

contrasts dramatically with the politics of resignification that Butler's formulation of performativity presupposes. Butler argues that the body is knowable through language (even if it is not reducible to language); corporeal politics for her often ensue from those features of signification and reference that destabilize the referential structure. In Butler's conception, insofar as the force of the body is knowable through the system of signification, challenges to the system come from interventions in the significatory features of that system. For example, Butler analyzes the reappropriation of the term "queer," which was historically used as a form of hate speech against lesbians and gays, but which has now come to serve as a positive term of self-identification. For Butler the appropriation of the term "queer" works by redirecting the force of the reiterative structure of homophobic norms and tethering the term to a different context of valences, meanings, and histories. What is notable for the purpose of my argument here is that it is a change in the referential structure of the sign that destabilizes the normative meaning and force of the term "queer." In the case of the mosque movement, as I have argued above, a change in the referential structure of the system of signs cannot produce the same effect of destabilization. Any attempt to destabilize the normative structure must also take into account the specificity of embodied practices and virtues, and the kind of work they perform on the self, recognizing that any transformation of their meaning requires an engagement with the technical and embodied armature through which these practices are attached to the self.

My somewhat long foray into Butler's theory of embodied performativity elucidates, I hope, the range of productive questions that are generated through an encounter between philosophical "generality" and ethnographic "particularity"—an encounter that makes clear the constitutive role "examples" play in the formulation of theoretical concepts. Moreover, an analysis of the historical and cultural particularity of the process of subjectivation reveals not only distinct understandings of the performative subject but also the perspectival shifts one needs to take into account when talking about politics of resistance and subversion.

TO ENDURE IS TO ENACT?

In this section I would like to return to the exploration of different modalities of agency whose operations escape the logic of resistance and subversion of norms. In what follows I will investigate how suffering and survival—two modalities of existence that are often considered to be the antithesis of agency—came to be articulated within the lives of women who live under the pressures of a patriarchal system that requires them to conform to the rigid de-

mands of heterosexual monogamy. Given that these conditions of gender inequality uniformly affect Egyptian women, regardless of their religious persuasion, I am particularly interested in understanding how a life lived in accordance with Islamic virtues affects a woman's ability to inhabit the structure of patriarchal norms. What resources and capacities does a pious lifestyle make available to women of the mosque movement, and how do their modes of inhabiting these structures differ from women for whom the resources of survival lie elsewhere? In particular I want to understand the practical and conceptual implications of a religious imaginary in which humans are considered to be only partially responsible for their own actions, versus an imaginary in which humans are regarded as the sole authors of their actions. It is not so much the epistemological repercussions of these different accounts of human action that interest me (cf. Chakrabarty 2000; Hollywood 2004), but how these two accounts affect women's ability to survive within a system of inequality and to flourish despite its constraints.

In what follows, I will juxtapose an example drawn from the life of a woman who was part of the mosque movement with another taken from the life of a woman who considered herself a "secular Muslim," and who was often critical of the virtues that the mosque participants regard as necessary to the realization of their ability to live as Muslims. I want to highlight the strikingly different ways in which these two women dealt with the pressures of being single in a society where heterosexual marriage is regarded as a compulsory norm. Even though it would be customary to consider one of these strategies "more agentival" than the other, I wish to show that such a reading is in fact reductive of the efforts entailed in the learning and practicing of virtues—virtues that might not be palatable to humanist sensibilities but are nonetheless constitutive of agency in important ways.

The full extent to which single women in Egypt are subjected to the pressure to get married was revealed to me in a conversation with Nadia, a woman I had come to know through her work in the mosques. Nadia was in her mid-thirties and had been married for a couple of years, but did not have any children; she and her husband lived in a small apartment in a lower-middle-income neighborhood of Cairo. She taught in a primary school close to her home, and twice a week after work she taught Quranic recitation to young children in the Nafisa mosque as part of what she considered her contribution to the ongoing work of *da'wa*. Afterward, she would often stay to attend the lesson at the mosque delivered by one of the better-known *dā'iyat*. Sometimes, after the lesson, I would catch a bus back with her and her friends. The ride was long and we would often have a chance to chat.

During one of these rides, I observed a conversation between Nadia and her longtime friend Iman, who was in her late twenties and who also volunteered

at the mosque. Iman seemed agitated that day and, upon getting on the bus, immediately spoke to Nadia about her dilemma. A male colleague who was married to another woman had apparently approached her to ask her hand in marriage.¹² By Egyptian standards Iman was well over the marriageable age. Iman was agitated because although the man was very well respected at her place of work and she had always held him in high regard, he already had a first wife. She was confused about what she should do, and was asking Nadia for advice. Much to my surprise, Nadia advised Iman to tell this man to approach her parents formally to ask for her hand in marriage, and to allow her parents to investigate the man's background in order to ascertain whether he was a suitable match for her.

I was taken aback by this response because I had expected Nadia to tell Iman not to think about this issue any further, since not only had the man broken the rules for proper conduct by approaching Iman directly instead of her parents, but he was also already married. I had come to respect Nadia's ability to uphold rigorous standards of pious behavior: on numerous occasions I had seen her give up opportunities that would have accrued her material and social advantages for the sake of her principles. So a week later, when I was alone with Nadia, I asked her the question that had been bothering me: why did she not tell Iman to cut off any connection with this man?

Nadia seemed a little puzzled and asked me why I thought this was proper advice. When I explained, she said, "But there is nothing wrong in a man approaching a woman for her hand in marriage directly as long as his intent is serious and he is not playing with her. This occurred many times even at the time of the Prophet."

I interrupted her and said, "But what about the fact that he is already married?" Nadia looked at me and asked, "You think that she shouldn't consider marriage to an already married man?" I nodded yes. Nadia gave me a long and contemplative look, and said, "I don't know how it is in the United States, but this issue is not that simple here in Egypt [*il-mas'ila di mish sahla fi maṣr*]. Marriage is a very big problem here. A woman who is not married is rejected by the entire society as if she has some disease [*il-maraḍ*], as if she is a thief [*ḥarāmi*]. It is an issue that is very painful indeed [*hadhahi mas'ila muḥliima jiddan, jiddan ḥaqīqi*]."

I asked Nadia what she meant by this. She replied: "If you are unmarried after the age of say late teens or early twenties—as is the case with Iman—everyone around you treats you like you have a defect [*al-naqṣ*]. Wherever you go, you are asked, 'Why didn't you get married [*matgawwaxtīsh ley*]?' Everyone knows that you can't offer to marry a man, that you have to wait until a man

¹² Islamic jurisprudence permits men to have up to four wives.

approaches you. Yet they act as if the decision is in your hands! You know I did not get married until I was thirty-four years old: I stopped visiting my relatives, which is socially improper, because every time I would go I would encounter the same questions. What is even worse is that your [immediate] family starts to think that you have some failing [*il-ʿēb*] in you because no man has approached you for marriage. They treat you as if you have a disease.”

Nadia paused reflectively for a moment and then continued: “It’s not as if those who are married necessarily have a happy life. For marriage is a blessing [*naʿma*], but it can also be a trial/problem [*fitna*]. For there are husbands who are cruel [*qāṣi*]: they beat their wives, bring other wives into the same house, and don’t give each an equal share. But these people who make fun of you for not being married don’t think about this aspect of marriage, and only stress marriage as a blessing [*naʿma*]. Even if a woman has a horrible husband, and has a hard married life, she will still make an effort to make you feel bad for not being married.”

I was surprised at Nadia’s clarity about the injustice of this situation toward women and the perils of marriage. I asked Nadia if single men were treated in the same way. Nadia replied resoundingly, “Of course not! For the assumption is that a man, if he wanted to, could have proposed to any woman: if he is not married it’s because he *didn’t want* to, or there was no woman who deserved him. But for the woman it is assumed that no one wanted *her* because it’s not up to her to make the first move.” Nadia shook her head again, and went on, “No, this situation is very hard and a killer [*il-mauḍūʿ ṣaʿb wi qātil*], O Saba. You have to have a very strong personality [*shakhṣiyya qawiyya*] for all of this not to affect you because eventually you also start thinking that there is something deeply wrong with you that explains why you are not married.”

I asked her what she meant by being strong. Nadia said in response, “You must be patient in the face of difficulty [*lāzim tikūni ṣābira*], trust in God [*tawwakali ʿala allah*], and accept the fact that this is what He has willed as your fate [*qaḍāʾ*]; if you complain about it all the time, then you are denying that it is only God who has the wisdom to know why we live in the conditions we do and not humans.” I asked Nadia if she had been able to achieve such a state of mind, given that she was married quite late. Nadia answered in an unexpected manner. She said, “O Saba, you don’t learn to become patient [*ṣābira*] or trust in God [*mutawakkila*] only when you face difficulties. There are many people who face difficulties, and may not even complain, but they are not *ṣābirīn* [patient, enduring]. You practice the virtue of patience [*ṣabr*] because it is a good deed [*al-ʿamal al-ṣāliḥ*], regardless of your situation: whether your life is difficult or happy. In fact, practicing patience in the face of happiness is even more difficult.”

Noting my look of surprise, Nadia said: “Yes, because think of how often

people turn to God only when they have difficult times, and often forget Him in times of comfort. To practice patience in moments of your life when you are happy is to be mindful of His rights [*haqqahu*] upon you at all times.” I asked Nadia, “But I thought you said that one needs to have patience so as to be able to deal with one’s difficulties?” Nadia responded by saying, “It is a secondary consequence [*al-natīja al-thānawīyya*] of your doing good deeds, among them the virtue of patience. God is merciful and He rewards you by giving you the capacity to be courageous in moments of difficulty. But you should practice *ṣabr* [patience] because this is the right thing to do in the path of God [*fi sabīl lillah*].”

I came back from my conversation with Nadia quite struck by the clarity with which she outlined the predicament of women in Egyptian society: a situation created and regulated by social norms for which women were in turn blamed. Nadia was also clear that women did not deserve the treatment they received, and that many of those she loved (including her kin) were equally responsible for the pain that had been inflicted on her when she was single. While polygamy is allowed in Islam, Nadia and other participants of the mosque movement would often point out that, according to the Quran, marriage to more than one woman is conditional upon the ability of a man to treat all his wives equally (emotionally and materially), a condition almost impossible to fulfill.¹³ For this reason, polygamous marriages are understood to create difficult situations for women, and the mosque participants generally advise against it.¹⁴ Nadia’s advice to Iman that she consider marriage to a married man, however, was based on a recognition of the extreme difficulty entailed in living as a single woman in Egypt.

While Nadia’s response about having to make such choices resonated with other, secular, Egyptian friends of mine, her advocacy of the cultivation of the virtue of *ṣabr* (roughly meaning “to persevere in the face of difficulty without complaint”) was problematic for them.¹⁵ *Ṣabr* invokes in the minds of many the passivity women are often encouraged to cultivate in the face of injustice. My friend Sana, for example, concurred with Nadia’s description of how diffi-

¹³ Both the Hanbali and Maliki schools of Islamic jurisprudence permit a woman to stipulate in her marriage contract that if the husband takes a second wife, she has the right to seek divorce. What is quite clear is that none of the schools give the woman the legal right to prevent her husband from taking a second wife. For recent debates on polygamy among contemporary religious scholars in Egypt, see Skovgaard-Petersen 1997, 169–70, 232–33.

¹⁴ This is further augmented by the liberal ideal of nuclear family and companionate marriage, which, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out (1998), has increasingly become the norm among Islamists as well as secular-liberal Egyptians.

¹⁵ I have retained the use of *ṣabr* in this discussion rather than its common English translation, “patience,” because *ṣabr* communicates a sense not quite captured by the latter: one of perseverance, endurance of hardship without complaint, and steadfastness.

cult life could be for a single woman in Egypt, but strongly disagreed with her advice regarding *ṣabr*.

Sana was a single professional woman in her mid-thirties who came from an upper-middle-class family—a self-professed “secular Muslim” whom I had come to know through a group of friends at the American University in Cairo. In response to my recounting of the conversation with Nadia, Sana said, “*Ṣabr* is an important Islamic principle, but these religious types [*mutadayyinīn*] think it’s a solution to everything. It’s such a passive way of dealing with this situation.” While Sana, too, believed that a woman needed to have a “strong personality” (*shakḥsiyya qawiyya*) in order to be able to deal with such a circumstance, for her this meant acquiring self-esteem or self-confidence (*thiqa fil-nafs wal-dhāt*). As she explained, “Self-esteem makes you independent of what other people think of you. You begin to think of your worth not in terms of marriage and men, but in terms of who you *really are*, and in my case, I draw pride from my work and that I am good at it. Where does *ṣabr* get you? Instead of helping you to improve your situation, it just leads you to accept it as fate—passively.”

While Nadia and Sana shared their recognition of the painful situation single women face, they differed markedly in their respective engagements with this suffering, each enacting a different modality of agency in the face of it. For Sana the ability to survive the situation she faced lay in seeking self-empowerment through the cultivation of self-esteem, a psychological capacity that, in her view, enabled one to pursue self-directed choices and actions unhindered by other people’s opinions. In this view, self-esteem is useful precisely because it is a means to achieving self-directed goals.¹⁶ For Sana one of the important arenas for acquiring this self-esteem was her professional career and achievements. Nadia also worked, but clearly did not regard her professional work in the same manner.

Importantly, in Nadia’s view, the practice of *ṣabr* does not necessarily make one immune to being hurt by others’ opinions: one undertakes the practice of *ṣabr* first and foremost because it is an essential attribute of a pious character, an attribute to be cultivated regardless of the situation one faces. Rather than alleviating suffering, *ṣabr* allows one to bear and live hardship *correctly* as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation.¹⁷ As Nadia says, if the practice of *ṣabr* fortifies one’s ability to deal with social suffering, this is a secondary, not essential, consequence. Justification for the exercise of *ṣabr*, in other

¹⁶ In the language of positive freedom, Sana may be understood to be a “free agent” because she appears to formulate her projects in accord with her own desires, values, and goals, and not those of others.

¹⁷ For contemporary discussions of *ṣabr* among leaders of the Islamic Revival, see M. al-Ghazali 1990; al-Qaradawi 1989.

words, resides neither in its ability to reduce suffering nor in its ability to help one realize one's self-directed choices and/or goals. When I pressed Nadia for further explanation, she gave me the example of Ayyub, who is known in Islam for his exemplary patience in the face of extreme physical and social hardship (Ayyub is the equivalent of Job in the Judeo-Christian tradition). Nadia noted that Ayyub is famous *not* for his ability to rise above the pain, but precisely for the manner in which he *lived* his pain. Ayyub's perseverance did not decrease his suffering: it ended only when God had deemed it time for it to end. In this view, it is not only the lack of complaint in the face of hardship, but the way in which *ṣabr* infuses one's life and mode of being that makes one a *ṣābira* (one who exercises *ṣabr*). As Nadia notes in the conversation reported earlier, while *ṣabr* is realized through practical tasks, its consummation does not lie in practice alone.

Importantly, Nadia's conception of *ṣabr* is linked to the idea of divine causality, the wisdom of which cannot be deciphered by mere human intelligence. Many secular-oriented Muslims,¹⁸ like Sana above, regard such an approach to life as defeatist and fatalist—as an acceptance of social injustice whose real origins lie in structures of patriarchy and social arrangements, rather than in God's will manifest as fate (*qaḍā'*). According to this logic, holding humans responsible for unjust social arrangements allows for the possibility of change, which a divine causality forecloses. Note, however, that the weight Nadia accords to fate does not absolve humans from responsibility for the unjust circumstances single women face. Rather, as she pointed out to me later, predestination is one thing and choice another (*al-qadr shai' wal-ikhtiyār shai' ākhir*): while God determines one's fate (for example, whether someone is poor or wealthy), human beings still choose how to deal with their situations (for example, one can either steal or use lawful means to ameliorate one's situation of poverty). What we have here is a notion of human agency, defined in terms of individual responsibility, that is bounded by both an eschatological structure *and* a social one. Importantly, this account privileges neither the relational nor the autonomous self so familiar to anthropologists (Joseph 1999), but a conception of individual ethics whereby each person is responsible for her own actions.¹⁹

¹⁸ As I indicated in chapter 1, I am using "secular-oriented Muslims" as shorthand to refer to those for whom religious practice has limited relevance outside of personal devotion. See chapter 2 for my discussion of how the term "secularism" is used by the mosque participants in Egypt today.

¹⁹ Notably, Sunni Islam shares with Protestantism two central ideas. First, they both share the assumption that each follower of the tradition is potentially capable of inculcating the highest virtues internal to the tradition and is responsible for the self-discipline necessary to achieve this goal (even though divine grace plays a central role in both traditions). Second, they both share

Just as the practice of self-esteem structured the possibilities of action that were open to Sana, so did the realization of *ṣabr* for Nadia, enabling certain ways of being and foreclosing others. It is clear that certain virtues (such as humility, modesty, and shyness) have lost their value in the liberal imagination and are considered emblematic of passivity and inaction, especially if they don't uphold the autonomy of the individual: *ṣabr* may, in this view, mark an inadequacy of action, a failure to act under the inertia of tradition. But *ṣabr* in the sense described by Nadia and others does not mark a reluctance to act. Rather, it is integral to a constructive project: it is a site of considerable investment, struggle, and achievement. What Nadia's and Sana's discussions reveal are two different modes of engaging with social injustice, one grounded in a tradition that we have come to value, and another in a nonliberal tradition that is being resuscitated by the movement I worked with.

Note that even though Nadia regarded herself as only partially responsible for the actions she undertook (the divine being at least equally responsible for her situation), this should not lead us to think that she was therefore less likely to work at changing the social conditions under which she lived. Neither she nor Sana, for a variety of reasons, could pursue the project of reforming the oppressive situation they were forced to inhabit. The exercise of *ṣabr* did not hinder Nadia from embarking on a project of social reform any more than the practice of self-esteem enabled Sana to do so. One should not, therefore, draw unwarranted correlations between a secular orientation and the ability to transform conditions of social injustice. Further, it is important to point out that to analyze people's actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is necessarily to reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination. Just as our own lives don't fit neatly into such a paradigm, neither should we apply such a reduction to the lives of women like Nadia and Sana, or to movements of moral reform such as the one discussed here.

THE PARADOXES OF PIETY

As I suggested in chapter 1, it is possible to read many of the practices of the mosque participants as having the effect of undermining the authority of a va-

the assumption that the highest virtues of the tradition must be pursued while one is immersed in the practicalities of daily life, rather than through seclusion in an enclosed community (of nuns, priests, or monks), or a predefined religious order (as is the case in certain strains of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism). Consequently all of life is regarded as the stage on which these values and attitudes are enacted, making any separation between the secular and the sacred difficult to maintain.

riety of dominant norms, institutions, and structures. Indeed, my analysis of the overall aims of the mosque movement shows that challenging secular-liberal norms—whether of sociability or governance—remains central to the movement’s self-understanding. Moreover, regardless of the movement’s self-understanding, the objective effects that the movement has produced within the Egyptian social field *de facto* pose stiff impediments to the process of secularization. Despite this acknowledgment, as I suggested before, it would be a mistake to analyze the complexity of this movement through the lens of resistance inasmuch as such a reading flattens out an entire dimension of the force this movement commands and the transformations it has spawned within the social and political fields.

This caution against reading the agency of this movement primarily in terms of resistance holds even more weight when we turn our attention to the analysis of gender relations. In what follows, I want to show why this is the case through ethnographic examples in which women may be seen as resisting aspects of male kin authority. While conceding that one of the effects of the mosque participants’ pursuit of piety is the destabilization of certain norms of male kin authority, I want to argue that attention to the terms and concepts deployed by women in these struggles directs us to analytical questions that are closed off by an undue emphasis on resistance. The discourse of the mosque movement is shot through, of course, with assumptions that secure male domination: an analysis that focuses on terms internal to the discourse of piety must also engage the entire edifice of male superiority upon which this discourse is built. Indeed, my analysis of the mosque participants’ practices of pedagogy and ritual observance (in chapters 3 and 4) is in part an exposition of this point. But the fact that discourses of piety and male superiority are ineluctably intertwined does not mean that we can assume that the women who inhabit this conjoined matrix are motivated by the desire to subvert or resist terms that secure male domination; neither can we assume that an analysis that focuses on the subversive effects their practices produce adequately captures the meanings²⁰ of these practices, that is, what these practices “do” within the discursive context of their enactment. Let me elaborate.

The pursuit of piety often subjected the mosque participants to a contradictory set of demands, the negotiation of which often required maintaining a delicate balance between the moral codes that could be transgressed and those that were mandatory. One common dilemma the mosque participants faced was the opposition they encountered to their involvement in *da’wa* activities from their immediate male kin, who, according to the Islamic juristic tradition, are supposed to be the guardians of women’s moral and physical well-being. In

²⁰ Obviously, my use of the term “meaning” here goes well beyond mere sense and reference.

order to remain active in the field of *da'wa*, and sometimes even to abide by rigorous standards of piety, these women often had to go against their male kin, who exercised tremendous authority in their lives, authority that was sanctioned not only by divine injunctions but also by Egyptian custom.

Consider for example the struggles a woman called Abir had with her husband regarding her involvement in *da'wa* activities. I had met Abir during one of the lessons delivered in the low-income Ayesha mosque and, over a period of a year and a half, came to know her and her family quite well. Abir was thirty years old and had three children at the time. Her husband was a lawyer and worked two jobs in order to make ends meet. Abir would sew clothes for her neighbors to supplement their income, and also received financial help from her family, who lived only a few doors down from her. Like many young women of her class and background, Abir was not raised to be religiously observant, and showed me pictures from her youth when she, like other neighborhood girls, wore short skirts and makeup, flaunting the conventions of modest comportment. Abir recounted how, as a young woman, she had seldom performed any of the obligatory acts of worship and, on the occasions when she did, she did so more out of custom (*'āda*) than out of an awareness of all that was involved in such acts. Only in the last several years had Abir become interested in issues of piety, an interest she pursued actively by attending mosque lessons, reading the Quran, and listening to taped religious sermons that she would borrow from a neighborhood kiosk. Over time, Abir became increasingly more diligent in the performance of religious duties (including praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan). She donned the headscarf, and then, after a few months, switched to the full body and face veil (*niqāb*). In addition, she stopped socializing with Jamal's male friends and colleagues, refusing to help him entertain them at home.

Abir's transformation was astonishing to her entire family, but it was most disturbing to her husband, Jamal. Jamal was not particularly religious, even though he considered himself a Muslim—if an errant one. He seldom performed any of his religious obligations and, much to Abir's consternation, sometimes drank alcohol and indulged his taste for X-rated films. Given his desire for upward mobility—which required him to appear (what Abir called) “civilized and urbane” (*mutahaḍḍir*) in front of his friends and colleagues—Jamal was increasingly uncomfortable with the orthodox Islamic sociability his wife seemed to be cultivating at an alarming rate, the full face and body veil (*niqāb*) being its most “backward” (*mutakhallif*) sign. He was worried, and let Abir know in no uncertain terms that he wanted a more worldly and stylish wife who could facilitate his entry and acceptance into a class higher than his own.

Things became far more tense between them when Abir enrolled in a two-

year program at a nongovernmental institute of *da'wa* so she could train to become a *dā'iya*. She had been attending the local mosque lessons, and felt that she would make a more effective teacher than the local *dā'iyāt* if she had the proper training. Jamal did not take her seriously at first, thinking that she would soon grow tired of the study this program required, coupled with the long commute and daily child care and housework. But Abir proved to be resolute and tenacious: she knew that if she was lax in her duties toward the house, her children, or Jamal, she did not stand a chance. So she was especially diligent in taking care of all household responsibilities on the days she attended the *da'wa* institute, and even took her son with her so that Jamal would not have to watch him when he returned from work.

Jamal tried several tactics to dissuade Abir. He learned quickly that his sarcastic remarks about her social “backwardness” did not get him very far: Abir would retort by pointing out how shortsighted he was to privilege his desire for worldly rewards over those in the Hereafter. She would also ridicule his desire to appear “civilized and urbane,” calling it a blind emulation of Western values. Consequently, Jamal changed his tactic and started to use religious arguments to criticize Abir, pointing out that she was disobeying Islamic standards of proper wifely conduct when she disobeyed the wishes and commands of her husband. He would also occasionally threaten to take a second wife, as part of his rights as a Muslim man, if she did not change her ways. On one occasion, when he had just finished making this threat in front of her family and myself, Abir responded by saying, “You keep insisting on this right God has given you [to marry another woman]. Why don't you first take care of *His* rights over *you* [*ḥaqq allāh 'ēlaik*]?” It was clear to everyone that she was talking about Jamal's laxity in the performance of prayers, particularly since just an hour before, Abir had asked him, as the man of the household, to lead the evening prayer (*ṣalāt al-maghrib*)—a call he had ignored while continuing to watch television. Abir had eventually led the prayers herself for the women present in the house. Jamal was silenced by Abir's retort, but he did not refrain from continuing to harass her. At one point, after a particularly harsh argument between the two of them, I asked Abir, when we were alone, if she would consider giving up her *da'wa* studies due to Jamal's opposition. She answered resolutely, “No! Even if he took an absolute stand on the issue [*hatta lau kān itmāssik il-mauqif*], I would not give up *da'wa*.”

In response to Jamal's increasing pressure, Abir adjusted her own behavior. Much to her family's surprise, she became uncharacteristically gentle with Jamal, while using other means of persuasion with him. In particularly tense moments, she would at times cajole or humor him, and at times embarrass him by taking the higher moral ground (as in the scene just described). She also

started to pray regularly for Jamal to his face, pointedly asking for God's pardon (*maghfira*) and blessings (*baraka*), not only in this life but in the Hereafter. The phrase "rabbinna yihdik, ya rabb!" ("May our Lord show you the straight path, O Lord!") became a refrain in her interactions with Jamal. Sometimes she would play tape-recorded sermons at full volume in the house, especially on Fridays when he was home, that focused on scenes of death, tortures in hell, and the day of final reckoning with God. Thus, in order to make Jamal feel vulnerable, Abir invoked destiny and death (reminding him of the Hereafter when he would face God), urging him to accord these their due by being more religiously observant.

All of these strategies eventually had a cumulative effect on Jamal and, even though he never stopped pressuring Abir to abandon her studies at the da'wa institute, the intensity with which he did so declined. He even started to pray more regularly, and to visit the mosque occasionally with her. More importantly for Abir, he stopped indulging his taste for alcohol and X-rated films at home.

What is important to note in this account is that none of Abir's arguments would have had an effect on Jamal had he not shared with her some sort of a commitment to their underlying assumptions—such as belief in the Hereafter, the inevitability that God's wrath will be unleashed on those who habitually disobey His commands, and so on. Abir's persuasion worked with Jamal in part because he considered himself to be a Muslim, albeit one who was negligent in his practice and prone to sinful acts. As an example of this, even when he did not pray in response to her repeated enjoinders, he did not offer a reasoned argument for his refusal in the way an unbeliever might have when faced with a similar situation. Certain shared moral orientations structured the possibilities of the argument, and thus the shape of the conflict, between them. When confronted with the moral force of Abir's arguments, Jamal could not simply deny their truth. As Abir once explained to me, for Jamal to reject her moral arguments would be tantamount "to denying God's truth, something even he is not willing to risk." The force of Abir's persuasion lay partly in her perseverance, and partly in the tradition of authority she invoked to reform her husband, who was equally—if errantly—bound to the sensibilities of this tradition. In other words, Abir's effectiveness was not an individual but a collaborative achievement, a product of the shared matrix of background practices, sensibilities, and orientations that structured Jamal and Abir's exchanges.

Secondly, it is also important to note that Abir's enrollment in the da'wa institute against the wishes of her husband would not be condoned by majority of the dā'iyāt and Muslim jurists. This is because, as I explained in chapter 2, while da'wa is regarded a voluntary act for women, obedience to one's hus-

band is considered an obligation to which every Muslim woman is bound.²¹ Abir was aware of the risks she was taking in pursuing her commitment to da'wa: Jamal's threats to divorce her, or to find a second wife, were not entirely empty since he was within his rights as a Muslim man to do so in the eyes of the sharī'a. Abir was able to hold her position in part because she could claim a higher moral ground than her husband. Her training in da'wa had given her substantial authority from which to speak and challenge her husband on issues of proper Islamic conduct. For example, as she learned more about the modern interpretation of da'wa from the institute where she attended classes, she started to justify her participation in da'wa using the argument, now popular among many Islamist thinkers (see chapter 2), that da'wa was no longer considered a collective duty but an individual duty that was incumbent upon each and every Muslim to undertake—a change that had come about precisely because people like Jamal had lost the ability to know what it meant to live as Muslims.²² Paradoxically, Abir's ability to break from the norms of what it meant to be a dutiful wife were predicated upon her learning to perfect a tradition that accorded her a subordinate status to her husband. Abir's divergence from approved standards of wifely conduct, therefore, did not represent a break with the signifiatory system of Islamic norms, but was saturated with them, and enabled by the capacities that the practice of these norms endowed her with.

It is tempting to read Abir's actions through the lens of subordination and resistance: her ability to pursue da'wa work against her husband's wishes may well be seen as an expression of her desire to resist the control her husband was trying to exert over her actions. Or, from a perspective that does not privilege the sovereign agent, Abir's use of religious arguments may be understood as a simultaneous reiteration and resignification of religious norms, whereby patriarchal religious practices and arguments are assigned new meanings and valences. While both analyses are plausible, they remain inadequately attentive to the forms of reasoning, network of relations, concepts, and practices that were internal to Abir's actions. For example, what troubled Abir was not the authority Jamal commanded over her (upheld by divine injunctions), but

²¹ Even among those writers who argue that da'wa in the modern period has acquired the status of an individual duty (*farḍ al-ʿain*) rather than a collective duty (*farḍ al-kifāya*), da'wa is still considered, for women, an obligation secondary to their duties as wives, mothers, and daughters. This position is upheld not only by men but also by women, like Zaynab al-Ghazali, who have advocated for women's increased participation in the field of da'wa (see Z. al-Ghazali 1996a, 39; al-Hashimi 1990, 237).

²² Jamal could have countered this argument by pointing out that most proponents of da'wa consider it to be a woman's duty only if da'wa does not interfere with her service to her husband and children (see note above). But since Jamal was unfamiliar with these debates about da'wa, he was unable to make this argument.

his impious behavior and his attempts to dissuade her from what she considered to be her obligations toward God. For Abir, the demand to live piously required the practice of a range of Islamic virtues and the creation of optimal conditions under which they could be realized. Thus Abir's complicated evaluations and decisions were aimed toward goals whose sense is not captured by terms such as *obedience* versus *rebellion*, *compliance* versus *resistance*, or *submission* versus *subversion*. These terms belong more to a feminist discourse than to the discourse of piety precisely because these terms have relevance for certain actions but not others. Abir's defiance of social and patriarchal norms is, therefore, best explored through an analysis of the ends toward which it was aimed, and the terms of being, affectivity, and responsibility that constituted the grammar of her actions.²³

da'wa and kinship demands

The significance of an analysis that attends to the grammar of concepts within which a set of actions are located may be further elaborated through another example, one that is well known and often cited among those who are familiar with the figure of Zaynab al-Ghazali. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Zaynab al-Ghazali is regarded as a pioneering figure in the field of women's *da'wa* in Egypt; she is also well known for having served as a leader of the Islamist political group the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Given her public profile and political activism, al-Ghazali has been seen as a paradoxical figure who urged other women to abide by their duties as mothers, wives, and daughters, but lived her own life in a manner that challenged these traditional roles (Ahmed 1992; Hoffman 1985). An often-cited example of this seeming contradiction is al-Ghazali's account of how she divorced her first husband whom she claimed interfered with her "struggle in the path of God" (*jihād fi sabīl lillāh*), and then married her second husband on the condition that he not intervene in her work of *da'wa* (Z. al-Ghazali 1995; Hoffman 1985, 236–37).

In her well-known autobiographical account, *Days from My Life* (*Ayyām min ḥayāti*), al-Ghazali reports an exchange with her second husband, who,

²³ My insistence throughout this book that we attend to the terms and concepts informing the actions of the mosque participants does not aim to simply reproduce "folk categories." Rather, my argument is that attention to these terms and concepts is necessary to rethinking analytical questions about regnant notions of agency in the social sciences and feminist theory. In this sense, my approach to the analysis of concepts is informed by the philosopher Ian Hacking who notes, "a concept is nothing other than a word in its sites. That means attending to a variety of types of sites: the sentences in which the word is actually (not potentially) used, those who speak those sentences, with what authority, in what institutional settings, in order to influence whom, with what consequences for the speakers" (Hacking 2002, 17).