

## Passional Preaching, Aural Sensibility, and the Islamic Revival in Cairo

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Charles Hirschkind received his PhD in anthropology from Johns Hopkins University and now teaches at Berkeley. In this impressive contribution he amasses a range of theory, from Walter Benjamin's important essay on the impact of modern technology on experience through recent work on embodiment and the senses. What is unique is the way he combines this literature on perception and aesthetics with an interest in ethical practice and religious discipline. Developing ideas found in the work of his teacher, Talal Asad (see chapter 9, above), Hirschkind is able to show how pious Muslims reconstruct their sensibilities in accord with models of Islamic moral personhood. He thus brings his own anthropological sensibility to bear on practices and events that are systematically misunderstood in the West today. Hirschkind's analysis helps us both to grasp the

meaningfulness and profundity of religious revival and to transcend simple oppositions between "tradition" and "modernity" or between power and morality (or subjection and agency). In showing the way religious practices cultivate virtuous dispositions and reflective citizenship, Hirschkind implicitly challenges the hegemony of doctrines of both rationalism and liberalism. For fuller argument see his book (2006a) as well as Mahmood (2005) for complementary and equally compelling work on pious women. For recent accounts of Islam and the state from other parts of the world see Hefner (2000) on Indonesia, Navaro-Yashin (2002) on Turkey, and Peletz (2002) on Malaysia. Casanova (1994) provides an important discussion of public religion more generally. Lively debate over secularism can be found in Bhargava, ed. (1998) and Connolly (1999).

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Among the many lines of inquiry to which Walter Benjamin's rich *oeuvre* has given impetus, one of the most fruitful for anthropologists has been an interrogation into both the history of the senses and the structures of sensory perception that underline particular forms of historical experience. Benjamin's excavation of buried histories of sensory experience from within the outmoded objects of modernity, and in particular his work on the impact of modern media techniques on perception, have provided scholars less a set of theoretical formulations than a particular methodological sensibility – a feel for the historically discordant within the contemporary. Most influential, in this regard, has been his classic essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1968 [1936]), in which he explored the impact of modern photographic and cinematic techniques on perception. In this essay, Benjamin argued that the particular experiential quality that grounded the uniqueness and authenticity of historical objects – what he called "aura" – had been all but effaced under the perceptual regime of modern technological culture. With the mechanical reproduction of works of art, not only does the idea of an authentic original lose all meaning; the traditions that were founded upon and upheld the knowledge of such authentic objects can no longer maintain the practical and perceptual conditions that sustained them. Benjamin further explored this process in "The Storyteller," written in the same year, where he argued that the traditional modes of knowledge and practice that grounded the art of storytelling had been rendered impracticable with the rise of information as the dominant communicative form.

In this essay, I want to take up Benjamin's interrogation of the relation between sensory experience and traditional practices, but from the standpoint of a question that Benjamin and those his work has inspired have rarely pursued. Specifically, I approach the question of the sensorium not from the side of the (modern) object and its impact on the possibilities of subjective experience, but rather from the perspective of a cultural practice through which the perceptual capacities of the subject are honed, and thus, through which the

world those capacities inhabit is brought into being, rendered perceptible. In exploring such a practice, I hope to suggest how traditions not only presuppose, but actively seek to cultivate the particular sensory skills upon which the actions, objects, and knowledges that constitute these traditions depend. Such tradition-cultivated modes of perception and appraisal not only coexist within the space of the modern, but are even enabled in ways by the very conditions that constitute modernity. Thus, through an analysis of a particular cultural practice geared to this task, I hope to contribute to the important and ongoing task of rethinking our received – and decidedly stubborn – opposition between the traditional and the modern.

My specific focus here is on the practice of listening to tape-recorded sermons among contemporary Muslims in Egypt as an exercise of ethical self-discipline. During a period of a year and a half, I worked with a group of young men in Cairo for whom sermon audition was a regular activity.<sup>1</sup> I also took lessons throughout my stay in Cairo on the art of preaching from an experienced preacher. For all of these men, the cassette-sermon was a technology of self-improvement, one among a number of such technologies that have been popularized in recent decades with the gradual emergence of what is commonly referred to as the Islamic Revival (*al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya*). In what follows, I explore the fashion of cassette-sermon audition as a disciplinary practice through which contemporary Egyptian Muslims hone an ethically responsive sensorium: the requisite sensibilities that they saw as enabling them to live as devout Muslims in a world increasingly ordered by secular rationalities. Notably, I use the terms "senses" and "sensibilities" here in a way that suggests their fundamental interdependency. Part of my argument is precisely to describe how emotions, capacities of aesthetic appreciation, and states of moral attunement or being – what we generally refer to as "sensibilities" – come to structure our most fundamental sensory experiences. It should be clear, therefore, that in referring to "senses," I am not indicating the object studied within the discipline of biology.

As I describe, among the men I worked with proper audition demanded a particular affective-volitional responsiveness – what I describe as an ethical performance – as a condition for “understanding” sermonic speech, while simultaneously deepening an individual’s capacity to hear in this manner. To “hear with the heart,” as those I worked with described this activity, was not strictly something cognitive in the usual sense but involved the body in its entirety, as a complex synthesis of disciplined moral reflexes. Indeed, the degree of benefit achievable through sermon audition was understood to be proportionate to the depth of moral sensibility the listener was able to bring to the act.

### Cassette Discipline

Since the 1970s, cassette-recorded sermons of popular Islamic preachers (*khutabā*, sing. *khaṭīb*) have increasingly become one of the most widely consumed media forms among lower-middle- and middle-class Egyptians (Hirschkind 2001; Salvatore 1998; Starrett 1995). Tapes are sold outside of mosques, on the sidewalks in front of train and bus stations, or in bookstores throughout the city. They may be listened to practically anywhere: while running a café or barbershop, while driving a bus or taxi, at home with one’s family after returning from work.

At the time of my fieldwork, there were six licensed companies in operation in Cairo which produced and distributed taped sermons, the largest three of these having additional distribution centers outside of Cairo, primarily in the cities of Alexandria, Mansura, and Suez. Besides sermon tapes, many of these companies also sell other items often associated with Islamist social trends, such as headscarves and modest dress styles for women, the long white shirts (*jalabiyya*) commonly worn by Egyptian men, perfumes and scented oils, incense, as well as books and pamphlets from Islamist publishers. In addition to the commercially produced and marketed tapes, there are an equal or greater number which are recorded, copied, and sold by small-scale entrepreneurs

without commercial licenses, contracts with *khutabā*, or the required permits from the Council on Islamic Research at the government-run al-Azhar mosque. Although the Egyptian police occasionally confiscate the merchandise of these vendors, most of the time they are left alone to sell their wares on the streets outside of mosques or bus stations. It should be noted, however, that the tapes sold within these commercial and informal markets do not reflect the number of people who participate in the practice of cassette-sermon audition today. This is due to the fact that the majority of tapes listened to in Egypt circulate outside of the structures of sales and marketing, and are obtained through informal practices of exchange and duplication among acquaintances, or from tape-lending libraries now offered by many mosques.

While the young men I worked with used cassette-sermons as a disciplinary technique to enhance their knowledge and ethical capacities, they seldom employed them in an exact or rigorous manner. Rarely, for example, would they listen at precise times of the day according to a fixed schedule. The one exception to this was in the case of mosque study groups, which would sometimes assign a certain number of tapes each member was to listen to in the course of a week. Usually, however, cassette sermon audition is a self-regulated activity, undertaken as a solitary exercise or in the company of a friend or family member. Among the sermon listeners I came to know, it was most often practiced in the evenings, after they had returned from work or school. As opposed to the communal sermon on Friday at the mosque, cassette audition takes place without the performance of ablutions (*wudū*). Importantly, most tape-users attend the Friday mosque ceremony and consider the tapes to be an extension of it, not an alternative.<sup>2</sup>

Sermon tapes afford the listener a type of relaxation from which one can nonetheless expect an enriching of one’s knowledge and a cathartic, purifying operation on the soul. As Ahmed, a recent university graduate now working in an aluminum plant, commented to me:

Remember when we were sitting at Muhammed's once and we played a tape of [the *khaṭīb*] Muhammed Hassan, you felt relaxed (*istirkhā*)? This is what can happen, this is the opening of the heart [literally, "chest"] (*inshirāh al-ṣadr*), the tranquility (*itmi'nān*), that makes you want to pray, read the Quran, makes you want to get closer to God, to think (*tafakkir*) more about religion (*dīn*). When you listen to a sermon, it helps you put aside all of your worries about work and money by reminding you of God. You remember that you will be judged and that fills you with fear (*khauf*) and makes you feel humility (*khushū*) and repentance (*nadm*). The Shaykh teaches you about Islam, what it requires of you, so you won't make errors.

Another man I worked with, Husam, who worked in a small store that sold sermon tapes and religious literature, explained the utility of tape audition this way:

Tapes are always of benefit, whether on the torment of the grave (*ʿadhāb al-qabr*), Judgment Day (*yaum al-qiyāma*), death, on the most dangerous of sins (*kabāʾir*), or the headscarf. You learn things you didn't know, and this is useful. And they restore you to [moral] health (*biyashfūna*). Listening to a tape of a sermon you've already heard is a way of reinforcing what you've learned, strengthening the fear of God's punishments, so you won't commit a moral error (*maʿāṣī*). This leaves your heart calm (*muṭmaʿin*). There are some people who just do what they should. Many others, however, they realize that the devil has got into their heads (*yūwaswasu* [whispers to them]), and is making them think that what is evil (*ḥarām*) is actually good (*ḥalāl*). By listening, they strengthen themselves against this, as it gets them to pray and read the Quran. Then they begin to regret (*nadm*) what they have done, and ask God for forgiveness (*istighfār*). The tape, in other words, helps them to fight (*bijāhid*) against the devil.

Tapes thus enable a strengthening of the will, and what many people refer to as an ability to resist the devil's whispers (*waswās*). With repeated and attentive listening, they can also help lead a listener to change his or her ways. Ahmed put it this way:

My brother, who is religious but [does not belong to the] *Jamāʿa*,<sup>3</sup> heard this tape by [the popular preacher] Fawzi Saʿid and it really struck him. He immediately made me a copy. He decided he had to change his life, so he stopped smoking and using foul language, and started to go to the mosque and pray. Now he is always talking about religion, always trying to get his friends to comport themselves more piously. Many of his old friends don't want to be around him any more because they get tired of his talk. Every time I go to his house now, we listen to a tape. I'm not as into it as much as he is, but I do feel it makes me think about important things I would forget.

For sermon listeners, the regular practice of sermon audition serves as a constant reminder to monitor their behavior for vices and virtues. Even in the absence of a complete transformation of the kind Ahmed's brother went through, young men like Ahmed and Hussein relied on the tapes to maintain a level of self-scrutiny (*murāqaba*) in regard to their day-to-day activities and, when possible, to change or modify their behavior. Many of the young men I worked with in Egypt related their decision to become diligent in the performance of their Islamic duties to having been moved by a particularly powerful sermon, heard either on tape or live, at the mosque.

What renders tape audition a technique suitable for practices of ethical self-improvement lies in the capacity of speech to act on the heart and reform it (cf. Padwick 1996). For those I worked with, this was not a mechanical process. Simply putting on a sermon tape or listening to verses of the Quran does not cleanse a heart that has been corroded by sin. A person with a "rusted heart," as one man I had come to know put it, is precisely one whose ability to hear has been impaired. An author, writing in *al-Tauḥīd*, a popular religious digest often read and cited by the sermon listeners of my study, likens this to a short-circuit in the wiring which prevents an electrical current from reaching the lamp it is supposed to illuminate. Drawing out the metaphor, he suggests:

The Quran is effective in itself, just as the electrical current. If the Quran is present [to

your ears], and you have lost its effect, then it is you yourself that you must blame. Maybe the conductive element is defective: your heart is damaged or flawed. Maybe a mist covers your heart, preventing it from benefiting (*intifā'*) from the Quran and being affected by it. Or maybe you are not listening well, or your heart is occupied with problems of money, and thinking about how to acquire and increase it. (Badawi 1996a: 13)

For the possessor of such a defective heart, the only solution according to the author lies in cleansing (*ṭahāra*) the heart, both by giving up the sinful acts that led to such a state, and by repeatedly listening, with intention and concentration, to sermons, exhortations, and Quranic verses. Such is the task that cassette-sermons are put to.

### The Listening Body

The effect of sermon speech on the heart, however, is not just one of cleansing. As the above comments make evident, sermons evoke in the sensitive listener a particular set of ethical responses, foremost among them fear (*khauf*), humility (*khushū'*), regret (*nadm*), repentance (*tauba*), and tranquility (*iṭminān* or *sakīna*). As elaborated within classical Islamic moral doctrine, these are the affective dispositions that endow a believer's heart with the capacities of moral discrimination necessary for proper conduct.<sup>4</sup> In order to understand their usage by the men I worked with, however, it will be useful to draw on some of the contemporary writings that they themselves use and frequently refer to. The following discussion comes from an article published in the same journal I cited above, *al-Tauḥīd*. The article focuses on the effect of particular Quranic verses, when used by a *khaṭīb*, on the moral condition of a faithful Muslim listener. Drawing from the exegetical works of classical scholars in regard to the interpretation of a verse from the Quranic chapter entitled *al-Zumar* (The Throngs), the author notes,

What is meant here is that when the true people of faith, the people of the eternal and deeply rooted doctrine (*al-'aqīda*) hear the

verses of warning (*al-wa'id*) their flesh trembles in fear, their hearts are filled with despair (*inqabaḍat qulūbahum*), a violent angst shakes their backs (*irta'adat farā'suhum*), and their hearts become intoxicated with fear and dread. But if they then hear the verses of mercy (*al-rahma*) and forgiveness (*istighfār*), their flesh becomes filled with delight (*inbasat julūdahum*), their chests are opened and relaxed (*insharāḥat ṣudūrahum*), and their hearts are left tranquil (*iṭma'nat qulūbahum*). (Badawi 1996b: 11–12)

What is described here is a kind of moral physiology, the emotional-kinesthetic experience of a body permeated by Islamic faith (*imān*) when listening to a *khaṭīb*'s discourse. The description is derived directly from numerous verses of the Quran depicting the impact of godly speech on a rightly-disposed listener, as in the following verse from the chapter entitled *al-Anfāl* (Spoils of War): "Believers are only they whose hearts tremble whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever his messages are conveyed unto them" (*al-Anfāl*: 2).<sup>5</sup> This particular responsiveness constitutes what might be termed a Quranically-tuned body and soul. This attunement, according to the author, defines precisely the characteristic of a person who is close to God (Badawi 1996b: 11). For such a person, auditory reception involves the flesh, back, chest and heart, in short, the entire moral person as a unity of body and soul. To listen properly, we might say, is to engage in a performance, the articulated gestures of a dance.

### The Task of the Khaṭīb

In discussing the Islamic sermon and its role in the shaping of ethical dispositions, it is important to distinguish between a rhetorical practice of evoking or modulating the passions as a means to sway an audience toward a point of view, and one aimed at constructing the passions in accord with a certain model. In regard to the former, Aristotle dedicated considerable attention to the possibilities of rhetorically manipulating the passions, examining the means by which anger, fear, or pity might

be intensified or attenuated by an orator to his advantage (1991). We also find in Augustine an emphasis on the utility of arousing the emotions as a means to move people to do what they know they should do but fail to. Such a technique is predicated on the instrumental use of emotions for purposes to which those emotions have no necessary relation. By contrast, in the practice of Islamic sermons, as I have noted, the objects of discourse and the emotions which are elicited in the context of their discussion are interdependent such that those emotions only achieve their proper formation through that relationship. The *khaṭīb's* task, in other words, includes not just the modulation of emotional intensities but also the orienting of those emotions to their proper objects.

There is considerable debate among Egyptian *khuṭabā'* as well as their listeners today on this issue. One of the indications that many people take as evidence of a *khaṭīb's* virtuosity is an ability to move an audience to tears. Weeping has an important place within Islamic devotional practices, as a kind of emotional response appropriate for both men and women when, with humility, fear, and love, they turn to God.<sup>6</sup> Many are concerned today, however, that people are crying during sermons for the wrong reasons. Note, for example, the following remark by the *khaṭīb* Fawzi Sa'id, in response to a question about why he didn't do more to evoke the passions of his listeners in his sermons:

Lots of people today just look forward to crying during sermons; they feel they are being cleansed, like Christians at baptism. But the sermon that just leads you to cry doesn't imprint upon the heart. It doesn't get people to change their actions. It is only through a careful engagement with the texts (*ta'aqqul ma'a al-nuṣūṣ*), reading the Quran and *sunna*, that knowledge gets rooted in the heart. Not that the sentiments are unimportant; but many people no longer know why they are crying.

One of the major concerns of the *khuṭabā'* I spoke with was that many cassette-sermon listeners today were engaging in the practice as a form of entertainment, for the pleasure of

the emotional experience produced through audition. My preaching instructor, Muhammed Subhi, voiced this worry in a conversation on the problems with preaching today:

When people today listen, they hear about Judgment Day and the torment of hell and they feel relieved and exalted (*intishā'*). *Intishā'* is what you experience when you drink alcohol and feel that all of the pressures and difficulties of your life have been lifted. Or when you hear a really beautiful song, that touches all of your emotions (*'awāṭif wa mashā'ir*) and sensibilities (*iḥsās*). You feel a kind of comfort and relief (*tanfīs*), a calm (*rāḥā*), a kind of catharsis (*kathrāsīs*): this is *intishā'*. If I am a Muslim, when I listen to the Quran I feel this relief (*nashwa*). But things must not stop at this feeling, as so often happens. It must be transformed into part of one's practical reality.

Subhi is concerned that sermons are being listened to for a momentary experience of catharsis, enthusiasm, and excitement which leaves no traces in the listener's behavior once the experience is over. As with Fawzi Sa'id above, Subhi is not advocating a rationalist, academic approach to preaching. In fact, he was quite critical of other *khuṭabā'*, whose intellectualist approaches succeeded neither in grabbing the attention of an audience nor in stirring their pious passions. Rather, he as well as most other *khuṭabā'* saw the problem as that of rooting (*raskh*) knowledge in the hearts of the listeners, binding their emotions to the appropriate objects, so as to move them toward pious comportment. Like many people I met, he worried that some contemporary preachers were playing on the emotions of their audience so as to bolster their own popularity, rather than sedimenting those emotions in their listeners in such a way as would incline them toward moral action. Knowledge of the events of Judgment Day, in other words, must not come to be assimilated to the categories of entertainment or information, the former linked to the wrong passions, the latter devoid of passions entirely. Rather, belief in these events, a requirement of Islam, must be passionately lived in one's daily actions.

## Musical Emotions

The problem of affective attunement was further elucidated for me through discussions I had about the difference between listening to cassette-sermons and listening to music. Many of the people I spoke to invoked the example of music in order to explain to me the kind of relaxed feeling one felt when listening to a sermon. One young man, Beha, described for me the workings of *tarhib* (the rhetorical style geared toward inciting fear in listeners), and then compared it to the experience of music:

When you hear about the tortures in the grave, you get scared (*tikhāf*), you fear God, then you start to feel regret (*nadm*), between you and yourself, for what you've done wrong (*al-ma'āṣī*), so you ask God for forgiveness (*istighfār*), you repent (*tauba*) and then you remember his mercy (*rahma*) and you feel calm (*rāḥā*), your chest opened (*munsharih al-ṣadr*), open to Islam, the Quran, God, and knowing that you will get close to him. When you listen to music, you also feel calm and relaxed (*rāḥā*), but that doesn't mean you're really close to God. With a sermon or Quran tape you can attain that closeness, so the feeling is better and greater than when you are just relaxed (*rāḥā*).

As noted above, many of the sermon-listeners I spoke with in Egypt suggested that, although they listened to taped sermons as a means to ethical improvement, there were also times when, feeling tired or tense, they might choose a music tape over a sermon or Quran recording. All three were understood to bring one to a state of relaxation. Yet, as Beha's comment begins to suggest, there is a key distinction to be drawn between the two experiences. As opposed to music, the sermon sets in motion a moral (and, as I have suggested above, bodily) progression from fear, to regret, asking for forgiveness, repentance, and leading eventually to a sense of closeness with God, an experience that was described to me through terms such as *inshirāḥ al-ṣadr* (opening of the heart or chest), *iṭmīnān* (tranquility), and *sakīna* (stillness). This progression constantly reappeared in the comments of the people I worked with in Cairo. Ahmed, for example,

told me: "If a Muslim sees hell close to him [through a good *khaṭīb*], he won't find peace until he asks forgiveness for his errors (*dhumūb*), repents (*yatūb*), and returns humbly and tearfully to God." Such is the movement which a listener's body/soul, one learned in the physiological dispositions I discussed above, makes under the guidance of a skillful *khaṭīb*. Importantly, this is not the *rāḥā* (calm) produced by soft music, but rather, a moral state conceptually articulated within the traditions of Islamic self-discipline. As I am suggesting, such states have far more to do with embodied capacities of gesture, feeling, and speech than with obedience to rules or belief in doctrine.

## The Dance of Words

The kind of attention and general attitude with which people listen to taped sermons was a frequent point of debate not only among the *khuṭabā'* I discuss above but also among many of those who listened to cassette-sermons. Many people in Egypt listen to sermon tapes while engaged in some other routine activity, such as driving a taxi, working as a waiter at a neighborhood café or cooking a meal, as was common among the mothers and sisters of the men I knew. Despite such styles of usage, however, many argued that the degree of ethical benefit a listener achieves through sermon audition depended on the level of concentration he or she applied to the act. As Ahmed, who I mentioned earlier, told me: "When you listen with humility (*khushū*), correctly and truly, and when you understand each word, then you truly benefit (*fāida*). You feel relieved, that your sins will be forgiven. But if you listen as one would read a newspaper, distractedly or indifferently, which many do, then the benefit is much less."

The fact that people listen with greater or lesser degrees of attentiveness, while an important point empirically, tells us little in itself about the kind of activity someone is engaged in when listening to a sermon. For example, people who attend the mosque on Friday also listen to sermons with differing degrees and modes of attention, some daydreaming, some held by the murmuring sound of a *khaṭīb*'s

voice, some following with critical scrutiny the arguments being made. The fact that some of these ways of attending to a sermon would be recognized by many Muslims today as wrong points to the existence of a set of normative standards which define what a correct performance by a listener entails, and against which incorrect performances may be identified and measured (what J. L. Austin, referring to speech acts, describes as the act's "felicity conditions": the variable circumstances that secure the success of an utterance (1975 [1962]: 12–24)). An act, in other words, is not determined by what happens to be in someone's consciousness at the moment of its execution, though this may bear on the degree to which the act is successful. Rather, an act (such as "listening to a sermon") must be described in terms of the conventions which make it meaningful as a particular kind of activity, one enacted for certain reasons and in accord with certain standards of excellence and understood as such by those who perform and respond to it. This point was repeatedly stressed by the people I worked with: one may listen to a taped sermon as one would read a newspaper, watch television, or hear popular music, but the ethical benefit of such a listening will be correspondingly lower.

The men I worked with often made a distinction between the verb commonly used for "hearing," *sam'*, and two other terms that suggest a more deliberate act: *anṣat*, meaning to incline one's ear toward, or pay close attention, and *aṣghā*, to be silent in order to listen. Quranic recitation, as was often the case, provided the point of reference for explaining the meaning of these terms.<sup>7</sup> This is not surprising, given both the pervasive use of Quranic verses in the sermon, and the sermon's emphasis on acts of remembrance (*dhikr*), supplication (*du'a*), giving thanks (*shukr*), and expressing fearful and loving respect for God (*al-taqwā*). As it was described to me, "listening with close attention" (*al-inṣāt*) is a complex sensory skill, one opposed to mere hearing (*sam'*), understood as a passive and spontaneous receptivity. Such is the kind of attentiveness appropriate to those moments when one's heart is inclined toward God. Muhammed Subhi echoed this view from his perspective as a *khaṭīb* con-

cerned about the attention of his audience: "I may get you to focus on what I'm saying and comprehend it, but without getting you to feel emotionally disposed (*tata'atāf*) toward it. A *khuṭba* (sermon) must lead an audience beyond mere hearing (*al-sam'*) to where they pay close attention (*yunṣatu*), such that the words actually turn over (*tanqalab*) their behavior."

This skill of careful listening has been most fully elaborated in the large body of literature on the art of Quranic recitation. While these classical texts provide instruction in a particular tradition of vocal performance, the performance itself is understood to involve a kind of audition, inasmuch as a skilled reciter should attempt to "hear the speech of God from God and not from [the voice of the reciter] himself" (al-Ghazali 1984:80). Among the demands of this audition cited by the eleventh-century theologian A. H. al-Ghazali are both practices of mental concentration and a variety of affective, gestural, and verbal responses whereby the reader or listener assumes the ethical dispositions corresponding to the recited or audited verses: humility, awe, regret, fear, and so on. In his manual on recitational technique, al-Ghazali writes:

During the Quran reading, when the Quran reader reads a verse on glorification of God, he will glorify Him and magnify Him. When he reads a verse on supplication [to God] and forgiveness [of Him], he will supplicate and seek forgiveness. If he reads a verse telling of any hopeful matter he will pray to God [for it]. But if he reads a verse on a frightening matter, he will seek the protection [of God]. (1984: 48)

In another section, al-Ghazali further elaborates this in terms of "fulfilling the right" (*al-ḥaqq*) of the verses:

When the Quran reader reads a verse necessitating prostration before God, he will prostrate himself. Likewise, if he hears [the recitation of] a verse of prostration by another person he will prostrate himself when the reciter prostrates. He will prostrate only when he is physically and ritually clean. . . . Its perfect form for him to utter *Allahu akbār* [God is Great!] and then prostrate himself and, while prostrate, supplicate with that



supplication which is appropriate to the verse of prostration recited. (1984: 44–5)

The word of God, as we see from the instructions al-Ghazali provides, demands a kind of dialogue from the reciter/listener. The receiver must not only seek to understand God's message, in the cognitive sense, but must assume the attitudes and perform the acts that correspond to that understanding. As scholars of the contemporary practice of Quranic recitation have described, these principles still provide the basis for training in the art as it is taught today (Denny 1980, 1981; Nelson 1985). A recent rector of al-Azhar University, Abd al-Halim Mahmud, echoes this in a *fatwa* (non-binding legal opinion) advising people that while reading the Quran, "they pause and respond to words by enacting what is called for, asking forgiveness, regretting their misdeeds, imploring salvation when reading verses of warning or retribution (*adhāb*), and so on" (al-Azhar 1988). It is this quite complex form of sensory engagement that also informs the practice of listening to sermons.

Importantly, the forms of comportment and concentration associated with Quranic audition and recitation are not simply transferred over into the sermon context as a set of guidelines or rules. More fundamentally, the cultivation of these skills stands as a necessary prerequisite for the sermon-listener to be able to follow, be moved by, and derive benefit from the sermon. Training in such skills begins in earliest infancy, inasmuch as the interwoven practices of audition, memorization, and recitation are central to the ethical upbringing of children in Egypt. In addition, the Quran, as well as other traditional Islamic genres, such as *ahādīth*, *qaṣaṣ* (Islamic stories), and *sīyār* (biographies of Muhammed and other early Muslim figures), are woven into much of daily life, with verses often punctuating the succession of devotional, ritual, public, and family activities occurring in the course of a day (Eickelman 1978; Graham 1987; Schimmel 1994). Moreover, just as individual Quranic verses invoke ethical responses, so also do ethical situations often give rise to the citation of verses, whether in acts of giving advice,

instructing children, making decisions, or arguing a point, particularly among those Muslims more observant of the demands of piety.

### Listening as Performance

The proper audition of a sermon on tape entails a complex variety of activities. To begin, the sermon necessitates a voiced or sub-vocal accompaniment, as listeners are repeatedly required to enact a range of illocutionary acts. The preamble is a collective utterance composed of acts of remembrance (*dhikr*), praise (*thanā*), and supplication (*du'a*). While it is the *khaṭīb* who provides the guiding vocalization for these acts, it is incumbent on the audience to accompany him in this with their hearts, an act that often involves the mumbled or whispered utterance of the appropriate devotional formulas. Shaykh Kishk (d. 1996) – a widely popular Egyptian preacher during the 1970s and 1980s – on occasions called on his audience to repeat word for word the invocations he recited, or more frequently, had them repeat one phrase over and over (such as "I seek forgiveness from God"), exploiting the pathetic momentum such rhythmic repetitions evoke in an audience.

Listeners also must be ready to pronounce the *basmala* ("In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful") each time the *khaṭīb* begins to recite a verse from the Quran, and call for prayers upon the Prophet ("God bless him and grant him salvation") each time his name is mentioned. Additionally, throughout a sermon listeners are frequently enjoined to vocalize a wide variety of supplicatory locutions, or *du'a*, that relate to the argument the *khaṭīb* is making or the situation he is describing. For example, in warning his audience about the dangers of gossip (*ghība*) or backbiting (*namīma*), a *khaṭīb* will call on them to implore God for forgiveness from moral error (*istighfār*). When lecturing them on a topic such as proper burial technique, he will have them ask God to increase their knowledge, to lessen the agonies of dying, or to illuminate the darkness of their graves. While discussing the plight of Muslims in Bosnia, he will pause to

have the audience ask protection for Muslims who face affliction elsewhere in the world, for the defeat of their enemies, for the strength to persevere the hardships they suffer. The popular *khaṭīb* Omar Abd al-Kafi punctuates his sermons at rapid-fire intervals with such enjoinders, continuously recruiting his listeners to vocally and morally participate in the oratory he performs. In the context of cassette audition, listeners may respond with clearly audible utterances, with whispers, or simply with a silent movement of the lips.

The final section of a sermon is composed solely of such acts of supplication (*du'ā'*), strung one after another by the *khaṭīb* in a rhythmic crescendo that gathers emotional momentum as it proceeds. During the live performance at the mosque, this is when the pathos of the audience reaches its peak, and it is not uncommon at this point for the entire assembly to weep without restraint. While a particularly moving *du'ā'* will also lead to tears among cassette-listeners and wet eyes are quite common, without the emotional dynamics put in play by a large crowd, the intensity of the experience is relatively less. Nonetheless, many of the men I worked with appreciated this section of the sermon for the ethical-emotional progression it could initiate, leaving them with a sense of closeness to God and the accompanying experience of relief and tranquility (*iṭmīnān*, *sakīna*).

As I have argued, this should not be thought of through a generic, psychophysiological model of catharsis, but as an experience of moral relief whose specific contours have been honed through practices of ethical discipline, such as sermon audition. The listener, for example, must have cultivated the capacity for humility (*khushū'*) and regret (*nadm*): these are both felicity conditions (in Austin's sense) for the act of supplication as well as conditions for the body's experience of *iṭmīnān*, the relief and kinesthetic relaxation that follows – via repentance (*nadm* and *istighfār*) – from such an act. If these conditions are not met, then the listener will not be able to adopt the attitudes and modes of concentration upon which successful and beneficial acts of audition revolve. One's listening, in short, will be impaired.

Much of the substance of sermons is drawn from those pieces of text which form the common stock of cultural wisdom: Quranic verses, *ahādīth*, biographies of the Prophet, accounts of the lives of early Muslims, and various traditional story genres that have been elaborated on the basis of these primary sources. Knowledge of these Islamic narrative forms, as the sermon-listeners of my study visibly demonstrated in explaining the sermons to me, consists not simply in the ability to recite a given text, but also in performing its emotional, gestural, and kinesthetic contours, the bodily conditions of the text as memory. While listening to taped sermons with these men, they would often interrupt with comments and gestures intended to help me understand the particular *ḥadīth* or story being recounted by the *khaṭīb*, sometimes stopping the tape to elaborate in more detail or introduce relevant passages from the Quran or other traditional textual sources. They all brought a common expressive-gestural repertoire to their explanations. Thus, in the context of recounting a *ḥadīth*, the narrowness of the grave (a common sermon topic) is expressed by a drawing up of the shoulders; the exit of the soul from the neck of a good man is distinguished from that of an infidel by the smoothness of the hand movement tracing the passage, the relaxed muscles of the face and hand, tightened and contorted in the case of the infidel; encounters with respected Muslim figures in heaven are accompanied by the joyful relaxation of the chest, the upward glance of delight. The events surrounding Judgment Day, a very common sermon topic for which many *khuṭabā'* have produced extensive cassette series (drawn either from sermons or mosque lessons), all have a strong gestural component: grasping of the book of one's deeds from above the right or left shoulder, the testifying of the individual parts of one's body as to the deeds they have committed, the binding of the hands by the guards of hell. While these stories all have a striking visual intensity, inasmuch as they are rarely given visual representation, their most visible aspect lies in the gestures and emotional expressions which accompany their verbal performance.

### Sermon Reception and Ethical Sedimentation

As should now be clear, sermon oratory recruits the body of the listener in multiple ways. Beyond its referential content, the sermon can be seen as a technique for the training of the body's gestures and affects, its physiological textures and colorations, its rhythms and styles of expression. The stories impart not simply moral lessons but ethical habits, the organization of sensory and motor skills necessary for inhabiting the world in a manner considered by those I worked with to be appropriate for Muslims. In learning the many performances involved in a sermon, such as extracting the soul of a sinner with a labored and trembling gesture of the hand rising above the neck, one acquires the affective-gestural experiences that make possible – in the view of the sermon-listeners I knew – the practices, modes of sociability, and attitudinal repertoires underlying a devout Islamic community. The task is similar to that of an actor who, when playing the part of King Lear, must hone the strained gait, the movement of the hands, the manner of breathing, and the contortions of the face that express the tortured soul of one so betrayed. Note that I am not referring to the symbolic coding of the body, the attribution of meaning to its surfaces, movements, and speech. Rather, it is more like what rhetoricians called “attitude,” a kind of “non self-referential mode of awareness” (Dreyfus 1994: 58) not reducible to mental states or symbolic processes.

Notably, the young men I knew in Cairo did not always agree with each other in regard to the truth-status of some of the accounts commonly found in sermons. It was common, for example, that one person would refer to a narrative element (such as the throne of God) as a symbol (*ramz* or *kināya*), while another would claim it as “literally real” (*ḥaqīqī*, *mish majāzi*) though unknowably so (*bila kaif*). A university student named Sayf, for instance, would often describe those parts of a sermon he understood to be somewhat far-fetched as “metaphors”: for example, the writing of the word “infidel” on the forehead of the Antichrist, or the blackening of the heart that

follows from sin. Other men, on the other hand, as well as most of the *khuṭabā'* themselves, insisted that these were statements of literal truth. Yet, despite these differences of opinion and comprehension, all of the young men I worked with would mimetically represent the narratives from which these elements were drawn in more or less the same way, including the corresponding facial and postural expressions of fear, delight, or tranquility. Not to say that these differences of interpretation are insignificant. Indeed, arguments about the ontological status of Quranic references have been extremely consequential throughout Islamic history. What I am pointing to here is that, beneath the level of expressed belief and opinion, those I knew who participated in the fashion of sermon-listening shared a common substrate of embodied dispositions of the sort I have described as instrumental to the task of sermon audition. It is these ethical dispositions, I argue, more than a commitment to a normative rationality, that constitute the common ground upon which the discourses of tradition come to be articulated; the moral “reflexes” that make arguments about the status of Quranic references meaningful and worthy of engagement.

Of course, in the moment of listening to a sermon, one does not act out all of the gestures and movements corresponding to the particular account being narrated by the *khaṭīb*, nor vocalize each and every response solicited. Rather, and this an important part of my argument, an experiential knowledge of the gestural and emotive elements of the story constitute a condition for its ethical reception. That is to say, one is capable of hearing the sermon in its full ethical sense only to the extent one had cultivated the particular modes of sensory responsiveness that that discourse demands. The British philosopher R. G. Collingwood's description of the experience entailed in the reception of works of art is instructive here (1966[1938]: 139–53). Collingwood argues that we hear the sounds, colors, movements, and emotions that a composer has written into her music only insofar as we have an ear – and a body – trained in the sensibilities the composer brought to bear on her work (1966: 146–51). One does not hear “the raw

sound" and then elaborate upon it an imaginary experience of emotion and color. One simply "hears" the emotion and color. The sensibilities that allow one to do so are not something purely cognitive, but are rooted in the experience of the body as a whole, as a complex of culturally and historically honed sensory modalities.

Our common understanding of the kinds of synaesthetic experiences Collingwood is referring to here is that they are composed of two parts: an objective part, represented by the sensuous, audible element, and a subjective one, belonging not to the actual sounds but to something we create in our minds independently of what we hear. Collingwood argues that this distinction between a sensuous and an imaginary part is misleading. To become an object that can be retained and referred to, he argues, a sensation must be attended to by consciousness, an act that transforms that sensation into an idea, an object of the imagination. A person comes to consciously attend to particular stimuli in the course of becoming experienced or trained, and their reactions to those stimuli become patterned in accord with the particular form of life that training upholds, and subordinated to the practices and goals which define it. As Collingwood says, our sensations become "fitted into the fabric of our life instead of proceeding on their own way regardless of its structure" (1966 [1938]: 209). Thus, the "imaginary experience" of movement, color, touch, and emotion that occurs when we listen to music is not produced through the free creative activity of the mind, but rather, is grounded in the actual sensual experience of the body as a complex of culturally-honed perceptual capacities. Our sensory responses are similar to those of other listeners or viewers, and to those that the author of the work intended to produce in us, to the extent that our capacities of hearing or vision have been shaped within a shared disciplinary context. They possess a specific affective-volitional structure as a result of the practices by which we have been formed as a member of a specific community.

Collingwood's discussion of perception in terms of the integrated totality of the trained body has, despite obvious differences, certain

parallels with recent anthropological work inspired in the phenomenology of Merleau Ponty (Csordas 1990, 1994, 1999; Jackson 1983a, 1983b, 1989). Thomas Csordas, in particular, has provided us with a rich body of ethnographic work that explores how the socially informed body, by placing us in a determinant and preobjective relation to the world, "orchestrates" the culturally-specific objectifications produced through reflective practice. Yet, despite this common concern for the embodied character of action and perception, the analysis I have presented here departs sharply from the phenomenological approach Csordas has elaborated. Specifically, while Csordas has focused on identifying the preobjective foundations, or *habitus*, upon which a religious discourse erects its particular architecture, my own work has been concerned with the practical techniques (such as sermon audition) by which the bodily dispositions that underlie virtuous conduct are inculcated. That is, I have given less attention to how those dispositions have been objectified within the discourses of contemporary Islam and more to the techniques through which they have been inculcated both as sensory skills and moral habits.

Such an approach, for example, allows us to understand the distinction that cassette-sermon listeners would frequently make between a kind of hearing which only engages the mind (*al-'aql*) and one that stems from the heart (*al-qalb*). As we can now see, their use of this distinction is not simply grounded in a metaphorical conceit. Instead, they are pointing to two contrasting modes of sensory organization, one purely intellectual, the other ethical and grounded in Islamic disciplinary practices. To listen to an Islamic cassette-sermon with the heart means to bring to bear on it those sensory capacities honed within disciplinary contexts which allow one to "hear" (soulfully, emotionally, physically) what would escape a listener who applied only her "ear" or *al-'aql* (mind). At the same time, sermon audition is one of the means by which those capacities are developed and deepened.

The kind of ethical skills learned and deepened by the men I knew through taped-sermon audition (among other practices) are precisely

of the kind that worried Plato in *The Republic*. In his view, those performances which engaged an audience in ways which bypassed a reflective, philosophical understanding – such as poetry, theater, or song (or, in this instance, sermons) – had a power to impact on and mold individuals which rendered such arts especially dangerous. As a contemporary interpreter of Plato recently noted:

The problem with uncontrolled mimesis, as Plato sees it, is not just the character of the likenesses it brings into our presence. It is how these likenesses gradually insinuate themselves into the soul through the eyes and ears, without our being aware of it . . . It is as if eyes and ears offer painter and poet entry to a relatively independent cognitive apparatus, associated with the senses, through which mimetic images can bypass our knowledge and infiltrate the soul. (Burnyeat 1998: 8)

Recognizing the power of such arts to shape moral character, Plato advocated the prohibition of those performances which depicted human qualities not corresponding to the Athenian virtues he saw as foundational to the ideal city. Later Christian thinkers, in contrast, emphasized the positive contribution of such embodied forms of knowledge. Arguing along lines much closer to those suggested by the men I worked with, Christian theologians from Aquinas to Luther to John Henry Newman have asserted that a certain disposition of the passions was necessary in order to assess the validity of claims for the truth of scripture; that virtues such as gratitude, humility, and love of God have an epistemic value, allowing one to evaluate evidence for the authority of the Bible in the proper light (Wainwright 1995: 50–2).

### Conclusion

In undertaking the practices of cassette-discipline I have described here, sermon-listeners sought to reconstruct their own knowledge, emotions, and sensibilities in accord with models of Islamic moral personhood. I have chosen to analyze this practice, less in terms of its ideological content – i.e., its

role in the dissemination of rules of conduct or the indoctrination of politico-religious subjects – than in its relation to the formation of a sensorium: the visceral substrate enabling of the particular form of life that those who undertook the practice aspired to. Practices of this kind do not impart mastery of a specific cultural activity, but perceptual habits that incline one toward certain acts, discourses, and gestures. As opposed to the sort of technical skills acquired in the course of learning, say, the game of chess – skills that inhabit a highly circumscribed arena of practice – the ethical capacities cultivated by the men I worked with were applicable across many contexts and social domains. In doing so, they opened up what Merleau-Ponty referred to as the “antepredicative unity of the world and of our life” (1962: xviii), rendering this world as a space of moral action and the actor as a moral being.

In light of the analysis presented here, I want to suggest we think about traditions, not simply in terms of doctrines or discourses, but as grounded upon perceptual skills – prediscursive modes of appraisal – shaped within practices for which language and discourse is essential, but not reducible to these. I do not refer here to a general model of enculturation – the idea that in inhabiting a culture or class position one acquires (as it were, unconsciously) the sensibilities that characterize that culture or socioeconomic location – but to self-reflexive practices specifically geared to the inculcation of perceptual habits. In speaking of such embodied capacities as grounded in and sustaining of the traditions of Islam, however, I am not suggesting that they constitute a universal and unchanging fundament beneath the actual historical and contemporary heterogeneity of Islamic societies. Clearly, the styles of narration and argument employed by *khutabā* today, as well as the spaces and times within which the practice of audition occurs, have been shaped by social and political modernity – by the institutional structures and practices of national citizenship and global market capitalism. The perceptual capacities listeners seek to cultivate are mediated, on the one hand, by functional possibilities of cassette technology, such as mobility, replay, and dis-

continuous listening; and on the other, by the discursive conventions of the modern print and televisual-based public sphere. In this sense, the sensibilities honed through this practice do not inhabit and reproduce a static historical edifice, ever identical with itself. As Asad has argued, to conceive of tradition in this way is inadequate:

An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to particular Islamic practice in the present . . . [I]t will be the practitioners' conceptions of what is *apt performance*, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form. (1986: 14–15)

What makes the practice of cassette-sermon audition part of an Islamic tradition is not its exact conformity to a fixed model, but the fact that, in its contemporary organization, assessment, and performance, the practice relies on authoritative discourses and historical exemplars embedded in that tradition (Asad 1999: 189–90; 1993: 210–11).

My argument here is that, beyond the discursive practices of historical articulation emphasized in Asad's remark, we should interrogate traditions in terms of continuities of disciplined sensibility and the practices by which these are created and revised across changing historical contexts. My suggestion, in other words, is that Benjamin's analysis of how the perceptual regime ushered in by

modernity renders traditional worlds silent, invisible, in short, imperceptible, need be complemented by a recognition of the way in which practitioners of a tradition, through innovation and adaptation, attempt to cultivate and sustain the sensory conditions, the modes of attention and inattention, that make that tradition viable within modern contexts (see Seremetakis 1994: 1–22). As in the practice described here, the possibilities for such innovation are often rooted in modernity itself, in the social, political, economic, and technological elements that define the modern. Thus, to cite a rather obvious instance, cassette technology makes the acquisition of a kind of traditional knowledge possible within the times and spaces of modern urban existence, one where the sort of long-term study, immersion, and apprenticeship characteristic of Islamic pedagogical practices has become inaccessible and impractical to most people. To speak of "the modern" as an enabling condition for "traditional practices" in this way rubs against the grain of our (still) normative understandings of these concepts.<sup>8</sup> The idea of a distinct temporal structure that binds together the constellation of modern elements gives way to a fractured historical space composed of heterogeneous practices, objects, and structures of varying temporal determinations. As the example presented here suggests, this plurality need be explored not simply in terms of languages, discourses, or practices, but also through the disciplined sensibilities against which these become articulable.

## NOTES

- 1 For an excellent discussion of women's participation in the Islamic Revival in Egypt, including the ways new Islamic media forms are being put to use by women, see Mahmood 2001.
- 2 The most interesting and comprehensive works on mosque sermons in the Middle East are those of Richard Antoun 1989 and Patrick Gaffney 1994.
- 3 The reference here is to the Islamic Group (*al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya*), a militant Islamist organization in Egypt.

- 4 On Islamic moral philosophy see Izutsu 1966, 1985; Fakhry 1983; Sherif 1975.
- 5 All translations of the Quran are from Muhammad Asad 1980.
- 6 For two interesting discussions of emotion in relation to poetic practice in Arabic contexts, see Lila Abu-Lughod 1986 and Steve Caton 1990.
- 7 The most interesting works in English on the topic of Quranic recitation are Denny (1980, 1981), Nelson (1985), Graham (1985, 1987), and Gade (1999).
- 8 As should be clear, I do not refer here to the sort of historical sleight-of-hand by