arabic. The age of the preachers is relatively young, and they put a modern look (jeans and polo shirts, or stylish open-collar suits, clean shaven with a carefully-trimmed mustache). By doing so, the two channels are trying to make those lay preachers more accessible to a wide base of young Muslim audience. Apparently, the young preachers believe Islam could benefit a great deal from the ways in which American evangelists have embraced modern media and mass culture to popularise religion.

Perhaps one of the most popular of Khaled's shows was Life Makers, aired by Iqraa. It was a series of devotional speeches with the realisation of social reform projects helping with poverty, unemployment, health, and small businesses. The popularity of the show transcended the Arab world, for when he told his viewers in one of the early episodes to submit practical reform ideas to his website, he reportedly received more than 350,000 ideas from 35 countries including the UK, France, Italy, and the US. Nevertheless, there are detractors of this kind of preaching, arguing that by adopting this approach to religion preachers like Khaled are “reducing a serious religious message to a sound bite.” Salafi lay preachers refer to his preaching style as “superficial, air-conditioned, and self serving.” On the other side, Khaled insists young Muslims need concrete reformers who would guide them, not simply tradition relayers who would flood them with Quranic recitations.

Perhaps because of Khaled's approach to preaching, which was aired on Iqraa, when the Salafi channel Al-Nas hosted

one of his shows in 2007, other Salafi Sheikhs who used to appear on its screen, like Mohamed Hussein Yakoub and Abu Ishaq Al-Howeini, objected to this move and threatened to boycott the channel. According to news reports, this led the officials of the channel to stop airing Khaled's shows, in compliance with the Salafi sheikhs request. Salafi preachers who have great influence on the content aired by channels like Al-Nas, Al-Baraka, Al-Rahma...etc. are clearly against the "modern" approach to religion adopted by preachers like Khaled, simply because Salafism places strong emphasis on literally mimicking the pious ancestors. While categorically rejecting the Western style of dressing, Salafis view mannerisms of the Prophet, wearing a long beard for example, as a constant reminder of their commitment that will help avoid sin. These choices are reflected visually on Salafi stations where preachers wear long beards and the same type of clothing that the first generation of Islam would have worn, whereas preachers who define themselves as non-Salafi wear less conspicuous robes or a suit and tie.

3.3 Women on Salafist screen

Salafism has also a much more rigid view of gender relations and the symbolic aspects of religion and is more Wahhabi and Saudi in its orientation. Indeed, many of the Egyptian self-defined Salafi preachers received their religious training in Saudi Arabia instead of Cairo's Al-Azhar and millions of Egyptians became more conservative while working in the

Gulf.⁶ For Salafis, who interpret the Qur'an more literally, there is less gray area: the world is divided into infidels and believers and the West clearly lies in the former category. Therefore, at least theoretically, dialogue with the "other" is highly unlikely. Therefore, some Salafis accuse certain non-Salafi preachers of compromising on principles in order to gain fame or influence. In a recent speech, a popular Salafi cleric mocked the "artist" Amr Khalid.⁷

The near total exclusion of women from the airwaves of the Salafi stations reflects Salafism's more rigid views on gender relations – a clear distinction from non-Salafi channels. For example, on Al-Resalah, several female Egyptian preachers and presenters, who wear only the *hijab* (a scarf), are listed as stars of Al-Resalah. On the other side, Salafi channels, like Al-Nas, got rid of their female presenters under pressure from Salafi figures like Mohamed Hassaan and Mohamed Hussein Yaquob for they believe they ought not to appear on TV.⁸ While most of the Salafi channels refuse the appearance of any female presenter on its channel as they believe it contradicts the teachings of Islam, one of these channels, Al-Hafez, which is affiliated with Al-Nas channel and started broadcasting in 2008, broke the rule by hosting fully-veiled female presenters wearing a black *niqab* (a long black loose garment covering the whole body and only shows the eyes of a woman) who present a programme about reciting the Holy Quran for women. However, the

⁶ James Toth, "Islamism in Southern Egypt", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2003.

⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkakThjUZKo

⁸ El-Sayed Zayed, The Female Presenter Who Wears Niqab: Women's Image in Salafi Channels, Islamonline.net

female presenters never mix with men in the studios of the channel. According to one of the presenters in the channel, Omayma Taha, the director of her one-hour show sets the spotlights and the cameras on her and then leaves the studio “so as not to be with a woman in the same room which is impermissible in Islam.”⁹ Taha believes that her work as a presenter in the channel is a kind of jihad for the cause of Islam.

However, the appearance of female presenters ruffled the feathers of Salafi sheikhs who work for Al-Nas channels group for they stipulated that no female should appear on the screen and no music should be aired by the channel. One of the staunchest critics of the appearance of female presenters is Abu Ishaq Al-Howeini, a Salafi sheikh who was taught by Salafi icons like the Saudi Abdel-Aziz bin Baz and Ibn Othaimin and the Jordanian Mohamed Nasreddine Al-Albani. He stipulated that no woman should appear on the screen of any of the channels affiliated with Al-Nas. He believes that a woman, even if she is fully veiled, could be seductive. But manager of the channels group, Atef Abdel-Rashid, defended the management’s decision to host female presenters, arguing that as long as they are adequately equipped with religious knowledge they are entitled to appear on TV. These female presenters host recital programmes aimed at teaching women how to recite the Holy Quran. Abdel-Rasheed does not find any problem in the appearance of a fully veiled woman on the screen, arguing that the priority is given to the content of the

⁹ Ibid.

programme rather than the appearance.

Media experts, in fact, disagree with the notion of having fully veiled presenters on the screen, arguing that it contradicts media ethics that are based on transparency. Mahmoud Khalil, professor of media at Cairo University, believes that a presenter should reveal their identity to the audience. “It’s meaningless to watch ‘a female dressed like a tent’ on the screen,” he said. He even believes that the appearance of a fully-veiled presenter is meant to trigger a controversy to attract more viewers. Observers believe that the number of female presenters will increase as long as call-ins increase, for the market decides the survival of programmes.¹⁰

3.4 Different approaches to religion

Another feature of Salafi networks is an unwillingness to give platforms to non-Salafi viewpoints: while other religious stations may give airtime to Salafi preachers they disagree with, when given the chance, Salafis do not return the favor. For example, Sheikhs Heweny, Hassaan and Yacoub quit al-Nass in 2006 after management refused to ban Amr Khalid from the air; the more dogmatic al-Rahma, owned by clerics, exclusively features Salafi preachers. In contrast, Salafi preachers do appear on Al-Reselah and Iqraa.

As far as content is concerned, Salafi channels place great emphasis on basic beliefs (*Aqida*), rather than Sharia

¹⁰ Ibid.

(Islamic Law), which would inevitably lead them to question certain government policies. In fact, many observers believe this is the reason why the Egyptian government allows Salafi channels to operate and transmit via the state-owned NileSat. Salafi Sheikhs' sermons aired by these channels are apolitical, for they never tackle political or economic issues. That's why, perhaps, the government would not allow a channel affiliated with the banned Muslim Brotherhood group to operate from Egypt, since the Egyptian government is not ready to give a media platform to clerics who would then use it to question its policies. Tammam argues that "given the fact that most of the Salafist religious satellite channels are broadcasting via the Egyptian state-owned NileSat, there is a set of legal and political measures that govern Salafist stations...therefore, the Salafist presence in Satellite channels is limited to giving sermons that are far removed from the message conveyed by other Salafist and Jihadist currents that have interests in political and public affairs." Therefore, these channels are hosting preachers whose discourse is apolitical like: Mohamed Hassaan, Mohamed Hussein Yaquoub, Abu Ishaq Al-Howeini, Mahmoud Al-Masry, Salem Abul-Fotouh, and others.¹¹

Nevertheless, the programmes of religious satellite channels in general are not completely devoid of any political content. The Palestinian-Israeli issue is tackled by many a preacher, since they call for offering a helping hand to "our brethren Palestinians", praying for them, and invoking God against

¹¹ Hossam Tammam, *Salafi Satellite Channels: Will Salafism Counteract the Secularisation of Religion on Satellite Channels?*, www.islamonline.net, 18 May 2009

the “Jews and Zionists”. But this kind of solidarity does not extend to directly blaming the plight of the Palestinians on the Arab rulers or calling the masses to make it to the streets to demonstrate against their governments. During the Israeli assault against Gaza in late 2008, some preachers prayed for the fate of the Palestinians, whereas preacher Mohamed Hassaan harshly criticised Arab society and leadership, though not by name, for their failure in assisting the Palestinians or stopping the war. However, this political attitude towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not necessarily something unique about religious satellite channels, because almost all Egyptian stations, regardless of their religious orientation, show solidarity with the Palestinians, for it is not regarded as a red line by the authorities.

Nevertheless, critics of the religious channels argue that these channels – which stress in their launching statement that they were meant to boost moderateness and fight extremism – have failed in fulfilling this promise. Montasser El-Zayyat, prominent Egyptian lawyer and expert in Islamist groups, is of the opinion that “they failed in addressing violence and the terrorism phenomenon, let alone failing in criticising Arab governments’ policies aimed at remaining [in power]...”¹². He added that religious channels do not have a work plan aimed at fighting violence and terrorism in “a methodological and academic manner instead of crying people’s eyes out by sermons about behaviour and

¹² Montasser El-Zayyat, *Religious Islamic Satellite Channels and Their Role In Fighting Terrorism*

morals...New preachers who appear on religious satellite channels were focused on attracting the audience by programs about morals and behaviour, without dealing with the problems of the nation under the pretext of keeping away from politics, for they receive a list of taboos from official media and security establishments...”¹³ These channels, according to El-Zayyat, failed in supporting the culture of religious moderation or stopping violence committed in the name of Islam, for they did not provide a platform to former extremist Islamic groups, like Jihad and Jamaa Islamiya (Islamic Group), who revised their views on Jihad and called for the cessation thereof, in order to set a good example for the viewers.

A glance at the content of religious satellite channels, especially the Salafi-oriented ones, reveals to what extent these stations adopt a puritanical approach to religion. For instance, one of the religious edicts broadcast by one of the channels made impermissible the standing of a naked woman in front of a male dog. In another example, a guest hosted by Mecca station on 28 May 2009 said that Swine flu started in Mexico because “it produces pornography like the United States and because it raises millions of pigs which God forbids the eating of its meat.” He said: “eating pork in general causes cancer, high blood pressure, increase in cholesterol, and causes hundreds of other diseases.”

A great deal of the fatwas issued by lay preachers on these channels promotes rejection of the other, and Western

¹³ Ibid.

civilisation in particular. For example, a sermon given by a lay preacher aired by Al-Hidaya channel on 12 June 2009 was centred on the West. “What we see in the West is not civilisation; it is only technology. The West lacks morals, so they don’t have [real] civilisation. How come they have a civilisation while they allow gay marriages,” the preacher said.

This “chaos” in issuing religious edicts prompted reaction from Al-Azhar scholars who called for “an immediate cessation of this farce by establishing an apparatus within the Religious Edicts House to monitor fatwas broadcast on religious satellite channels.”¹⁴ Qutb believes that these channels “are unprofessional and are lacking proper planning.”¹⁵

While such controversial edicts are more likely to be adopted by illiterate people in a country like Egypt (around one-third of the country’s population is illiterate), the relationship between viewers and religious satellite channels are mainly one-way, especially in Salafi-oriented stations. The majority of the programmes aired are mainly presented by one preacher or a dialogue between a presenter and a preacher. Viewers are given the opportunity to interact by calling in or sending SMS posing questions about a host of religious issues, ranging from how to perform rituals, or how to behave in daily life situations. However, in Salafi channels the interaction between the audience and the preachers is

¹⁴ Gamal Qutb quoted in an article entitled “Religious Islamic Satellite Channels: Mission or Business”, 7 November 2007, <http://ar.qantara.de>

¹⁵ Ibid.

limited to posing questions on the part of the former and giving answers on the part of the latter. This one-way interaction has turned the audience into receivers, depriving them of taking part in a wider discussion about the issue tackled or the question posed.

In fact, there is a remarkable difference between a show in a Salafi channel and in a non-Salafi one like Iqraa and Al-Resala. Each presents a different type of relationship with the audience which reflects a different image of the type of Islam the preacher is advocating. Khaled's highly produced "modern" programme, with its abstract studio, inter-gender audience and overt emphasis on individual relationships and personal emotions, contrasts greatly with, for example, Mohamed Hussein Yakoub's paternalistic, homespun show, which depends on either preaching fire and brimstone sermons or answering the questions of the viewers without giving them the opportunity to communicate their opinions. On the other side, the audience attending Khaled's show at the studio who are mainly young people, pass the microphone around, and Khaled constantly encourages, challenges and engages with them, calling on them to speak. He always reacts individually to each person and sometimes he repeats their words and adds his own thoughts, or uses one of their comments as a jumping-off point to relate a Quranic story or share a relevant saying of the Prophet (Hadith).

Nevertheless, religious Islamic satellite channels have paved the way to the individualisation of religion, having cut the relationship between the traditional religious establishments

and the general public by building a new relationship between new lay preachers and the audience. In fact, these channels have arguably changed the way people consume religion. “Religious satellite channels have given people many choices by giving them the ability to handpick from a variety of religious programmes and sheikhs... a demand-supply relationship has arisen between preachers who appear on satellite channels and the viewers, as the former provides a religious product that meets the demands of audience.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Hossam Tammam, Religious Satellite Channels and New Preachers and the Secularisation of Religion, Islamonline.net

Chapter Four

Market Conditions and Competition: the Boom's not over

The advent of transnational satellite television broadcasting in the Arab world in the 1990s has been accompanied by an explosion in private, commercial television productions that paved the way for the emergence of religious Islamic satellite channels. However, with the proliferation in the number of religious Islamic satellite channels, which hit 30 this year, the market becomes even more competitive. Although no channel revealed its operating costs, revenues or net profits, it seems that the market still has opportunity for new stations. Given the low cost of launching such a channel, new stations are scheduled to be launched this year – like the one that will be launched by Egyptian preacher Khaled El-Guindi.¹

I do believe that the number of religious stations will continue flourishing due to the ever increasing presence of religion in public life in Arab countries in general, and in Egypt in particular. Egyptians, as mentioned before, are considered to be the most religious society in the world. Therefore, there has been and will be an increasing demand on religion in mass media.

Another key factor that is likely to influence the shape of competition among religious satellite stations is the attempts

¹ Interview with Preacher Khaled El-Guindi in the Egyptian daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm*

by official religious establishments in many an Arab country to restore its pioneering role in Islamic preaching, a role it held for centuries without competition. Al-Azhar, a seat of Sunni Islam, announced few months ago that it would launch a channel carrying its own brand. The religious committee at the People's Assembly, the Egyptian lower house of parliament, gave its seal of approval of the new channel. Omar Hashem, the head of the committee and former chairman of the Al-Azhar University, was quoted as saying that the TV channel will be managed by its board of Trustees comprised of benevolent people and experts of propagational media.² According to Hashem, non-biased religious scholars and experts will monitor programs of Al-Azhar channel, which is aimed at "fighting extremism and the issuance of irresponsible Fatwas". He pointed out that the programmes of the channel would reflect "difficulties and plight of Palestinians and Muslim minorities around the world, encouraging innovative religious dialogue based on rationality and justice".³

Another country, Qatar, is set to start working on a new Islamic satellite channel with the aim to offset the growth of other religious channels.⁴ The initiative was promoted by the Organisation of the Islamic Countries and Qatar was ready to start working on the project. "The Organisation of the Islamic Countries has approved an initiative for the creation of an Islamic satellite channel and Qatar has a fully-fledged

² An interview with Hashem in the Egyptian daily official Al-Ahram

³ Ibid.

⁴ Qatar working on new Islamic satellite television channel, Gulfnews.com, 19 September 2007

plan for its implementation. Hopefully, the project will help curb the growth of Islamic satellite television,” according to Doha-based media expert Marzouq Bashir.⁵

In Yemen, the government is reportedly planning to launch a religious satellite channel, Al-Iman. Its Minister of Information, Hassan Al-Lawzi, announced his ministry’s intention to launch a religious satellite channel, but did not reveal when the channel would start broadcasting. Al-Lawzi said the decision to launch his Al-Iman Channel was “a real vision of the media’s role and duties towards Islam and its issues.”⁶

One of the important goals of Al-Iman is to “educate and make people aware of Islam as a faith, along with its morals and rules.”⁷ He also noted the significance of the media’s role in presenting Islam, pointing out its significance for all peoples and confronting the distorted picture of Islam “reflected by its enemies.”⁸ Al-Lawzi said that the channel would be neither fanatical nor extremist, and in accordance with Sharia law. The channel will present Islam’s legacy and its strong points to viewers. However, he did not reveal from where the channel plans to broadcast.

Algeria also is planning to launch a religious channel to counter unauthorised fatwas broadcasted by satellite

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Almgidad Dahesh Mojalli, “Minister of Information will launch a religious TV channel”, Yemen Times, 31 May 2008

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

channels and on the Internet. The success of Al-Quran Al-Karim (the Holy Quran) radio station encouraged the authorities to launch a TV channel under the same name and with the same purpose: unifying Algerians under one religious banner, a source at the Ministry of Religious Affairs said.⁹ The aim of launching the channel is countering unauthentic fatwas and particularly violent ones that played an important role in destabilising the country during the security crisis that bordered on civil war in the 1990s. “The new channel will aim at projecting a moderate image of Muslim Algeria,” according to Azeddine Mihoubi, Director General of Algerian National Radio (ENRS).¹⁰ The launching of the Algerian channel is meant to provide the Algerians with religious edicts that appeal to them. “Some fatwas coming from satellite channels could be suitable for other countries, but not Algeria,” he said.¹¹ The channel will feature interactive fatwa programs and viewers’ questions will be received via phone calls and text messages. Providing a “moderate” version of Islam remains the motto of all the new channels: “Questions will be answered by Algerian preachers known for their moderate stances. However, new preachers with moderate religious views could also be introduced,” Mihoubi stressed.¹²

⁹ Ramadan Belamry, “Algeria to launch state-owned religious channel”, 9 March 2009, www.khilafah.com

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Conclusion

Religious Islamic satellite channels came to existence in the first place to appeal to a growing number of religious people in the Arab world. The emergence of this type of station could also be seen as an attempt by Saudi businessmen to capitalise on the unmistakably growing tide of *Salafism* in the Arab world. With a growing number of Salafists who do not have a media platform that provides them with the Salafist dose they always cherished, a business opportunity emerged for Arab businessmen. This high demand on religion in satellite media was spurred by the fact that the religious discourse prevalent in the official media - represented mainly by Al-Azhar scholars who appear on the official terrestrial and satellite channels – did not meet the Salafist audience demand. Another factor that affected the emergence of these channels was the fact that their programmes are apolitical, which convinced the Egyptian government to allow them to have their headquarters in Cairo and to transmit via its satellites.

Obviously, the appeal of Salafist stations is most prevalent amongst the Egyptian lower classes for economic reasons. Liberalisation and privatisation adopted by the Egyptian government might be producing economic growth, and certainly benefit the upper and upper middle classes, but the policies also put at least half of Egyptians at the mercy of the market. For most, barely struggling to get by, and with no foreseeable prospects for improvement, the more puritanical, dogmatic views of Salafism provide comforting answers to their predicament.

While some channels are counting on financial support from charities and public figures, the cost-effective business model adopted by the majority of channels is proving successful up till now. With the minimum operation costs and the utmost use of commercials, charged SMS, downloads and logos, a station like Al-Nas is arguably one of the most viewed among Egyptians. Interviews with a sample of twenty viewers of TV in Egypt conducted by the author of this research showed that religious channels, and especially Al-Nas, has become a daily habit, especially among the residents of rural conservative audience.

“Moderateness” is the keyword in most of the mission statements announced by channels. However, the content of programmes and shows aired by these channels can be divided into two types: the relatively moderate and the puritanical Salafist content. Religious channels present two types of lay preachers: one that is relatively moderate aimed at providing a doze of religion to the middle, upper middle and upper classes; and another type of hard-line, Salafist preachers who are popular among the uneducated and poorly educated who constitute the majority of the poor class in Egypt. The first type channel tries to portray Islam as “modern” religion that appeals to young people by featuring former Egyptian movie stars who wore veil and sleek lay preachers, while the second type host Salafist preachers who keep crying people’s hearts out by reminding them of the tortures they will endure in the afterlife.

The market still holds opportunities for more new religious Islamic satellite channels. While the number of these

stations stands now at 30, tens of new channels are likely to be launched in the coming few years, especially after many an Arab government and official religious establishment announced that they would enter the competition to win people's hearts and minds. Every party, be it a private company, a government or a religious establishment, seeks to make capital out of an increasing presence of religion in public life.

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