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2009

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“A Light in Every Home”: Huda TV’s Articulation of Orthodox Sunni Islam in the  
Global Mediascape

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“A Light in Every Home”: Huda TV’s Articulation of Orthodox Sunni Islam in the  
Global Mediascape

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2009

## Dedication

بسم الله

الحمد لله فاطر السماوات والأرض. المحي المميت, الغفور الرحيم. فلا حول و لا قوة إلا

بالله, و لا شفاعة إلا بإذن الله. اسأل الله أن يصلي و يبارك على نبيه الكريم, آخر

المرسلين, محمد ابن عبد الله, في هذا الذكر و كل ما يليه.

In the name of Allah

All praise is due to Allah, the creator of the heavens and earth, the giver of life and death,

the most forgiving, the most merciful. Verily, there is no power or might except with

Allah, and there is no intercession except with His permission. I ask Allah to exalt and

bless his noble prophet and final Messenger, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, in this instance

and all those that follow.

### Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my parents for their immeasurable support and generosity – the foundations upon which this effort and all those that preceded it were built. Next, there is no expression of gratitude that can honor the selflessness and sacrifice of my wife, Kai. I am truly blessed to share my life with such a remarkable woman, who has patiently endured the long years of this degree and never yielded in her support for my intellectual and professional endeavors. I am also indebted to my children who have sacrificed many hours of time with their father so this project could reach fruition.

The Department of Radio-Television-Film at The University of Texas at Austin has provided me with a challenging and welcoming intellectual home for the past eight years. I am particularly grateful to the co-supervisors of this dissertation, Karin Wilkins and John Downing, who always allowed me to speak in my own voice as they helped me to grow and mature as a scholar. This project would not have been possible without their patience, insight, and professionalism. Special appreciation is also due to my other committee members – Akel Kahera, Joseph Straubhaar, and S. Craig Watkins – for their helpful advice throughout my academic career. I also wish to thank the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education, the Binational Fulbright Commission in Egypt, the Institute of International Education, and the U.S. Department of State. They provided invaluable support for this research. Finally, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the management and staff of Huda TV.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

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The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic growth in Middle Eastern satellite television. The corresponding diversification of content and restructuring of media power in the region raise many important questions for research. This dissertation is a case study of Huda TV, an English-language Islamic satellite channel broadcasting from Cairo, Egypt. The author collected participant observation data as an employee of the channel in 2005-2006. The primary research question asks how Huda TV asserts an Islamic presence in the satellite television arena. Many areas of media research, including the broad historical debates on culture and power, contemporary conceptions of hybridity, and the analysis of media institutions in the Middle East, share an overarching secular bias. Consequently, this dissertation plots out relevant bodies of theoretical and empirical research that both inform and constrain the kind of questions that can be asked about Huda TV as a Muslim institution. With a conscious effort to overcome the reductionist secularism of media studies, this work offers empirical data on the manner in which orthodox Sunni Islam operates within the global mediascape – the increasingly

integrated, geographically expansive, and globally accessible media environment of which satellite television is one important component. This dissertation first examines the concrete manner in which Huda TV attempts to define Islamic satellite television as a distinct set of content and practices. Next, it turns to the channel's engagement with dominant discourses and bodies of knowledge that may compete with Islam for ultimate authority. Finally, it examines the impact of cultural and political-economic factors on the channel's work. This dissertation offers original insights into the study of contemporary Islam and contributes to significant, enduring questions of media research.

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### Note on Arabic Usage

This dissertation employs a simplified transliteration style for Arabic. The commonly used terms mentioned herein are readily identifiable to Arabic speakers and students of Islamic studies. However, they do not employ extensive diacritical marks or phonetic symbols to reflect the difference pronunciations of some consonants and vowels in the Arabic language. For instance, the English letter “t” will be used to refer to two variants of the sound “t” in Arabic, which correspond to two distinct letters. The vowels are limited to “a”, “i”, and “u”, reflecting the three basic vowel phonemes of Arabic. However, they do not indicate long or short vowels. This approach is accessible to non-Arabic speakers and does not sacrifice clarity. The author would like to thank Dr. Hamid Ouali, Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee for his advice on this matter.

All quotations from the Quran are taken from the Sahih International translation (Riyadh: Abulqasim Publishing House/Al-Muntada Al-Islami, 1997) with minor modifications by the author.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Driving west beyond Cairo's dense urban core, one encounters a landscape of highways, luxury hotels, megastores, golf courses, gated communities, and amusement parks. Amidst these fixtures of leisure, privilege, and entertainment sits a complex of buildings that makes up the Egyptian Media Production City. Its giant satellite dish transmits programming via NileSat to the entire Middle East, North Africa, and even parts of southern Europe. Within its hallways, one may encounter Egyptian government officials, austere religious scholars, or teenagers flocking to a music video shoot. In fall 2005, a new English-language Islamic channel called Huda TV started broadcasting from Media Production City. Its slogan – “A Light in Every Home” – represents the channel's core mission: to communicate the message of Islam to a broad global audience. In the Quran, “light” is invoked as a symbol of guidance and faith. Huda TV represents a contemporary effort to convey that ancient message of light, albeit through the incandescent glow of the television screen.

This dissertation is a case study of Huda TV. At present, the channel broadcasts to North America, Europe, Africa, and large swaths of Asia. It is also viewable through streaming video at the Huda TV website ([www.huda.tv](http://www.huda.tv)), and several programs are featured on [youtube.com](http://youtube.com) and other content sharing sites. The head office of Huda TV is located in Saudi Arabia, which is also the source of the channel's private financing. The author conducted participant-observation research at Huda TV in 2005-2006 during its first year of operation. With a diverse range of colleagues that included several other Americans, religiously educated Egyptians, and local media professionals, the author

observed and contributed to a formative period in the channel's history and a unique moment in the emerging project of Islamic satellite television.

Calling on Arjun Appadurai's conception of globalization (Appadurai 1990), Huda TV represents a unique intersection of ethnoscapes (Americans, Saudis, Egyptians, and Muslims of other cultural backgrounds); financescapes (abundant Saudi money, cheap Egyptian labor, expensive American cultural capital); ideoscapes (post-colonial conceptions of modernity, Western converts to Islam); technoscapes (high end, increasingly accessible means of content distribution); and mediascapes (the articulation of orthodox Sunni Islam to a global audience through satellite television) (296). Viewing Huda TV in this light, the channel's theoretical richness is quite apparent; it represents an instance of hybridity, the evolving power of the nation state, the religious influence of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world, the cultural power of Americans as media producers, the dynamism of new media in the Arab world, the endurance of existing power structures in the region, and alternative, global television that is independent of dominant corporate media firms. At some level, all of these factors will be considered in this dissertation. However, Huda TV also represents something else. Its core identity and mission cannot be understood by employing the various categories and conceptions of academic analysis mentioned above. According to the shared vision of the channel's donors, managers, and staff, Huda TV is a product of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy. Its mission, programs, and work procedures are all conceived as an embodiment of the core religious principles and legal injunctions of the Muslim faith. In other words, although the vast global audiences, high tech media production, and use of English seems a far cry

from the mosque courtyards and scrolls of classical Islamic scholarship, Huda TV very much defines itself as a product of that tradition. How did this come about?

Over the past two centuries, the Muslim world has witnessed major upheavals as a result of European ascendancy and the consequent emergence of a modernity with dramatic power imbalances. Over this time, Islamic scholarship, the historical crucible of orthodoxy, has managed to survive while coping with significant challenges.

Independent endowments that used to fund religious education have been annexed by state ministries. The classical learning circles in mosques have moved to concrete classrooms in modern universities. The influence that religious scholars used to exercise over the political authorities in Muslim lands has been curtailed, with unabashedly secular, nationalist movements taking hold of power. Muslim scholars have responded in variety of ways. Some have sought to reinterpret Islam's sacred texts in light of modern scientific knowledge. Others have distanced themselves from the material trappings of modernity to preserve, as much as possible, the type of world that existed in the past. Others have willfully served the nation-building projects of Muslim states. Conversely, various social movements have emerged calling for a return to classical conceptions of Islamic law. Some have attempted to do so through political activism within modern states. Others have tried to foment revolution and overthrow oppressive governments or foreign occupiers. And some have adopted the very modern technique of political resistance known as terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

Through the complex interaction of orthodoxy with the unprecedented social, political, and cultural realities of modernity, a crisis of authority has emerged in the

Muslim world. This crisis is not characterized by the abandonment of Islam's sacred texts or legal tradition, as many media pundits wistfully allege. Rather, this crisis manifests in the contested application of orthodoxy to the unprecedented challenges and complexity of modernity.<sup>2</sup> This crisis is summed up well in the words of Hasan al-Turabi, the famous Sudani intellectual and political leader, who describes his conception of *tajdid* (religious renewal) as follows: "God, praised and exalted, does not let us choose our new challenges. Instead, he expects us to choose our responses to those challenges" (Esposito and Voll 2001, 127). Like many Muslim scholars, Turabi argues that the process of renewal is ideally achieved by exercising independent judgment (known as *ijtihad* in classical Islamic jurisprudence) based on, and with a fluency in, the core Islamic sacred texts and the extensive scholarly tradition (127). This concept is not unique to the modern age. In fact, Islamic history is replete with reformers who worked toward the same goal.<sup>3</sup> However, the modern age presents a particularly unprecedented, and therefore highly contested, set of challenges. It is worth mentioning a few of particular relevance to this dissertation. First, there is the rise of modernity under European ascendancy, a dynamic that continues to impact the political, cultural, social, and economic life of Muslim societies. Next, there is the rapid development of science and technology that not only constitutes a means to exert power, but also represents bodies of knowledge that compete for the ultimate authority accorded to religion. Finally, the political structures and social complexity of today's historically Muslim world presents unprecedented contexts within which classical Islamic scholarship must operate.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the religious discourses that emerge from these unprecedented conditions will be referred to as *Islamism*. While this term is often deployed in reference to only a limited range of Muslim movements (e.g. those seeking to gain political power), its use here refers to the aforementioned crisis of authority and contested application of Islam. In this sense, Islamism can be defined as: *the body of thought and associated political, social, and cultural activism that seeks an authentic and effective application of Islam within today's world*. This definition is useful because it (a) eliminates the political stigma of the term, which is often used as a dismissive gesture against various politically radical Muslim movements; (b) unites a variety of Islamic discourses under a common historical, intellectual, and strategic dilemma: how to understand the collapse of Muslim ascendancy and precipitate an Islamic revival; and (c) recognizes a distinction between Islam – the orthodox system of beliefs and religious practices – and the contested application of Islam within complex, modern contexts. This latter point also honors the Islamic tradition as the repository of authority, but recognizes how spatial and temporal factors can inform the understanding and application of that tradition. In other words, Islamic orthodoxy is not simply dismissed and carelessly relativized.

As an institution that defines itself as an embodiment and representative of mainstream Sunni orthodoxy,<sup>4</sup> Huda TV is an illustrative instance of this Islamist project at work. Its mission is to convey the authoritative message of Islam to English-speaking audiences. However, as will be evident in the chapters that follow, this mission is deeply impacted by the channel's social, cultural, and political contexts. The channel's

application of Islam amidst these varied influences will be drawn into sharp focus. In the process, this dissertation will contribute to the existing literature on transnational media, television in the Middle East, and enduring questions about the relationship between culture and power. It will also contribute to a deeper understanding of Islamism by investigating the application of Sunni Islamic scholarship to the world of satellite television. That said, Huda TV is only one slice of a much broader world of contemporary Islam. This dissertation provides rich, illustrative data of a single case but it cannot be applied across the full spectrum of Muslim thought.

These prefatory remarks on the general parameters of contemporary Islam are necessary to firmly situate the channel in its own intellectual milieu. This is important, because across media studies literature, there is an overarching secular reductionism that limits the kind of questions that might be asked about an institution like Huda TV. Nevertheless, academic literature does identify many of the crucial factors and phenomena that impact the channel's work. Recognizing this framework of inquiry, the primary research question of this dissertation asks: **How does Huda TV assert an Islamic presence in the satellite television arena?** This question places the dissertation within an existing body of empirical research on satellite television, and it promises significant contributions to existing debates in communication theory. At the same time, this question invokes the term "Islamic" as a critical concept whose meaning will take shape through the examination of Huda TV as a contemporary expression of Muslim orthodoxy. By avoiding the pre-emptive and dismissive conceptions of religion – and

Islam in particular – that color a great deal of academic work, this dissertation will contribute original insights and new challenges to media theory.

Chapter two offers an overview of relevant literature in media studies, first through a discussion of overarching theoretical issues, and then by examining the range of empirical work of direct significance to Huda TV. The first section identifies key issues of communication theory, including emerging conceptions of Islamic media. However, it also traces the secular bias that runs through the literature. This overarching bias is referred to in this dissertation as the *humanist consensus*. This consensus is not simple or singular. However, it does identify those beliefs, values, and ideals upon which media research is centered. This does not preclude overlap or agreement between humanism and religion – or in this case, Islam – but it does identify the way that certain concepts are ubiquitously and uncritically deployed in a manner that prohibits the examination of alternative belief systems. The second section of chapter two examines research on media, particularly television, in the Middle East, along with more general studies of Islamic media. Overall, this chapter helps to identify key theoretical concepts: hybridity, the question of cultural hegemony and independence, authoritarianism and free expression, among others. It also plots out areas of omission in media studies literature, thereby opening space for a critical engagement of Islamic orthodoxy.

Chapter three expands on the primary research questions for this dissertation and explains the methodology in detail. The primary research question is broken down into three areas. The first asks how the very concept of “Islamic satellite television” is conceived at Huda TV. The second examines how the channel communicates its

religious message in relationship to other dominant global discourses – namely medical science and human rights. Finally, the third question investigates how the specific cultural and political-economic context of the channel impacts its work. With an extraordinary level of access, the researcher was able to carry out extensive participant observation research over the course of one year. This method ensured a rich range of data for the case study. Chapter three also explains the methodological justification for this approach, along with certain limitations in regards to both data collection and broader findings.

Chapter four explores how the concept of Islamic satellite television is conceived and practiced by Huda TV. The term “Islamic” is sometimes deployed in an ambiguous and even sloppy manner within academic discourse, referring to everything from cultural formations to religious traditions to political identities. This chapter examines how the channel defines Islamic television as a lawful alternative to the largely unacceptable content that dominates satellite television. This perspective represents a conservative opinion within Sunni Muslim scholarship, but one that is reflected across a broad range of thought and sectarian affiliations. After examining the diverse range of programming at the channel and the manner in which its Islamic character is defined, this chapter turns to the processes of content regulation at Huda TV, particularly its attempts to honor Islamic law in the production process. However, it also raises the issue of how contextual factors, both the cultural milieu and political-economic structure, impact production decisions. This discussion raises important issues that will be examined with greater depth in subsequent chapters.

Chapter five analyzes the channel's engagement with dominant global discourses that compete with Islam as ultimate sources of knowledge and authority. First, it looks at the channel's engagement with modern medical science through the program *Health and Islam*. This program reveals the extent to which the terrain of epistemological authority remains hotly contested in the Muslim world, and also the various strategies used to defend orthodoxy against perceived challenges of modernity. The second half of the chapter examines the channel's reaction to the Danish cartoon crisis which erupted across the Muslim world during the author's time with the channel. After the publication by a Danish newspaper of cartoons defamatory toward the prophet Muhammad, outrage gripped the Muslim world and found its expression in various forms of activism, protest, and even violence. The channel responded to this issue by engaging the broader discourse of human rights. This section offers some useful contrasts between the channel's treatment of medical science, which is accorded enormous respect, and human rights, which is viewed as less threatening and more contested.

The cultural and political-economic context of Huda TV comes into focus with chapter six. One of the interesting aspects of Huda TV is the relative degree of creative authority bestowed on American staff members. At one level, this represents a pragmatic decision based on the channel's almost exclusive use of the English language in programming. However, it also represents the extent to which the American cultural experience is valued as a means to effectively convey the message of Islam. By examining the role of American staff in a variety of programs, this chapter challenges conceptions of Islam as a closed system, and also contributes to the ongoing discussion of

American cultural hegemony in global media. The second part of chapter six considers how Saudi ownership and the Egyptian context of production impact the channel's message and define the acceptable range of discourse. Ironically, while the American influence can be understood as enabling, the immediate context of production within the historically Muslim world often inhibits the channel's ability to voice its perspective on important contemporary issues. In this respect, Huda TV faces many of the same pressures of self-censorship as media in Egypt and across the Arab world.

This analysis presents an in-depth case study of one Muslim media institution. While contributing to ongoing debates in communication theory, it also raises important questions about the limits of existing research on Muslim media and contemporary Islam. In reference to the Islamist project outlined above, this dissertation does not take an adversarial or dismissive posture. Rather, it brings the tools of social analysis to bear on one Islamist institution. In this sense, it functions as a bridge between the discursive terrain of academia and at least one strain of the Islamic scholarly tradition.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, James Curran and Myung-Jin Park argue that the discipline of media studies has suffered from an inability to extend analysis beyond the American and European experience (Curran and Park, *Beyond Globalization Theory* 2000). Their work collects a variety of essays illustrating the vast diversity of media systems and the unique power structures that govern them. In many ways, this dissertation responds to their call, offering a detailed case study analysis of one non-Western media entity.

While valuing diversity, Curran and Park are also eager to avoid rootless relativism. They argue that “In making the case for de-Westernizing media studies, we are not suggesting that normative values have only a zonal application. On the contrary, the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity seem to us to have a universal validity.”(15) Unfortunately, in proscribing all that falls outside of these humanist values, the call to de-Westernize media studies falls short. Surely, the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity cannot be deemed exclusively “Western.” The expansion and coordination of global social movements in recent decades proves that these humanist values, though perhaps rooted in Western thought, have been effectively and authentically globalized. Curran and Park thus articulate a *humanist consensus* that is prevalent in academic discourse, accommodating to several types of geographic and cultural diversity, while uncritically excluding all that falls outside of its boundaries. So what of those media practices, or even broader social movements and traditions, that stand apart from liberty, equality, and solidarity? From “empowerment” and “democracy”? Is it possible to include

ideological, rather than cultural or geographic, alternatives in the de-Westernization of media studies?

Huda TV is not an “Islamic” channel simply in the sense that its staff is composed of Muslims, or that it is culturally linked to historically Muslim peoples and lands. It is “Islamic” in its advocacy for Islam as the ideal, universal way of life. And while this mission is not wholly antagonistic to the humanist values identified by Curran and Park, it does not inscribe them with ultimate authority, or a priori virtue. Beyond the “universality” of Huda TV’s Islamic mission, the channel is also *hybrid* in its multicultural staff makeup and use of English as the primary language. In fact, it is fair to say that the channel is, in many respects, “Western.” So how does the singular Islamic mission relate to the channel’s cultural plurality? Is the channel an aberration from the orthodox Islamic tradition? This dissertation investigates such questions by stepping back from the humanist consensus that characterizes so much of academic literature. In doing so, it engages Huda TV within its own cultural and theological framework while offering a range of unique contributions to the field of media studies.

Existing academic literature does not provide a neat and singular framework for this type of analysis. How can Huda TV be categorized? Does it represent a region-specific phenomenon associated with the rise of satellite TV and the erosion of state media control in the Middle East? As an English-language channel, is it more effectively categorized as an alternative form of media within the Anglophone world? And what about the channel’s conservative religious world view? Can this be aligned with the commonly unchallenged virtues asserted in media studies literature: democracy,

empowerment, liberation? Or is it the antithesis to humanism: regressive, fundamentalist, authoritarian? What about the channel's multicultural character, and its privileged inclusion of American staff? What does this say about the relationship of culture and power, the apparent American hegemony within an ostensibly non-Western institution driven by an Islamic mission? These questions all highlight active processes and phenomena in play at Huda TV. What makes this dissertation distinct is the formulation of a research question that centers on the crucial concern of the channel itself: how does Huda TV assert an Islamic presence within the satellite television arena? The focus on Islamic media, and how Huda TV embodies one articulation of that concept, is the axis around which other theoretical and empirical questions rotate.

This literature review consists of two sections – theory and empirical research – that are directly relevant to the case study of Huda TV. The theory section covers three areas. First, it offers a general overview of how the relationship between culture and power, in an international context, has been analyzed in media studies. This section helps to define the general spectrum of academic thought, particularly in regards to the humanist consensus. Specifically, it looks at (a) the way that American cultural hegemony has been analyzed over time; (b) how the academic discourse on hybridity applies to the case of Huda TV; and (c) the manner in which media institutions lying outside the humanist consensus are analyzed. Next, the literature review will turn to the work of Edward Said on media and Islam. The relevance and limitations of Said, in reference to this specific case, will be examined. Finally, this section examines the various ways that Islamic media theory has been conceived in academic literature.

The second section of this literature review – broken into two parts – examines empirical research of direct relevance to the case study of Huda TV. First, in light of the theoretical issues previously identified, it will look at the regional context of production for Huda TV. This is necessary to understand the environment within which the channel operates, the factors that led to its inception, and the parameters or restrictions of its specific context. This approach will help to identify crucial factors that will inform, but not define, this analysis. Next, the empirical research section will look more broadly at studies of religious – and particularly Islamic – media. This area is not limited to a regional or geographic context, but rather looks at the ways Islamic media has been identified and framed in existing empirical studies.

## **I. Theory**

### Media, Culture, and Power

The emergence of mass culture in the early twentieth century accompanied the rapid political, economic, and social changes of late modernity. Many critics regarded the emerging media technologies of the time, and their social and cultural impact, with a sense of alarm. This feeling of apprehension seemed to gain irrefutable legitimacy with the wickedly effective use of media as a propaganda tool in Nazi Germany. As the ashes of World War II settled, and American economic and cultural hegemony intensified worldwide, many critics remained skeptical of whether media, even when packaged with slogans of freedom and democracy, could truly represent a force of liberation. Scholars of the Frankfurt School, steeped in the bitterness of exile, saw in American popular

culture and media features that were strikingly familiar to what they previously witnessed in Nazi Germany (Adorno and Horkheimer 1987).

In Great Britain, the spread of American popular culture also met with stiff resistance from the intelligentsia. Several scholars took particular issue with the apparent displacement of indigenous working class culture as a result of the new import. Among them was William Hoggart, who bristled at the character of American popular culture, deeming its “shiny barbarism” a dangerous and corrosive force (Hoggart 1957, 160). The body of thought that would evolve into British cultural studies emerged from this concern with media and power, and a particular fixation on the expansive power and impact of American culture.

In the 1960s, Herbert Schiller added his voice to the chorus, documenting and lamenting the dominance of American media throughout the world. Schiller condemned not just an imbalance in the flow of cultural products, but also the accompanying values that were disseminated via media to all corners of the world. The American economic system, and idealized way of life, was presented in idyllic and unrealistic terms to audiences worldwide (Schiller 1992).

Opposed to the radical academic view were scholars who identified media as a benevolent force in the propagation and preservation of democracy. In many American mass communication departments, scholars developed functionalist analyses of media that emphasized their catalyzing role in free public discourse, the transparency of government, and public education (Lasswell 1948). James Curran describes a similar perspective in Britain – “liberal pluralism” – and its assertion that mass media effectively

represent and give voice to the diverse constituents in society (Curran 1996). In the international context, and in stark contrast to the radical view, some scholars saw American media as a force of progress in the non-Western world. Lerner and Schramm pioneered work that viewed media as the antidote to social and cultural backwardness, and the facilitator of advanced modern democracies (Schramm 1963, Lerner 1958).

Over time, the debate progressed. Some radical voices on the left, such as Herman and Chomsky, continued to see an overwhelming enforcement of dominant economic interests in the supposedly free media. Their propaganda model argued that ostensibly democratic media systems are still able to practice extensive censorship through various filters (Chomsky 1989, Herman and Chomsky 2002). Other scholars turned their attention to audiences, eager to re-examine the actual impact of media upon those supposedly affected by dominant ideologies and cultures. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model marked a departure from theories of ideological dominance to more subtle analyses of how texts and audiences, producers and consumer, interrelate (Hall 1980). Scholars also identified, in earlier analyses, elements of ethnocentrism and patriarchy. How were the experiences of minorities and women – as citizens, and as media consumers and producers – excluded in academic discourse? Such questions gave rise to a radical reassessment of media power. Many scholars became more willing and interested to identify emancipatory capacities in forms of media that were previously viewed as buttresses to dominant ideologies. Lively debates ensued on the relative significance of the various loci of power in culture, and the complex processes of

production and consumption, domination and resistance (Morley 1996, Curran and Morley 1996).

On the global scale, many scholars began reconsidering earlier theories of American domination as simplistic and overly deterministic. Schiller revised his theories to account for the rise of multinational corporations, rather than American firms, as the dominant players in global media. Schiller surrendered little ground, however, in his overarching thesis. The same dominant capitalist values were conveyed through a new vehicle, but this presented little qualitative change (Schiller 1991). Other scholars saw a more complex reality. Beyond the rise of multinational corporations, there was also a growing recognition of regional media powers representing a meaningful economic and cultural alternative to dominant players of the past. In fact, several of these production centers, such as Egyptian cinema, had existed as a counterweight to hegemonic forces since the early days of mass media. Recognizing the multicentered and multidirectional nature of global media, Straubhaar posited the theory of asymmetrical interdependence as an important corrective to more rigid models such as Schiller's cultural imperialism thesis (Straubhaar 1991). Again, a more careful attention to texts, audiences, and media theories revealed a much more nuanced view than those posited by scholars of the past. In the 1980s, several scholars argued that the American television program *Dallas*, apparently representing all that is wrong with American culture and capitalism, could actually take on profoundly different meanings depending on the context of reception (Katz and Liebes 1990, Ang 1985).

The present study will contribute to the extensive literature on media and power, particularly the rise of new voices in global media and the ongoing concern with American cultural hegemony. In one sense, Huda TV represents a radical and non-Western message, but one that is often articulated through American idioms and cultural forms. With this strong influence, and in light of decades of literature on American cultural power, it is worth considering how American influence at the channel relates to its orthodox Islamic message. Is this a self-defeating dynamic? Or is there a symbiosis that allows cultural adaptability within the general framework of orthodoxy? Chapters four and six will pay particular attention to these cultural dynamics. Beyond the specific concern with American power, the multicultural character of the channel is worth considering through the broader concept of *hybridity* as it has been discussed in recent academic literature.

**Hybridity, Creed, and Culture:** With the debate expanded beyond the positive or negative effects of a dominant culture, other critical concepts emerged to help explain the complex interaction of media, ideology, and identity. And as essentialist categories of identity became less and less tenable, and the significance of the nation-state was questioned in terms of its internal diversity and external influence, there was also a need to account for plurality and complexity as a rule, rather than a unique exception to bounded cultures and their media products. The concept of hybridity has proven useful in this regard. Homi Bhabha presents hybridity as a means to destabilize notions of essential or unchanging identities. Writing along the borders of various historical and cultural influences, Bhabha defined hybridity in reference to the “disjunctive space of

modernity”, or the “ambivalent temporality of modernity” (Bhabha 1994, 342). These notions attempt to identify the process through which various layers of identity engage and transform modernity. This is the lived, empirical terrain of creative and intellectual voices who speak from the cultural margins. With this effort, Bhabha attempts to destabilize the “fixed tablet of tradition” as a means to explain difference (3). He argues that:

The ‘right’ to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are ‘in the minority’.

The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition. The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress (3).

This conception of hybridity raises a number of useful and important questions for the present study. In one sense, what Bhabha describes as *signifying* from the peripheries of *authorized power* is an accurate representation of Huda TV as an English-language channel that conveys orthodox Islam to global audiences. Likewise, with the articulation

of that peripheral message (at least in relation to dominant discourses in the West) in the context of satellite television, in the English language, with staff representing a wide variety of cultural and national backgrounds – including the peripheral Blackamerican<sup>5</sup> experience from within the West itself – one can easily identify a realignment of customary boundaries, the blurring of tradition and modernity, and radical glosses on the notions of development and progress – no doubt a disjunctive space of modernity.

The problematic issue, in this instance, is how the concept of “tradition” is understood and applied by Bhabha, and whether this definition can serve as a useful analytical tool for the study at hand. It is quite clear that Bhabha views tradition as something both real and imagined, and that it generally refers to conceptions of cultural identity. This is problematic in reference to the Islamic religious tradition. First, tradition in Islam exists within a large body of intensive and extensive scholarship based on foundational sacred texts. This type of tradition is qualitatively different from a cultural identity, whose essence is obviously more imagined and mutable. Next, there is an assumed contradiction in the “invention of tradition” and “received” tradition. In the context of Islam, the religious scholarship that is rooted in received tradition is considered dynamic and flexible according to certain contextual factors. However, the basic validity, currency, and accuracy of the tradition (again, in reference to sacred texts, core beliefs, and principles) are considered stable and accessible.<sup>6</sup> In reference to Huda TV, it would not be useful to conflate the various levels of religious tradition, culture, and identity into Bhabha’s general theory of hybridity. Likewise, to deny or dismiss the Islamic religious heritage as either historically opaque or irreducibly contested, as a

premise for analysis, would pre-emptively invalidate and disempower the central organizing principle of Huda TV, and the extensive religious tradition for which the channel claims to speak. Bhabha argues that “the very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities – *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* – are in a profound process of redefinition” (7). This statement, while true in reference to a given range of identities, conflates several issues and ignores others. Does it truly apply to all notions of transmitted tradition? Is the consensual aspect of tradition essential for its contingency? And in what respects? For instance, Sunni Islamic scholarship devised an entire branch of knowledge to evaluate Prophetic narrations transmitted across generations (Kamali 2005). This is qualitatively different than received cultural traditions or customs. These questions are not considered by Bhabha, but they are of essential importance to the present study.

In short, through Bhabha’s analysis, we can identify Huda TV as an example of certain hybrid processes and identities that may commonly characterize the global cultural landscape. However, Bhabha does not offer a useful framework to discuss the relationship between the Islamic religious tradition and the hybrid cultural and social character of the channel. This point is further supported by Bhabha’s frequent and fairly uncritical invocation of the humanist consensus as the overarching political project of his work. For instance, he speaks fondly of “a dialectic without the emergence of teleological or transcendent History” (Bhabha 1994, 37). He laments “essentialist opposition between ideological miscognition and revolutionary truth,” and a perspective

that comes “like a pure avenging angel speaking the truth of a radical historicity and pure oppositionality” (38). He demands that “we need a little less pietistic articulation of political principle (around class and nation); a little more of the principle of political *negotiation*” (41). Although Bhabha is clearly speaking within a Marxist discourse, it is telling that he chooses religious imagery and allusions as a device for ridicule. In light of such telling comments, how could one fairly apply Bhabha’s view to an institution defined within the parameters of Islamic orthodoxy? Among the core principles of the Islamic faith is belief in a teleological and transcendent History. Islam affirms the intervention of “avenging angels” in human history. These beliefs are aspects of Islamic ‘*aqidah* (core elements of faith) and are not easily accommodated by Bhabha’s analysis.

Sunni Islam is often characterized by religious scholars as flexible and varied on legal matters but more singular in matters of creed, or belief. In this dissertation, the term *creed* is used in place of the Arabic word ‘*aqidah*. It includes theology, but can also extend to other areas that are considered essential components of faith, such as belief in angels and the Hereafter. The centrality of creed to Huda TV’s mission will be examined through channel policy documents in chapter four. The question at hand is not whether the truth of such beliefs can be measured by social analysis. However, it is necessary to recognize that, in the Muslim world, the dynamics of culture that Bhabha’s work may help to explain are quite distinct from the continuity and stability of the religious tradition itself. These various levels of identity – those relating to creed and culture – can interact, but they cannot simply be swept together in a single theoretical gesture.

This raises an important theme that will recur throughout this dissertation. The distinction between creed and culture is poorly theorized in academic literature. Concepts like *identity* and *difference* are often employed to cover a wider range of cultural, ideological, and intellectual formations. In itself, this categorization is reflective of certain historical experiences and intellectual processes that are primarily rooted in the Western tradition. In this case, such a theoretical approach ignores some of the most crucial questions that arise in the analysis of Huda TV. For instance, how does the concept of a singular, historically contiguous creed interact with an environment of vibrant cultural diversity, where the boundaries of tradition and modernity are inextricably tangled, and where technology throws accepted political and social orders into flux? A notion of creed and culture as interchangeable cogs of “difference” would not allow such a crucial question to be asked or answered.

Other scholars add a temporal element to the discussion of hybridity by challenging a simplistic dichotomy of tradition and modernity. According to the work of such scholars, it is reasonable to assume that hybridity has become a normal, rather than exceptional characteristic of identity. Garcia Canclini offers a strong account of hybridity, particularly the manner in which tradition and modernity coexist (Garcia Canclini 1995). This coexistence does not entail a side-by side truce, but rather a deeply engrained interaction, where the identification of one is almost impossible without recognizing the other. The contemporary age of postmodernism, according to Garcia Canclini, “is not a style but the tumultuous copresence of all styles” (244). This is a situation where “all cultures are border cultures” (261). In line with Bhabha, Garcia

Canclini's views the longing for tradition as nothing more than a mythological endeavor. Again, using religious concepts as a tool of dismissal, Garcia Canclini defines such a fixation on tradition as "fundamentalism". More elaborately, he argues that postmodernism

"refutes the originary quality of traditions and the originality of innovations. At the same time, it offers the opportunity to rethink the modern as a project that is relative, doubtable, *not antagonistic to traditions nor destined to overcome them by some unverifiable evolutionary laws*. It serves, in short, to make us simultaneously take charge of the impure itinerary of traditions and of the disjointed heterodox achievement of our modernity" (144, emphasis author's).

Here, Garcia Canclini describes a comfortable and disjointed hybridity that engages both tradition and modernity. However, the crucial aspect of the Islamic tradition, and its animating characteristic in modern Islamic movements and ideologies, is the very insistence on authority (Maguire 2007). Again, tradition might define a wide range of phenomena, including those hybrid cultural identities that coalesce and disperse throughout history. However, in reference to the Islamic scholarly tradition and its internal measures of authenticity, Garcia Canclini offers little beyond the dismissive notion of fundamentalism to explain it. By adding a temporal element to the analysis of hybridity, Garcia Canclini's subversion of the tradition/modernity dichotomy is useful to this analysis. As will be demonstrated throughout, Huda TV's conception of orthodoxy accommodates a great deal of cultural diversity and comfortably incorporates many trappings of modernity.

Marwan Kraidy brings the concept of hybridity into more direct focus by explaining how it has become the norm, rather than the exception of global cultural life. However, this process has not occurred innocently or without the influence of enduring power dynamics. Kraidy describes “corporate transculturation” as a “discourse in which fluid identities and porous cultural borders are depicted as growth engines in the service of a cosmopolitan capitalism” (Kraidy 2005, 90). This immediately divorces the discussion of hybridity from any naïve or idyllic conception of global unity. The question of power is central, and capitalism is shown once again to be adaptable in manipulating and profiting from, even driving, a rapidly transforming global system. In contrast to classical Marxist theories of culture and power, Kraidy does not insist on a rigid view of culture (and hybridity) as the malleable superstructure of global capitalism’s core. With what Kraidy calls “critical transculturation,” it may be possible that hybridity “fulfills its social and political potential, mitigating social tensions, expressing the polyvalence of human creativity, and providing a context of empowerment in which individuals and communities are agents in their own destiny. Only then can the unsavory implications of hybridity as the cultural logic of globalization be mitigated. And only then can hybridity – albeit without guarantees – be a progressive, hopeful discourse” (161).

These concluding words nicely summarize the ideal to which Kraidy, and perhaps the discourse of hybridity, are working. And while he is keen to avoid the determinism that may have limited earlier critical analyses of the relationship between culture and power, his comments quite succinctly and directly reaffirm the humanist consensus as the

underlying value system of media research. Again, the question must be asked, “what about those practices that lie outside of this humanist consensus?” Or more specific to Kraidy’s discussion, are there ways of understanding hybridity beyond the vicious elements of global capitalism and the ostensibly hopeful and progressive aspects of critical transculturation? These questions are crucial to the analysis of Huda TV, where the dynamics of hybridity are at work, and while often reflective of broader power relations, they operate within the framework of a unified Islamic mission.

It is worth looking briefly at the manner in which Kraidy discusses the relationship between Islam, hybridity, and culture. This will point to broader issues in the scholarly analysis of Islam and media that are addressed later in this chapter. Drawing from his empirical work in Lebanon, Kraidy astutely points out the ways that various categories of identity can be blended or consciously resisted in cultural practices. He recognizes a common blending of Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, ideas with distinct and mutually incommensurable qualities (127). He also highlights the tendency among Maronite Christian youth to consciously draw from multiple identities, making clear value judgments associated with various aspects of local and global cultures (129). In these examples, hybridity is seen as a normal, rather than exceptional, condition which still reflects the power relationships of a post-colonial society. However, Kraidy’s view also carries an implicit critique of universalist or essentialist discourses which in many ways predetermines how religious identity can be analyzed. He asserts that “confessional identities are contingent and best understood as historically constructed relations, not as ahistorical, primordial essences” (146). This statement may hold true with the self-

defined identity of Lebanese youth, or broad cultural and social identities that are somewhat deceptively contained under sectarian religious labels. Indeed, it is the mobilization of complex social and political agendas under simplified confessional labels that fueled such tragic levels of violent conflict in the Lebanese context. Kraidy is wise to unpack these complex identities given the tense environment within which they still operate. However, he leaves little room to fairly address the self-definition of religious traditions according to their own bodies of knowledge and thought. Again, Islamic creed and legal scholarship cannot be superimposed onto ostensibly religious cultural and communal identities.

In his concluding comments, Kraidy offers a hopeful vision of a Lebanese media system with “truly independent stations” that are not pre-defined according to sectarian identities (160). He asserts that “these media outlets could express various ways of being a Maronite, a Shiite, or a Sunnite, exposing the internal diversity of all confessions” (160). Indeed, the cultural identities within these faith groups are complex and in many ways, inextricably linked. However, there are unasked questions in this formulation. How do religious traditions themselves conceive of their internal diversity? Do religious traditions actually claim to be “ahistorical, primordial essences” or is the reality more complex? Again, Kraidy’s view is deeply reflective of the humanist consensus. In his view, religious identity is a component of culture that is irreducible to any clear principles, values, or coherent history, and when given such authority, religion becomes a dangerous and divisive force. In chapters four through six, some of these missing elements will be addressed in reference to Huda TV as a Sunni Islamic institution. The

existence and implications of hybridity, evident at Huda TV in ways very similar to what Kraidy identifies in Lebanon, will nevertheless be reassessed by considering the Islamic religious discourse itself.

Although hybridity is a powerful concept with which to characterize cultural identity in post-modernity, it tends to emphasize interaction and relativity over stability. The endurance of universalizing tendencies and claims presents an interesting challenge to hybridity theories. Does the existence and persistence of hybridity disqualify or demystify any claims to universality? Do various claims at universality differ, or do they all share common features? Can hybridity and universality comfortably exist or do they inevitably engender some type of intellectual schizophrenia or conflict? These are significant questions for the study at hand, as Huda TV quite clearly articulates Islam as a universal message, and yet the channel's multiple cultural influences, all of which impact the communication process, seem redolent of hybridity. Kraidy explains that "hybridity is a dialogical re-inscription of various codes and discourses in a spatio-temporal zone of signification" (Kraidy 1999, 472). Clearly, the united effort of American, Egyptians, Saudis, Sudanis and others to articulate an orthodox Islamic message, in the English language, and through the techniques and conventions of satellite television, qualifies as an instance of hybridity under this definition. However, what will be clarified in the following chapters is how that hybrid experience interacts with the Islamic orthodoxy to which all parties claim allegiance. Compatibility and conflict, in this regard, are the significant analytical issues at play in this case study. Recognizing the complexity of these relationships can also be explained as an effort to decouple creed and culture as

analytically distinct concepts. The dynamics that apply to the intermixture of cultures do not automatically apply to the issues of creed. In the case at hand, it will be shown that creed operates with its own logic, even while actively engaged with various cultures and social contexts. These themes will be addressed in more detail below and again through the following chapters.

**Beyond the humanist consensus:** Given the broad history of culture and power as critical concepts within media studies, there are some crucial findings that need to be addressed. First, while there is a great deal of disagreement on how media functions to either liberate or dominate, there is general consensus on the virtue, and in fact the almost transcendental benevolence of concepts such as “democracy,” “empowerment,” “liberation,” and “emancipation.” When Curran and Park articulate those values upon which we can supposedly agree, they are in fact reaffirming a broad consensus that has united the vast bulk of media studies literature and spans diverse political and ideological perspectives. This section confirms the pervasiveness of the humanist consensus. The important question that remains is: how can belief systems that lie outside of the humanist consensus be addressed within academic literature? And moreover, can they function not only as objects of study but also bodies of thought with which social theory and analysis may interact? These questions will be addressed in various ways throughout this chapter.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to answer why the humanist consensus exists. However, it is fair to say that it emerges broadly from the liberal Western tradition and has congealed in recent times as a globally integrated, culturally diverse,

overwhelmingly secular, and largely unchallenged body of thought. The immediate and relevant question that arises from this realization is: how does the field of media studies deal with those beliefs and practices that fall outside of the humanist consensus? The present analysis looks at a media institution whose overarching mission and principles are rooted in universalistic religious beliefs based more on the concept of human servitude to God than the accepted pantheon of humanistic values. This simple fact does not preclude areas of agreement between Islam and the broad spectrum of humanism. In fact, the ways in which Huda TV engaged dominant humanist discourses will be addressed in chapter five. This discussion will show that Islam and the humanist consensus are not oppositional. Rather, they constitute two distinct centers of thought – each with a great deal of internal complexity – whose conflict on certain issues does not preclude conversation, commonality, and coexistence.

This section has examined how culture and power have been conceived and analyzed in media research. There are two salient characteristics that can be drawn from this discussion. First, communication theory is largely circumscribed by the humanist consensus, leaving limited ways to analyze discourses that fall outside of its purview (except of course, according to the consensus itself). This dissertation will contribute to the existing literature without prejudicially invoking conventional questions and categories that uncritically reinforce the humanist consensus. It therefore answers the call for de-Westernization of media studies. Next, theorists of culture and power have alternately lamented and celebrated the global dominance and influence of American media. Over time, deterministic views of culture, media, and power have given way to

more subtle theories that challenge the notion of essentialist or unchanging identities. However, these concepts, such as hybridity, have uncritically maintained the humanist consensus and therefore have a limited capacity to explain the relationship between culture, power, *and* creed. This analysis offers a means to examine the latter dynamic with greater sensitivity. Reflecting on the humanist consensus, the next section examines literature dealing directly with the academic study of contemporary Islam.

### Edward Said, Orientalism, and Media

Edward Said is commonly viewed as one of the definitive academic voices on Islam and Muslim world, and for good reason. Said's powerful and enduring analysis of Orientalism remains an essential model for understanding the relationship between Islam, knowledge, and representation in the West. Due to the central significance of his work, Said is a good starting point to investigate how Islam and contemporary Islamic society are analyzed in media theory. Said is particularly useful in this regard because his critique covers both academic and popular thought.

Said argues that Islam comes to be known in scholarly and popular discourse through a process of dichotomization (Said 1994, 1997). Orientalism effectively splits the world into a dynamic, evolving, internally diverse "us" – the West – and an unchanging, static, exotic "other" – the Orient, and more specifically, the Muslim world. According to Said, this body of knowledge is intimately bound to the global projection of Western power, with the effect that Islam becomes knowable only through such a dichotomization. And with this process, Islam comes to represent the opposites of all that the West boastfully attributes to itself. Western civilization is contrasted to Islamic

barbarism; Western democracy to Islamic despotism; and Western progress to Islamic stagnation. Said's critique is unique in its application to both intellectual history and popular culture.

In *Covering Islam*, Said exposes the underlying discursive frame within which the Muslim world is commonly portrayed. He carefully outlines the terms of analysis for the Islamic world and Muslim peoples, exposing them as constitutive of a unique mode of representation. Said argues that history and contemporary events in the Muslim world are portrayed as one with Islam, and that Islam is posited as a sufficient explanation to account for any such events. He explains that:

the term "Islam" as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures (Said 1997, 1).

In this sense, "Islam" is deployed in popular discourse without any clear understanding of its meaning, and yet it is invested with extraordinary explanatory power to account for the myriad of events, conflicts, and trajectories of the historically Muslim world. In this popular discourse, "'Islam' seems to engulf all aspects of the diverse Muslim world, reducing them all to a special malevolent and unthinking essence" (8). Said details this process by examining press coverage on issues such as the Iranian revolution and hostage

crisis, gender relations in Saudi Arabia, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Said's critique of popular discourse buttresses the argument of *Orientalism* by further explaining how the Muslim world is defined and known through the power relations of Western hegemony.

Said's relevance to this case study can be assessed according to two primary categories. First, Said's work is definitive in describing the discursive parameters within which Huda TV must operate in communicating the message of Islam to the West. It is the homogenizing caricature of Islam – so effectively described by Said – to which the channel must inevitably respond through its programming. The dynamics identified by Said are central, regardless of whether they are implicitly or explicitly referenced. As will be demonstrated clearly in chapter five, Huda TV endeavored to engage some of the dominant global discourses (progress, science, human rights) against which Islam has been defined as the regressive opposite. Said also considers how Muslims might be impacted by Orientalism, He states:

If the history of knowledge about Islam in the West has been too closely tied to conquest and domination, the time has come for these ties to be severed completely. About this one cannot be too emphatic. For otherwise we will not only face protracted tension and perhaps even war, but we will offer the Muslim world, its various societies and states, the prospect of many wars, unimaginable suffering, and disastrous upheavals, not the least of which would be the victory of an "Islam" fully ready to play the role prepared for it by reaction, orthodoxy, and

desperation. By even the most sanguine of standards, this is not a pleasant possibility (173).

As Said suggests, it is a valid line of questioning to examine how Muslims have internalized the Orientalist view of self and other, and how this defines and limits their conception of Islam. Timothy Mitchell describes the modernization of Egypt as a brutal set of practices that reshaped and reordered the social world (Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* 1988). With this kind of violence as the historical backdrop to contemporary Islamic activism, it is worth considering how the imperialist terms of discourse may be internalized and then refashioned as authenticity under a religious banner. This dissertation will examine how some of the naturalized discourses of modernization and colonialism impact the conception of Islam that the channel put forth. However, this line of thinking also runs the risk of dismissing all modes of Islamist thought as reactionary symptoms of modernity's gross power imbalances.

This raises the second area of analysis for which Said's relevance must be assessed. While Said offers a profound account of how Islam and Muslims are represented in media, he does not deal significantly with how Muslims represent themselves. Nor is his work immediately concerned with the internal dynamics that operate within Islamic orthodoxy. This is not surprising; Said was not Muslim and did not ever claim to be defending Islam as a faith. Rather, he was concerned with the relationship between power and representation, and paid particular attention to the way that Islam and its associated signifiers are deployed in intellectual and popular thought. For instance, Said asks, "Is 'Islam' in the end useful as a notion or does it hide, distort,

deflect, and ideologize more than it actually says?” (Said 1997, 62). This statement obviously addresses the distorted and monolithic portrayal of Islam in academic and popular discourse. For Muslims, “Islam” remains useful for their own definition of identity and engagement with orthodoxy.

This dissertation examines an Islamic institution in its own epistemological milieu, that is, the broad scope of Sunni Islam, which still constitutes the majority of the Muslim world; whose scholarship in many ways defines the character and direction of Muslim life in the current age. Said’s work provides some useful parameters for understanding how that orthodoxy interacts with Western discursive power. However, concerning the question of Muslim self-representation, Said’s relevance is generally limited to the impact of Orientalism on Islamic thought, as described above.

This critique does not diminish Said’s contribution, but it clearly defines the limits of his analysis in reference to this study. Much like the scholars mentioned above, Said very much operates within the humanist consensus as his own ideological framework. He states: “until knowledge is understood in human and political terms as something to be won to the service of coexistence and community, not of particular races, nations, classes, or religions, the future augurs badly (161).” Much like the conflation of creed and culture in hybridity theory, Said’s formulation makes certain presumptions about the relationship of Islam to other categories of identity. For instance, what can be said about a faith that seeks to bridge racial, class, and national barriers, but does so under a universalistic theological framework, as is the case with Islam? How do its contemporary institutions operate? Such questions are not easily drawn from Said’s

formulation. Again, empirical engagement with the self-representation of Muslims in media is one of the original contributions of this research. To establish a framework for this analysis, the next section will address two attempts to blend media theory with Islamic scholarship.

### Islamic Media Theory

A few scholars have ventured to develop media theory that is directly informed by the Islamic tradition. For instance, Ayish proposes an “Arab-Islamic world view” to guide communications research (Ayish 1999). Ideally, this would form the basis on which one could formulate an authentic Islamic model of development. This curious terminology, conflating the Arab ethnicity with Islamic belief, is punctuated by his attempted integration of secular elements from pre-Islamic Arabia with the religious principles of Islam. This is a profoundly ahistorical characterization. Additionally, he invokes several aspects of Islamic belief – iman (belief), tawhid (monotheism), ‘ibadah (worship), umma (community), ‘ilm (knowledge) – but offers a fairly reckless attribution of religious sources to explain this material (38-39). These principles are all drawn from orthodoxy, but there is little attention to the bodies of thought in which they fit or how they might be deployed within the scholarly tradition itself. In addition, the mixing of pre-Islamic Arabian elements that have always been considered antithetical to the faith is highly problematic in terms of understanding religious institutions and practices. However, Ayish is correct to recognize that these various aspects of identity exist in an odd equilibrium in the contemporary Arab world. For instance, Mamoun Fandy’s analysis of Al Jazeera identifies several ideological factors at work in the channel –

Bathist, Arab Nationalist, Nasirist, and Islamist (Fandy 2000). Al Jazeera does not define itself primarily as a religious medium, so this blend of ideologies is no surprise.

However, for a channel or institution that does have a religious mission, there is a self-conscious effort to put faith in a superior position to other sources of authority or identity. For this reason, Ayish's model does not easily apply to an institution such as Huda TV.

Similarly, Ziauddin Sardar offers a unique perspective on how to build a Muslim information infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like Ayish, he invokes certain concepts from the Islamic past as essential principles for contemporary Muslim institutions. These include tawhid (monotheism), 'ilm (knowledge), hikma (wisdom), 'adl (justice), ijma'a (scholarly consensus), shura (consultation), istislah (public interest), and ummah (community) (Sardar 1988). While these concepts are clearly rooted in the Islamic tradition, they in fact emerge from very different discourses. Monotheism is a foundational principle; public interest is a secondary tool of jurisprudence; knowledge, justice, and wisdom are general virtues or goals. Sardar also thinks concretely about how traditional social institutions such as the waqf, or public trust, might be adapted to an information society. In this sense, his engagement with the classical tradition is valuable. However, there is no clear engagement with the living scholarly tradition which may offer its own insights into the issues. The tendency to invoke and manipulate classical terminology without that connection leads to potentially dubious outcomes. In contrast to these theories, this dissertation provides an examination of one media institution that is directly connected to orthodox Sunni Islam. This will provide a deeper insight into how

media, and satellite television specifically, are conceived within that tradition, and how orthodoxy responds to a variety of contextual influences.

One contemporary Muslim scholar, Tariq Ramadan, offers a more sophisticated model for the interaction of social analysis with the Islamic religious and scholarly tradition. Ramadan considers the core of Muslim intellectual life to be the principle of *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism) and the major disciplines of the scholarly tradition – theology, Quranic sciences, jurisprudence, and legal theory. For the Muslim social analyst, these core principles would replace the humanist consensus as the basic source of values and judgments. Ramadan draws a distinction between natural and social sciences, visualizing the prior as somewhat distant from the core disciplines due to the relative objectivity of the natural world. The social sciences have a greater “proximity” to the core of religious thought because “the scope for interpretation, subjectivity, and ideological orientation is considerable...(a particular view of the world may influence work in these sciences)” (Ramadan 2004, 60). This view recognizes the ideological bias that can exist in social analysis, as this chapter has demonstrated, but does not divorce it completely from the orthodox Islamic tradition. This dissertation applies Ramadan’s insights to the field of media studies, thereby operating as a sort of *critical Islamism*. It recognizes and engages the orthodox tradition, of which Huda TV is a conscious product, on the terrain of media theory, without pre-emptive judgments and biases of the humanist consensus. To complement this discussion of Islamic media theory, the next section of this chapter turns to empirical work on Middle Eastern and Islamic media.

## II. Empirical Research

This section will examine empirical research of direct significance and relevance to the current study. First, it will identify the crucial contextual elements and active processes in Middle Eastern satellite broadcasting. In addition, it will also assess the extent to which this body of literature is skewed by the humanist consensus. Next, it will examine research on Islamic media more generally, without particular attention to geography or other immediate contextual factors of relevance to the present study.

### Media in the Middle East

The geographic and temporal context of Huda TV defines key parameters for media research. This section will examine some of the major themes in the study of television broadcasting in the Middle East. Of particular significance is how the rise of satellite broadcasting, with its extraordinarily diverse range of programming, is interpreted in light of existing debates. The satellite era has witnessed both change and continuity. However, the crucial issue for this dissertation is how that change and continuity are assessed and *valued* within media research. What will be evident is the extent to which the humanist consensus, in various manifestations, has defined the parameters of research in this area over time. The issues and measures deemed crucial according to the consensus are not of *primary* relevance to the present study. Therefore, to understand Huda TV outside the humanist context, in reference to the religious tradition that the channel represents, typical issues of theoretical concern, although significant, are given secondary importance. Again, this does not preclude a critical engagement between Islam and the humanist consensus. The examination of the Danish

cartoon crisis in chapter five will illustrate the complex dialogue that operates between these competing systems of thought. Rather, this study re-centers the analysis on Huda TV's Islamist milieu.

Broadcasting in the Middle East developed along with the rise of independent states under various nationalist projects. Consequently, for decades, television was strictly controlled by the state (Boyd 1999). Limited content and repressive policies led to a bland and predictable televisual landscape. Satellite television had the impact of diversifying content, eliminating or strongly reducing the power of individual states to control content, and diffusing media power through various sectors of Middle Eastern society. That said, the overarching power structures of media in the satellite era remained surprisingly stable, with states and elite private interests exerting a major influence (Sakr 2001b). Again, the crucial question, in this context, is not so much what change has occurred, but why that change matters, and how it should be assessed against conceptions of an ideal media system.

The Western analysis of media in the Middle East has a long history. Among the earliest studies of international media within American academia was the landmark work of Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958). Lerner conducted an extensive survey of media across the Middle East with several key premises in mind. First, he viewed the process of modernization, under the American model, as universally beneficial and necessary for societies seeking to break free from the stagnating bonds of their tradition. Next, media would play an important role in the process, creating empathy – defined as the capacity to imagine one's condition beyond the constraining

limits of tradition – among the target population. Of course, by witnessing the ostensible superiority of the West, a psychological change would occur in the people, and this new way of thinking would facilitate modernization. In imagining the role of Islam in this new, modern world, Lerner offers a variety of illustrative comments.

Regarding Egypt, Lerner argues that “psychic displacement of the elite between the ancient world of piety and the modern world of ingenuity is possibly the most fundamental problem of stable governance” (Lerner, 259). In this statement, the world of religion is clearly cast as oppositional and antagonistic to modernity and progress. He also argues that the

“elite lives spiritually in the Western world, whence derive its main ideas of the good life in a participant society. But it lives physically in the Middle Eastern world of massive inequality, widespread illiteracy, prevailing destitution, early death, and the constrictive power of traditionalism. Highly involved in the symbols of national aspiration, these persons find no guidance in Koranic fundamentalism” (259).

Not only is this traditional world of piety deemed culpable for these festering social crises, but the modern West is also cast as a “spiritual” alternative to the traditional faith of the region. The implication is clearly that Islam and modernity are incompatible.

Elsewhere, Lerner is even more blunt in his assessment of Islam, arguing, “Whether from East or West, modernization poses the same basic challenge – the infusion of a ‘rationalist and positivist spirit’ against which, scholars seem agreed, ‘Islam is absolutely defenseless’” (45).<sup>7</sup>

Although Lerner's position seems quite straightforward from these statements, elsewhere he speaks of Islam with greater ambiguity. He posits that "the top policy problem for three generations of Middle Eastern leaders has been whether one must choose between 'Mecca or mechanization' or whether one can make them compatible" (405). And in asking "which Islam" will prevail in the Middle East, Lerner argues that "the choice will follow those spokesmen of the New Feeling who show how Islam's most cherished symbols can be made compatible with the secular requirements of new lifeways" (406). These characterizations do not allow for a comfortable compatibility between Islam and modernization. They certainly leave no room for an Islamic critique of modernity. However, in one respect, they do identify crucial issues that Muslims have themselves raised, and that is how to maintain orthodoxy amidst the rapid changes and fluctuations of the modern age. For now, it is important to recognize that Lerner generally paints a very dichotomous picture of Islam and modernity. The question that follows, of course, is the extent to which such an approach has remained active in the study of Middle Eastern media, and how, therefore, does this lineage of thought apply to the case study at hand.

Karin Wilkins laments the "idealization of tradition and modernity" that has historically informed US foreign intervention efforts in the Middle East (Wilkins 2004, 483). In this conception, which accurately characterizes Lerner's research in the region, "the Arab Middle East in particular tends to be constructed in public discourse as suffering from social, political, and economic hardships..." (483). In short, this classic philosophy of analysis and intervention assumes a teleological, ethnocentric view of

history that culminates in some conception of Western modernity as the ultimate goal of development. While Lerner's own notion of modernization has been denounced along these lines, Wilkins examines the extent to which his ideas still hold currency in the analysis of Middle Eastern media. Two aspects of this approach are relevant to the current dissertation. First, there is the question of whether the development of media, audiences, and social change in the Middle East has in fact confirmed Lerner's vision. The answer to this is a resounding "no". The late twentieth century witnessed a strong resurgence of Islam across the region. Likewise, the dramatic diversification of media in the satellite era has yielded a wide range of content, including everything from Western movies to conservative religious programming, none of which would have been aired in the height of nationalism. Similarly, certain aspects of Western-style development, particularly American modernity, have proven to be far from universal, beneficial, or ideal. The second area of interest is Wilkins' examination of those media scholars who have attempted to transcend the modern-tradition dichotomy. In the work of Naomi Sakr, Muhammad Ayish, and Marwan Kraidy (all of whom are mentioned elsewhere in this chapter), Wilkins identifies efforts to understand Middle Eastern modernity, latent and emerging civil institutions, and the diverse array of media according to their complex variety, rather than a simplistic division of tradition and modernity. In order to address these issues, it is necessary first to examine the origin and evolution of satellite broadcasting in the region.

**The Rise of Satellite Television in the Arab World:** Television broadcasting in the Arab world has historically articulated the stringently controlled voice of national

authority. Hussein Amin argues that “the official function of the media in the Arab world can be understood in terms of the following sequence of priorities: conveying news and information, interpreting and commenting on events, reinforcing social norms and cultural awareness, providing specialized data for commercial promotion, and...entertainment” (Amin 1996, 103). Individual nations vary in terms of exact priorities and strictness of regulation. Regardless of the particular orientation, most Arab countries traditionally follow a model of direct or indirect government control over media systems. Douglas Boyd argues that television is not traditionally viewed as a means of education in the Arab world. He notes that “a good deal of time is devoted to political information, though in general such non-entertainment programming, including news and commentary, merely extols the accomplishments of the political leaders, whether elected or members of ruling families” (Boyd 1999, 9). With the advent of satellite technology, the landscape of Arab television gradually shifted to accommodate real transformations. These technologies offered new possibilities, but it was not until the launch of Al Jazeera from the small, resource-rich state of Qatar, that there was a fundamental change in the character of broadcasting. Prior to Al Jazeera’s growth and success, new technology was generally employed within the traditional structures and hierarchies.

Al Jazeera has helped unify and develop a transnational public sphere within the Muslim world. However, the technological infrastructure that would allow such unity has existed for some time with very little impact on the overall media content. In 1969, the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) was started with the support of the Arab League (Gher and Amin 1999, 64). This organization was designed to “coordinate radio

and television activities and to train personnel” (64). Through most of its history, however, the ASBU was “an almost prototypical victim of shifting political priorities in the Arab world” (Boyd 1999, 348). Member states often manipulated the ASBU in the service of their unique regional agendas (348-9). Boyd explains that “it is safe to say that the Arab world’s regional broadcasting organization in the late 1990s is so ineffective that it has all but been abolished” (349). He explains that “Arab electronic news tends to reflect the state-operated broadcaster transmitting it” (349). This initiative to develop a means of cooperation among Arab broadcasters can accurately be viewed as a major failure. Incidentally, Al Jazeera was snubbed by the ASBU because the network failed to follow censorship standards in its provocative political programming (Sakr 2000). The ASBU does not constitute the only attempt to unify the Arab world in media development.

ARABSAT was started around the same time as the ASBU as a joint project of the ASBU, UNESCO, and the Arab Telecom Union to develop a satellite network that could serve the Arab world (Gher and Amin 1999, 64). ARABSAT was supported by Arab governments because they were interested in achieving “satellite self-sufficiency” (Boyd 1999, 8). INTELSAT was available but its use would deny Arab countries autonomy in controlling this area of technology (349). ARABSAT was designed as a “public service” for all Arab League members (Gher and Amin 1999, 64). Several waves of satellites were launched, culminating in a set of new generation satellites that provided direct-to-home broadcasting capabilities (64-5). Ultimately, Al Jazeera would use ARABSAT, along with other international satellites for its global broadcasting.

However, for many years, ARABSAT remained largely unused even when nations held leases on satellite space (Amin 1996, Gher and Amin 1999). Once the new satellite technology was put into place, Arab nations moved ahead cautiously with plans to negotiate cooperative projects on the ARABSAT satellites (Gher and Amin 1999, 65). Additional capability for direct-to-home, regional satellite broadcasting was put into place in the 1990s (Gher and Amin 1999, 65). However, even regional satellite broadcasting did not significantly transform the character of Arab news until Al Jazeera's calculated intervention.

The first major Arab satellite network was the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), launched in September, 1991 (Gher and Amin 1999, 66). MBC was based in London but received the bulk of its financial backing from wealthy Saudi elites (66). The network's base outside of the Arab region contributed to a greater degree of freedom and innovative formats, though sensitive political topics remained taboo (Ayish 1997, 490). In fact, Naomi Sakr demonstrates that the channel was largely designed on the model of CNN (Sakr 2001b, 45). In addition to pioneering independent satellite broadcasting in the Arab world, MBC was also considered the "first fully commercial Arabic-language television service" in the region (Ayish 1997, 475). However, MBC leadership made active policy decisions to focus on news even if it was not the logical response to market pressures (487). Despite the increased attention to news programming, MBC failed to fundamentally alter the style of news reporting in the Arab world. It failed to focus on issues of conflict in the region, and presented few perspectives that fundamentally challenged political authority (489). And while it made some strides in the development

of more open media, the network still heavily curtailed freedom of expression, placing it within the traditional model of Arab broadcasting despite its financial and technological uniqueness (Sakr 2001b, 86). However, the trend for commercial broadcasting to reflect elite interests may not be so strictly deterministic. In many ways, Al Jazeera replicates the structural features of MBC – a satellite network emerging from a resource-rich country with the backing of political elites. In its first several years, Al Jazeera represented an interesting form of regional public service broadcasting that took advantage of new technologies. However, the channel also has faced the pressures of commercialization. Managing Director, Mohammed Jasim Al-Ali asserted that,

“This is our strategy; we need to change the mentality of the businessman here in the region. Usually when you have a large audience, all the advertising companies come to you. Here, all the advertising businesses are impacted by political considerations; they think about the political side rather than business side. I think this will change, just like the freedom of the press has changed on the editorial side. The commercial side will change too” (Schleiffer 2000).

This extraordinarily candid recognition of the problems with commercialization is accompanied by an equally extraordinary naiveté about Al Jazeera’s capacity to single-handedly transform commercial news broadcasting. The messianic portrayal of Al Jazeera has been muted in subsequent analyses that examine the channel’s sensationalist style, its ambiguous relationship to power elites, and its mixed record of crisis coverage (Zayani 2005).

**Media and Power in the Middle East:** Moving beyond the novelty of satellite broadcasting in the Middle East, Naomi Sakr examines the power dynamics at work in the changing mediascape. Her work shows how dominant political and regional elites have continued to exert power in the satellite age. For instance, Sakr examines the Egyptian government's entry into satellite broadcasting, both as a content provider, and through regulations that allow private broadcasters a greater degree of access (Sakr 2001a). This is particularly significant given that Huda TV operates within this very regulatory structure. Sakr notes that, "[a]nnouncing in January 2000 that the government had finally decided to allow private Egyptian companies to broadcast externally by satellite from a designated 'free zone', Safwat al-Sharif<sup>8</sup> stressed that his ministry reserved the right to censor both news and entertainment broadcasts by private channels" (156). This particular issue of tacit censorship within an ostensibly "free zone" will be addressed repeatedly throughout this dissertation. As will be demonstrated in chapter six, the concern with government intervention permeated the professional culture of Huda TV and greatly impacted the articulation of religious perspectives on controversial issues.

Sakr herself is more broadly concerned with how satellite television will fit into a development vision that involves political, and possibly social, liberalization. She laments that in the new space for private media, "alternative proposals for party political television or independently regulated public service television were marginalized" (164). Elsewhere, she outlines the structures of power in satellite television that reveal the enduring influences of the region's states and superwealthy. Examining satellite television through the prism of certain development ideals, Sakr comments that "concepts

like ‘global civil society’ and the ‘global public sphere’ were also exposed as unsuited to the tasks of describing or explaining the status of pressure groups vis-à-vis transnational television in the Middle East. Terms like these represent aspirations, not reality” (Sakr 2001b, 208). Sakr sets the bar high for her analysis, arguing that “it is freedom of expression, not transnational television technology as such, that is crucial to development” (102). While Huda TV may not operate with the same standard of development, Sakr’s view on the persistence of existing power structure in new satellite media will be confirmed throughout the following chapters.

This presents an interesting question for the current study. In some ways, Huda TV represents the kind of private, public-service media venture that Sakr hopes might develop in the satellite age. Its aim is not profit but the communication of a religious message. However, in spite of the fact the Muslim activism has been viciously suppressed across the region, there have also been instances where governments have used religious movements to counter other oppositional forces. Gilles Kepel describes the rise of Gam’at al-Islamiyya, a religiously minded reform movement in Egypt, during the 1970s as a concerted strategy of President Anwar Sadat to counter leftist forces in universities and other corners of society. The organization’s publication was permitted wide distribution until political winds shifted and Gam’at Al Islamiyya was suppressed (Kepel 2005, Ch. 4). This type of analysis may underemphasize the actual popular appeal of religious movements. However, the specific case is telling, and all regimes in the Middle East invoke Islam to defend their legitimacy. While there is no reason to suggest that Huda TV was actively used or manipulated by the Egyptian government, the

political context exerts a powerful influence that will be addressed repeatedly in the following chapters.

Sakr's work on satellite broadcasting is definitive in many respects, but its overarching focus again reveals an uncritical commitment to the humanist consensus that prevents certain key questions from being considered. Similarly, Annabelle Sreberny excoriates Lerner for his "triumphalist, unilinear, statist" approach, contrasting it to "a more useful approach" that examines "the competing pressures of conservatism, tradition, cultural maintenance, and other pressures toward change and modernization which exist within every society and are pronounced across the region" (Sreberny 2001, 101). Sreberny accurately defines some of the active phenomena in play, but her judgments of Middle Eastern media and the social direction in which they push are so flagrantly biased toward her own ideological perspective that her purported self-contrast to Lerner is doubtful. For instance, she states

Arguments about the nature of late modernity focus increasingly on self-reflexivity and the chosen life, as compared with life lived within the remit of unchallenged tradition. Television, especially with significant doses of foreign programming, displays the variety of lives in the world, including the far greater individualism, freedom and emancipation of women in western societies – as well as in some Arab societies in comparison to others. It mediates the private, making new social relations visible and opening up a new gender politics as significant as the more formal political liberalization that so many want (113).

The specter of Lerner is quite apparent in these comments, in spite of the fact that Sreberny represents a different ideological orientation. First, there is the implicit assertion that existing gender roles in the Middle East are feebly embedded within the confines of “unchallenged tradition.” Next, she argues that this condition may be remedied by heavy doses of foreign programming through which the superior status of women in the West can be effectively communicated. Lerner’s “empathy” reverberates through these words. Additionally, Sreberny comfortably and uncritically projects the ideas of freedom, liberalization, and perhaps even individualism, as universal ideals to which all people should inevitably aspire – oddly triumphalist and unilinear given her previous comments on Lerner.

Sreberny is also quite clear on the anticipated outcome of such cultural interaction. “The more open and diverse media environments will spur greater debate in Middle Eastern societies, with loss of control by traditional authorities, such as government and religious scholars...and produce further pressure for both cultural and political democratization” (115). Again, Sreberny seems to view media in functionalist terms, with Western models of gender and democracy as civilizational ideals to which the Middle East will be irresistibly drawn. Religious scholars are simply another side of the coin to repressive governments, and democracy shines brightly on the horizon. Sreberny clearly holds Islamic orthodoxy in contempt, an opinion to which she is certainly entitled. However, it is fair to question whether her model holds explanatory weight, or if it only represents her own personal vision for the region. For instance, how could one explain the rise of multiple religious channels, such as Huda TV, that articulate an orthodox

Islamic message? What about the famous case of a popular satellite televangelist inspiring women among the educated Westernized elite to adopt the Islamic headscarf (Wise 2006)? What is going on? Why aren't the American music videos and Hollywood films working? How are these religious figures, chained in their own medieval obscurantism, proving so versatile in this era of self-reflexivity?

The fact is that Sreberny's judgmental assessment of Middle Eastern society proves crippling to the explanatory power of her approach. She accurately identifies the forces in play, and calls the reader to consider their complex interaction. However, she operates with a caricature of Islamic orthodoxy, in particular, and Middle Eastern "tradition" in general, alongside a zealous faith in the universal benevolence of democracy. One final point illustrates the significance of this analytical failure. Sreberny argues that "[t]he increasingly wide variety of imagery being produced within the region also erodes a simple traditionalist, often religious critique about the negative impact of western material; the boundary of who constitutes 'us' and 'them' keeps shifting, and is brought closer to home if producers in the region are themselves testing the accepted boundaries of media content and cultural taste" (Sreberny 2001, 113). These conceptions of cultural difference are certainly in play, but Sreberny conflates culture and creed in much the same manner as the hybridity theorists. This problem will come into clear focus throughout the following chapters. Chapters four through six illustrate the relationship between orthodoxy and the broad cultural diversity at Huda TV, which includes a strong American contingent. Sreberny's work is a perfect illustration of how the humanist consensus inhibits the necessary path of analysis for the study at hand.

This section has raised several important issues that will inform the current analysis. First, the prevalence of the humanist consensus in the study of Middle Eastern media steers analysis away from crucial questions. Despite the evolution of thought over time, certain themes of Lerner can still be detected in contemporary literature that preemptively disqualify Islam from serious analysis. However, much like the discussion of hybridity, the literature does identify certain crucial phenomena and processes that operate in the context of Huda TV. Media do bring multiple perspectives, discourses, experiences, and cultures into direct contact and conflict. Despite the rapid diffusion of satellite television technologies and content, enduring power structures still hold a strong grip on the media system. Private channels such as Huda TV must grapple with these issues on a daily basis. Various types of censorship are common: silencing of dissent, along with voluntary and involuntary self-censorship. It is important to understand how these various levels of content regulation operate.

One of the key issues drawn out in this section is the relationship between tradition and modernity, or whether such a distinction even makes sense. Lerner's caricatured definition of both tradition and modernity is certainly not useful, and the ostensibly updated conceptions of Sreberny offer minimal improvements. Other scholars more effectively deconstruct these rigid categories through empirical analysis, illustrating the complex interaction of past, present, capital, states, faith, and nationalism. However, the theorization of Islam itself remains vague due to pre-emptive mischaracterizations of orthodoxy. To help clarify this point, the next section turns to existing research on Islamic media.

## Media, Religion, and Islam

While the regional context of Huda TV creates certain parameters for analysis, the institutions and practices of Islam, whether in their classical or contemporary manifestations, are not limited to a specific geographic space. This section examines the ways that Islamic media, on a global scale, have been examined in academic literature. Of particular importance is the extent to which Islamism has been critically engaged. This will provide a more concrete focus with which to contrast the humanist consensus, as an organizing theoretical framework, with the critical Islamism that informs this dissertation. It will also serve as a useful bridge to the analysis chapters, effectively foregrounding the original contributions of this research.

Stewart Hoover prefaces his analysis of American Christian evangelical television by recognizing that the transcendental claims of religion are not easily accommodated by social analysis. While not going so far as to challenge the humanist consensus itself, Hoover calls for more serious attention to the religious experience, and the various contextual factors that inform it (Hoover 1988). Most of the literature mentioned in this chapter achieves the sophisticated attention to context that he demands. Consequently, there are a range of critical issues that set the broad parameters for this analysis (e.g. hybridity, media power in the Middle East, and American cultural hegemony). However, by recognizing and decentering the humanist consensus as the value system that guides research, other crucial questions emerge. Hoover's study of *700 Club* viewers in the United States is qualitatively different from this case study of Huda TV. Additionally, it would be wrong to assume that the social analysis of American Christianity would map

neatly onto the Islamic world due to a common categorization as “religion”. However, Hoover’s general theoretical task recognizes a unique dilemma to the study of communities and institutions that lie outside of the humanist consensus, particularly those representing the religious resurgence that occurred worldwide in the late twentieth century.

In a similar manner, John Downing calls for greater inclusion of religious movements in media scholarship, though with some ambiguity on the exact limits. He recognizes the potentially transformative power of religious movements employed as a form of liberation theology (Downing 2001, Ch. 7). He also notes that “religious dimensions of power...have had and will continue to have considerable practical import for radical media. Secular research that is blinded by its secularism into neglecting this leaves a significant lacuna” (80). This calls for the inclusion of religion as a meaningful force within the wider practices of activism. However, Downing defines his particular object of study – radical media – as “those small-scale media of many technical and genre formats that have no allegiance to corporate, religious, or governmental authority, but rather set out to suborn an oppressive status quo and propose defenses and alternatives to it” (Downing 2003, 242). In the Muslim world, for even the most radical, anti-governmental media, religious authority remains an essential currency of legitimacy (Fandy 1999a, Zaman 2002, Fandy 1999b). So what about Islamist movements, disconnected from the state, appealing to traditional scholarly authority, and opposing an oppressive status quo according to their own accepted values? Is this also radical media? And does it have the right to a voice within social analysis in the same way as those

radical discourses that clearly do qualify. Both Hoover and Downing open the door to the critical inclusion of religion, but not quite far enough. Among those who have studied Islamic media, or the movements that inspire them, this bias is nearly always present, though it ranges from gross caricatures to more subtle and sophisticated empirical work.

In the global context, Islamic media often represents a small scale effort (in budget and resources, if not reach) connected to broader Islamist social movements. Once again, academic efforts to grapple with such phenomena are often dismissive. Manuel Castells offers an account of millennial political and social activism that includes two useful insights for this study (Castells 1997). First, he examines the overall character and orientation of global social movements. This provides an overarching scheme for research on the associated media activism of such groups. Additionally, Castells categorizes various social movements according to a general value dichotomy that he refers to as *proactive* and *reactive*, defining the latter as social movements that “build branches of resistance on behalf of God, nation, ethnicity, family, locality, that is, the fundamentalist categories of millennial existence now threatened under the combined contradictory assault of techno-economic forces and transformative social movements” (2). He expands on the definition of *fundamentalism* as “the construction of collective identity under the identification of individual behavior and society’s institutions to the norms derived from God’s law, interpreted by a definite authority that intermediates between God and humanity” (13). He views these reactive, fundamentalist movements – specifically Islamism, Christian fundamentalism, nationalism, and ethnic movements – as

an attempt to assert threatened identities against the threat of “real virtuality” (66). For Castells, this term refers to a profound sense of alienation and instability that results from the collapse of time and space in the network society. The threat to locality and tradition, therefore, engenders a predictable, reactive response. In this characterization, Castells asserts a universal analysis of religious sociology that allegedly applies across a wide range of movements. This scheme implies an essential unity among religions, or other “reactive” movements, through a common psycho-social coping function. Castells claims that “when the world becomes too large to be controlled, social actors aim at shrinking it back to their size and reach” (66). The alternative, the proactive social movement – environmentalism and feminism, for example – tend to embrace the new network society and its break with tradition (Chs. 3 and 4). In a manner reminiscent of Lerner and Sreberny, Islam falls on the opposite end of this strict dichotomy. The idea that Islamic “fundamentalism” might intersect with proactive social movements is not considered, although Castells does approve of some Muslims who stand squarely outside of orthodoxy. Likewise, Castells asserts another common device in linking Islam to the particular and local, which could easily be challenged by the global scope and universal ethos of Islam. Finally, Islamism is hastily matched to diverse movements which seem to have very little in common except as *others* to Castells’ uncritical humanism.

Castells does recognize the political currency of liberation theology as a component of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. He refers to the integration of religious and secular activism, in this context, as “a distinctive expression of the old search for social justice under new historical conditions” (83). Therefore, unless certain

indicators bring religion into an acceptable humanist frame, Castells exiles it from the field of meaningful political discourse. Castells also indicates this criterion in his analysis of Islamism. Unlike its use in this dissertation, the term “Islamism” often holds a somewhat derogatory meaning because it implies a distinction between its adherents and proper Muslims. While the latter embody the religion of Islam accurately, the former allegedly co-opt the faith and reassert it as a political ideology. Castells echoes this sentiment, referring to Islamism as a hypermodern movement that mythologizes Islamic history for political ends (Ch. 2). However, Castells does not give critical attention to the real political elements of Islamic scholarship in order to measure their application within contemporary movements. Likewise, he only accepts as legitimate those Islamic voices that fall far outside of orthodoxy. Again, this type of perspective is based more on a caricature of Islamism – perhaps by fixating on those aspects of the faith that appear antagonistic to the humanist consensus – rather than any real integration with or understanding of orthodoxy.

Moving from the level of social movement to media practices, Gary Bunt provides a strong empirical analysis of the Islamic Internet, but it is characteristically flawed through a weak engagement with Islamic orthodoxy (Bunt 2000). Bunt poses an essential question about the nature of Islamic authority online, questioning whether the electronic environment provides a legitimate Islamic experience for Muslims, or whether its virtuality overtakes any meaningful connection to the rows of worshippers and pulpits of the mosques (Ch.1). This presents a useful approach to the issue of authority, and Bunt produced a good survey of Islamic online content at the time of his writing.

However, his focus consistently emphasizes the capacity for the Internet to break down traditional systems of religious authority and allow individual readings of sacred texts (Chs. 3 and 5). John Anderson offers a similar analysis of the Islamic Internet, emphasizing the link between new interpretation of Islam and an emerging Muslim civil society (Anderson 2003, 57). These views are problematic for two reasons. First, they tend to dismiss the entire Islamic intellectual tradition as simply one among many equal claims to religious authority. The idea that real criteria exist within that tradition, or that learned scholarship may be required for accurate interpretation, is undervalued. Additionally, the focus on diversity for diversity's sake ignores the fact that many Muslims go online in search of authority rather than for justification of their personal opinions and desires (Maguire 2007). Bunt subjects his analysis to the criteria of the humanist consensus, expecting Islamic authority to crumble once exposed to a force of decentralization.

Beyond political activism, other studies tend to focus on the ways that the Internet impacts, and usually corrodes, standards of Islamic etiquette and morality. Wheeler examines the use of Internet in Kuwait (Wheeler 2001). Kuwait represents a common trend in the Gulf countries of rapid technological diffusion alongside an interest in strict control of Internet content (188). This is an interesting dynamic, but one that should be examined through Islamic theories of authority and modernity. Instead, Wheeler follows Bunt by citing examples of the Internet's transformative power in Kuwait, with the explicit value judgment that such change is positive (197). In particular, Wheeler cites the blurring of sectarian lines through a Sunni-Shi'a online romance and the increase of

male-female interactions online. For a conservative Muslim country, these developments could lead to major social crises. Wheeler, however, simply dismisses the orthodox perspective on these issues, offering no analysis of Islamic law, its applicability to this situation, or the potentially negative social consequences for these changes in behavior. She simply places Internet culture in Kuwait on a scale of repression and liberation, nicely couched within humanism, but largely irrelevant to the context of her research. These two examples are indicative, once again, of how the humanist consensus impacts research on Islamic media.

### Looking Forward

This chapter raises several crucial theoretical issues and examines a range of media research. First, in the effort to look beyond the traditional geographic or cultural frontiers of media studies, it is also important to recognize the ideological boundaries – i.e. the humanist consensus – within which the vast bulk of media research is conducted. Next, when analyzing the Muslim world, the inhibiting effects of this humanist consensus preclude certain key questions which should guide social analysis. In particular, creed and culture, as two categories of identity, must be clearly distinguished. This case study empirically engages the self-representation of Muslims in order to fill existing gaps in communication theory. Likewise, this analysis contributes to existing literature on the broad area of broadcasting and media in the Middle East. Many of the phenomena and processes identified by other scholars will be evident in the analysis of Huda TV. However, Huda TV is distinct in a number of respects. Its multicultural staff, use of the English language, communication of Islam to a global audience, and relationship to

orthodoxy, raise unique questions. Finally, the discussion of research on Islamic media raises a more finite set of issues that help to structure this analysis, which will be presented in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This dissertation employs a *case study* and reflective approach to the in-depth, qualitative analysis of a single media institution. Earl Babbie describes the “essential characteristic” of case study research as “the limitation of attention to a particular instance of something” (Babbie 2001, 285). In this case, the focus on Huda TV provides a detailed examination of one instance of Islamic television, an emerging segment of global satellite television, and an opportune case with which to examine gaps in existing theory and open new spaces for scholarly inquiry. Drawing from the concept of *critical Islamism* introduced in the previous chapter, this dissertation answers the question: **How does Huda TV assert an Islamic presence in the satellite television arena?** This question analyzes the “Islamic” character of the channel in relation to (a) the body of orthodoxy within which the channel defines itself, and (b) the various contextual factors – political-economic, cultural, discursive – that inform its work.

#### Suitability of a Case Study Approach

Robert Yin defines the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when...the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2009, 18). Nicely matching Yin’s criteria, the current study examines an illustrative instance of an emerging media phenomenon, Islamic satellite television, within a unique historical moment for both the particular institution and wider context. The complex interaction between the institution and its context is a primary focus in the analysis chapters that follow. In terms of the practice of research, Yin argues that the case study “copes with

the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of internal interest than data points, and as one result...relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result...benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (18). In relation to the last point, the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter offers the necessary guidance for this study. As will be discussed below, multiple sources of data are consulted, with the additional benefit of long-term participant observation, providing a “fourth dimension” to data triangulation through the observation of themes and trends over time. Indeed, the level and intensity of access is a unique strength of this project.

George and Bennett identify four particular strengths of case study research that bear closely on this dissertation (George and Bennett 2005, 19-22). First, they recognize that case study research allows for a high degree of *conceptual validity*. As explained in the previous chapter, the term “Islam” and its various contemporary permutations (i.e. “Islamic” and “Islamism”) are rarely defined with a great deal of precision or validity in academic literature. Islam is simplified, pluralized, or relativized, and interchangeably refers to both creed and culture. By examining how this term is deployed and understood by Muslims within a framework of religious activism, this case study promises a richer understanding of Islam within the context of modernity.

Likewise, George and Bennett also suggest that case study research can assist in *deriving new hypotheses* (20). Moving beyond dismissive categories such as “fundamentalist” or “regressive” when analyzing contemporary manifestations of

orthodox Islam, this case study also offers a preliminary framework with which to interpret and understand the complex interaction between the Islamic tradition and its contemporary context. At a more finite level, the case study's capacity to generate new hypotheses also enables the identification of new variables. As described in chapter two, the humanist consensus in media studies limits the kind of questions that can be asked about Islamic media. Chapters four through six will illustrate how the dynamics at work in Islamism are by no means a simple conflict between tradition and modernity. Although the core of religious tradition is viewed as timeless and universal by orthodox Muslims, modernity is only viewed as a unique historical challenge to the processes of adaptation, flexibility, and renewal that have always been in force. Through this dissertation, variables such as the application of orthodoxy and the integration of competing discourses should be understood as more crucial to understanding contemporary Islam than a crude scale of hazily-defined religiosity or fanaticism.

George and Bennett caution that single case studies have the potential to be “descriptive and monographic rather than theory-oriented” (69). However, they also recognize that the pitfalls of single case studies can be reduced by multiple observations of that case (32). As a participant-observation study conducted over the course of a full calendar year, this dissertation minimized the risks of a short-run case study through extensive and repeated observations. Moreover, Yin describes “unique” and “revelatory” cases as two possible rationales for the single case study, both of which are highly applicable to Huda TV. The diverse cultural backgrounds of channel staff within the specific context of Egyptian Media Production City is unique, and the level of access

accorded to the researcher is rarely available, thus providing revelatory data that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Yin 2009, 47-8). George and Bennett describe the third and fourth strengths of case study research as *exploring causal mechanisms* and *modeling and assessing complex causal relations* (George and Bennett 2005, 21-2). They are particularly concerned about these benefits because of their capacity to develop theory. Since Huda TV represents a unique case of Islamic media, this dissertation is cautious in making generalizable causal claims. This is for two major reasons. First, the various actors and associated variables at work in this case study – Saudi ownership, Egyptian management, American cultural authority, etc. – are constituted according to their interrelationships within this specific formation. Next, some variables that make sense within the parameters of this case – such as the levels of religious observance, or the impact of cultural identities – may not apply in a different situation.

That said, this study provides a distinct conceptual advance in challenging dominant accounts of contemporary Islamic practices. Its examination of how Huda TV interprets and applies Islamic orthodoxy is conducted in reference to a historically established body of knowledge, and therefore, the findings in this area have broader impact. As Yin states, “case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (Yin 2009, 15). This case study cannot be generalized to all cases of intercultural dynamics in Muslim institutions, or the behavior of employees at any Islamic television channel. However, in terms of the specific theoretical framework of critical Islamism, this dissertation can offer a compelling framework with which to study similar phenomena in contemporary life. Likewise, Yin discusses a “hierarchical

stereotype” (7) that places case study research low on the scale of research methodology – serving only as exploratory research rather than descriptive or explanatory (9). This dissertation does offer exploratory data on how the emerging model of Islamic television is defined. However, it also offers descriptive and explanatory findings on the interaction of Islamic orthodoxy with contemporary, contextual elements, and therefore contributes effectively to the development of theory in this area.

### Process of Data Collection

This dissertation draws from multiple sources of data – primarily note-taking and documentation – collected over an extended time period. Primarily, it employs a participant observation approach to data collection. After working part-time with Huda TV from March-June 2005, the author accepted a full-time position at the channel which ultimately spanned the timeframe of July 2005-August 2006. During this time, he was directly involved with program production processes and oversight. He contributed to the creative process of the channel in many respects, and played a direct role in the production of several programs. As the presenter for two major programs, he also helped to define the on-screen identity of the channel, and interacted with audience members on live, call-in broadcasts. The result is a plethora of data sources which primarily take the form of personal notes and production-related documents.

The fieldwork for this research employed a participant-observation method, a unique feature of which is the deep involvement of the author with Huda TV, a role that Babbie describes as “the complete participant” (Babbie 2001, 278). Inherent in this role is both the tendency to impact the social environment and the potential to gain rich

observations and insight. Regardless of the level of participation, Spradley outlines the following guidelines that should guide fieldwork. He writes:

[Y]ou will have to maintain a *dual purpose*: you will want to seek to participate and to watch yourself and others at the same time. Make yourself *explicitly aware* of things that others take for granted. It will be important to take mental pictures with a *wide-angle lens*, looking beyond your immediate focus of activity. You will experience the feeling of being both an *insider* and an *outsider* simultaneously. As you participate in routine activities, you will need to engage in *introspection* to more fully understand your experiences. And finally, you will need to *keep a record* of what you see and experience. These six features of the participant-observer role distinguish it from what you already know as an ordinary participant (Spradley 1980, 58).

In every respect, these six features were maintained throughout the period of research. While some activities required more intensive involvement (such as hosting live programs) that may not have allowed for a high degree of record keeping, other activities or moments presented ample opportunities for observation that supplied the bulk of data for this dissertation. Work-intensive experiences were often illustrative, and are appropriately referenced in this work, but they did not serve as the primary process of data collection.

The broader ethnographic experience of this dissertation helps to shine light on practices that might otherwise remain obscure in scholarship. As Spradley notes, “ethnography alone seeks to document the existence of alternative realities and to

describe these realities in their own terms. Thus, it can provide a corrective for theories that arise in Western social science” (14). To that end, this research was not conducted by viewing the researcher’s colleagues as “others” or the researcher as a neutral observer. Thus, rather than the notion of “scientific detachment” (Babbie 2001, 279), this research depends on a consciously *reflexive process* that does not depend on an absolute demarcation of subject and object.

The researcher was employed at Huda TV with the official position title of “Director of Program Preparation.” In practice, this title meant little, and the researcher worked with a team of employees under the general supervision of a program director. The team always included two or three Americans, and several Egyptians who all held degrees from the Islamic Studies in English Department at Al Azhar University, one of the premier Islamic educational institutions in the world. The Cairo office of Huda TV also included a regional manager, an accountant, and the Production Director, the last of whom supervised a large Egyptian staff who handled all the technical aspects of the channel, including editing, direction, set construction, lighting, sound, and post-production. Huda TV’s top management is located in Saudi Arabia. The Cairo office had occasional contact with the Saudi head office, but the researcher did not participate in channel-wide decision-making. Specifically, the researcher served in the following roles:

- Host of *Ask Huda*, a live, call-in *fatwa*<sup>9</sup> program featuring an expert in Islamic law.
- Host of *Perspectives*, an interview program on current events, often with a religious focus.

- Script editor and production supervisor for *Sermons From the Holy Land*, a program featuring translations of Friday sermons from Makkah and Madinah.
- On-set supervisor of several programs. Provided content oversight, particularly in relation to sensitive material or potential violations of channel censorship policies. Reviewed recorded programming in the same capacity.
- Participated in creative development process for a variety of programs. Included conceiving programs, script writing, editing, and episode selection.

These constituted the primary roles of the researcher at the channel, though other duties were performed as needed.

### Sources of Data

**Note-taking:** During the researcher's time at Huda TV, he collected extensive notes on program planning and production. This included detailed notes taken on-set during the production of several multi-episode programs. As described in more detail below, the author employed memoing as a preliminary source of data analysis to focus the note-collection progressively over time.

**Documentation:** A major secondary source of data is documentation. This source can be broken down into three general categories:

- Huda TV policy and procedure documents, such as the channel mission and goals, and the censorship policy. These documents clearly define the ideals and

parameters that influenced production at the channel. However, they also help to illustrate the ways that individuals and informal processes and decision-making shaped the channel.

- Pre-production and preparation documents, including program proposal forms, episode planning documents, interview questions and talking points. For certain programs, such as *Health in Islam*, the researcher collected significant documentation.
- Documents used during production, including scripts for *Sermons from the Holy Land*, e-mail questions for the call-in fatwa program *Ask Huda*, notes from live call-in programs recording the topic of conversation with callers. The level of detail for these documents varies greatly. Documents used during a taped episode often reflect much more detail than documents developed during live programs, due to the obvious time and pressure constraints for the latter.

Due to the informal structure and chaotic work flow of Huda TV, it was not possible to collect all the documents associated with every program. However, for several crucial programs, a vast number of documents were available. This includes scripts for *Sermons from the Holy Land* that span from October 2005-May 2006, on-air notes and email questions from episodes of *Ask Huda* that span roughly the same time period, and a large portion of the production material associated with the talk shows *Perspectives* and *Health and Islam*. Documentation from other programs is not as extensive, but some single items still served as useful secondary sources of data.

Data collection was pursued continuously through the researcher's entire term of employment at Huda TV. Most data were collected while performing work duties, which yielded varying levels of detail. The researcher kept detailed notes through the entire production cycle of certain programs. For others, large volumes of production documents were collected.

### Data Analysis

Babbie describes coding as “the key process in the analysis of qualitative social research data” (Babbie 2001, 365) In this research, coding can be described through the following steps:

**Memoing:** During the process of data collection, particularly note-taking, the researcher used the technique of *memoing* (369-9) to sketch out initial paths of analysis. This process often occurred during filming or other “real time” situations where note-taking was appropriate. When this was not possible, notes were written up promptly after the relevant event. Notes were periodically reviewed, and the blank left pages adjacent to the notes were used for analytical comments.

**Inductive Operationalization:** Guided by the analytical memos, detailed review of the data indicated key issues and patterns that helped to define the specific research questions detailed below. This research did not require detailed coding of large text documents that might have required more advanced qualitative research software. Rather, it involved the organization of small bits of text, notes, and document excerpts that coalesced around analytical themes. It was sufficient to use a basic coding scheme, aligned with the specific research questions, in order to group data in manageable units. For instance, in

chapter five, identification of the program *Health and Islam* as analytically significant was made during program planning meetings and note-taking on the set. Available data were then examined for basic patterns. This led to an identification of two major themes: Islam as both *complementary* and *superior* to modern medical sciences. Using this scheme, data broke down into relatively identifiable cases and instances that were easily suited to analysis. In this sense, the final steps of coding were actually quite minimal due to the gradual honing process that began during fieldwork itself. Although this work did not formally employ Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence, the process did reflect the movement from *descriptive* to *focused* to *selective observations* (Spradley 1980, 33). Thus, the research questions outlined below are a result of *focused observations* that were subsequently analyzed through the *selective observations* that help to answer those questions.

### Operationalization

This dissertation is structured according to three intermediate-level research questions, corresponding to chapters four through six, that are each divided into two specific questions. These specific questions were arrived at inductively by combing the data and identifying key patterns and occurrences. They provide a concrete framework through which to address the issues of greatest analytical significance. While not providing an exhaustive treatment of the concerns identified in the intermediate-level questions, they do focus on the most useful and illustrative examples that emerge from the fieldwork.

**IRQ1: How do Huda TV's production processes and programming help to conceptualize Islamic satellite television?**

This question emerges from the gaps in existing literature, which are due to the lack of engagement with Islamic orthodoxy. After examining the view of contemporary Muslim jurists on the medium of television, the specific research questions below will offer exploratory and descriptive accounts of this particular instance of a satellite channel conceived within the bounds of the Islamic tradition.

**IRQ1A: How does Huda TV conceive its selection of programming as Islamic?**

Explanation – The descriptive adjective “Islamic” is a modern neologism that was rarely used in classical religious scholarship. It is in fact a term that attempts to decouple Islam and Muslims from the varied influences of colonialism, Western culture, and other perceived threats to an authentic identity (Jackson 2005, 154-5). However, the common use of the term makes it meaningful, particularly in reference to institutions such as Huda TV that are deemed “Islamic” against a backdrop of media content that is decidedly not so. This question will help to define what makes Huda TV's programming “Islamic”. This question will also help to specify the religious schools of thought and cultural influences that constituted the nascent identity of Huda TV. In this respect, this question will also compare and contrast Islamic media criticism and media studies literature in the West, with some important implications for the concept of hybridity and the general discourse of media and power.

Sources – The question will draw broadly upon the entire range of data while focusing on individual programs as a unit of analysis. In addition to the final product, this question will also reference the process through which the broad body of content is formed. In this respect, *there is a clear difference between the formal plan for programming and the actual product, between the channel's collective ideals and the vision of its individual staff members*. In many ways, this affirms a common phenomenon of television, where the interplay of structure and agency is informed by various institutional, economic, social, cultural, and individual factors (Straubhaar, World Television: From Global to Local 2007, Ch. 1). However, these processes operate under a unified religious banner. The crucial issue is to examine how these factors play out among staff members who are united by a common creed.

**IRQ1B: How does Huda TV regulate content – through policies, guidelines, work processes, and censorship – to ensure that programming exhibits an Islamic character?**

Explanation – While question IRQ1A focuses on the definition of Islamic programming, this question examines the process and policies that regulate content. This question will illustrate how certain dynamics of power, namely cultural authority and censorship, operate in reference to the channel's Islamic mission.

Sources – This question will reference formal and informal channel policies as expressed through staff meetings and channel documents, particularly the policies

on censorship. These broader texts will be applied to specific instances of production that help to illustrate the real process. Most notably, this section will address the conflicts that emerged during recording of *Right Click* (a program dealing with computer technology and internet content) that serves as an illustrative application of broader channel principles. This program is unique because it illustrated a conflict of religious agendas within the broad mission of the channel. And while *Right Click* showcased a great deal of non-Muslim content (Google Earth, children's websites, etc.) – some of which had arguably un-Islamic elements – the Islamic websites created more controversy because of how they projected the authority and authenticity of certain controversial positions. Also referenced is *10 Promised Paradise* (a program describing the biographies of ten notable early Muslims). On the surface, this program represents a series of historical biographies. However, the individuals and events referenced are extremely significant to inter-sectarian polemics within the Muslim world, particularly between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. This program was an effort to assert the orthodox Sunni position with a diplomatic touch. In this way, it illustrates how channel guidelines and ideals were put into practice. The researcher supervised the production of both these programs on the set.

**IRQ2: How does Huda TV assert an Islamic identity among and against dominant global discourses?**

Recognizing that Islamic orthodoxy views its primary sources and legacy of scholarship as relevant and applicable to contemporary life, a major component of

Islamic activism, in any form, is to engage with discourses that are perceived to compete with Islam for ultimate authority. This chapter examines how Huda TV approaches two such discourses – modern science and human rights. This chapter will support the concept of a crisis of theorization in Islamism, as well as highlight some of the political-economic and cultural contextual factors that impact the channel's work.

**IRQ2A: How does Huda TV engage with faith in science and technology as the guarantors of truth and progress?**

Explanation – There is a great volume of literature and multimedia products dealing with the relationship between Islam and science. Although some Islamic beliefs are irreconcilable with a strictly materialist view (such as belief in miracles, the unseen, paradise and hellfire, etc.), there is a particularly strong effort to show that Islam is compatible with science in a way that makes the Enlightenment critiques of Christianity inapplicable. Additionally, science and technology remain the beacons of development and progress in the Muslim world, perhaps more so than the West where these concepts have come under greater scrutiny. This theme was evident throughout programming at Huda TV.

Sources – The major source for this research question is the program *Health in Islam* (a program featuring an American Muslim host and a variety of Egyptian doctors). The researcher took detailed notes during the filming of several episodes for this program and collected a wide variety of production documents. Notes from production meetings will also be used. *Health in Islam* was defined by a senior manager as a program whose success would be measured by the extent

to which the scientific and Islamic messages were effectively integrated. The host, an American Muslim, made an effort to relate the various guests' medical expertise to Islamic principles. A theme of conflict that continually emerged was how to define the concept of "Prophetic medicine" – that which is established in core Islamic texts – against the objections of modern medical science. A particularly interesting instance of this conflict was the discussion of *hijaamah*,<sup>10</sup> a practice which is rejected by many Egyptian medical doctors. An episode on *hijaama* was filmed with a doctor trained in Chinese medicine from an institution in China. A practice similar to *hijaamah* is employed in that body of knowledge, so his defense of the practice did not threaten his professional reputation.

**IRQ2B: How does Huda TV engage with dominant humanist discourses, particularly freedom of expression and human rights?**

Explanation – Much like the relationship between Islam and science, the alleged conflict between Islam and humanism is also a common feature of contemporary debates and polemics. This section will examine how Huda TV engaged with practical manifestations of the humanist consensus outlined in chapter two. For some, Islam represents a medieval antithesis to humanism and the broader virtues of liberal secularist thought. Huda TV expended a great deal of effort to safeguard and defend the classical understanding of Islam, including those aspects that conflict with secular humanism (e.g. the belief in divinely ordained law). However, there was also a clear effort to highlight those aspects of Islam that are

consistent and compatible with dominant humanist discourses. These tensions were evident through a variety of Huda TV programming.

Sources – This question will reference programming dealing with the Danish cartoon crisis, including “Ask Huda” (a call-in *fatwa* program hosted by the author), “Perspectives” (a current events interview program hosted by the author), and “Sermons from the Holy Land” (translations of the Friday sermons from Makkah and Madinah). When the Danish cartoon crisis unfolded in the Muslim world, Huda TV felt an obligation to weigh in, both to condemn the cartoons, an unquestionable outrage according to Islam, but also to counsel Muslims on the appropriate responses. The researcher was directly involved with several programs that addressed this issue, most notably “Ask Huda” and “Perspectives”. Within the channel, there were also contested views on how to respond to the cartoons, positions which often reflected the cultural background of staff members more than the level of religious commitment or practice.

**IRQ3: How is Huda TV’s Islamic mission impacted by its cultural and political-economic context?**

While the influence of contextual factors is obliquely addressed throughout the dissertation, this question brings them into clearest focus. The question directly addresses issues of media, culture, power, and hybridity that are raised in chapter two. It also offers a direct contribution to the study of satellite television in the Middle East, and the complex interactions of orthodoxy, authoritarian states, American cultural hegemony, and even sectarian polemics within the Islamic tradition itself. Again, the unique

contribution of this dissertation is to examine these trends in reference to the perspective of orthodoxy within which they operate and emerge.

**IRQ3A: How do American staff members at Huda TV contribute to communicating the Islamic mission to a global audience?**

Explanation – During the author’s term of employment, an interesting aspect of Huda TV was the strong presence of American Muslims among the creative staff.<sup>11</sup> These individuals played an important role in cultural translation of content to achieve maximum appeal and impact to an English-speaking, global audience. In the words of one senior American staff member, this process was known as “translotion”, meaning the eloquent translation of language and culture without sacrificing creed. The cultural power of American staff within the orthodox Islamic framework of Huda TV yields interesting insights on the old questions of cultural imperialism and emerging notions of hybridity.

Sources – This question will primarily reference the programs *Sermons from the Holy Land* and *Untold Stories of World History*. The researcher accumulated a vast collection of transcripts for *Sermons* and worked weekly on the recording of the English versions, a process wherein most of the creative “translotion” occurred. This question has the additional benefit of documenting the contributions of a senior staff member whose experience and sophistication were unmatched at the channel. This program helped to develop an unofficial “style guide” for the channel that would effectively and accurately communicate Islam without making cultural blunders in reference to the Western audience. *Untold*

*Stories* was a creative project conceived and executed by American staff members and a visiting American imam who served as program presenter. These programs also illustrate the strong cultural capital of American staff members (a fact that was also reflected in salaries) in possessing a strong sense of how to bridge cultures and avoid embarrassing gaffes. In this respect, the American staff members were given a great deal of power and autonomy to control the message, if not the process, of production. However, the Americans went further, conceiving of their experience as more effective, and even more authoritative, in communicating the Islamic message.

**IRQ3B: How does the immediate political-economic context impact Huda TV programming?**

Explanation – Historically, Egypt and the wider Middle East are not known as open media environments. Although this situation has changed dramatically in recent years, there are still explicit and implicit political pressures on any media institution operating within that environment. This chapter will examine enabling and limiting factors of the immediate context of production. As detailed in chapter two, the changing mediascape of the Middle East is still driven and bound by many of the same forces and power centers that governed earlier eras of media. In this respect, Huda TV does not exist in a vacuum. In addition to the Egyptian political context, the channel depends on private funding from Saudi Arabia, which creates another layer of influence and control over programming decisions.

Sources – This question will draw significantly on the production meetings and programming decisions that were impacted by the political-economic context, particularly relating to the program *Perspectives*. The researcher served as host of *Perspectives*, which often featured former Egyptian diplomats and public officials. This required a delicate balancing act on the part of the channel to avoid political hostility. It is worth noting that many of these decisions may have been rooted in perception rather than actual threats. This is very much the dilemma and challenge of working in a system that operates on self-censorship.

#### Ethics and Human Subjects Research Approval

In 2005, the researcher obtained approval for study 2005-03-0015: Islamic Authority in the Global Mediascape. This included approvals for interviews with Islamic scholars who actively participate in satellite television and other media. The study proposed using recorded interviews with subjects whose identities would be disclosed due to the analytical importance and relevance of this information. The study was approved prior to the researcher gaining employment at Huda TV. This project evolved through an inductive process with specific research questions emerging during the fieldwork. The institutional focus and participant-observation approach is distinct from the original proposal, though it is effectively the same intellectual project as the proposed study. By focusing on a single institution, it was also possible to maintain a greater degree of confidentiality and privacy for all informants, none of whom are identified in the dissertation. In every respect, the narrowing of focus to Huda TV presented a more conservative approach to human subjects. No recorded interviews were performed and

confidentiality of all participants was strictly maintained. The original proposal allowed for both recorded interviews and the disclosure of participant identities when appropriate. All members of the Huda TV staff were aware of the researcher's dual role at the channel. After completing the fieldwork, the University of Texas Institutional Research Board confirmed the original approval's applicability to this case study in its final form.

### Research Limitations

**Timeframe:** The author's involvement in Huda TV spanned the timeframe of March 2005-August 2006. Contact with the channel began shortly after the start of production. Full-time employment began in July 2005, before the channel's first broadcast. Huda TV went on air with programming (previously, it displayed a logo and brief promotional video) at the start of Ramadan, 1426, which corresponds to October 2005. This timeframe is distinctive in that it documents the early process of channel development. By the time of the author's departure in July 2006, the channel was fairly well established, although it would continue to evolve in subsequent years. With a relatively small creative staff, some changes to the character of the programming occurred due to staff turnover, though there were no significant changes during the period of fieldwork, which formally ended in May 2006. Thus, the rich data collected during the author's involvement with the channel was easily sufficient to answer the research questions.

**Language:** The channel broadcast entirely in the English language. Most production and staff meetings occurred in English, or Arabic and English with rough simultaneous translations by capable staff members. A good portion of the professional staff (cameramen, producers, audio specialists, set designers, etc.) spoke little to no English.

Therefore, colloquial Egyptian Arabic was used commonly on the set. The author effectively communicated with production staff but mutual comprehension never reached 100%. The author's more formal training in classical and modern standard Arabic assisted with the effective engagement of religious discourse at the channel, which often occurred in Arabic with an accompanying English translation.

**Production Process:** Huda TV operated in professional studios with a skilled production staff. However, a good portion of the creative staff had limited prior experience in television production. Therefore, any results of this study should be applied with caution to more established television firms with full professional staffing. While this limitation is significant in respect to other satellite television channels, it is not directly relevant to the research questions. It is also likely that many Islamic channels, in the sense of those with an explicitly religious mission, would draw from a similar variety of content-appropriate knowledge and professional expertise. Therefore, the research may prove to be more generalizable, relatively, to that category of media. It may also hold implications for the study of alternative media, particularly in the context of rapid technological diffusion, where relatively independent producers are capable of creating high quality content.

**Limitations of Researcher's Role:** The researcher did not have significant access to the decision-making and planning processes of Huda TV management in the Cairo or Riyadh offices. With the exception of a few consultative staff meetings that included the creative staff, both Saudi and Egyptian management remained somewhat opaque. There was also an often hazy definition of roles at the Cairo office, which caused some degree

of confusion and conflict between the various units. And as is often the case with television production, every program required a wide variety of roles, all of which would have been impossible for any person to perform or even observe.

**Defining the Spectrum of Sunni Orthodoxy:** While this dissertation examines Huda TV as a contemporary manifestation of religious scholarship, this does not imply that the channel represents the full spectrum of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy. However, in many cases, the research questions highlight areas of broad agreement and consensus within that body of orthodoxy. At other times, the viewpoints of the channel were particular to one school of thought, or even a small range of contemporary scholars. Additionally, some discussions also deal with perceptions of orthodoxy by individual staff members who were not personally trained in religious scholarship. And finally, differences of opinion within the spectrum of orthodoxy also existed between channel staff. Therefore, this dissertation should not be read as an exhaustive or definitive statement on Sunni Islam; it is just one contemporary manifestation of orthodoxy. Nevertheless, this limited analysis can help to chart out future research questions on the relationship between Sunni orthodoxy, media, and even broader elements of social practice.

#### Chapter Four: Defining Islamic Television

This chapter asks: **How do Huda TV's production processes and programming help to conceptualize Islamic satellite television?** This question is designed to yield exploratory data on the nascent project of Islamic television in light of the discussion of literature in chapter two. Before embarking on the analysis of Huda TV itself, this chapter considers the religious background and context from which the channel emerges. Next, issues such as hybridity, the distinction between creed and culture, American cultural hegemony, the Islamic scholarly tradition, and the immediate political-economic context are all examined in reference to the broad range of programming at Huda TV. The second half of the chapter begins with an examination of content regulation at the channel through the implementation of several key policies. It then turns to two specific programs that illustrate the complex interaction of policy, producers, and context.

Several important trends will be examined through the broad definitions of Islamic television and the various processes and guidelines that operate in program production. First, the term "Islamic" can apply to both religious matters (e.g. prayer, fasting, theology, charity) and those areas of life that are simply permissible in Islam. This is an important corrective to any definition of "Islamic" that deals only with matters of faith. In fact, it is through the application of this term to all areas of everyday life, such as television, that it acquires a distinct meaning. This usage attempts to classify activities and phenomena in contemporary life as lawful and acceptable according to classical legal principles. In such a framework, orthodox scholarship remains the primary

lens through which the world is surveyed, while the exceptional conditions of modernity only present themselves as particularly unique opportunities for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning and legal deduction). In this sense, modernity and the Islamic tradition do not represent a rigid dichotomy. Through this understanding, one can appreciate how the enduring authority of orthodoxy can coexist with highly contested applications and interpretations in the scholarly tradition. As mentioned in section one of chapter two, the process of application and interpretation is the terrain of Islamism, where social analysis and orthodox scholarship can meet.

What is evident in the construction of something so contested as “Islamic satellite television” is a common commitment and belief in orthodoxy that is nevertheless skewed and refracted by various cultural, political, and social factors. While the channel’s policies on core issues of Muslim creed are well established, the intuitive processes of content regulation, by people with very different experiences and ideologies, reveals a more complex process. Also, while “the West” is generally conceived as the target of Huda TV’s programming, the relationship between Islam and the West is highly contested in the channel’s work. Similarly, the tacit pressures to limit politically-oriented content present distinct analytical challenges in defining this medium. And how do conceptions of the channel’s religious message differ between American creative staff, Egyptian production staff, and Saudi management? These issues and others will be explored in the current chapter and explained in much greater depth in chapters five and six.

In order to answer the research questions set forth in this chapter, it is necessary to explain briefly the history of religious-oriented programming in the Arab world along with various legal opinions on television by Muslim scholars. Islam has always had a presence on television in Arab lands. In the Middle East, the medium has featured Quranic recitation, Friday sermons, lectures by popular preachers, and other varieties of at least ostensibly religious content.<sup>12</sup> The same holds true for the more recent, incredibly diverse, and rapidly evolving realm of satellite television. As mentioned in chapter two, Al Jazeera cannot be described as an “Islamic” channel, though it certainly gives voice to a variety of Muslim perspectives. It also includes programs such as “Ash-shari’ah wal-hayat” (Islamic law and life), hosted by the popular scholar and mufti of Qatar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi. But despite the religious elements present throughout the full spectrum of broadcasting, the idea of a channel driven by an exclusively Islamic mission, operating independent of direct state control, and defining itself according to Islamic law is something new. Huda TV represents such an effort.

Historically, Muslim scholars have looked upon television with a great deal of suspicion. Although some objected to the medium itself due to the general prohibition against images in Islam, the prevailing and widespread critique relates to content. In this sense, the medium is viewed as a transparent vessel that can be filled with either positive or negative material, without any distortion or impact from the vessel’s structure. It is possible to glean a sense of this critique from the following fatawa (plural of fatwa – a legal opinion in Islamic law) published online:

**Fatwa from fatwa-online.com**

Topic: Watching soap operas/serials on television

Question: What is the ruling regarding watching soap operas/serials which are transmitted on television?

Response: It is upon the Muslim to safeguard his time (involving himself) in that which will benefit him in his life and the Hereafter because he is responsible for his time which he spends: How did he spend it? Allaah (Subhaanahu wa Ta'aala) says:

**{Did We not give you lives long enough, so that whosoever would receive admonition, - could receive it?}, [Soorah al-Faatir, Aayah 37].**

And in a hadeeth, a man will be asked about his life and in what he spent it, (at-Tirmidhee). Watching soap operas/serials is a waste of time so it is not befitting for the Muslim to busy himself with it. If the soap operas involve anything that is forbidden then watching them is haraam; such as overt and beautiful women, music and singing, and soap operas and serials which convey bad thoughts far from religion and good manners. Also, like soap operas/serials which include shameless (actions and speech) which badly affects good manners. So these types of soap operas/serials are not permissible to watch.

Shaykh Ibn al-Fowzaan

al-Muntaqaa min Fataawa Fadheelatush-Shaykh Saalih Ibn Fowzaan - Volume 3,  
Page 346, Fatwa No. 516<sup>13</sup>

**Fatwa from islamonline.net**

Name of Questioner: Masoud - Afghanistan

Title: Watching TV & Dancing in Weddings

Question: Dear scholars, as-Salamu `alaykum! I would like to know if it is halal to watch TV. I would like also to know what Islam says about a girl who dances in a wedding of a relative or a friend.

Answer: Wa `alaykum As-Salamu wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuh.

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

All praise and thanks are due to Allah, and peace and blessings be upon His Messenger. Dear brother in Islam, we commend your eagerness to become well-acquainted with Islam and its teachings, which is the way Allah has chosen for the welfare of His servants.

In fact, watching television is exactly like getting involved in any sort of reading books. Whatever affects ethics and religion negatively is Islamically unacceptable, and what is supportive to them is Islamically recommended. In general, television is like a vessel that could contain something good, as well as it could contain something bad; so it depends on what one watches in it.

To make this point crystal clear, we would like to cite for you the following fatwa:

“Not all TV programs are haram. It is haram to watch programs that show nudity or any type of indecency. A Muslim should always select channels and programs that are beneficial, educational, and informative. If, by

accident, one happens to see any indecent thing, one should turn the TV off forthwith. In fact, the problem is not in the TV as a machine but in what a person sees in it. If one watches documentary movies, news, educational and Islamic programs, then there is nothing wrong in watching TV so long as the TV does not distract the person away from his/her Islamic duties such as prayer.”

Excerpted, with slight modifications, from: [www.islamicity.com](http://www.islamicity.com) <sup>14</sup>

**Fatwa from sunnipath.com**

Title: What is the ruling on watching television?

Answered by Shaykh Amjad Rasheed

Question: What is the ruling on watching television?

Answer: Televisions and its like, such as screens of computers, that display numerous programs are not haram in themselves, but what is haram is showing programs that go against the shari’ah, such as showing women who are dressed and undressed, the drinking of alcohol, relations of love and intimacy that are against the shari’ah, and singing that is accompanied by haram music. Showing all of these things is haram and so is looking at them.

As for programs that don’t contain any of these forbidden things, it is not haram to show them, nor to look at that them, especially if there is religious benefit in it, such as lessons from the sirah [Prophetic biography] and the like. Or even if there is worldly benefit such as programs about culture and thought that

have a purpose. It is best for a Muslim to act with wisdom as much as he can to keep his children from being attached to the television, because it is obvious that its evil is widespread and its corruption is far worse than its benefits and that most of it is not free of the haram.

What could be worse for Muslims and their homes than television? For the limits of its evil are not just showing morally depraved pictures, but rather it carries something very dangerous for the youth and others which cultivates blameworthy character and belittles the gravity of disobedience by way of showing things like television series [such as sitcoms, soap operas and reality shows] and western and eastern movies. And Allah is the helper and only through Him is success for the best of states, Glorious is He.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Fatwa from islamtoday.com**

Question: What is the ruling for watching television? Do cartoon programs have a different ruling?

Answered by Shiekh `Abd al-Wahhâb al-Turayrî, former professor at al-Imâm University in Riyadh.

Answer: The ruling for watching television depends upon what is being viewed. If the viewer is viewing unlawful images or watching programs with an un-Islamic content, then it is unlawful for him to do so. On the other hand, if he watches permissible programs such as educational programs or the news, then it is lawful.

Cartoons have nearly the same ruling: If they contain unlawful scenes, then it is forbidden to watch them; otherwise watching them is permissible.

And Allah knows best.<sup>16</sup>

Although these four fatawa overlap to a great degree, it is significant to note that they represent a variety of schools of thought within Sunni Islam. Fatwa-online.com showcases opinions of the scholars who hold official positions within the Saudi religious establishment. This is the school of thought often known somewhat pejoratively as “Wahhabi”, though it labels itself as “Salafi”. The term Salaf refers to the early generations of Muslims and this school of thought places a great emphasis in closely following these predecessors in religious matters. Islamonline.net is overseen by Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (the host of the aforementioned Al Jazeera program) who represents a more modernist position that remains grounded in classical Islamic scholarship. He is also affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the most prominent Islamic political forces in the Arab world. Conversely, sunnipath.com adheres to the Sunni schools of law as they developed over the centuries and also places a strong emphasis on Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. The Sufi and Salafi views are often described as mutually antagonistic poles within Sunni Islam. The final fatwa is drawn from Islamtoday.com, a website representing a more moderate Salafi position that is less directly connected to the Saudi state. Incidentally, this is probably the perspective most proximate to the management and staff members of Huda TV. By reviewing opinions on television that

represent multiple schools of thought within Sunni Islam, the broad religious parameters for this issue are clearly discernable.

For many scholars, the notion of television that meets the guidelines stipulated above was only theoretical until recently. It is with the lowering of technological, economic, and political barriers to entry in the satellite age that more autonomous examples of Islamic television have arisen. Huda TV offers one clear example of how this genre can be defined. This chapter answers the following questions:

IRQ1A:        How does Huda TV conceive its selection of programming as Islamic?

IRQ1B:        How does Huda TV regulate content – through policies, guidelines, work processes, and censorship – to ensure that programming exhibits an Islamic character?

This division of the chapter's primary research question reflects the two qualities that are most distinctive about Islamic channels such as Huda TV. First, they represent a cohesive effort of communicating the message of Islam in a creative and comprehensive manner. In this sense, the content is purpose-built as "Islamic", in contrast to more generically religious content that supplements a broader range of programming. Next, these channels represent a creative project of re-constructing the medium of television according to Islamic law, *which can be both enabling and restrictive*. However, it is important to look beyond the mere impact of Islamic law on programming. It is also worth considering how this instance of "Islamist" practice – the contemporary application of Islam – can be informed by social analysis.

## **IRQ1A:**

### **How does Huda TV conceive its selection of programming as Islamic?**

#### Islamist Discourse on Television

Reflecting on the aforementioned fatawa on television, there are two major concerns about the medium – the explicit issue of content that does not conform with Islamic law; and the more subtle concern that television constitutes a waste of time and intellect. In contrast to some of the classic debates on media, culture, and power, there is no attention to the styles and formats of television programs; nor is there mention of cultural identity and authority. This is significant in understanding the Islamic critique of television. Cultural autonomy is not seen as a primary measure of quality or legality. For instance, some media scholars might herald the rise of Arabic music videos as a representation of indigenous culture and a meaningful diversification of the global media space. However, according to Islamic law, Arabic music videos are problematic for the same reasons as their Western counterparts. The prohibition of such material does not have anything to do with culture, but rather with a standard of legal and moral permissibility. Likewise, it remains possible that one could adapt another media style – the talk show for instance – which is arguably rooted in a foreign culture, but its beneficial content would render it permissible and even praiseworthy. In this respect, there is much room for “glocalization” (Roberston 1995) and other forms of cultural hybridity in Islamic television. This is a powerful, preliminary illustration of the distinction between creed and culture that will become more evident throughout this chapter and those that follow.

The above fatawa also express a view on the technological transparency of television. In other words, the medium is perceived as an empty vessel that can be filled with either good or evil. The passivity and inaction of the viewing experience is cited as the prime evidence that the medium wastes time. According to Islamic law, the absence of a meaningful or useful purpose in any activity is cause for derision. This view might be seen as reminiscent of early models of communication that operated on the premise of audience passivity. However, it is distinct in attaching a specific value to the kind of audience activity that would be considered acceptable. In other words, there is no guarantee that “emancipatory” or “resistant” experiences would change the basic ruling on the permissibility of media consumption. With the exception of stricter views that ban television under the general prohibition of images, these aforementioned fatawa do not deal significantly with the structural or contextual elements. This issue, in particular, may be an area of weak theorization in the Islamist discourse. As will be shown below, there are several instances at Huda TV where such factors exert an influence at odds with the stated aims of the channel.

#### Defining Islamic Television at Huda TV

This section examines the stated mission and vision of Huda TV and the range of programs and program formats at the channel. These broad components help to illustrate the meaning of “Islamic” in this context, in reference to both the stated aims of the channel and its actual practices. Huda TV lists its mission and vision as follows:

**Vision:**

*To be the foremost leading satellite channel, providing non-Arabic<sup>17</sup> knowledge and guidance to Muslims and conveying the true image, spirit and meaning of Islam to non-Muslims.*

**Mission:**

*To strive to become a guiding light for those who seek it, by offering a selection of carefully produced material of exceptional quality that suits the viewer's taste and interests.*

Within this brief statement of principles, the problem with a technologically transparent conception of television is evident. It is reasonable to ask if there might be a potential conflict in “providing...knowledge and guidance to Muslims and conveying the true image, spirit, and meaning of Islam to non-Muslims” while doing so in a manner “that suits the viewer’s taste and interests.” Clearly, the channel hopes to both attract viewers through the usual strategies of television production while upholding a higher religious goal. At one level, it is clear that Islam allows a certain degree of flexibility in defining content. However, this openness does not preclude the influence of contextual or structural factors that may inhibit or even contradict the channel’s stated message if they are not effectively considered. These tensions are best illustrated by looking directly at Huda TV programming.

The staff members at Huda TV were requested to align each new program with one of the channel’s stated goals, which are:

To guide and educate Muslims, whose native language is not Arabic, about Islam

**AND**

Calling non-Muslims to Islam and introducing them to the True Religion<sup>18</sup>

Within each of these goals are several sub-goals, one or several of which should neatly match each program. However, while the channel's Saudi management promoted the goals among the programming staff in Cairo, the management in Egypt did not distribute or enforce the mission and vision document effectively. So, rather than each program having an instrumental relationship to channel policy, there was also a strong personal impact on the development of new programs according to the vision of individuals at the channel. Additionally, the cultural and national background of staff members exercised a clear influence on decision-making.

The dialectic of personal/cultural vision vs. Islam as the "true religion" presents a commonly referenced discourse on Muslims in modernity. In academic literature, the idea of a singular, unified Islam comes under immediate suspicion – a critique that Said applies to both Orientalist representations of Islam and self-representations by Muslims. Perhaps more subtle in his approach, Olivier Roy recognizes the continuity of Islam but argues that modern manifestations of the faith are best understood through the sociological lens that examines religion in general (Roy 2004). In his view, recent Muslim efforts to reinvent and revive the faith are in fact a type of fundamentalism that is a product of Westernization and not a remnant of the past (31-3). And at least within academic literature, the only viable alternative to this relativistic explanation seems to be

the Orientalist view that Islam is singular but also historically, socially, and culturally demiurgic (i.e. it explains every event and malady in the contemporary Muslim world).

The issue at stake here is whether or not the interplay of creed, culture, and context at Huda TV, in many ways a perfect example of what Roy calls “globalized Islam,” is somehow aberrant within the Muslim tradition itself, and whether it automatically invalidates the notion of “true religion” that the channel seeks to convey. Applying the work of Roy and others, one might assume that the staff of Huda TV, the complex group of Muslims who are working to fulfill the channel’s mission, are in fact unaware of the cultural and historical nuances that make their position unique. However, the opposite is true. Many staff members of Huda TV were conscious of and openly discussed culture and context. Moreover, many of the religious authorities whose training reflects the authoritative scholarly tradition of Islam, were also keen to situate their discourse within specific cultural and social currents. In their estimation, there was no contradiction in doing so. This requires us to look beyond the pre-emptive conclusions of Roy and others.

In answering the pertinent question for this section, “how does Huda TV conceive its selection of programming as Islamic,” it is useful to set some basic parameters through which to order the wide range of programming. First, the medium of television is essentially modern, in the sense that no “fundamentalist” users of the technology would be able to claim that it reproduces an idealized past. However, as mentioned earlier, Muslim scholarly views of television tend to view the medium as transparent. Therefore, it is worth looking first at programming that seems to reflect this approach, filling the

television with content that is more or less transplanted from existing or historical contexts, such as lessons in Islamic law or religious sermons. Next, when programming does depart from a more traditional format, or when it openly borrows from global media formats, how does it remain “Islamic” in the eyes of its producers? By examining both aspects it will help to clarify (a) how the project of Islamic television is conceived as a product of Islamic orthodoxy, and (b) how weak theorization of structure and context impacts the effectiveness of that broader project. These two approaches contribute effectively to the project of critical Islamism by investigating the gap between ideal conceptions of media and their practical implementation.

### Traditional Formats

Some programming on Huda TV mirrored existing practices of Islamic television in the Middle East – both the historical examples in state-controlled media and newer independent satellite channels – by modeling its programming on classical forms of Islamic instruction or public education. This approach reflects, and in some ways supports, the transparent view of technology: television as an empty vessel to be filled with either good or bad content. Examples of this approach at Huda TV included the following programs:

**Lessons in Fiqh:** This program, presented by an English-speaking imam from Saudi Arabia, reproduced a classroom environment in the studio, complete with students, at least some of whom were seriously and sincerely engaged with the content. This format did not preclude the usual elements of television production: cuts, retakes, planted questions, etc. However, the audience was imagined as an extension of students in the

studio classroom. Additionally, the curriculum of *Lessons in Fiqh* was a classic collection of Prophetic ahadith (narrations or statements) called *Bulugh al Maram min Adillat al Ahkam* (Attainment of the Objective with Legal Evidence), assembled by a luminary of the fifteenth century, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (Al-Asqalani 2002). This text is organized to teach Islamic law through a topical study of Prophetic ahadith. The pace of the program was dictated by the significance of individual hadith and episodes constituted an ongoing continuation of the text. Channel management considered extending the program indefinitely through subsequent recording sessions, as only a small portion of the text was covered with the initial set of episodes.

**Sermons From the Holy Land:** This program showcased taped Friday sermons from Makkah and Madinah with an English translation overlaid onto the Arabic audio. The translation and recording of the English version were done by Huda TV staff. In one sense, this program represents the most direct and transparent effort to reproduce a classical Islamic format. The Friday khutbah (sermon) has always been the pillar of public religious education in the Muslim world. However, the translation process also involved careful filtering by the American staff members, who were tasked to insure culturally appropriate content. While the sermons from Makkah and Madinah are strongly circumscribed by Saudi politics, those limitations do not neatly align with restrictions in Egypt or the cultural sensibilities of Huda TV's target audience. The senior staff member on this project referred to this process as "translotion", i.e. *smoothing out* the content both linguistically and culturally. This program illustrates how technology and context can transform content. However, whether in the more

technologically transparent conception of the program, or the actual, active process of translation, all staff members were committed to the “Islamic” orientation of the program. And in terms of the content, the original Arabic sermon and edited translation may only differ in the same manner as live sermons in Makkah and New York, for example. Therefore, while this program represents a fairly transparent adaptation of traditional Islamic formats, it also illustrates how the medium, context, and professional staff can impact the tone of communication. Chapter six will examine this program in greater detail.

Considering the term “Islamic” from a base definition of “that which relates to the religious practices of Islam,” these traditional formats represent a fairly obvious application of the term. They reproduce as closely as possible a format of instruction that has been central to religious scholarship and popular preaching throughout history. That said, it would be problematic to suggest that these program formats have no impact, given the significance of the medium itself and the wider cultural and production context. Later chapters will deal with contextual issues more directly. What is important to ask, at this stage, is whether this limited definition of “Islamic” is sufficient given the wide range of programming at Huda TV that departs from traditional models? Huda TV’s self-conception as an *Islamic* channel – applied across the full range of programming – would seem to demand a more sophisticated understanding of the term.

### Hybrid Formats

The great bulk of programming at Huda TV involved some hybridization of existing television formats and more traditional styles of teaching. Almost all programs

featured religious scholars in some capacity, though the degree to which their role departed from traditional styles varied greatly. This range of programming clearly illustrates that various forms of hybridization occur (between religion, culture, and media). What remains consistent throughout, however, is that the full range of content is consciously viewed as authoritative, or at least lawful, according to the Islamic scholarly tradition. This quality of Huda TV's programming challenges the view that hybridity is solvent of notions of universality and transcendence. Evident in Huda TV are both – a consensus on the timeless immutability and authority of the religious content, along with a great deal of flexibility to accommodate the medium and cultural context. Examples of hybrid formats include:

**Untold Stories of World History:** Hosted by an American Muslim imam who also holds a Ph.D. in history, this program combined a traditional lecture format with documentary elements. While ostensibly a program about little known or controversial elements of Islamic history (such as evidence of pre-Columbian Muslim explorations of the Americas), *Untold Stories* also obliquely addressed many contemporary issues. For instance, the presenter made an effort to identify racial and gender egalitarianism as a central theme throughout Islamic history. The show also contained an implicit critique of Eurocentrism, identifying the omissions of mainstream history in reference to the Muslim world. Although the content of this program mirrored many previous lectures by the presenter (some equally hybrid, e.g. a lecture on Islam in Africa for an American university's Black History Month program), the elaborate set and use of documentary elements (photos, texts, etc.) condensed the material into a series of televisual episodes.

This program has important implications for how the American staff at Huda TV used their cultural authority to craft programming. It will be examined in greater detail in chapter six.

**Health and Islam:** Using a more traditional talk show format, this program included a host (an American Muslim convert but not a religious scholar) and a guest doctor with relevant expertise for the program topic. In a planning meeting for *Health and Islam*, a senior manager from the Riyadh office set the criterion for this program's success as "...the ability to integrate the religious and scientific messages." The compatibility of Islam and science is a common theme in religious apologetics. However, the actual production of this program involved a careful balancing act between the program objectives – which often referred to "Prophetic medicine" or other healing practice from the orthodox Islamic tradition – and the medical expertise of the doctors, who fastidiously restricted themselves to discussing "evidence-based medicine." This program actually delved deeply into issues of Islamic authority and legitimacy, often using the expertise of the doctors to support various positions without extending ultimate authority to their respective disciplines. *Health and Islam* will be addressed in chapter five.

**Ask Huda:** Ask Huda was a live call-in *fatwa* program. The author hosted the program along with an expert on Islamic law. The program dealt with a wide variety of issues, usually dictated by viewers' questions. This program took the traditional role of the Muslim scholar and recast it for television, especially by mediating the questions through a moderator. *Ask Huda* was the flagship program of the network, and was therefore used as the official platform for channel statements about current events. Several episodes of

*Ask Huda* directly addressed the Danish cartoon crisis. What was particularly unique about *Ask Huda* was its positioning as an English-language program in the Middle East. Although no formal statistics were kept on viewer phone calls, a good portion came from either English-speaking elites in Egypt or neighboring countries, or Anglophone populations who do not speak fluent Arabic (such as the South Asian community in the Gulf countries, or Muslims in Nigeria) and therefore could not access information on Arabic language call-in fatwa programs.

**Game Show:** During the author's time at Huda TV, there were efforts to develop a game show that was delayed repeatedly due to technical concerns, but was eventually produced after his departure. The game show consisted of religiously-oriented questions in a variety of areas, and was designed to include three contestants per episode in a tournament-style competition. The proposed prize was an all-expense-paid trip to 'umrah, the "lesser pilgrimage" in Islam. The game show represented the extreme of hybridity – the format of light, trite entertainment par excellence blended with one of the most significant acts of devotion in Islam. Although the program's format was borrowed almost entirely from the popular culture memory of the American staff at Huda TV, there was no sense of conflict with the Islamic mission. The religiously-oriented content was considered sufficient to fill the "transparent vessel" of the game show. At the theoretical level, the game show was conceived as fully and authentically Islamic. Unfortunately, the author was not able to observe the production of this program, so it is not possible to say whether it was an illustration of Islam's cultural flexibility or an instance of weak theorization in the channel's Islamist project.

### Creative Formats

Although most programs represented a clear hybridization of common program formats (talk show, game shows, call-in, etc.), there were several programs that seemed to break the mold of either common media styles or traditional modes of religious education. It is worth mentioning these apart from the others. It is significant that the creative dynamic at Huda TV was not simply one of traditional styles with modern adaptations. These programs show that “Islamic” television can in fact produce unique, innovative styles of programming. These types of programs include:

**A Guest at Home:** This program was unique in that its content and format were almost entirely conceived within the program department composed of Americans and religiously-educated Egyptian Al Azhar University graduates. The only aspect of the program that was adjusted by channel management was the name. The originally proposed title, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, was changed to *A Guest at Home*. This program featured the channel’s religious expert, along with a host and two alternating guests. The set was designed to replicate the host’s home, where the sheikh (religious expert) was invited over to casually discuss religious matters. No one on the program ever addressed the camera directly, so in this sense, it functioned almost like a fictional program, though the set-up and content was very much like a talk show.

**Right Click:** This host of this program was closely tied to the channel’s central management in Riyadh, and his program was largely conceived outside of the Cairo office. *Right Click* featured explanations of basic computer technology in the initial episodes and then a showcase of websites where Muslims could find useful and

appropriate online content. The program included some religious websites, but gave a great deal of attention to general sites deemed appropriate for Muslim use. In program preparation, the selection of religious sites generated greater controversy since they represented multiple schools of thought. Internal divisions among channel staff and the program presenter became apparent through this process. Those websites without an Islamic character, even when they sometimes contained problematic elements from a religious standpoint, were not subjected to the same level of scrutiny. The content regulation processes for *Right Click* will be addressed further in the next section of this chapter. At this stage, it is worth noting how the two prevailing identifications of “Islamic” come into play with this program – i.e. that which deals explicitly with religion vs. that which is permissible under Islamic law.

#### Program Fillers

A unique characteristic of Huda TV and several Arabic-language Islamic channels with a similar approach is the heavy use of short fillers, both as promotional devices for the channel, and to convey concise content that is unsuitable to full-length programs. Huda TV’s theme “A Light in Every Home” inspired a wide variety of computer graphic fillers, showing urban or rural environments from different geographical locations, with some play on the “light” theme concluding each segment (e.g. the filler shows a snowy street and the “camera” peers into a window, where a TV displays the Huda TV logo.) There were also several filler programs that showcased Quranic recitation (e.g. *Junior Reciters* with children recruited from around Egypt). Other programs taught supplications or presented brief commentaries on core religious texts (e.g. *Invocations*, an

adaptation from a well known handbook of prayers called *Hisn ul Muslim* (Fortress of the Muslim) (Al-Qahtaani 2003). While these fillers varied greatly, they constituted a large portion of the content on Huda TV, and therefore deserve mention. They also displayed the same qualities as the full-length programming, from fairly transparent adaptations of traditional religious formats to more innovative hybrid and creative models. One of the most unique examples of fillers is the development of Islamic music videos, a category that will be mentioned in greater detail below.

### Points of Contention

Among the representative range of programming described above, there are clear parameters that help to define “Islamic television”. In this case, the term “Islamic” refers to both traditional religious content and formats, and more broadly to that which is lawfully acceptable. And significantly, the hybridity that Huda TV expresses – through its blending of the Islamic scholarly tradition, various cultural influences, TV formats, and media technology – is viewed by channel staff, and the religious experts who provide oversight, as internally coherent and consistent. In this respect, Huda TV’s conception of “Islamic programming” upsets accounts of Islamic activism that treat evident and subtle traces of modernity as a sort of falsification of authority, as proof that “Islam” is irreducibly plural and subjective. However, what the array of programming says about the unified notion of “Islamic television” does not preclude a consideration of conflict and contention within the channel. In fact, there were extensive disagreements about some of the finer points of television production, standards for content, and the level of censorship employed at the channel. Sometime, these areas of disagreement emerged

from fissures in orthodoxy and therefore reflected long-standing disagreements in the Muslim world. However, at other times, conflict emerged due to a variety of contextual factors. The lack of theorization in how such elements interact with orthodoxy may have contributed to their magnification. These areas of contention will be addressed further in chapters five and six.

Beyond the array of programming, the channel's conception of Islamic television can also be identified through its policies and work processes. While channel policies were all conceived as "Islamic" in much the same way as the programming – representing either religious principles or lawful actions – they also reflected a much greater deal of contextual influence. Perceptions of the audience, political structures, cultural experiences, and of course the orthodox tradition, all informed the articulation and implementation of channel policies. These aspects of the channel are covered in the next section.

### **IRQ1B:**

**How does Huda TV regulate content – through policies, guidelines, work processes, and censorship – to ensure that programming exhibits an Islamic character?**

#### **Organizational Structure**

To understand "policies, guidelines, work processes, and censorship" at Huda TV, it is necessary to first define the various "players" at the channel and then consider the formal and informal regulations that operated between them. The primary players at Huda TV were:

**Central management in Riyadh:** This group included the owners and senior managers of the channel, along with their connections to donors and religious advisors. From the vantage point of Cairo staff, the Riyadh office was fairly opaque. However, their presence was often felt through the dissemination of formal policies, complaints about programming that were conveyed through the Cairo office management, and occasional personal visits.

**Cairo management and production staff:** This group included the regional manager for the channel (who in many ways stood apart from all other positions) along with the production manager and his staff of television professionals, which included studio managers, set designers, camera operators, audio-visual technicians, and even “tea boys”. Aside from the regional manager, the production staff served a technical role and did not make significant contributions to the content. In fact, many staff members, including the production manager, did not speak fluent English, and were unable to understand the programming. Some of the production staff also displayed little outward commitment to religion. More observant staff members often lamented that some colleagues spent their prayer breaks drinking tea, smoking cigarettes, and socializing. While this group lacked a certain amount of creative control and religious authority, they steadfastly guarded the business decision-making processes (e.g. payments to contractors, selection of off-site shooting locations). The major exception in this regard was the regional manager, who spoke English fluently and tended to be actively involved in all aspects of production.

**Cairo program staff:** This group included an American program manager along with several native English speakers, an English-speaking religious scholar, and several

religiously educated Egyptians. Members of this group were often featured on screen due to the need for native English-speakers. Without exception, the members of this group were more outwardly religious and tended to view work at the channel as both a job and religious commitment. It is worth noting that the salaries of foreign staff members were magnitudes higher than their Egyptian counterparts. Some of the reasons for this disparity will be discussed in chapter six. Most of the program development, planning, and preparation activities occurred through this office, though there was no absolute autonomy in that regard.

**Independent contractors:** Huda TV depended on a wide variety of independently contracted media professionals, including directors, editors, and graphic artists. This group shared many characteristics with the channel's production staff. They worked more broadly in mass media and brought varying levels of religious commitment. Pay rates were likely more generous for outside contractors than they were for permanent staff, although the author did not have access to financial data in this regard. Occasionally, individuals in this category would be hired as full-time employees of the channel.

The relationships between these groups were complex and often conflicted. The American program director had frequent disputes with the regional manager and production director over creative and logistical control of projects. While these conflicts often reflected differences in American and Egyptian business cultures, there was also an implicit assertion in the program director's view that the more outwardly religious unit should maintain the greatest creative control. The Saudi management maintained a

somewhat distant relationship to the program office, and their exact allegiances and motives in delegating authority were unclear. Finally, there was also ongoing tension between the production staff and contractors, on one side, and the program staff on the other. While program office staff members were empowered due to the religious focus of the channel, most had extremely limited experience in media and were more or less incapable of undertaking the technical aspects of production. This lack of experience led to occasional gaffes, such as programs being planned that would have required technology unavailable at the channel and sparsely available throughout Egypt.

#### A Note on Context

Huda TV's production offices are located in the Egyptian Media Production City, a giant complex of media facilities on the desert plateau west of Cairo. A wide variety of media production occurs at this site. In fact, sharing a corridor with Huda TV were at least one music video channel, an Iraqi news channel, and for a time, an Arabic-language religious channel. The latter was shut down shortly after going on air, and as tends to be the case in such situations, it was rumored that the channel had drawn the scrutiny of state security. The physical location is important for several reasons. First, as mentioned above, the political environment of Egypt is one where government suppression is a constant threat. Next, some of the conflicts at the channel can be attributed to particularities of working in Egypt. For instance, while few other locations would allow for such high production value at a limited cost, it is not necessarily true that Islamic television would invariably employ people of widely contrasting religious commitment. Likewise, the shortage of native English speakers in this environment gave the foreign

staff a level of authority and responsibility that they would not have been accorded elsewhere. These idiosyncrasies of context were significant and will be addressed throughout the following chapters. However, for the immediate question of how the channel's Islamic identity was defined and maintained, these contextual factors were not significant.

### Formal and Informal Processes

Despite efforts to institute formal policies and procedures at Huda TV, a great deal of decision-making at the channel reflected personal visions or informal guidelines. There are two key documents that outline the channel's formal policies – the “mission, vision, goals, and policies”, and the censorship guide. The Saudi management repeatedly made pleas that all programs address one or multiple goals, as outlined on the official “mission, vision, goals, and policies” document. In practice, the author did not actually see these documents until well into his tenure at the channel. Additionally, when program forms (the documents used to propose and plan new programs) were completed, the “goals” section was often improvised on the spot. In this case, the programs represented some goal deemed important to the program staff, but there was virtually no attention paid to the governing document. It is unlikely that this document was ever read carefully by most channel staff members. The other formal document, the censorship guide, was made available to staff early on and was therefore referenced more frequently. However, the actual practice of censorship usually involved more intuitive decision-making. In this regard, the American staff members were given significant authority to determine the cultural appropriateness of content. The informal regulation of content will

be a consistent theme throughout the following chapters. The next section looks at (a) how certain crucial policies operated across the range of programming and (b) two specific examples of programs where the formal regulation of content came into direct focus.

### Content Regulation in Action

Given the various players and processes at work at Huda TV, it is worth highlighting a few examples of content regulation and how the various forces operated in this regard. The following examples are illustrative but not exhaustive. Taken together, they show a representative range of situations and issues encountered at Huda TV.

**Women and Music:** Two policies that distinguish Huda TV from other satellite channels are the conspicuous absence of women on screen and the prohibition of instrumental music. Both positions have a firm, albeit conservative, foundation within Islamic law. As Islam places great emphasis on modesty in general, and female modesty in particular, the medium of television, by demanding an attentive gaze, presents a unique dilemma. In fact, the Quranic verses that prescribe the veil for women also commands believers, men and women, to “lower their gaze.”<sup>19</sup> As an intensely visual medium, some scholars feel that television should never feature women as it invites the uncontrolled and uncontrollable gaze of male viewers. The same basic principle, of course, applies to female viewers of men on television, though the prohibition does not carry the same intensity. That said, many other Islamic channels do include women wearing the requisite Islamic dress and do not consider it problematic. Huda TV took a particularly stringent position on this issue. Similar to the policies on women, Muslim scholars have

historically frowned upon musical instruments, though this issue has been subject to a great deal of controversy and disagreement. In this case, the validity of disputed legal positions is not relevant. What is significant is that these prohibitions are attempts to maintain a conservative position, well rooted in religious scholarship, within a medium where such views are generally anathema. Given the prevailing scholarly view of television as a transparent medium, it is worth investigating what actually happens when these policies are put into action.

The prohibition against women appearing on screen reflects a strict position in Islamic law that the women's '*awrah* (the parts of her body that unrelated men are not permitted to see) includes the face. While many at Huda TV adhere to this opinion, there was also a shared commitment that women be represented at some level in Huda TV programming. On the live call-in program, *Ask Huda*, a good portion of the callers were women. And although no formal audience measurements were taken by the channel, the number of calls and emails from women suggested that they constituted a majority of viewers. Frequent conversations occurred on strategies for greater inclusivity of women. And at several points, the Cairo office program staff made efforts to include women on screen. In one instance, one American staff member's wife (also American) was interviewed on camera during a live broadcast on the Muslim holiday of Eid al Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan. She wore *niqab*, a full body covering revealing only her eyes. It was later reported from the Cairo regional manager that some channel personnel in Saudi Arabia were displeased at this decision. Another program included a woman as one of the regular guests, and efforts were made to avoid close-up shots of her.

This strategy also met with resistance from channel management. These few efforts constituted the Cairo program staff's attempt to work creatively around the strict legal limits on women's dress and public visibility. While several of the Egyptian and American staff held the same religious view as the Saudis, no one in the Cairo office fully comprehended why the Saudi prohibition was so unyielding when it came to the inclusion of women on screen. While the status quo was deemed "safe" by the Saudis, the Cairo staff, especially the Americans, realized the potentially alienating effects of this policy on female viewers. Indeed, the researcher's informal contact with women outside the channel often involved discussions of this issue. Likewise, Muslims who did not adhere to the same level of strictness on this issue, including some program guests, voiced serious concerns about the policy. The Cairo staff feared a loss of credibility with core viewers. For that reason, every effort was made to include women as narrators. One British woman became the "voice of Huda" in many respects by doing voiceovers for the channel's promotional fillers, which always ended with her saying, "Huda: A Light in Every Home." This policy illustrates a few crucial factors. First, it is evident that cultural backgrounds and the financial structure of the channel played as much of a role in this policy as the Islamic ruling itself. Next, one can detect in the Saudi approach a weak theorization of television, seeing the prohibition of women appearing on screen as a "safe" approach. However, when considering the content in reference to the audience, and the messages sent by absence as well as presence, it is clear that this policy is quite different than the ordinary observance of the veil. Again, the Cairo staff did not wish to use television as an excuse to show more of women than what would normally be

allowed. The effort was only to use creative techniques that would include women on screen without subjecting them to the direct gaze of male viewers. As with many issues relating to the Saudi head office, there was sparse access to the decision-making processes. It is therefore hard to discern the “who” and “why” that would explain the rigidity of the policy on women. Again, what is evident in this example is the distinction between the ideal principle and its practical implementation within the context of satellite television. Much like the question of television formats, it is the task of critical Islamism to identify and engage this case of weak theorization

The issue of music also illustrates how the medium and context of production can impact the application of a conservative Islamic ruling. Among Huda TV and several other channels with a similar orientation, there has developed an alternative form of “music” to serve as program theme tracks and filler audio. Huda TV used a cappella songs and sounds to substitute for elements of television that would normally include music. These audio elements were solicited and purchased from outside vendors. The Cairo regional manager maintained these professional relationships, occasionally asking for input from other staff members. According to many Muslim scholars, a cappella audio is permissible because it only uses the human voice and not instruments. That said, some scholars still warn against and look down upon “singing” in general, so the Huda TV alternative is not without its critics. What is important to note is that the a cappella audio elements were absolutely essential to the branding and identity of Huda TV. Most programs and promotions shared a very common “sound”, with only a handful of producers providing all of the audio content for the channel. Indeed, it was these audio

elements, along with graphics from Cairo media firms, which gave Huda TV a professional and distinctive identity. For those staff members at the channel who cared about the music issue, it was taken for granted that these audio elements were fully vetted from an Islamic perspective. However, on one occasion, the Cairo regional manager mentioned in passing that some of the audio tracks actually have a “musical patch”. This admission casts serious doubt on the legitimacy of Huda TV’s music policy. If the audio elements are in fact computer-generated music that aims to sound like the human voice, then they may in fact be subject to the same ruling as the musical instruments that they are intended to replace. Again, the legal debate over music is not central to this analysis. The crucial issue is how the conservative ruling was filtered through the production process and implemented in a final product. First, the players at Huda TV with the most direct control over the production and editing of the audio elements were those who tended to be less outwardly religious. Several previously worked in other fields of media that are decidedly problematic from the channel’s conservative Islamic viewpoint (e.g. Egyptian cinema). Their value to the channel was their technical expertise and business experience in the Egyptian media industry. Yet, their decision-making may have ultimately compromised a principled stand that the channel was attempting to make. It is not that an alternative to music was not possible, but it is hard to say whether Huda TV actually achieved it.

Another alternative to instrumental music that Huda TV produced internally was a series of music videos. The first group of videos used children’s a cappella songs with accompanying visual elements produced in house. Later, Huda TV developed videos for

an a cappella singing group made up of Indonesian students at Egypt's famous Al Azhar University. After their work debuted on Huda TV, this group actually gained a great deal of fame across the region. While the videos were purely a cappella (there was no issue with musical patches), it is striking that a channel holding so fast to conservative principles would produce a format that is often cited as the pinnacle of televisual evil by religious scholars. The actual content of the music videos were religious in nature, but the techniques and visual product were very much in line with the genre as a whole. Again, the transparent view of television is evident. These programs show a level of cultural adaptability and flexibility in Islam. However, they also reveal a weak theorization of media, audiences, and even technology.

Therefore, what is evident in both the women and music issues is not the inability of conservative religious principles to adapt to satellite television. To a certain extent, the channel succeeded in both regards. However, there was a clear failure to look beyond the final content on-screen to appreciate the broader process of media production. These examples illustrate how strict applications of Islamic law can be applied to a medium such as satellite television. There is no inherent contradiction, but rather a failure to consider the complexities of media production and the channel's relationship to a wider public. Turning away from general policies that arose throughout the channel's work, the next section will offer in-depth illustrations of two programs where the regulation of content proved especially illustrative.

**The Ten Heaven-Bound:** As one of the first programs produced by Huda TV, *The 10 Heaven Bound* was an early effort to communicate consciously the channel's orthodox

Sunni message. However, the program also reflected a very delicate approach to the tacit criticism of other schools of thought and sectarian affiliations in the Muslim world. This marked a direct implementation of channel policies on intrareligious dialogue, and the program's message enjoyed the full commitment of the program host, a Western imam, the creative staff, and channel management. In sharp contrast to the issue of women appearing on screen, the channel's approach to this issue reflected a careful consideration of its broad audiences. The reasons behind this difference in approach are difficult to discern. It may be explained as a product of the extent to which sectarian discourses and conflicts, and the manner in which to navigate them, are already so engrained in the religious discourse of the region. The issue of gender roles may be more naturalized or viewed only in terms of ideological conflict with the West. Although *The 10 Heaven-Bound* dealt with material that directly engages essential sectarian debates in the Muslim world, it did so by mentioning issues, positions, and evidence rather than the labels (e.g. Sunni and Shi'a) that could be viewed as divisive.

At the surface, *The 10 Heaven-Bound* was simply a biographical account of ten important contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad who were informed of their place in Paradise before death. This is based on a famous hadith that affirms the lofty status of these individuals as the early luminaries of the Muslim community. However, this topic also goes to the heart of conflict between the Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam, and it broaches several points of tension between orthodox and modern readings of early Islamic history. The program retained the mode of biographical narrative while offering

refutations of heterodox positions. In dealing with this type of conflict, Huda TV policies state:

Under “General Rules”: Point 1- “There should be no attack against any particular deviant sect or group, rather the talk about any deviated sect should be in a general manner that demonstrates the Straight Path without referring to any particular names.”

Under “Schools of Law and Sects: Banned Areas” Point 1- “Ridiculing or disparaging any of the schools of law adopted by the Adherents of the Sunnah [i.e., the Hanbali, Shafi’i, Maliki and Hanafi schools of law] or any of their followers or Imams”;<sup>20</sup> and Point 2- “Referring to anything of the beliefs, customs, rituals of worship, famous leaders, or history of the straying deviated groups (in the past or nowadays) except in case of presenting scientific criticism and demonstrating the truth.”

These principles all affirm the broad spectrum of Sunni Islam as the channel’s official foundation, although specific positions advocated by the channel primarily reflected the perspective on only one legal school. The term “deviant groups” is not precisely defined, but in reference to orthodox Sunni thought, there is no question that it points primarily to Shi’a Islam. It may also apply to other sects within the broad spectrum of Sunni Islam but the exact limits in this regard are unclear. These general principles were understood and implemented in *The 10 Heaven-Bound*.

This section will examine episodes dealing with ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan, the third khalifa (political successor/leader) of the Muslim community after the death of the

Prophet. ‘Uthman’s status and biography play heavily in sectarian polemics, so a good portion of the program content is devoted to defending him according to the orthodox Sunni position. During the rule of ‘Uthman, the Muslim world witnessed its first major internal political strife, which ultimately resulted in the assassination of ‘Uthman by a band of Muslim rebels. Some of ‘Uthman’s public policies and political appointments were criticized and dissent grew in certain areas of the expanding Muslim empire. The program employed three general strategies to defend ‘Uthman according to the Sunni Muslim consensus. First, it listed his virtues and accomplishments in the Prophetic and post-Prophetic eras. Next, it peppered the discussion with indirect responses to specific accusations against ‘Uthman. Finally, it used the story to emphasize the broader Sunni position regarding the honor and trustworthiness of the Prophet’s Companions.

‘Uthman played a major role in Muslim history and, as khalifa, contributed to the consolidation of the early Islamic state. The program emphasized his closeness to the Prophet Muhammad and emphasized hadith that attest to the noble status of ‘Uthman. These citations included mention that: ‘Uthman married two of the Prophet’s daughters, both of whom died during his lifetime; he was one of the first Muslims and a leader among those who migrated from the oppressive conditions of Makkah in the early days of Islam; he is famous for his generosity in supporting the early Muslim community’s needs; he oversaw the authoritative compilation and reproduction of the Quran, Islam’s foundational text, to distribute to the various corners of the Muslim empire; and he presided over the expansion of Islam into several new territories. Of course, it was also

mentioned that he was included in the group of ten companions promised Paradise by the Prophet, the ultimate certification of his status.

The second strategy employed responses to various accusations against ‘Uthman within the narrative of his life. For instance, ‘Uthman was excused from the first major battle of the Islamic era, the Battle of Badr, where the fledgling Muslim community fended off an attack by an Arab pagan force with superior numbers and resources. His absence was later used by critics as an indication of his alleged duplicity. The Prophet’s permission for his absence was highlighted in the program to fend off such accusations. It was also emphasized that other major companions served loyally in his administration and defended him when dissent was voiced. In particular, his successor, ‘Ali ibn Abi Taalib, a major figurehead for Shi’a Islam, dispatched his own sons to defend ‘Uthman when the latter was under siege. This fact is mentioned to ward off any suggestion that ‘Uthman and ‘Ali held mutual enmity.

The final episode on ‘Uthman conveyed a moral to his story that reinforces the consensus Sunni position on the status of the Prophet’s companions. First, the presenter cited a hadith where the Prophet was reported to have stated, “Don’t abuse my Companions.” This is one of the sources used to prove the orthodox Sunni position. In addition, the presenter concluded the episode with a general warning to those who might believe, revive, or disseminate the accusations against ‘Uthman. He urged viewers to remember that ‘Uthman was beloved by the Prophet Muhammad and his other close companions, and to make that assessment the ultimate and accurate judgment. This warning is particularly important in the contemporary context. First, it addresses a core

element of Shi'a polemics which seek to diminish the status of certain companions of the Prophet, including 'Uthman. However, the accusations against 'Uthman have also surfaced recently in Sunni circles. The presenter did not mention any such groups by name, but the opportunity to discuss 'Uthman was used to cast as wide a net as possible in safeguarding Sunni orthodoxy.

The case of 'Uthman reflected a careful approach to controversial issues and a sensitivity to the sectarian orientations of potential viewers. In this case, there seemed to be a conscious awareness that audience members would approach the programs with various levels of knowledge and inherited sectarian identities that may or may not correspond to belief in the actual dogmas of such groups. This awareness led to a much more sensitive and nuanced approach than what might have occurred in a private lecture or personal conversation. This critical engagement with the audience marks a sharp contrast from the channel's approach to other contested issues, such as the presence of women on screen. Again, the reasons for such a difference are difficult to determine. However, various states and political movements in the region represent diverse sectarian positions and coexist in a tense equilibrium. It is reasonable to assume that all members of the channel would have been tuned into the potential pitfalls of upsetting this dynamic. Other controversial issues did not find such a high degree of consensus among channel staff members. The reasons for such differences, including the influence of various historical and cultural experiences, will be discussed in the following chapters. The next example of content regulation will illustrate internal conflict and debate at the channel.

**Right Click:** The program *Right Click*, as described above, focused on a wide variety of technical and computer-related issues while imparting advice and suggestions about content on the web. The program mixed technical instruction on how to maximize the use of a home computer, physical demonstrations of computer hardware, and the exposition of several websites. As an example of content regulation, *Right Click* produced a rich field of data. The program sought to validate and critique advanced technology and its varied applications from the standpoint of orthodoxy. It also produced heated disagreements over the authentic representation of religious authority. Finally, it subtly reflected certain dynamics of the political-economic environment. While these processes will be examined in subsequent chapters in much greater detail, *Right Click* represents an illustrative convergence of multiple forces that informed that channel's work.

The Huda TV censorship guidelines begin with a page detailing practical etiquettes for the channel. In addition to what is stated above, this section includes the following statement:

-“the starting point should be from the common ground between Islam and other religions...”

These rules are immediately followed by pages of material dealing exclusively with Islamic creed. Examples of banned areas include:

-Dissatisfaction with Allah's Decree and Predestination and showing displeasure towards it.

-Doubting the prophethood or message of any of the Prophets and Messengers or disparaging any of them or exaggerating his status.

-Denying the existence of any of the Angels or any of their types, ridiculing them, disparaging them or exaggerating their capabilities or statuses.

The list is extensive, but its primary theme is a focus on the Muslim ‘*aqidah*, or creed.<sup>21</sup>

The word ‘*aqidah* comes from a root that means “knot”, and its meaning implies those areas of belief that are firmly established within the faith of Islam. While Islamic law has many variations and accepted differences of opinion, the core elements of Islamic faith are fairly singular. In many cases, ‘*aqidah* relates to belief in that which is unseen (God, Paradise and Hell, etc.) and only knowable through divine revelation. It is not surprising, then, that the censorship guidelines paid such strict attention to these issues. Sunni Islamic law itself, which has developed within the “legal schools” mentioned previously, is generally more flexible and contested, especially when dealing with the many unprecedented issues of modern life.

In *Right Click*, issues of creed and law were both contested by program staff members and the show’s presenter, a Saudi resident from another Arab country. This conflict emerged most clearly in the process to select which “Islamic websites” would be featured on the program. While the host showcased many general websites – e.g. Google, a math site for kids, seaworld.org, some of which contained potentially problematic content from an Islamic legal perspective – they incited no real controversy among staff members. However, a handful of Islamic sites caused more conflict because they

represented divergent scholarly opinions to which the various staff members held competing allegiances.

Among the general rules expressed in the channel's guidelines is the following:

Point 3- "There should be no fanaticism towards approving the opinions of a certain school of law or a certain sheikh and trying to defend them wholeheartedly, rather there should be flexibility and broad-mindedness within the framework of Shar'i [legal] texts."

This principle was not honored in the production process of *Right Click*. The two sites that created the most controversy were islamonline.net and islam-qa.com.

Islamonline.net presents extremely diverse content, ranging from daily news to a "fatwa bank". There are occasional live chats with scholars to address selected topics or general questions. The site is supervised by the aforementioned Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the mufti of Qatar and a renowned scholar. Al-Qaradawi is widely respected but also known for approving some controversial legal positions on modern issues. He is therefore viewed by some Muslims as someone who does not accurately represent the religious tradition and authentic knowledge. Islam-qa is more restricted in content and focuses almost entirely on legal opinions. The site is translated into several languages, and is used as a common reference by Muslims across the globe. The site is overseen by Sheikh Salih al-Munajjid, a famous Saudi scholar with a religious pedigree along the lines of Saudi conservatism.

Initial concern arose with one of the American staff members when islamonline.net was presented as a potential site. After searching the site, a fatwa authorizing Muslim converts to celebrate Christmas was discussed. Drawing from a

Prophetic hadith, many view the celebration of non-Muslim holidays as a sacrilege, especially when they commemorate beliefs that are rejected by Islamic creed (in this case, the birth of the “son of God”, an assertion that Islam firmly rejects). Given al-Qaradawi’s affiliation with the Ikhwaan al- Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood), the presenter was also suspected of similar leanings. Although the Ikhwaan exist within the broad spectrum of Sunni thought, some view their positions as overly accommodating to deviant sects and overly flexible on legal issues. The modern Muslim Brotherhood is also accused by some of using compromise, deception, or other underhanded practices in the interest of gaining political power. In line with this idea, the “Christmas fatwa” (which in fact was not written by Qaradawi himself) was viewed as a ploy to win the loyalty of converts through excessive accommodation. For a few staff members, this single element on the site was interpreted as a violation of Muslim creed and could therefore not be tolerated in any respect. This illustrates that the distinction between flexibility in law and strictness in creed cannot always be neatly maintained.

As an alternative, Islam-qa.com was suggested to the program host as a possible site, having been deemed authoritative, informative, and sound by the program office. The program host expressed concern that Islam-qa.com represents a perspective that is excessively narrow and exclusively informed by the views of a recently deceased Saudi scholar. He viewed the site’s stance as too restrictive for a global audience; not something that should be promoted by the channel. Several members of the Cairo program office were quite disturbed by his position. In a way, these sites functioned as emblems of the various personalities working on this project and their individual

approaches to orthodoxy. Additionally, they also represent ways that the perceived reaction of audiences impacts the channel's Islamic identity. The situation was complicated by the fact that the presenter, although an "outsider" to the channel, was very close with at least one of the top managers in Saudi Arabia. While the program office in Cairo had nominal control of content, it was clear, in this case, that the Saudi management could trump any decision. In the end, Islamic sites with less obvious sectarian biases were included, and some compromises were worked out, so the program moved forward without serious problems. Inspired by this sequence of events, however, there was some speculation that the presenter and members of the Saudi staff were "Ikhwaanis" – members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the attitude of Saudi management toward the Cairo program office could not be easily discerned, it eventually became clear that the program director's role was being curtailed by Riyadh. It is unlikely that this single program precipitated that decision, but it is an illustrative event in what eventually became a sour relationship. Ironically, it was some American staff members who advocated the conservative position more commonly associated with Saudi Islam, and the Riyadh office that promoted a more liberal approach. This challenges simplistic notions of Saudi influence in the sectarian landscape of the Muslim world. Unfortunately, it was difficult for the researcher to explore the dynamics of the Saudi head office due to lack of access.

The production process for *Right Click* also illustrated elements of politically-motivated censorship and the influence of diverse cultural backgrounds. Operating within Egypt, there was a tacit assumption that state security officials could have shut

down the channel at any moment. Therefore, for a program such as *Right Click*, the decision on what content to include simultaneously acknowledged what cannot be considered. For the “secular” websites mentioned on the program, it was reasonable to discuss Google Earth, a math site for kids, or a free online dictionary. However, no one would have considered sites that teach activist strategies against unfair labor practices, expose human rights abuses in the Middle East (except, perhaps, those that occur in Israel), or shine light on corruption among government officials. For religious sites, it was acceptable to include those that focus on the Quran, Islamic art, or general religious lectures. Indeed, programs with such themes have always appeared on Arab television channels. However, any site that challenged the religious legitimacy of Arab regimes would have been untouchable. In fact, two websites (Islamicity.com and radioislam.com), both of which are maintained in the West, were avoided simply because of their active and open political engagement. The decision was not influenced by specific articles or a particularly radical reputation. Part of the explanation for such a decision, once again, may be the general anxiety of living in a repressive police state. The impact of this type of self-censorship will be examined in chapter six. Additionally, there were clearly other factors in play that deserve attention, relating to the contrasting cultural backgrounds of channel staff.

One trend that was evident at Huda TV was the contrasting political and social outlooks of American, Egyptian, and Saudi staff. While everyone was in agreement on the general environment of repression and the impact of authoritarianism on decision-making, there were clearly different views on the relationship between Islam, politics,

and authority. At one level, this can be explained by the fact that, along with political repression, Muslims in Egypt and Saudi Arabia (perhaps more so with the latter) live with a constant barrage of propaganda asserting the religious legitimacy of the state. Additionally, those Muslim groups that have rebelled militarily against modern Arab states have often instigated significant social turmoil, and in virtually every case, have failed. While many agree with the grievances of such groups, their methods are not held in high esteem. Thus, there resides in the political culture a type of fatalism, and a suspicion that change may not bring anything better. Conversely, American and Western converts to Islam usually develop their religious identity through a radical break with society and total recasting of beliefs and loyalties.

In his analysis of Islam in America, Sherman Jackson highlights an ideological backdrop to immigrants' religious experience that he calls, "post-colonial religion" (Jackson 2005, 77). This concept highlights the manner in which the post-colonial experience impacts the interpretation and priorities of religious renewal. Jackson contrasts this to the religious experience of converts. His insightful description is worth quoting at length.

Post-Colonial Religion is not revealed but a product of history. At its core lies not so much a body of texts or interpretive tradition as does a particular historical experience from which its followers desperately seek redemption...In this capacity, Post-Colonial Religion is psychologically linked to what Arnold Toynbee once referred to as the "Ghost of Empire," that inner voice that incessantly highlights the disparity between a fallen present and a powerful and

glorious past. Post-Colonial Religion seeks first and foremost to reverse the sociocultural and psychological influence of the West, either by seizing political power as a means of redirecting society or through an ideological rejection of all perceived influences of the West. Where these options are deemed undesirable or unattainable, the influence of the West is essentially overcome by denying the alien provenance of would-be Western influences, affirming in the process the complete compatibility between Islam and the dominant culture in the West (77-8).

When trying to understand why Huda TV avoided certain radical social or political approaches, the concept of “post-colonial religion” must be taken into consideration. For instance, in explaining the rationale for the “tech talk” portion of the program, the host referred to Microsoft Windows as a “breakthrough for humanity.” There was obviously no pressure from the Mubarak or Saudi regimes to endorse Microsoft so whole-heartedly. Yet, there was also apparently no consideration of whether American information capitalism truly honors the moral values of Islam. In this statement, there is clearly a preference for the dominant forces of the West, those that can provide a sort of validation to the Islamist project. *Right Click* was generated outside the American-dominated program department, and traces of Jackson’s post-colonial religion can easily be detected. In this case, the program fixated on the issue of technology, reinforcing a message that Islam is perfectly compatible with, and respectful of, advanced technology, thereby denying its “alien provenance”. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the definition of “Islamic” from a traditional scholarly perspective can encompass technology and cultural

hybridity, but it certainly does not demand the uncritical reification of progress under the stewardship of corporate America.

### Discussion

This final element of *Right Click* moves beyond the discussion of formal policies to examine the much more subtle and pervasive influence of historical and cultural experiences on the channel's content. The next two chapters will examine those processes in greater depth. This chapter has demonstrated that "Islamic television" can be defined with a great deal of stylistic and cultural plurality while remaining authentically embedded in the Islamic scholarly tradition. At the same time, there exist a range of discourses and practices whose under-theorization impacted the channel's work in a variety of ways. Practical implementation of the channel's formal policies and informal practices demonstrated both trends. Efforts to adhere to the limits of orthodoxy were compromised by ineffective consideration of the audience, at times, or an accepted belief in the transparency of television as a medium. As mentioned in chapter two, this type of activity is part of a much wider discourse of contemporary Islam. It is the task for critical Islamism to make the complex relationship between principle and practice visible, and subject it to analysis according to the scholarly tradition. The primary research question for this work asks not only about the idea of "Islamic television", whose contours have been established by this chapter, but also about the application of this concept within the specific context of the satellite arena. This engagement with the wider cultural, political, and ideological climate will be addressed in chapters five and six.

## Chapter 5: Competing Discourses and Islamic Authority

This chapter answers the question: **How does Huda TV assert an Islamic identity among and against dominant global discourses?** The first section examines the Huda TV program, *Health and Islam*, which explores the relationship between Islam and modern science. The second section examines Huda TV's coverage of the Danish cartoon crisis by highlighting the interaction of Islam with the general discursive framework of human rights. Whether in reference to science as authoritative knowledge, or human rights as a prevailing value system, the channel consistently strived to posit Islam as a *compatible* and/or *superior* discourse. However, in the case of science, strategies of compatibility and superiority are neatly bounded, monitored, and maintained. This is largely due to the high status accorded to modern science and medicine in Egypt and the Arab world. For discourses such as human rights that reflect dominant value systems, the same strategies operate more ambiguously. This chapter examines tangible examples of processes identified previously. In grappling with dominant discourses, Huda TV endeavors to project Sunni orthodoxy within the contemporary world of ideas. And as discussed in chapter four, the processes identified in this chapter are often refracted through various cultural, political, and social experiences. At a very practical level, these processes were rooted in the channel's imagined relationship with its audiences. Huda TV staff generally agreed that "the West" was a primary audience for the channel, which included both Muslims and non-Muslims, while Anglophone Muslims in the region (whether expatriates or those fluent in English) were viewed as a secondary audience. And according to the pattern identified previously,

the channel's work in this regard proceeded from agreed upon principles of Muslim creed and law, while the application of those principles was contested among staff members.

What will draw respect for Islam from the channel's imagined audience? What does that audience consider authoritative? These questions are implicitly put forth and contested at various stages of the production process. This chapter also clearly illustrates the crisis of authority that exists within Islamism. It offers a concrete means to examine how various discursive, cultural, social, and political factors inform and distort the application of Islam within contemporary contexts.

#### **IRQ2A:**

**How does Huda TV engage with faith in science and technology as the guarantors of truth and progress?**

The program *Health and Islam* represented an effort to validate Islam in the public eye through a discourse of modernity – medical science – that is perceived as authoritative. Given the context of Egypt, it is worth noting the special status and prestige of medicine, and the extent to which the compatibility of Islam and medicine has historically been asserted by Islamists. Gilles Kepel's study of Islamist movements in the 1970s includes a detailed analysis of the works of Sheikh Kishk, a figure of great repute among Islamists, whose recorded sermons were spread at one time by cassettes throughout the Muslims world, and continue to be disseminated today through the Internet. Kepel notes Kishk's extensive use of medical imagery and metaphors in his stirring sermons. He comments,

The selection of medicine rather than some other scientific or technical discipline is no accident, for Kishk could just as well have taken his metaphors from engineering, electronics, physics, or whatever. But in the popular mind, medicine is the science of the hit parade of faculties in Egypt, the subject the most brilliant students are supposed to graduate in, according to the selection process. By mining the medical textbooks for his figures of speech, Kishk places himself on the level of the Egyptian intellectual elite in the eyes of his audience...By using these arguments, all of which claim an agreement between medicine, the supreme ‘science’ in Egypt, and faith, Kishk subordinates modern knowledge to Qur’anic knowledge. But this Islamicization of science, far from making science seem more remote from his listeners, brings it closer to them by demystifying it (Kepel 2005, 193-4).

Kishk is by no means an isolated case. The assertion of compatibility between Islam and modern science (and necessarily the superiority of Islam when the two are at odds) are common tropes in missionary media. A popular booklet, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, widely distributed throughout the world and accessible online through the site [www.islam-guide.com](http://www.islam-guide.com), is filled with analysis of “scientific miracles” in the Qur’an – areas of uncanny correspondence between modern scientific knowledge and descriptions of the natural world in the Qur’an. The booklet draws from the work of Abdul Majid Az-Zindani, a famous preacher who heads up the Iman University in Yemen. Identified as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the United States government,<sup>22</sup> Az-Zindani is a pharmacist by trade. In 2006, Az-Zindani declared

publicly that he and a team of Arab scientists had discovered a cure for AIDS.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, efforts to link modern scientific authority to Islam are not limited to the case of Egypt. These discourses are in high circulation throughout the Muslim world, and within Muslim communities in the West. It is motivated by a particular fascination with science and technology, and medicine in particular, as representing some of the best that modernity has produced. The selection of *Health and Islam* by Huda TV management as one of the channel's first recorded programs is well in line with prior and prevailing thought in Egypt and the Arab Muslim world.

#### Format of *Health and Islam*

Health and Islam was a one-on-one interview program featuring an American Muslim host and Egyptian doctors from a wide variety of specializations. The doctors tended to identify themselves through their title and specialization, but almost without fail, they listed American professional organizations to which they belonged, and highlighted professional and educational experience in the West. The appeal to Western authority as a certification of professional legitimacy reflects the obvious power imbalance (and perhaps more significantly, its perception as unbalanced) that exists in the post-colonial Muslim world. Throughout the production process, the regional manager repeatedly emphasized that these doctors were “the cream of Egyptian society” and should be accorded their due respect. The host of the program, an American Muslim convert, represented Western cultural authority and familiarity. From the perspective of the channel, and especially the program staff in Cairo, his role was also to ensure that the discussions referred back to Islam as much as possible, and that the doctors did not allege

any superiority of medical knowledge to Islam when an apparent conflict arose. However, the host did not have formal religious training, and the lack of direct input from religious scholars proved significant. As mentioned in chapter four, one of the top channel managers from Riyadh declared that the channel's success depended on the effective integration of the scientific and Islamic messages. Given the evident discursive tension and targeted outcome of the program, *Health and Islam* can be viewed as an effort to assert both the *essential compatibility* between Islam and modern science and the *exceptional superiority* of Islam in cases of conflicting authority. Again, this framework drew quite neatly and naturally from core aspects of Islamic creed – that the Islamic scriptures and Prophetic message are essentially flawless and universally applicable. However, this designation was monitored and maintained by individuals with limited or no formal training in Islamic scholarship. Therefore, the application of these principles to the specific case of medicine drew out key differences and tensions among channel staff and the guest doctors, thereby revealing the crisis of theorization in Islamism.

#### Conflict and Compatibility in Authoritative Bodies of Knowledge

In planning for *Health and Islam*, the program staff in Cairo consulted the translated book *Medicine of the Prophet* by Ibn ul-Qayyim al Jauziyyah, a noted thirteenth century scholar. The contemporary translation, published by Dar us Salam Publishing House in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, offers a manual of medicine from core Islamic sources that can be used, in many respects, as an alternative to the modern medicine which may or may not be readily accessible to Muslims living in the West. Proposed topics included: the medicinal benefits of honey, black seed, food mentioned in

the Qur'an and Prophetic narrations, and *hijaamah*, or cupping.<sup>24</sup> Although these issues were all ultimately addressed in the program, the episode structure did not neatly follow the themes outlined in the *Medicine of the Prophet*. Although there is some overlap between this text and the various disciplines of modern science (an overlap that was highlighted whenever possible), the classical approach to medicine is more akin to homeopathic or alternative medicine, areas that have yet to (and may never) gain mainstream acceptance in much of the scientific community. For the American staff, modern medicine clearly did not hold the same status and prestige as it did for other staff members. These converts were much more willing to suspend belief in modern science and accept traditional Islamic medicine as an acceptable or even superior alternative. For the doctors on *Health and Islam*, however, such an approach presented a serious threat to their professional status and reputation. Just as the doctors consistently emphasized credentials earned overseas, they were also scrupulous to disassociate themselves from anything that could not be categorized as “evidence-based medicine.” This term was invoked repeatedly when doctors were asked to present programs on more controversial practices.

The reluctance of doctors to engage with traditional Islamic medical practices did not imply an ambiguous or hostile attitude toward Islam in general. In fact, the medical profession is known as a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's oldest and strongest Islamist organization. While working with doctors on a project such as *Health and Islam*, it would have been entirely inappropriate to ask about affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is technically illegal and often the object of political

crackdowns from President Hosni Mubarak's security forces. However, from general conversations, and the willingness to participate in a religious program, all the doctors showed some level of commitment to the faith. And for practices where traditional Islamic medicine intersected with evidence-based medicine, they were generally eager to present such a topic as proof of Islam's validity. However, for areas of controversy, some doctors took the extreme path of denying that "Islamic medicine" and "Prophetic medicine" were valid concepts. According to the perceptions of orthodoxy by key staff members in the program office, this assertion compromised sound Muslim creed. The Qur'an and authentic Prophetic narrations are considered infallible. Other doctors adopted a more nuanced position, segmenting medical knowledge and Islamic knowledge as two distinct areas that could not be automatically reconciled.

The subject of *hijaamah* will be dealt with in greater detail later in this chapter. However, it constitutes an illustrative example of this basic dynamic. *Hijaamah* is unlike other aspects of traditional Islamic medicine. Rather than just lacking confirmation in modern science, it is deemed irredeemably backwards in many quarters. Within the Egyptian medical establishment, this is the kind of practice that could destroy a reputable doctor's career. While one may detect a certain post-colonial insecurity in the doctors' tendency to shy away from traditional Islamic medicine, there was no issue that elicited dramatic backlash more than *hijaamah*. Still, doctors tried to communicate a moderate position on the issue. For instance, one doctor privately acknowledged that he believed in *hijaamah*, and that one could justify its effectiveness according to anecdotal evidence. However, he also acknowledged that there was no explanatory mechanism within

evidence-based medicine that could account for the success of this practice. For that reason, he would be unable to present it. Additionally, he mentioned that his license to practice medicine could be revoked if he publicly performed this procedure on television.

The contested approach to authoritative knowledge by Huda TV staff, management, and program guests effectively represents the contested terrain of thought in contemporary Islam. Given the prestige and status accorded to the medical profession, *Health and Islam* presents unique strategies that were used to describe the relationship between Islam and modern scientific knowledge. However, there was no religious scholar directly involved in the production of *Health and Islam*. The program staff members assumed that they authentically represented orthodoxy by consulting a classical text. However, the issue of epistemological authority in regards to modern science and ancient healing practices is actually a point of more nuanced discussion by religious scholars.<sup>25</sup> This section will examine how the themes of compatibility and superiority played out in reference to competing perceptions of orthodoxy in *Health and Islam*.

#### The Case for Compatibility

Within the broader theme of compatibility, there were a variety of specific strategies used on *Health and Islam*. First, there was the assertion of a basic and essentially transparent compatibility between Islam and science, with the latter viewed as a timeless abstraction that exists outside of human activity and social context.<sup>26</sup> Next, there was a strategy to illustrate Islam's capability of responding to and incorporating scientific knowledge. Finally, there is a tendency to highlight areas where a seeming contradiction between Islam and science is resolved when the evolution of scientific

knowledge matches or confirms the Islamic textual sources. This last category approaches a claim of superiority for Islam, but in practice falls short. While everyone involved in producing *Health and Islam* – from the production staff to the doctors – was eager to highlight areas where science seemingly proves Islam to be true, any proposal to defend still irreconcilable issues was, in almost every case, summarily vetoed. Within this strategy of compatibility is an evident contradiction. Science is recognized as an imperfect and evolving body of knowledge, while the Islamic sources are viewed by all as immutable truth, but science is effectively given the final word for a variety of reasons. In this sense, the doctors' involvement with this program ensured a defensive posture toward the dominant discourse of modern science.

The first strategy of compatibility focused on the epistemological level. It employed a widely used trope in modern Islamist apologetics, the notion that historical origins of modern science can be traced to the golden age of Islamic civilization during the European “dark ages”. This strategy focused on a variety of indisputable historical facts. It is indeed true that the Islamic world preserved a great deal of classical scholarship which subsequently fueled the European Renaissance. Additionally, the development of natural sciences during the height of Islamic power reveals a different relationship between faith and reason than what existed in medieval European Christendom. The work of Muslim scientists remained crucial to the development of certain fields well into the modern age. However, although these issues are often asserted and celebrated by Muslims, they do not offer any real mechanism with which to reconcile the relationship between Islam (particularly the unchanging aspects of creed) and modern

science.

In *Health and Islam*, this strategy was evident throughout the program. One episode about orthopedics focused broadly on the evolution of science and medicine and their relationship to Islamic history. The following questions were mentioned in the production planning document for this episode (quoted verbatim):

- 1- How did Islam help in development of orthopedics as a science?
  - 2- What is Islamic way of thinking?
  - 3- What is the difference between Islam & other religions & old civilizations regarding ways of thinking?
  - 4- What is Islamic science & the difference from modern science?
  - 5- Give examples of scientific achievements in Orthopedic surgery specially.
  - 6- Why is the Muslim world not advanced now?
  - 7- Is there a contradiction between being good muslim & modern science?
  - 8- Is there a need for good muslim to have material strength & advancement?
  - 9- What (from a scientist point of view) does Muslem world need to regain advancement & development again?
- [Extra Questions Penned In]- Were there any great Muslim doctors in this field?  
What were their achievements?  
Did these scholars adhere to any scientific methods that are used... [incomplete-implication is “used today”]?

Several questions drew a distinction between Islam and modern science. These questions hinted at strategies for asserting the superiority of Islam. Although the author did not

view the taping of this program, he conducted the initial meeting with this doctor and can ascertain his approach in this regard (which will be dealt with later in this discussion of hijamah, of which this doctor made mention). Of immediate concern is the effort to draw a timeline of scientific evolution that passes through or begins with classical Islamic civilization. What was not included in this strategy, however, was the concept of Prophetic medicine itself. Islam was presented as an appropriate milieu within which scientific thought can freely develop. However, the more crucial point (and ultimately the bases for conflict between Islam and modern science) was how to deal with those aspects of medical knowledge that can be drawn from core Islamic texts – aspects, which regardless of their apparent incompatibility with modern science – could be considered part of the creed itself. On this issue, the strategy of epistemological compatibility, as evidenced by the historical lineage of science, was virtually silent. Other strategies of compatibility dealt more explicitly with the idea of Prophetic medicine that is rooted in the Islamic sacred texts.

The second strategy of compatibility related to the flexibility of Islamic law to incorporate modern scientific knowledge. Like the first strategy, this did not engage directly with areas of conflict between the two bodies of knowledge. However, it did focus on core Islamic sources, and therefore tangentially defended the concept of Prophetic medicine, albeit in a partial and sometimes consciously apologetic tone. A key example of this strategy on *Health and Islam* was the issue of smoking. Smoking is a unique issue within Islamic jurisprudence because it has gained the status of firm prohibition with a high degree of *scholarly consensus* – known as *ijmaa*’ in Arabic –

within the modern era.<sup>27</sup> According to classical schools of Islamic jurisprudence, ijmaa' is considered legally binding, though sometimes rare, source of legislation (Phillips 2000). Smoking is unique in the high level of contemporary, scholarly consensus that affirms its prohibition. The two primary sources of Islam – the Quran and sunnah – do not explicitly address smoking. Its prohibition derives from overarching principles that are established in those primary sources. One that is commonly mentioned is the hadith, “La Darara wa la Diraar” – roughly translated as “No harm and no reciprocal harm” (Higab 1997, 149). This simple hadith is viewed as a major axiom of Islamic law. When something is proven to be harmful to the human being, it becomes unlawful by virtue of this principle.

On *Health and Islam*, the topic of smoking was mentioned on almost every episode, with doctors emphasizing the harms of smoking according to their individual specializations. One doctor, a prominent figure who worked with the World Health Organization, presented an entire program about the harms of smoking. He highlighted a successful public health campaign that occurred in Egypt under the auspices of Al Azhar University, the seat of Islamic authority in the land. A fatwa against smoking was posted in mosques throughout the country, making citizens aware of its health impacts and religious prohibition. According to the doctor, the program was enormously successful. This example emphasizes that Islam is equipped to incorporate scientific knowledge as it advances. However, the essential caveat to that principle, which was not addressed, is that those innovations in scientific knowledge cannot oppose anything that is clearly established in the Quran and sunnah. The same doctor who voiced such enthusiasm for

the Al Azhar fatwa also denied outright the concept of Prophetic medicine. When asked if he would do a program about hijamah, the doctor resisted. In this regard, his view represents an extreme position in the dialectical relationship of Islam and modern science. He enthusiastically supported the concept of compatibility, but appointed modern science as the ultimate arbiter of truth. From the standpoint of orthodox Islamic creed, this view is highly problematic, as it demands a dismissal of core texts based on the current state of knowledge in modern science. Many other doctors adopted the same strategy of flexibility, particularly in reference to the issue of smoking. However, this approach was also supplemented by the final strategy to assert compatibility – the idea that science evolves in a manner that validates Islam.

The final compatibility approach hinted at the superiority of Islam as an infallible source of knowledge, but it only asserted that claim in a way that remained consistent with modern science. This was done by examining areas of evolving scientific knowledge that now coincide with aspects of Prophetic medicine previously deemed invalid. On *Health and Islam*, this was a strategy frequently employed by American host in order to drive home the view that science, however powerful, is full of human error and should not be placed at a higher station than the core religious sources. However, some doctors also employed this approach for specific issues where the Islamic sources matched up with “evidence-based medicine.”

The Islamic prohibition on alcohol and intoxicants was one issue that enabled doctors to argue for compatibility. An episode dedicated to the harms of alcohol was presented by an otolaryngologist. Planned questions for the program included:

What are the numbers of people affected by alcoholism?

What are the negative consequences of alcoholism?

Does drinking present special risks for women?

These questions respectively addressed 1) the prevalence of alcohol abuse 2) the negative effects of alcoholism 3) and concrete medical impacts of alcohol. These areas illustrated a strong compatibility between Islamic law and the current state of modern medicine.

Additional questions probed further into how the evolution of medical knowledge has served as further confirmation of Islam. Two angles of approach were employed. First, the doctor was asked “Can alcohol cause cancer?” This question had been requested by the doctor himself, because he wished to emphasize recent research indicating a correlation between alcohol use and certain types of cancer. The doctor acknowledged that the research was far from conclusive, but it served the program’s primary agenda to blend Islamic and modern medical knowledge. This was a risky approach that is often criticized by religious scholars. A hasty insistence to prove Islam’s compatibility with today’s medicine may backfire tomorrow when new knowledge takes its place.

The second strategy was illustrated by the question, “Is it true that drinking can lower the risk for heart disease?” This approach highlighted an area of contemporary medical knowledge that seems to conflict with the Islamic prohibition. To counter such arguments, the doctor acknowledged that some studies do show a correlation between moderate alcohol consumption and low rates of heart disease. However, he couched this evidence within the broader view of alcohol’s toxic social and medical effects. The host of the program had planned to align this big picture view of alcohol with the Islamic

position. The prepared questions included the following verse from the Quran: “They ask you (O Muhammad) about wine and gambling. Say, ‘In them is a great sin and [yet, some] benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit.’”<sup>28</sup> The historical prohibition of alcohol among the first Muslim community occurred in stages. At the dawn of Islam, basic elements of creed, rather than legal maxims, were emphasized. Once these were firmly established within the community, the details of Islamic law were gradually conveyed and implemented. Alcohol was actually banned in stages – from discouragement, to prohibition during prayer, to full prohibition. Through the verse quoted above, the full range of recent medical discourse on alcohol was aligned with Islamic precepts.

Another topic that was used to prove the validity of Islam according to the evolution of medical knowledge relates to foods mentioned in the Quran and sunnah. In many ways, the concept of Prophetic medicine is more closely aligned with alternative and holistic approaches than the evidence-based modern medicine so valued by the Egyptian doctors. However, as the boundaries between alternative and mainstream medicine have increasingly blurred, the authority accorded the latter has also shifted. Ironically, in the case of Huda TV, the Western staff members were generally more enthusiastic about alternative medicine, while the Arabs, and the doctors in particular, were more eager to enforce a somewhat narrow and even slightly archaic view of modernity and knowledge.

The most illustrative example of this holistic approach is the topic of honey. The Quran is clear and unambiguous in declaring that honey has medicinal value: “There

emerges from their bellies [bees] a drink [honey], varying in color, in which there is healing for humanity...”<sup>29</sup> Until recently, the idea of honey as a medication was not taken seriously within modern medicine. However, in preliminary research for the program, the staff discovered that honey had gained mainstream medical acceptance for a variety of applications, including the treatment of wounds. Several doctors were aware of this research and the topic of honey was highlighted as one where the Quran ultimately validated the evolution of scientific knowledge. However, the complete episode on honey was conducted with a doctor whose expertise was in Chinese, rather than modern Western medicine (the doctor is described in the discussion of *hijaamah* below). There are also instances in the Quran where foods are mentioned in a specific rhetorical style (e.g. “By the fig and the olive tree”). According to the principles of Quranic exegesis, anything that is mentioned in this manner is among the distinguished and magnificent aspects of Creation. Any food mentioned in such a manner is therefore considered to have distinctive qualities, even if they are not explicitly mentioned by the sacred texts. Similarly, some discussions on *Health and Islam* examined the medical benefits of other aspects of Islamic law and conduct (e.g. cleanliness, brushing teeth, eating moderately). Unlike honey, however, these latter aspects did not clearly employ the strategy of compatibility according to the evolution of scientific knowledge.

As mentioned previously, this final strategy is closest to asserting the superiority of Islamic knowledge over modern medical science, but it only does so by highlighting areas of converging agreement between the two discourses. The crucial question that remains, however, is how Islam can be asserted as superior in those areas where

Prophetic medicine and modern medical science are at odds. For reasons identified above, the strategies of superiority were much more contested than those of compatibility.

### The Superiority of Islam Over Modern Medicine

The superiority of Islam over modern science was affirmed by most of the participants in *Health and Islam*. However, few doctors were willing to make any bold assertions to that effect in front of the camera. In production meetings, doctors took several approaches to reconciling this belief in superiority with their professional commitments and principles. Some simply said that they believe in Prophetic medicine on the basis of the sacred texts, but they cannot affirm or practice it according to their professional knowledge in evidence-based medicine. They segmented the areas of knowledge as *practically* or *professionally* irreconcilable on certain points.

Another strategy employed by the doctors relates to a Prophetic hadith that, they argue, grants authority to science. The hadith reads:

Raafi' ibn Khadeej reported that Allah's Messenger (May the peace and blessings of Allah be on him) came to Madeenah and found the people grafting their date-palm trees. He asked them what they were doing and they informed him that they were artificially pollinating the trees. He then said, "Perhaps it would be better if you did not do that." When they abandoned the practice, the yield of the date-palms became less. So they informed him and he said, "I am a human being. So when I tell you to do something pertaining to the religion, accept it, but when I tell you to do something from my personal opinion, keep in mind that I am a

human being.” Anas reported that he added, “You have better knowledge (of technical skills) in the affairs of this world” (Phillips 2000, 34).<sup>30</sup>

The invocation of this hadith by doctors, and its application to areas of disagreement between Prophetic and modern medicine, rankled members of the program office. A basic principle of Sunni Islam is that the Prophet Muhammad’s sunnah (statements, actions, and tacit approvals) are a form of divine revelation and source of legislation. The Quran states, “He does not speak from [his own] inclination. It is not but an inspired revelation.”<sup>31</sup> The hadith of the date palms raises a particular issue in reference to Prophetic authority. Phillips explains that this hadith belongs to “another category of unconfirmed deduced rulings which demonstrate that the Sunnah is limited to confirmed religious rulings and exclude personal habits and customs of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) which he did not instruct his followers to follow” (Phillips 2000, 33). It is understood by religious scholars as evidence of the Prophet’s capacity to err in independent judgments about worldly affairs. However, the language of the hadith does not indicate a command, but rather a suggestion. The difference in expression holds important legal implications, as commands are taken as a form of legislation. The concept of Prophetic medicine may actually represent a combination of commands, which should be believed and acted upon, and suggestions related to the medical practices of his time. They should not be disparaged, but current medical practices may be accepted as superior.<sup>32</sup> These subtleties help to clarify the issue, but they were not readily referenced by either the doctors or the program office. The lack of scholarly input, in this case, contributed to the crisis of authority.

The issue that most clearly illustrated this discord is *hijaamah*. The Prophetic narrations on *hijaamah* are numerous. It is undeniably endorsed in the sacred texts. Within Egypt, however, the practice is considered taboo among the medical establishment. Virtually no doctor was willing to present on *hijaamah*, even when they privately acknowledged its validity. Others rejected it outright. Although a *hijaamah* episode was prioritized by the Cairo program director early in the process, its production was delayed until late in the shooting cycle.

Two episodes on *hijaamah* were finally produced, complete with a studio demonstration of the procedure on a volunteer American convert. The doctor who performed the *hijaamah* was not in fact a member of the mainstream Egyptian medical establishment. He earned his credentials in traditional Chinese medicine from a school in China. In his school of thought, a version of *hijaamah* is sanctioned and regularly practiced, so it did not present a conflict of interest. During the first episode, the doctor presented a history of *hijaamah* and a general account of the controversies surrounding it. He described it as an ancient practice that was rejected in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe with the rise of modern medical science. The doctor then provided a few disclaimers on how the practice could be misused. First, he described it as a science that has its own rules and procedures, and should not be conducted by non-specialists, as is often the case in Egypt and elsewhere. And interestingly, the doctor also quoted the hadith of the date palms to indicate that while *hijaamah* is unquestionably approved by the sacred texts, its exact function and mechanism can be open to further study by medical professionals. These disclaimers prefaced a discussion of *hijaamah* according to the principles of Chinese

medicine. The doctor described hijaamah as a means to balance vital forces in the body. He contrasted this view to the localized approach of Western medicine and its alleged lack of holistic understanding. Introducing the concept of “chi” and its flows through the body, along with an explanation of the human circulatory system, he described hijaamah as a corrective practice for imbalances or diseases that may be unique to each patient.

The demonstration of hijaamah very much replicated the aesthetic of a common medical examination room. The doctor emphasized the importance of sterilization and the use of proper equipment and techniques. Thus, the ancient practice was blended with icons of authority and legitimacy in modern medicine. While performing the procedure, the doctor explained the concepts of latitude and longitude in human anatomy as a means by which to identify appropriate locations for hijaamah on the body. Significantly, the doctor’s explanation of hijaamah was not in perfect alignment with the practice described in Islamic texts. For instance, the doctor explained hijaamah in relation to flows of blood but rejected the concept of “bad blood.” The latter is mentioned in some Islamic scholarly texts and fatawa, though its explicit source in the sacred texts is unclear. The doctor also rejected the idea of cupping being beneficial or recommended during certain times of the month, although that is explicitly mentioned in a hadith.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, even with this demonstration of hijaamah, the doctor is performing many of the same strategies that were used by other doctors, except in this case to argue for the compatibility of Islam with another body of knowledge – Chinese medicine. In many ways, these episodes raised the same issues of conflict that were identified as highly problematic among the Western-trained doctors. However, the visual product of a

hijaamah demonstration was generally celebrated among channel staff. The question of whether the doctor's explanation truly accorded with the sacred texts was not significantly addressed. This points to a dramatic difference in how Islam is weighed against the discourse of modern Western medicine, which is invested with high levels of social and epistemological status, as opposed to other bodies of knowledge that are not perceived as immediately threatening to Islamic authority. It also shows how the monitoring of orthodoxy can be somewhat rudderless without the input of a qualified scholar. In the next section of this chapter, the more ambiguous relationship with discourses perceived as powerful, but not necessarily authoritative, will be examined further.

#### Deciphering the Relationship Between Islam and Science

*Health and Islam* reveals a major fault line in contemporary Islamist discourse. Modern science is revered as independently authoritative, and alternatively supportive and threatening of Islamic authority. The strategies of *compatibility* and *superiority* show the dramatic contest for religious, social, and cultural legitimacy that exists among these discourses. Due to the weighty social and epistemological authority accorded to modern medicine, strategies to assert the superiority of Islam were not easily enacted through the production process of *Health and Islam*. When they were employed, many of the original conflicts remained unaddressed. Either these areas of conflict were strategically ignored, or the basis for superiority was only superficially conceived. Privately, many staff members simply believed in Islamic medicine while retaining a guarded appreciation of modern science. However, in confronting this issue on a global stage, the program

needed to directly engage the epistemological conflict. In the case of *Health and Islam*, this effort met with mixed results. This program clearly illustrated the crisis of authority in Islamism. The tools with which to navigate the discursive torments of the contemporary age were not precisely calibrated. At times, the authority accorded to doctors and evidence-based medicine subjugated Islam to an inferior position. At other moments, efforts to assert the superiority of Islam showcased an inability to identify competing epistemologies. Moreover, residues of Egypt's cultural and historical encounter with Western knowledge and power were clearly evident in the programming. It was in fact the Egyptians and Saudis who implicitly defended a more archaic and unyielding notion of modernity – through the discourse of evidence-based medicine – as the measure of development and sophistication. The fact that these dynamics were rarely acknowledged or explored shows the weak level of theorization informing this instance of the broader Islamist project. At the same time, the program staff members asserted a conception of orthodoxy that was not fully informed by scholarly input. The next section also deals with the relationship between Islam and dominant, global discourses. However, moving from the epistemological terrain to the realm of values – and with the direct involvement of religious scholars – the dynamic of contested authority becomes more ambiguous.

## **IRQ2B:**

### **How does Huda TV engage with dominant humanist discourses, particularly freedom of expression and human rights?**

This section brings human rights and freedom of expression into direct focus. These terms are among those social and political concepts that are posited as universal human values though the historical lineage of their contemporary usage may be traced to the West. In addition, the Muslim world, and orthodoxy specifically, is often conceived as the regressive “other” to these apparently universal values. This section does not engage the broad philosophical and practical debates on human rights or freedom of expression. Rather, it examines the way that these concepts are deployed in reference to Islamic orthodoxy, and the ways that one Muslim institution responds to the challenge. By engaging these issues, Huda TV clearly showed an awareness of their significance and the need for an Islamic response. However, since humanist discourses were not invested with the same epistemological authority as modern science, there was a much greater degree of ambiguity in the strategies employed by staff members and program guests. The themes of compatibility and superiority are therefore more difficult to distinguish. This section also brings into focus the interaction of Muslim creed with the social, cultural, and political factors at work in the production process. This will be dealt with in greater detail in the chapter six.

This chapter will focus on a variety of programming content that coalesces around a single issue – the Danish cartoon crisis which gripped the Muslim world in early 2006. After the provocative publishing of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by the

Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, outrage spread quickly throughout the Muslim world. Well-publicized acts of violence accompanied more subtle forms of protest, such as boycotting and diplomatic pressure.<sup>34</sup> Generally, Huda TV avoided engagement with contemporary political issues, but this event was considered something that could not be ignored. One of the senior managers from Riyadh once commented, quite simply, that there was no real choice – the channel had to respond. The range of programming addressing the cartoon issue included: specially dedicated episodes of the live fatwa program, *Ask Huda*; short promotional fillers; a special live episode of the talk show *Solutions*, which was subsequently discontinued; and several dedicated episodes of a new one-on-one interview program, *Perspectives*. The latter program continued to air after the cartoon crisis subsided. At the time, it was outside the character of other Huda TV programs because it focused primarily on current events and debates, with religious content taking a back seat. The program *Sermons from the Holy Land* – the recorded, translated sermons from Makkah and Madinah – also addressed the cartoon crisis. This program did not constitute original Huda TV content (except for the translation process itself, whose significance will be mentioned in the next chapter). However, it did offer an illustrative example of how the issue was treated across the world. Many of the same features identifiable in these transcripts can be discerned across the channel's programming. For this reason, they will be quoted at length.

#### Sermons From the Holy Land

The khutbah from Makkah on the 4<sup>th</sup> of Muharram 1427 (corresponds to February 3, 2006) included the following statements:

The Muslim Ummah has cooperated and supported one another to protest the slander of the Prophet (PBUH)<sup>35</sup> and they have called each other to adhere to the truth. It was in these precincts that Muhammad (PBUH) was born, commissioned for Prophethood and in which he emigrated. It is the place where the Qur'an was revealed and the revelation descended. These lands played a leading role in defending the Prophet (PBUH) that deserves praise and commendation. Then, the Muslims here were followed by their brothers and sisters in other countries...

...Among the lessons of this incident is that we Muslims should temper our feelings and behave wisely and deliberately in situations like that. We should refer to the people of knowledge, the wise scholars and decision makers in order that our actions may yield positive results. This righteous stand should not consist of mere excitement or emotional agitation without self-control or forethought.

The khutbah from Madinah on the same date stated:

Know that it is obligatory on the whole Muslim Community to love, defend and protect the Prophet (PBUH). Beware of laying your eyes upon these cartoons that abuse and insult our Prophet (PBUH). Our righteous predecessors warned against this. Shaykhul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah stated, "Indeed, it breaks one's heart to repeat verbal abuse or ill speech about the Prophet (PBUH). What a great sin is this." Loving the Prophet (PBUH) requires that we should not excessively praise the Prophet (PBUH), exalting him above the rank of a prophet and servant of Allah. The Prophet (PBUH) states, "Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians did to 'Isa ibn Mariyam. I am only Allah's servant and messenger, so

say about me, “Allah’s servant and messenger”.

The following week, virtually the entire sermon from Makkah was devoted to this event.

The sermon began with a detailed explanation of the Prophet’s status in Islam and the importance of his sunnah – his life example – for Muslims. Afterwards, the following statements are included:

We recall, O followers of the Prophet (PBUH), that at these late times where a heavy darkness covers the whole universe and an exhausted silence shrouds it, a plain historical catastrophe has occurred; some wicked people voiced lying and slander against the Prophet (PBUH). Their pens are dipped in the wells of falsehood, error and disobedience and they drew malicious images that supposedly represent the Prophet of Islam. So evil are these pictures that they shocked the minds of Muslims and grieved them. They have dared – woe to them – to slander the greatest person who ever treaded the earth, our Prophet (PBUH)...

...How can we lead a pleasant life or hope for victory while we have not supported every endeavor to defend our beloved Prophet (PBUH)? What grave slander and defamation! Where are the international conventions?! Where are the organizations and societies of the world to confront this heinous crime? What is the attitude of the wise and fair people towards this mockery?! Where are the global charters that discourage this calumny and lying?!...

...The Muslim countries, their leaders and laity, their cities and villages, condemn this evil slander. We proclaim this from the pulpit of the Mosque in Mecca, the

place where the Messenger of Islam came of age and was commissioned for prophethood. In the name of all Muslims, we call those in charge of the international organizations and assemblies to afflict the severest punishment, without leniency, upon those who slandered the noble person of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the one free from any disgrace or defect....we require international resolutions to condemn and punish those who commit such heinous crimes. The international charters and resolutions must punish those who dare to slander Allah, His Messengers, Prophets and sacred signs...

...This event has shaken the world and leads us to ask, "Tell us, o people of the world, about the freedom of expression and its standards which you claim that we reject. Tell us about the charters protecting the sanctity of the Messengers and heavenly messages, for you claim that we have ignored them. The principle of freedom of expression is applied only when the sacred signs of Muslims are violated, when their great personalities are slandered and when their Prophet is insulted? Surely the double standard is evident. It is no surprise that agreements are breached by those who ridicule the greatest person in creation, while they claim to protect principles, rights, development and honor....

...It is now clear who truly nourishes extremism and terrorism, inflames racism, violence and hatred between the peoples of the world, and who kindles discord and civilization conflicts.

These sermons are quoted at length due to the illustrative richness of their content. There are several themes at work here, all of which can be traced through the Muslim world

microcosm of Huda TV. The significant trends include:

1) Instruction in the basic Muslim belief on the status of the Prophet and the place of his sunnah in Islamic law. This opportunistic approach used the crisis to highlight elements of the religion that are not widely understood or practiced. Despite the differences between religious figures on Huda TV and those speaking from the Saudi-controlled pulpits in Makkah and Madinah, religious instruction was a common element across the spectrum of responses to the cartoon incident.

2) The sermons depict a message of Muslim solidarity that (a) asserted and celebrated an apparently unity between Muslim nations, leaders, and individuals, and (b) asserted that Saudi Arabia plays a leading role in this effort. This message is complicated. In one sense, it reflects a common Saudi strategy to promote its authority in terms of religious legitimacy. Next, it invokes the idea of political unity among Muslims which very much exists as a latent ambition among Muslims, although the extent to which existing political authorities share that goal is highly doubtful. At the same time, despite the evident flaws of modern Muslim governments, there are religious principles of unity and political quietism that may lead to a similar conclusion. That said, the strategy employed above obscured the very real and persistent internal conflicts that exist between states and religious reform movements.

3) The sermons also engaged broader discourses of human rights and international law. The hints at “international conventions” and “resolutions” showed (a) a willingness to engage in the processes of international diplomacy, and (b) an evident lack of knowledge or illiteracy in the actual nature of international agreements, and particularly the political

cultures of the West from which the cartoons emerged. The calls for “punishments” are difficult to understand. Likewise, aspects of the Western political culture (particularly free expression) are viewed cynically and suspiciously. The cartoon incident was used as proof that Western political culture operates with a double standard. Finally, one can detect a conspiratorial view of world politics in the sermons, with the view that attacks on Islam are somehow central to Western discourse and only thinly veiled by the principles of political freedom that are used to justify the cartoons.

4) The last major theme that can be detected in the sermons is the profound sense of outrage and insult caused by the cartoons. As will be shown below, this is also a complicated matter. From a purely religious standpoint, any insult of the Prophet Muhammad is a grave offense. However, when combined with the low prevalence of religious practice, the sense of outrage was interpreted by some at the channel as an expression of “dishonor” within contemporary Arab culture (perceived from a modern nationalist rather than religious perspective). In light of the internal conflicts that were obscured by the sermons, this is an alternative interpretation of some significance. With secular Arab nationalist ideologues playing a historically active role in the suppression of Islamic activism, some saw a type of hypocrisy in the outrage – in the superficial use of the Prophet as a cultural icon while his religious status and significance is largely ignored.

As mentioned earlier, the channel’s approach to the Danish cartoon crisis highlights a range of tensions that develop between creed, culture, and politics. Huda TV’s multicultural character, and unique political-economic structure, drew these issues

into particularly clear focus. Despite the fact that Huda TV shied away from controversial issues, the pressure to address this issue was so great that it trumped all other concerns. It was considered irresponsible to ignore the issue, given the public outcry and sense of injury. The informally stated goals of the channel were to offer a balanced approach to the issue, addressing both Muslims and non-Muslims, and to use the event as an opportunity to convey the core religious message of the channel. This section will mention individual programs where the four strategies identified above are evident (and ambiguously intertwined) throughout.

#### Promotional Filler

The filler project was developed by the channel's art director and was modified later through the input of other staff members. It featured a graphics background of clouds, superimposed with quotes from human rights documents relating to the protection of religious belief. The filler used a song by Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) about the Prophet Muhammad with the following lyrics:

If you ask me who my Prophet is,

I will say, "Haven't you heard"

If you ask me who my Prophet is,

He's a mercy to the world....

a mercy to the world.

If you ask me who my enemy is,

I will say, "Don't you know?"

If you ask me who my enemy is,

He's that same old devil...

that same old devil.

The concluding text of this filler was subject to controversy and debate, and it illustrates some of the internal conflict within the channel about how best to deal with this issue.

The first version of the filler ended with the text, "A Deserved Apology is Requested."

Later, this text was changed to "Islam: A Faith of Tolerance and Respect."

This filler showed the diversity of tactics used by Huda TV to express its position on this issue. Doubtlessly, the Danish cartoons caused great offense to Muslims. Yet this does not predetermine any specific response. By employing the Yusuf Islam song, the filler drew upon one of most popular figures of Islam in the West, and a cross-cultural symbol to whom many non-Muslims relate. Additionally, the concepts of tolerance and respect represented an Islamic articulation of human rights designed to situate the channel's message within an accepted international discourse. The channel's efforts in this regard will be examined in greater detail below through the program *Perspectives*. With less cynicism than the sermons' mention of "international conventions," this humanist discourse was presented as a legitimate and ongoing global dialogue within which an orthodox Islamic view could be authentically represented. This strategy was viewed as particularly important because it shows that Muslims are not fundamentally antagonistic to generally accepted political and social norms. In the West, the apparently irrational rage of Muslims in reaction to the cartoons was commonly cited as evidence that Islam does not permit freedom of speech. The invocation of human rights as a common discourse that protects and honors religion puts the newspaper on the defensive.

It was no longer a beacon of freedom, but became an instance of bigotry that is condemned by international standards. The question that remains, which will become clearer through other examples, is exactly how the discourse of human rights relates to Islam. Again, the strategies of compatibility and superiority were in play, but in a more fluid and ambiguous manner than occurred with *Health and Islam*. While the concept of human rights was viewed as worthy of engagement, it did not have the same authoritative resonance as modern science. Therefore, apparent conflicts were not carefully articulated or navigated in the production process.<sup>36</sup>

The promotional filler also shows how the cultural background of staff members impacted the message. The original conclusion – “a deserved apology is requested” – reflected a sense of injury, though it failed to convey any positive message. It also embodied a popular, and perhaps delusional, view of how the Danish state would react to this crisis. Perhaps due to the dictatorial context of Egypt and the Middle East, the government may be viewed as a patriarchal force in society, poised to discipline its naughty populace. Though the Danish authorities exhibited insensitivity and callousness during the cartoon crisis, it is somewhat implausible to imagine a Western government apologizing on behalf of its free citizens.<sup>37</sup> Much like the sermons from Makkah and Madinah called for punishments to be inflicted upon the perpetrators of slander, this demand for an apology betrayed a deep unfamiliarity with the political codes of the West. This message also indicated a defensive posture, more concerned with protecting a sense of honor than steering the issue in an alternative direction. It was perceived by some as ironic that this statement originated from staff members who were less outwardly

religious. For this reason, some members of the program staff (Americans and some of the religiously educated Egyptians) saw this approach as more of a cultural reaction based on honor or a brand of nationalism. However, there was no clear consensus on this issue. According to accepted standards of Islamic creed, it is mandatory that Muslims feel a sense of anger and injury from the cartoons. The difference arises in two areas that were already identified in the sermons. First, if one is to prove love for the Prophet Muhammad, then one should emulate his example and follow his commands. For those who seem lax in these areas, outrage was perceived as at least somewhat illegitimate. Second, and this is clearly evident in the promotional filler text, was the issue of how to strategically respond, regardless of the level or source of anger over the cartoons.

The second text – “Islam: A Faith of Tolerance and Respect” – presented a very different message. Rather than responding with a sense of indignation, this message essentially ignored the cartoon incident. It offered a positive contrast: not only should Islam be protected, but Muslims actually uphold a higher standard when dealing with the beliefs of others. It redefined the issue on the channel’s own terms. Though there was general consensus that the original text should be changed, the second version was developed with the input of American staff members. In this instance, there was an effort to respond to the West on its own terms, with a stronger awareness of Western political cultures. The Danish incident was cast as a current manifestation of the intolerance and bigotry that has plagued European history. Additionally, the decision not to mention the cartoons in the response also had a religious dimension, which accompanies the Yusuf Islam song extolling the Prophet’s virtues. As mentioned in the sermons, it was

considered blameworthy for Muslims to even look at the cartoons, first because they offered a pictorial representation of the Prophet (something that is firmly prohibited by Sunni orthodoxy), but also because it was considered unbefitting to listen to this type of slander. When the issue first emerged, there was a discussion in the program office about how to react. A staff member pointed out that one should not even open the forwarded emails that included the cartoons, much less pass them on to others. One Egyptian staff member mentioned a national proverb that translates as, “The lions are feared despite their silence, while the dogs are ignored despite their barking.” In other words, it is not a true expression of faith or strength to draw attention to the cartoons. As mentioned before, however, once the issue became global, the channel felt compelled to respond, and there was no major opposition to this from any quarter.

#### Solutions/Perspectives

The cartoon controversy was covered extensively on the channel’s two current events programs – *Solutions* and *Perspectives*. *Solutions* was originally shot as a taped program in spring 2005 and covered many contemporary topics relevant to Muslim life, such as gender relations, human rights, and parent-child relations. The first, and ultimately only, live episode of *Solutions* was shot in February to address this cartoon issue. The show included a studio audience – who were encouraged to participate – call-in guests, and a live studio guest – an established Muslim scholar who worked in the United States for many years. This scholar had also participated in various interreligious dialogues through the United Nations on topics such as human rights and the ethics of science. The channel viewed him as an authority who could effectively engage the

broader discourses of human rights and free expression that were so central to the cartoon crisis. *Perspectives* was a one-on-one interview program, hosted by the author. The first episode was filmed in February, with the same topic and guest as the live *Solutions* episode. These programs followed an almost identical set of questions and reflected the most clearly articulated position of channel management on this issue. *Perspectives* also included several follow-up episodes with other guests, usually former Egyptian ambassadors. However, these guests were invited by a freelance producer and did not reflect careful planning by the Riyadh or Cairo offices. These episodes tended to reflect personal views of the author, the independent producer, and program guests (views which were often in conflict).

This group of episodes employed the range of strategies outlined above. First, the channel wished to challenge the popular characterization of the conflict as freedom vs. fundamentalism. This is where the relationship between human rights and Islam was most explicitly articulated. These episodes challenged the proprietary claims of Denmark (and implicitly the West) to the value of “free expression.” The complexities and contradictions of this principle, particularly its application in Europe, were explored. On both programs, the aforementioned scholar addressed the limitations that accompany any articulation of “freedom of expression.” The guest highlighted the ubiquitous exceptions to freedom of expression in all societies, particularly the principle of not causing harm to others. He argued that the Danish cartoons violated the sanctity of religion and constituted a form of bigotry. These principles were voiced as Islamic standards of human rights that should be incorporated into shared international discourse. Due to his

experience with the UN, the guest was able to articulate an authoritative and credible Islamic position on what are often seen as secular principles. This reveals the ambiguity and overlap of the strategies in play. The discourses of human rights and free expression were not deemed as universally authoritative, but they were not summarily rejected. In contrast to the more dismissive view expressed in the sermons, the channel was promoting a message of dialogue through the voice of a scholar with significant cross-cultural experience. At the same time, Islam was comfortably asserted as superior without the deference accorded to modern science in *Health and Islam*. And while the channel promoted dialogue and various forms of peaceful resistance (i.e. boycotting), it was also essential to mention the gravity of the offense. Without a show of legitimate emotion, the programs might not have been deemed credible by Muslim viewers.

In addition to reframing the broader discourse on Muslim terms, these episodes also attempted to convey the core religious message of the channel, in light of the cartoon controversy. This was accomplished through several steps. First, the Prophet Muhammad was highlighted as a “historical Prophet,” whose life was well documented and whose life example constitutes a complete model for all Muslims. Although the concept of “historical Prophet” was credited to Western thinkers,<sup>38</sup> it reaffirms a core principle of Muslim creed. This rich approach addressed Muslims and non-Muslims and conveyed several layers of meaning. First, it instructed Muslims in the proper religious attitudes and behaviors – to follow through with the full implications of believing in the prophethood of Muhammad. For non-Muslims, it clarified the Prophet’s pivotal and central role in Islamic life. The program highlighted the Prophet as a model of tolerance

and respect for other faiths. This also served multiple purposes. It highlighted another aspect of Muslim creed – belief in many Prophets who were all sent with the identical message of monotheism. It also echoed the promotional fillers’ closing text. Again, by taking the high road, and defining the issue as one of decency, rather than freedom, the channel escaped an exclusively defensive tone.

Finally, these programs highlighted a course for political action. This was a highly contested area among Muslims in general, and the staff of the channel in particular. The guest on these programs supported the popular boycott of Danish products, though he opined that this tactic should not continue indefinitely. He also advocated an ongoing, global dialogue, within the framework of human rights, to develop a consensus on the protected status of religion. Attention was also given to discourage the violence and chaos that characterized some Muslim responses to the cartoon controversy. These comments helped to send a message of balanced political action within a mainstream global framework.

Subsequent episodes of Perspectives were not as planned or closely supervised by channel management. However, they did represent illustrative examples of how various cultural and political factors coincided in the production process at Huda TV. The independent producer brought a series of guests, most of whom were former ambassadors with extensive connections to the Egyptian government. The relationship between the Egyptian government and Islamist forces is generally antagonistic, although there have been moments of détente and even cooperation in recent history. What was immediately evident in these programs was the way that the governments and peoples of the Muslim

world were consistently portrayed as united in opposition to the cartoons. As mentioned in reference the sermons, this is a highly problematic claim given the history of government repression and abuse by self-identified Muslim rulers in the modern Muslim world, particularly toward religious movements. Some questions that embody this approach were<sup>39</sup>:

-Some western reporters provide false reports about Islam, a thing which shows Islam in a wrong way. In your opinion, how to deal with this? And what do you think about the initiative taken the Ministry of Awqaf (Endowments) in Kuwait to publish a Guidebook for reporters on Islam and doubts put forth about it? By the way, Saudi Arabia has made similar efforts in this regard. Do you think this is enough?

-Do you think that mutual interest is the only criterion that affects the relations between countries? Would this way of response bother the Europeans if Muslim nations didn't have the economical tools of pressure?

-Is the inter-dialogue the proper way in dealing with such a crisis, even if they were referring to the religion? Or such a dialogue must come after the heated response?

-What do you expect if the weapon of boycotting is applied in all Muslim countries?

These questions all suggested that the political elite of Muslim countries are suitable spokespeople for the religion. Additionally, they implied an essential unity between government tactics (such as boycotting or dialogue) and the popular unrest around the

cartoon issue. Although it should be mentioned that political quietism is in fact rooted in the Islamic scholarly tradition (with the intent of promoting stability in society), it is not accurate to say that the Muslim governments, or their representatives in international dialogue, are legitimate in the eyes of Muslim populations or religious scholars. In fact, many would argue that the cartoon crisis was a perfect opportunity for corrupt governments to falsely assert their Islamic legitimacy – one of the essential components of effective rule in the Middle East. Of course, at a religious channel operating in the Egyptian context, the program host could never have dared to mention these issues. This was an example of self-censorship, an impact of the political-economic context of Huda TV that will be dealt with more in the next chapter.

#### Ask Huda

*Ask Huda* was a live, call-in, Q&A program on Islamic beliefs and rulings. The author hosted the program alongside the channel's religious advisor, who provided most of the show's content. He answered several questions on the cartoon controversy and dedicated portions of at least two episodes to this issue. These programs took a more direct religious approach, with less treatment of topics such as human rights. Yet, they also offered a political analysis and plan of action for the crisis.

The religious advisor addressed this issue from a variety of angles. First, he clarified the Islamic belief in the Prophet and its implications for Muslims. He cited core religious texts to illustrate the Muslim's obligation to love, follow, and defend the Prophet Muhammad. Again, this approach addresses a broad audience of Muslims and non-Muslims. It implicitly criticized a compromised expression of Islamic identity that

was commonly identified among those reacting to the crisis. An oft-repeated maxim in these programs was, “The best way to show your love for the Prophet is to follow him.” The concept of sunnah – the Prophet’s life example, commands, and approvals – was presented as an essential pillar – alongside the Quran – of Islamic creed and law. This core religious message also explained to non-Muslims the importance of the Prophet in Muslim life. Contrasted to the Islamic belief was the irreverence of the West in dealing with religious figures, even those in whom many believe. Again, the idea of Islam as a tolerant and respectful faith, unwilling to engage in crass insults of other religious figureheads, refashioned the message in a non-reactionary mold. Concerning the core religious message, there was virtually no disagreement among staff members, and these principles are areas of consensus in Muslim creed.

However, the political analysis and plan of action presented on *Ask Huda* revealed some cultural and ideological splits between staff members. The religious advisor presented the issue as a deliberate provocation. This claim, in itself, was not contested. The cartoons were obviously conceived to offend, and no one would have assumed that Islam was randomly chosen as the target. Yet, the scope and intent of the provocation were subject to widely different assumptions and interpretations. The religious advisor argued that the cartoons were a litmus test to measure the tolerance and reaction of Muslims. With this premise, his prescribed response was to boycott Danish products and engage in peaceful strategies of protest and condemnation. Some creative approaches to the problem were also encouraged, such as a letter writing campaign to Danish citizens that would extol the virtues of the Prophet.<sup>40</sup> Others at the channel felt that excessive

attention to the crisis helped to disseminate the cartoons themselves. For such staff members, a non-aggressive approach, limited to the religious issues, would have been considered more effective. The crucial issue of disagreement here was not an interpretation of religious principles, to which all were in agreement. What was in play were the political and cultural factors, often unperceived, that guide the application of Islam in the contemporary environment. Again, this is a where contested theorization of the social and political realities can lead to alternative modes of Islamism.

Boycotting was also justified through a reading of Danish political culture. The religious advisor cited public opinion polls in Denmark that registered strong support for the newspaper's right to publish. He also suggested that the democratic nature of Denmark would allow its citizens to take action on this issue, if indeed they opposed the offensive gesture. The argument was often presented in the terms, "*They* insulted our Prophet, so we should boycott *their* products." The difference of opinion arose in whether "they" and "their" actually represented the same entity. Others at the channel doubted the reliability of polls and questioned whether the issue was properly understood by the Danish polity. There was also concern that the broad boycotting of all Danish products may have unfairly targeted those who were not directly responsible for the cartoons. Again, these differences of opinion seemed to split along cultural lines. The varied political experiences and ideologies of staff contributed to the diverse analysis of this issue.

### Discussion

Huda TV represents the unitary creed and diverse cultures of Islam in the context

of modernity. The programs examined in this chapter reveal a common religious mission that is fractured and warped through historical, cultural, and social experiences. The convert experience was in some ways privileged by a fluency with and casual disregard for the perceived authority of Western civilization. This led to a greater sense of boldness in asserting Islam against dominant discourses, and also a more subtle understanding of ideas and processes internal to Western societies. In reference to the imagined Western audience, this approach may have proved to be a distinct advantage. However, the immediate, regional audience, and the confines of the political-economic and cultural context, may have resonated more with the experiences and outlooks of Egyptian and Saudi staff. Despite what seemed like cumbersome, and to some, even heretical restrictions on content, these strategies may have represented a practical necessity to connect effectively with the regional audience and communicate the channel's message. These issues – the empowerment and role of American staff, and the limitations and impacts of the political-economic context – will be examined further in the chapter six.

This chapter also illustrates the crisis of theorization that impacts the articulation and implementation of Islam in contemporary contexts. As mentioned in chapter two, *Islamism* is a useful term to understand the highly complex and contested application of the faith in modernity. By engaging powerful global discourses through the lenses of compatibility and superiority, the programs examined in this chapter paint a detailed portrait of contemporary Islamism. However, the contested epistemological and moral terrain of those discourses requires multiple competencies to articulate an effective

message. This was not always the case. The fixation on medical science in *Health and Islam* warped the program's desired message. Similarly, the program staff narrowed the scope of orthodoxy unnecessarily due to a lack of expertise in Islamic scholarship. Huda TV's response to the cartoon crisis showed a higher degree of interaction between orthodox Islamic scholarship and dominant contemporary discourses. The channel's concrete engagement with values central to the humanist consensus shows how these competing centers of thought coexist practically in a state of ongoing dialogue. Clearly, a simplistic opposition between Islam and the humanist consensus does not hold in this case. Still, many contextual factors that exerted a strong influence on the channel's work were not adequately theorized, illustrating the crisis of authority in Islam. The next chapter will consider how various factors function to facilitate or inhibit the broader project of critical Islamism.

## Chapter 6: Culture and Context at Huda TV

The previous two chapters examined (a) how the mission, content and processes of Islamic television are defined at Huda TV and (b) the manner in which the channel's mission is articulated in reference to dominant contemporary discourses. Throughout this analysis, the impact of contextual factors – Saudi ownership, American staff, the Egyptian political environment – have been highlighted repeatedly. This chapter asks: **How is Huda TV's Islamic mission impacted by its cultural and political-economic context?** It looks specifically at the cultural power dynamics and political-economic milieu of the channel. In many ways, this chapter offers the most direct contribution to ongoing debates within the field of media studies. How does the process of self-censorship continue to operate in the ostensibly “freer” atmosphere of the satellite broadcasting era? Do the English-language format and native English-speaking staff help to reinforce aspects of American or Western cultural hegemony? How does Saudi ownership function to limit the range of legitimate social, political, and religious discourse at the channel? And how did the repressive political environment of Egypt impact production decision-making? The capacity of this study to help answer such questions will become evident throughout this chapter. However, beyond this contribution of new data to current debates, the primary questions of this study endure: what is the significance and meaning of these various phenomena according to the Islamic perspective that drives the channel's work? How are the usual indicators of empowerment, hybridity, and cultural autonomy perceived within the Islamic scholarly tradition? And how can this discussion help to identify alternative models of media that

represent not only non-Western experiences, but also worldviews beyond the embrace of the humanist consensus. The first section of this chapter examines the impact of the American staff at the channel. The second section looks at impacts of the political-economic context. Both sections consider the broader issues of how Islamic orthodoxy is expressed at the channel.

### **IRQ3A:**

#### **How do American staff members at Huda TV contribute to communicating the Islamic mission to a global audience?**

Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant provocatively assert that American cultural power can be so persistent and penetrating that it frames discourses that superficially appear as resistant or counter-hegemonic. They claim that “numerous topics directly issuing from the intellectual confrontations relating to the social particularity of American society and of its universities have been imposed, in apparently de-historicized form, upon the whole planet...these presuppositions of discussion which remain undiscussed” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999, 41). In addition to more traditional notions of American intellectual and cultural dominance, Bourdieu and Wacquant also see an insidious force within discourses that are considered resistant within the West, but nevertheless exert the same type of discursive domination and false universalization that emerges from more mainstream bodies of thought. In particular, they highlight how American conceptions of racism, with a strong dichotomization of black and white, have come to inform analyses of societies with more complex, distinctive racial dynamics (44).

The authors ground their critique in a somewhat simplistic understanding of race in America – rightly recognizing the past nonrecognition of mixed race identities in US census categories, but underestimating the extent to which a “continuum of ‘color’”, which characterizes societies such as Brazil, actually exists in America as well. The general argument, however, is worth some consideration. Does the American conception of racism “have the effect of facilitating the actual ‘globalization’ of American problems”? (46) The authors focus on how private foundations and the academic industry help to facilitate the spread of such theories in a one-way direction. However, they also hint at the dramatic effects that such an intellectual process might have on activists who implement dehistoricized, American ideas or methods within their own specific context. This consideration is of particular relevance to Huda TV.

Given the significant creative control accorded to Western Muslims at Huda TV, and the way that their vision often comes into conflict with Arab management and staff, Bourdieu and Wacquant’s questions seem highly appropriate. Is the production department, in effect, a shill through which American cultural power is able to dominate a seemingly resistant Islamist discourse? Does this in fact demonstrate that structural autonomy (through Saudi and Egyptian control) cannot overcome American hegemony? Is the latter so enduring as to somehow corrupt an authentic instance of regional or Arabo-Islamic expression? And in particular, given the extent to which the American Islamic experience is rooted in the opposition to racism, is the apparently radical vision of American converts actually an unconscious and virulent means to reinforce American hegemony? This chapter will show that such questions presuppose a model of cultural

power that is arguably irrelevant to the Islamist mission of Huda TV. The American staff members are not viewed simply as cultural intermediaries, but as representative of Islamic authority and authenticity *because* of their hybrid identities. This status is conferred implicitly by the channel's hierarchy and structure, but it is more directly demonstrated in the activities and attitudes of the American staff members themselves. This section will examine their role through projects in which they were given relatively free rein.

#### "Put some lotion on it"

For the program, *Sermons from the Holy Land*, two or three American staff members, including the author, controlled key aspects of the production process. Sermons from Makkah and Madinah were recorded and passed to the Egyptian translation staff in the program office. After rendering a rough translation, the sermons were passed to the author, who performed a first edit of the English version. The author then sent a copy to an American staff member (with significant professional and personal seniority) who would ultimately record the sermon at an independent production studio in Cairo. Working together, the author and the senior staff member, along with occasional participation from other program staff members, performed a second edit of the sermon during the recording process. In many ways, this process took the form of an apprenticeship, with the senior staff member drilling the author in techniques of *da'wah* (conveyance of the religious message). The senior staff member referred to the process as *translotion* – the effective “smoothing out” of texts according to standards of eloquence and cultural appropriateness. The translotion process was not just a linguistic

exercise, but rather an illustrative case of the manner in which American staff were accorded (and assumed) unique authority in conveying the channel's message. Thus, their contribution went beyond a stylization of content and included a creative articulation of orthodoxy. In this sense, the metaphor of translocation is an emblematic, though not exhaustive, description of the American perspective at Huda TV. Beginning with the process of translocation, the *Sermons* program will then provide a framework through which to understand an independent, in-house production of Huda TV – the program, *Untold Stories of World History*.

At a foundational level, the process of translocation was geared to “smooth out” the language used in the sermons to make it attractive and palatable to native English-speaking audiences. Beyond the linguistic intervention, the process of translocation included more subtle cultural mediation and even recasting of the original message in a manner perceived as more authentic than the original. Some examples of purely linguistic adjustments included the following:

“It is not strange – o you may Allah have mercy on you – to inquire cautiously about our attitudes towards this Sanctified Town. What is our behavior towards the most honorable sites? “

Changed to:

“We should evaluate our sentiments – o you, may Allah have mercy on you – towards this Sanctified City. How do we behave therein?”

This example related to the conduct of visitors and residents in the city of Makkah, the most holy site in Islam. The change in language was mainly to eliminate awkwardness,

simplify the language, and eliminate traces of a literal translation. Other examples that focused purely on the quality of translation included:

“...statement written in international webs of information.”

Changed to:

“... statement written on the world wide web.”

and

“Indeed, your Lord is in observation”

Changed to:

“Indeed, your Lord is ever-Watchful”

Other examples focused on language, but also dealt with issues of greater significance in matters of faith and worship. In these cases, more care was taken to reconstruct the passage’s literary style. One such example was:

“The life of man in this world consists of stages and people in this world are either departing from it or getting prepared for departure. Actually every breath one takes draws one to the Hereafter.”

Changed to:

“The life of man consists of stages and every soul will depart from this world.  
Every breath draws one closer to the Hereafter.”

The awkwardness of this phrase was considered particularly problematic because it relates to a core element of the Islamic creed: belief in the Hereafter. The original translation was clumsy and did not convey the exact meaning of “departure”. During translation, there was always a conscious effort to convey the message of the text with a

degree of eloquence. A final example shows the same effort at linguistic translation, but it also reveals a simple instance of cultural mediation:

“However, the common value that all people should share is the absolute virtues that conciliate between the members of the society and make them one set that has a common name. The individuals in this set are like members in one group that have different roles and forms; every one is playing his role in order to maintain the integrity of the ill-inclusive structure.

Changed to:

“However, all people should share in the common virtues that reconcile between scattered individuals and unite them under a common name. The individuals are like members of a team; each with a different role and position; every one fulfilling his responsibility to maintain the integrity of the system.”

In this last example, there is also an element of cultural translation that introduces a “team” or “sports” metaphor that is absent in the original translation. This gives a preliminary indication of how the process of translation was more than a linguistic exercise. The awkward phrasing is reworded to accommodate a cultural reference that the American staff members deemed more appropriate for the target audience. This kind of process was evident throughout the production process of *Sermons from the Holy Land*. Unlike the example above, translation also dealt with issues that were central to Islamic creed or the application of Islam within contemporary times. In this sense, it embodied a theorization of Islamism that drew its legitimacy directly from the American cultural experience.

One aspect of translation that reflected this tone of cultural authority was the development of an informal “style guide” in terms of commonly used vocabulary. Two instances of this style guide offer relevant insights. In the rough translations, certain Arabic terms were simply transliterated without meaning. Some of them – technical terms such as “Quran” and “hadith” – were retained in the translation process, while others were changed. One that was consistently adjusted was “ummah” – an Arabic term that is popularly translated as “nation”. The term appears in this famous Quranic verse: “You are the best ummah brought forth [as an example] for humanity.”<sup>41</sup> In *Sermons from the Holy Land*, the term was not rendered as “nation,” but as “community”. This choice is telling; it was made by the senior staff member and represented a personal policy of how the term “ummah” should be translated. “Nation” was viewed as indicative of the nation-state and a particularly modern political and identity formation. In fact, the term “ummah” is actually deployed throughout Islamist thought in reference to the idea of a reconstituted political order (Mandaville 2003). However, many religious and secular critics are skeptical that this conception of ummah is actually representative of the classical Islamic tradition. It is instead viewed as an attempt to uncritically graft classical Islam onto modern political formations. The use of the term “community” was an effort to capture a more authentic connotation of the term “ummah,” one that describes the essential unity of Muslims regardless of the specific political structures within which they live. The choice of “community,” therefore, represented an articulation of Islamism that transcends and even devalues specific political formations, whether they are existing states that speak in the name of Islam, or imagined political orders that may replace them.

The other illustrative term in the informal style guide was the use of “servant” in the place of “slave.” The Arabic term “‘abd” – whose best technical translation is indeed “slave” – is commonly used to refer to an individual’s relationship with Allah. The common name “‘Abdullah” means “slave of God.” Any other combination of ‘abd with the multiple “names of Allah” are also common, e.g. ‘Abdul Hakeem (Slave of the Most Wise), ‘Abdur-Rahman (Slave of the Most Merciful), ‘Abdul-‘Aleem (Slave of the All-Knowing). While no staff members on the *Sermons* project objected to this technical meaning of “‘abd” or its implication for Muslim life, the term “slave” was considered too culturally and socially insensitive to use without any parenthetical explanation. For instance, in an extended discussion on the program, *Solutions*, the specific concept of “slavery to Allah” was carefully contrasted with slavery to another person. This type of explanation was deemed necessary for the Western, and particularly American audience. For the *Sermons* project, no such explanation was possible. Therefore, the more neutral term, “servant,” was deemed appropriate to the target audience. The decision reflects a specific concern and experience of Blackamerican Muslims. Islam originally took root within the Black community through the religious experience and leadership of Malcolm X. Blackamerican Muslims remain the largest portion of converts by far, so the concern with the culturally sensitive term “slave” was significant in reference to an important contingent of the target audience. This was a clear instance of American staff members using their cultural authority to present content in a way that was deemed authentic, but still conveyed that Islamic message in a way that would be culturally palatable to the primary audience.

The re-articulation of Islamism with American cultural authority is also evident in the way that social and political concepts are addressed in the translation process.

“Therefore, these prevailing bad manners will cause foreign powers to attack the Muslim Ummah, overcome it and divert its individuals away from achieving their interests, and all that will be practiced under the shade of the “killing” freedom.”

Changed to:

“When these bad manners prevail, foreign powers attack the Muslim community, outmatch it, and divert its members from achieving their interests. All this occurs under the deceptive banner of freedom.”

In this example, the original text mentioned perceived threats posed by foreign powers and the ideological banner through which such actions are justified. There was also a principle of creed mentioned in the text– the belief that Muslims must look inward and address deficiencies in the community in order to ward off foreign aggression. This belief is supported by the Quranic verse: “Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves...”<sup>42</sup> The edited text did not abandon this core meaning. However, its description of “freedom” was changed substantially. While the term “‘killing’ freedom” was awkward from the linguistic standpoint, it also revealed a somewhat blunt rejection of a central concept in the broad spectrum of Western humanist thought. In this case, the American editors made an editorial decision to soften the dismissal of “freedom” while retaining a degree of skepticism toward it. Obviously, any wholesale opposition to “freedom” would risk reinforcing stereotypes of Islam as anti-modern and regressive. However, the basic intent of the sermon – that the

term “freedom” is deployed in a questionable manner throughout the Muslim world – was deemed valid by the editors. Such sensitive and potentially controversial issues are one reason that Western staff members were accorded creative autonomy. In this case, the editors were intent on maintaining the sermon’s radical edge by describing the contemporary invocation of freedom as a “deceptive banner.” This kind of editorial decision – knowing exactly how far to push the limits of controversy – is the type of contribution that was valued from the American staff.

The creative activism of the American editors also extended beyond linguistic and cultural “translocation”. In some cases, the editors assumed a greater degree of autonomy with content and freely altered meaning to convey what was perceived as a more authentic Islamic message. While this level of authority was freely (though informally) assumed by American staff members, it is likely that channel management would not have explicitly approved. Although the boundaries of authority for American staff were never explicitly plotted, the Americans themselves tended to view this type of strategy as something necessary but perhaps illicit within the power dynamics of the channel. Later in the chapter, the performance of American staff members as leaders of contemporary Islam, rather than as mere cultural translators, is explored further through the program *Untold Stories of World History*.

There are two illustrative examples of this effort to substantially alter content while trying to clarify the Islamic message. The first case is the following edit:

“Adhering to the material explanations and scientific justifications of the natural disasters and keeping away from admonitions and reminders [are] due to the temptation of Satan.”

Changed to:

“Acknowledging the material, scientific explanations of natural disasters while denying them as divine signs is from the temptation of Satan.”

It is part of the Islamic creed to accept the qadr – divine decree – of Allah in all matters.

It is not considered fitting for the believer to be displeased with the will of Allah. Even more so, the idea that Allah is not sovereign over His creation constitutes blasphemy. In reference to the example above, it is true that Islam considers natural disasters, whether they impact Muslims or non-Muslims, as part of Allah’s decree. They are considered a punishment or test for those afflicted and a reminder for those who look on from afar.

For the latter, it is also considered as a test to mobilize resources to provide relief for those suffering. Although the textual changes were minor, they represented a clear effort to clarify the creedal issue while avoiding potential misunderstandings that the original text might convey. Recording of this program occurred only a few months after Hurricane Katrina. There was a concern that this text might be interpreted as a callous response to that specific disaster. In addition, the original text might have been interpreted as declaring the mutual exclusivity of science and religion. Through translation, this meaning was altered. The material explanations are not rejected, but they are deemed ultimately insufficient from a religious perspective. In addition to the basic issues of Islam’s compatibility with science, there was also a concern not to parrot some

of the conservative voices in the West that might use such a religious concept to dismiss global warming or climate change. The staff members liberally rewrote the text with these factors in mind, not particularly concerned with the original author's intent, and confident that their changes were fully in line with orthodoxy.

In another case, the American staff members made the following edit:

“Who saved Prophet Muhammad while he was hiding with his companion from the disbelievers in the cave?! Who raised Jesus Christ to the heavens?! Who is the one Whose relief is hoped for every grief?! Who is the One Whose help is hope for every affliction?! He is Allah, the Almighty.”

Changed to:

“Who saved Prophet Muhammad and his companion while they hid from the disbelievers in the cave?! Who rescued Abraham when he was thrown in the fire?! And who parted the sea for Moses?! Who raised Jesus Christ unto Him?! Whose relief is sought in times of grief?! Whose help is sought when any calamity strikes?! He is Allah, the Almighty.”

The essential message of this excerpt was not substantially altered. However, content was added to extend the meaning and make it more culturally comprehensive. The addition of “Moses” is telling. While the original text mentioned miracles that are associated with two Prophets accepted by Islam – Muhammad and Jesus – these examples could be perceived as singling out Muslims and Christians while slighting Jews. By adding Moses, who is also accepted in Islam as a Prophet, the message is changed to reflect greater inclusivity and cast the net of da’wah to a broader audience.<sup>43</sup>

American staff members at the channel often read contemporary discourse in the Arab world as excessively critical of Judaism. On one occasion, an entire segment of a sermon was deleted due to references to Judaism that were deemed unacceptable and incorrect, mixing religious polemics with modern anti-Semitism. At other times, these staff members made comments ridiculing the conspiratorial notions of global Zionism that are common throughout the Arab world. One staff member also repeatedly noted the sincere commitment of Jews to alleviating racial injustice in America, a cause from which Arab-Americans have been notoriously absent. These acknowledgements are one index of the American staff's disregard for the dominant political culture and social outlook of the Arab Middle East. In this sense, the American staff members truly viewed themselves as the most authoritative individuals at the channel, not necessarily in relation to the scholarly discourses of Islam, but to their application in the contemporary world. Their Western perspective, filtered through the radical lens of the American convert experience, was deemed as the crucial element to the effective conveyance of the channel's Islamic message. Certain perceived tropes of contemporary Arab discourse – uncritical nationalism, relics of state propaganda, far-reaching unfamiliarity with Western institutions and ideologies, and an epidemic of conspiracy theories – were viewed as the internal saboteurs of the Islamist project.

These outlooks were not perfectly split between American and Arab staff members. Some Egyptian staff members were highly critical of the aforementioned tropes, while some Americans referenced them as authoritative. The religious scholars involved with the channel often brought their own hybrid cultural and educational

experiences, combined with deep religious knowledge. However, in *Sermons from the Holy Land*, the original Arabic texts were a product of individuals with limited interaction with the Western world. To turn their words into a Western cultural product required heavy intervention, at a variety of levels, from the channel's American staff members. At the other end of the spectrum, the program *Untold Stories of World History* represents a creative effort that was almost entirely authored and managed by Americans. In this regard, it presents an illustrative example of how the American staff members enacted their unique vision for the channel.

#### Untold Stories of World History

The presenter for *Untold Stories of World History* was a well known Blackamerican imam who holds a degree in Islam from a Saudi university along with a Ph.D. in history from Canada. He is famous for lectures on the history of Islam throughout Western lands and the African continent. The program office staff members were familiar with his work in this regard and suggested the topic of history as a focus for his program. The title, *Untold Stories of World History*, was selected after consultation with the imam. Two American members of the program staff, including the author, worked closely with the presenter to craft the programs's episodes. The staff members were primarily responsible for selecting and cueing images that supplemented what was otherwise a condensed lecture presented in 13 minute segments (two segments making up a single episode).

The salient elements of this program are that (a) it links an orthodox account of Islam with that radical Western perspective, (b) it uses history to address contemporary

critiques of Islam, and (c) it makes the radical, Western-rooted vision a means with which to explain the contemporary decadence of the Muslim world. The capacity to be radical, culturally integrated, and socially appropriate is exactly what gave the American staff such high levels of creative capital at Huda TV. A main feature of the radical message of *Untold Stories* was the challenge to accepted truths of Western history. The presenter began the program by offering evidence of a pre-Columbian Muslim presence in the Americas. The primary logic of this message is that the Islamic traces are evident in the historical record, but have been overlooked by those without the requisite linguistic and religious training to identify them. As a Ph.D. holder from a Western university, the presenter was able to convey a sense of authority and legitimacy. Moreover, he was able to engage this issue through general standards of evidence and validity from the academic world. During the preparation process, the presenter made a clear distinction between claims that could be backed up by sound evidence and those with a more speculative cast, clearly giving preference to the former in terms of what would be presented on-air. The challenge to mainstream history is significant because it also functions to highlight the injustices and abuses that have existed throughout the centuries of Western ascendancy. Orthodox Islam, as embodied in Islamic history, then offers a clear counterexample to the blameworthy aspects of the West. These themes were present throughout the program.

**Alternative History:** After the initial foray into pre-Columbian history, *Untold Stories* moved across various geographic regions to portray their unique Islamic histories. The overarching theme of the program, as embodied in the title, was history that has been neglected or ignored within the Western canon. Evident therein is an implicit critique of

Eurocentrism and its dismissal of Islamic history, particularly the civilizational achievements of Muslims on the African continent. The program drew from the discourse of Afrocentrism, although the Islamic framework was consistently maintained as well. Within the American context, the overwhelming majority of converts to Islam have always been Blackamericans. This religious process has often been connected to other movements of liberation and resistance against American racism. The legacy of Malcolm X has always exerted a powerful role in the American Muslim community. Additionally, many Americans have converted to orthodox Islam after involvement with quasi-Islamic but highly ‘racially’ politicized Black nationalist movements such as the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters.<sup>44</sup> The presenter of *Untold Stories* embodied this radical pedigree. By highlighting the extensive presence of Islam in Africa throughout history, the omissions of Western history were made apparent. Islam then functions as both culturally authentic for members of the African diaspora while also offering a universalistic vision for an activist life.<sup>45</sup>

The Afrocentric message, embedded within a broader assertion of Islam as an alternative model of civilization, is evident throughout the episode structure. Topics included: Habasha (Ethiopia), North Africa and Spain, Muslim exploration across the Atlantic, Al Andalus (Muslim Spain), the peaceful spread of Islam to West Africa, the Golden City of Timbuktu, the Swahili coast, the fall of Granada and Portuguese expansion, and Islam in American slavery. The basic story that unites the episodes was that Islam spread to much of the world due to peaceful trade and the universality of its message. Under Islam, various regions developed into advanced cultures that were

authentically linked to other regions through the universal message of Islam, while also retaining regional or local autonomy. The achievements of these civilizations were remarkable, and in fact paralleled, or even directly inspired, many of the advances attributed to Western civilization. Additionally, he described Islam as a lost heritage of the African diaspora that was suppressed due to its proclivity for resistance.

After the initial Muslim conquests of North Africa and Spain, Islam spread through the African continent along land and sea trade routes. *Untold Stories* paid particular attention to this phenomenon, highlighting Islam's expansion across the Sahara to West Africa, along with its coastal and occasional inland spread along the East African coast. This strategy has a double function. First, it is implicitly contrasted to the brutality with which European Christianity was established in these regions. Additionally, it describes a process through which the local inhabitants accepted Islam on their own terms rather than through coercion. Certain key centers of civilization were highlighted, such as Timbuktu in the West (located in modern day Mali) and the city of Harar in the East (located in modern day Ethiopia). At their height, these areas boasted sophisticated practices of urban planning and even advanced educational systems. The Sankore University at Timbuktu was considered a major global center of learning in the Middle Ages. These depictions contrast with common stereotypes of Africa as a land on the fringes of civilization. It also shows the capacity of Islam to empower people rather than subjecting them to colonialism and economic exploitation, as occurred with the spread of Western power in the region. According to the presenter, as the power of the Islamic powers declined, Europeans took advantage of Muslim knowledge, particularly in

Spain, to spearhead their plans for global expansion. And in the painful legacy of slavery that emerged from that expansion, Muslims were not exempt from victimization.

However, records of Islam in the new world illustrate a vibrant and defiant culture that can and should inspire Islam as an alternative source of belief and identity.

This overview of the program illustrates a concerted effort to link a radical, Afrocentric ideology with the message and history of Islam. As mentioned in chapter four, this calls to mind Sherman Jackson's analysis of contemporary Islam. It represents an orthodox articulation of Islam within the tradition of Blackamerican spirituality, and more generally, the radical perspective born from the Western experience. This is quite different from post-colonial Islam, which often views the West as a standard to be matched. In this case, the radical perspective of the West is taken as a baseline. This enabled the three specific strategies that were evident throughout the program: it linked an orthodox account of Islam with that radical Western perspective; it used history to address contemporary critiques of Islam; and it made the radical, Western-rooted vision a means with which to explain the contemporary decadence of the Muslim world.

**“Radical” Islam:** *Untold Stories* introduced a radical epistemological challenge to mainstream Western history. By positing evidence of a pre-Columbian presence in the Americas, and highlighting the advanced civilizations of Islamic Africa, the program painted Western history as a process of omissions and usurpations rather than development and progress. The presenter emphasized that an “objective look” at history reveals multiple transatlantic ventures from the West African coast. Implicitly, the common Western depiction of Columbus was recast as patently biased. In the episode

describing the fall of Muslim Spain, the brutality of the Christian conquerors was explicitly described. In a later episode on East Africa, the excesses of Portuguese exploration and colonialism were detailed. As a member of the African diaspora, and a veteran of American radical movements of the 60s and 70s, the presenter of this program clearly drew from his own Western radicalism to dethrone mainstream discourses of history. And while the same themes of superiority and compatibility, as described in the previous chapter, were evident in this program, they took on a markedly different character. There was really no effort to prove Islam's compatibility with dominant discourses. The Western tradition – from which the other dominant discourses emerged – was described, at its roots, as the embodiment of injustice. For those matters that were described in terms compatible with ostensibly modern political or social values (such as gender equality or religious tolerance), the comparison only functioned to show that Islam is the only true and enduring model for such principles. There was no epistemological adulation for dominant Western discourses, historical or otherwise, and this is a clear product of the Blackamerican Muslim experience.

**Refutations:** Untold Stories also used historical accounts of Muslim history to refute contemporary criticisms of the faith. The issue of gender equality was mentioned repeatedly. It was emphasized that West Africa's historic seat of Islamic learning, Timbuktu, was founded by a woman. The presenter also spoke of fugitive Muslim slave communities in the Americas where women were accorded a high status and actively involved in society. Likewise, participatory politics and pluralism were mentioned as enduring features of Islamic history. In an episode on the East African city of Harar, the

presenter described the political culture and structure of the city as representative, with a majlis ash-shura (council of consultation) giving voice to diverse constituents of the society. Likewise, the capacity for Muslim civilization to generate material progress was a common theme. The presenter described Muslim Cordoba as the world's largest city at its height, with an advanced public works and planning infrastructure, and home to diverse cultures and religions that coexisted peacefully. Along these lines, scientific and technological advances were mentioned occasionally, including an explicit statement that faith and science are not opposed in Islam. Although these themes are similar to the treatment of compatibility and superiority in other programs, the Western model was not presented as an ideal to be emulated. In the concluding episode of *Untold Stories*, the presenter described Islam as a balance between spiritual and natural life, between church and state, and between different nations and tribes. Implicitly opposed to these characteristics are the unbalanced qualities of Western civilization – obscurantist religion giving way to radical materialism, oppressive religious authority giving way to a soulless secularism, and racism and nationalism fueling centuries of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, whose legacy endures to this day.

One final element that responded to contemporary critiques of Islam was the presenter's treatment of jihad, the term referring to religiously-sanctioned armed combat in the Islamic tradition.<sup>46</sup> The presenter gave some attention to historical manifestations of jihad and the early Muslim conquests, but the topic was addressed more explicitly in reference to another historical phenomenon: slavery. Estimates vary as to the numbers of Muslim African slaves brought to the Americas. On *Untold Stories*, the portion is posited

as 30%. The presenter described some of the Muslim communities that took root during the era of slavery and the resistance activities that occurred under their leadership.

Evidence was presented to show a clear Muslim presence in areas such as Cuba, Haiti, Suriname, Brazil, and the southern United States. According to the presenter, Islam was perceived as a threat and directly targeted by colonial authorities to minimize the chances of resistance. However, in several cases, Muslims conducted organized armed rebellion against the system of slavery. Concerning one Muslim-led slave rebellion in Brazil, documentation still exists that casts the struggle under the banner of jihad. This strategy has a double effect. First, it again highlighted the abuses and injustice of Western history, thereby undermining any Western proprietary claims on social virtues such as equality. Next, it described one of the most controversial contemporary issues – jihad – according to a universally accepted form of political violence, the slave rebellion. Again, Islam was not presented as equivalent to some Western ideal, but rather as the true and balanced embodiment of universal values. Turning away from the Western criticisms, *Untold Stories* also offered a direct diagnosis of the contemporary Muslim world's dilemmas.

**A Western vision for Islam:** In the final episode of *Untold Stories*, the presenter offered comments on the downfall of Al-Andalus as an implicit commentary on the contemporary Muslim world. He mentioned three key qualities in that process, through which “Muslims lost the light” – distance from religion, racism, and nationalism. The first, distance from religion, is clearly in line with the orthodox religious view of social decadence and defeat. A commonly cited Quranic verse in this regard is: “Whatever

calamity strikes, it is only what your hands have earned. And He [Allah] is oft-forgiving.”<sup>47</sup> This concept is a driving force behind the broad range of Islamist reform movements. Annexed to it, in this case, were concepts drawn from modernity – nationalism and racism. It is therefore worth investigating how these concepts were deployed and described throughout the episodes of *Untold Stories*.

Examining the Islamic past from a contemporary Muslim perspective is always a process of asking, “Where did we go wrong?” For nearly 1000 years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim world was among the dominant political and economic forces on the globe. The expansive ummah existed with some level of collective conscience and multiple political formations stretched across continents. It was therefore impossible to produce a program such as *Untold Stories* without implicitly or explicitly addressing the collapse of Islamic political authority in the modern era. At several stages in the program, the presenter addressed moments of decline and renewal in Islamic history. The major example, as mentioned above, was the case of Al Andalus. On the episode dedicated to this topic, the presenter explained that Muslim Spain had split up into distinct, divided kingdoms while tribalism and racism had gained sway. It is worth noting two things at this stage. First, the early history of Islam in the Arabian peninsula was very much a story of the universalistic and egalitarian ethic of Islam overcoming the tribalism and racism of its contemporary world. Therefore, it was not at all anachronistic to introduce these concepts in a discussion of Islamic history. Next, when considering the comments from the concluding episode, it can be understood that tribalism and nationalism were being used interchangeably. This is a common feature of

Islamist discourse to regard nationalism as a modern manifestation of tribalism, and a means through which Muslims are artificially divided.

Adding detail to the relationship between racism and Islamic decline, the presenter described some cases of egalitarianism in times of ascendancy and racism during eras of collapse. He mentioned the early history of Islam in West Africa, which developed without conquest but rather through the processes of trade and social interaction. When West Africa, particularly the city of Timbuktu, became a major global center of Islamic activity, the leaders occasionally made hajj – the major Islamic pilgrimage to Makkah – with a large entourage. In one such case, Mansa Musa, a legendary leader of the region, went on hajj with an estimated 60-70 thousand people. The presenter described how this black African was honored and respected throughout the Muslim lands as he travelled. In another episode, he described the “beautiful blending” that occurred along the East African coast when Islam took root in the region, a phenomenon that was eventually subverted by Portuguese expansion. On an episode dealing with the Muslim communities that developed in South Africa, the presenter again invoked the idea of “beautiful blending” and closed the episode by reflecting on the Prophetic advice against racism and nationalism. Much like the case in East Africa, the Muslim communities in South Africa were victimized by colonialism, and later apartheid, both of which originated from European peoples. Although racism in the Muslim world was mentioned as a cause for downfall, its explicit manifestations were only obliquely addressed. In one instance, the presenter mentioned the story of a West African religious scholar, Ahmed Baba as-Sudani, who was captured by a Moroccan invasion force during

a time of internal conflict among Muslims. While in chains, he gave religious lectures to the Moroccan soldiers and eventually won his freedom. The implication was that ethnic distinctions had overcome any sense of unity based on faith, until this “black scholar in Morocco” served as a reminder of the egalitarianism that should have existed.

Why was internal Muslim racism such a consistent theme in the program, even when its specific historical manifestations were not extensively addressed? The answer lies in the contemporary realities of the Muslim world, particularly the Arab heartland. Among the American staff members at the channel, the problem of racism in the Arab world was a constant theme of discussion and complaint. Racism in the Middle East is palpable, particularly for Blackamerican converts. Staff members, including the author, discussed this problem with the presenter of *Untold Stories*.<sup>48</sup> For many Muslim converts who accepted Islam based on its egalitarian principles, the discovery of racism in the Muslim world is particularly troubling, and this single issue often becomes, in their eyes, the salient explanation for the Muslim world’s state of humiliation. According to such converts, including virtually all those who worked at Huda TV, the problem of racism is compounded by the fact that it remains almost completely unrecognized and unaddressed. The difficult lesson drawn from this realization is that the Western experience of recognizing and confronting racism does in fact provide a more effective platform from which to articulate and implement Islam authentically and authoritatively. This aspect of the Western radical tradition, which has in many ways been disseminated throughout Western society, is deemed, ironically, as more Islamic than the accepted and common discourses of the Muslim world. And it is through this particular issue, more than any

other, that the American staff members at Huda TV assumed an authoritative role beyond linguistic or cultural mediation.

### Whither American Hegemony?

From this analysis of *Sermons from the Holy Land* and *Untold Stories of World History*, the unique role of the American staff members at Huda TV comes clearly into focus. First, it is evident that Americans did hold a high level of cultural capital at the channel. Most staff members recognized this, but the American staff members in particular were confident in defining themselves not just as cultural intermediaries, but as the effective and authentic conveyors of the Islamic message. In some respects, this can be explained through their linguistic and cultural literacy that suited the channel's English-language format and target Western audience. The cultural advantage reflected an indigenous experience within the West and a greater level of comfort in accepting and rejecting Western discourses while holding fast to an Islamic identity. Beyond these experiences, there was also a strong sense among the American staff members that their Western experience actually enabled a more authentic understanding of Islam and a greater capacity to effectively apply the faith to contemporary crises. In this sense, the questions raised by Bourdieu and Wacquant should be viewed in a different light. The American staff members were certainly exploiting their cultural capital by working at the channel, and there was clearly an effort to use their radical Western experience in a global context, under the rubric of Islamic renewal. Bourdieu and Wacquant might have rightly identified these phenomena as dehistoricizing, universalizing processes. However, the cultural authority accorded to American staff members was not perceived

to conflict with the channel's universalistic conception of Islam. In this way, diversity in cultural or national identity was valued and considered a malleable resource in conveying the message of Islam. In reference to the academic discourse on hybridity, this example shows how cultural pluralism can be comfortably accommodated by a unified faith.

There is an important clarification to these claims. What is deemed the American or Western experience in this analysis is not intended to assert essentialist or neatly bounded definitions for those cultural identities. It was in fact a kind of radical and highly critical American experience that united the staff members at Huda TV. Likewise, the suggestion that this American experience might be optimally equipped to communicate Islam does not imply that the Arab Middle Eastern milieu is singularly stagnant and incapable of doing so as well. Such a statement would indeed reek of Orientalism. However, the next section will focus primarily on the ways that the political-economic context exercised a restrictive role on the channel's mission, contrasting sharply to the enabling effect of American staff. This does not imply an essentialist critique of Arab culture, or even a generalizable account of all such media projects in the region. However, it does identify the salient contextual factors that impacted, and in many ways limited, the channel's ability to autonomously communicate its message. These factors, rather than being rooted in static tradition, are very much the product and outcome of historical process and political formations of the modern era.

### **IRQ3B:**

#### **How does the immediate political-economic context impact Huda TV programming?**

Huda TV management and staff generally accepted the American contribution as effective in communicating the channel's core Islamic message. The exact scope of authority for the American experience is somewhat contested among channel staff members, with the Americans viewing their own expertise as more significant than simple linguistic or cultural intermediation. However, the channel is based in the Arab Muslim world, housed and produced at one of the major production sites within Egypt. It is financed and managed in Saudi Arabia, with the main office exerting a notable influence on the channel's activities and character. So what is the impact of this immediate political-economic context? What impact does it have on the message of the channel and its effectiveness as an English-language medium? As demonstrated in chapter five, the local environment exerted a clear ideological influence on the channel. Conceptions of science, technology, and human rights, among other discourses, helped to define the character of several programs. Channel guests, Saudi management, Egyptian producers, and American creative staff members often asserted competing views of religious authority and divergent conceptions of Islam in contemporary life. In this section, the influence of the local context will be examined more directly. And while the American cultural experience provided an enabling authority to the Islamic message itself, the contextual elements examined here generally exerted a countervailing, limiting influence. That said, there are practical factors in the channel's political-economic

context that would not allow it to operate in the West with the same level of quality and professionalism. It is worth turning briefly to those factors.

#### Enabling Contextual Factors

Huda TV was able to operate successfully, with a high level of production quality, due to several factors in its specific context. First, the financial burden to sustain the channel would have been difficult to maintain in an environment where extensive charity funds were not easily accessible. Although the exact channel finances remained inaccessible to the author throughout the duration of fieldwork, the general parameters were occasionally discussed by channel management. The channel was largely sustained by several key Saudi investors and supplemented with levels of charitable donations that would be difficult to match outside the resource-rich Gulf area. The channel's graphics and production quality were of a sufficient quality to compete with other prominent media outlets in the region. Major expenses included: renting the production and office facilities at Egyptian Media Production City, the cost of satellite space on NileSat (later expanded to include at least two other international satellite systems), salaries for an extensive production staff (particularly the American salaries that were inflated beyond local standards), and unique production costs for individual programs (e.g. increased staff hours, set design, digital graphics). Exact figures on these expenses were not available, although management indicated that monthly expenses could run into tens of thousands of dollars. Comparable quality would have been almost impossible to maintain in the West given the financial resources of Muslim communities in those lands. And

particularly after the 9/11 attacks, money does not flow as freely from Saudi Arabia to America.

By locating the channel in Egyptian Media Production City, Huda TV benefits from one of the state-of-the-art production facilities in the Middle East while keeping labor costs to a minimum. Even the American salaries, which were quite exorbitant for Egypt, would have been a pittance in the Gulf countries or the West. The production staff members were generally paid meager wages for long hours of work, a practice as typical as it is tragic in Egypt. Again, exact figures were not available to the researcher. However, some staff members complained of being paid between \$150-500 per month for work that may often have taken up 70-80 hours per week. Professional wages in the West among unionized media professionals would have been prohibitively high given the extent of work required to make the channel successful. Although labor protections in other Arab countries may be similarly weak, the higher cost of living would have demanded an increased base wage for production staff. Additionally, the channel relied on a great deal of contract work with local graphics houses. Generally, the channel paid within the Egyptian market range for these services. Without exact figures, it is still safe to assert that those costs were significantly less than comparable media services in other countries. The relatively low cost of production, combined with the easy flow of Saudi funds to Egypt, made the specific context of Huda TV an ideal environment for high technical quality at limited costs.

Huda TV also benefited from its location in a historical center of Sunni orthodoxy. This factor is much more significant for Arabic-language channels, since

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other core Arab nations boast a high concentration of learned Muslims. However, Huda TV also benefited from English-speaking scholars in the region who would have been inaccessible in the West. At least two scholars who worked with the channel expressed fears about travelling to the United States and would not have participated in programs produced there. Additionally, it is likely that they would have been financially restricted from contributing as significantly to the channel if it had been located elsewhere. Guest scholars were compensated generously, enabling short-term, full-time work for the channel rather than sporadic or occasional contacts. The channel's religious advisor, who played a major role across the range of programming, would not have been able to secure a similar position in the West with a livable wage. The inclusion of an on-site religious advisor helped to ensure a consistent and conscientious message in the channel's programming. And although the Egyptian environment was restrictive in many respects (as detailed below), there was a degree of freedom with certain issues that would have been impossible to enjoy with political and social pressures in the West. That said, the overwhelming influence of the specific political-economic context was restrictive. This remainder of this section will be devoted to examining those limiting factors.

#### Limiting and Restrictive Factors

The limiting and restrictive factors of the channel's immediate political-economic context present a unique analytical challenge; they engage what was not said, what was assumed and not uttered, or even what was not considered at all. However, one of the striking and persistent features of media in the Arab world is the stifling effects of self-

censorship. As mentioned in chapter two, the satellite age has witnessed a definite shift toward free expression. However, Huda TV does not enjoy the backing of a financially wealthy state – such as Al Jazeera’s support from the Qatari monarchy – that would insulate it from political or economic pressure. The awareness of political and cultural sensitivity was always in circulation at Huda TV. The difficulty in measuring them, however, is overcome to a large degree by the author’s extensive time at the channel and full participation in a variety of production activities. This role made the subtleties of self-censorship and content regulation readily apparent. The most illustrative example of these processes comes through the talk show, *Perspectives*.

*Perspectives* was a recorded interview program hosted by the author. Its focus was less religious than most other programs, with a heavy emphasis on current events and contemporary issues. Its genesis was rooted in the Danish cartoon controversy. The first several episodes of *Perspectives* dealt almost exclusively with the cartoon issue, focusing on themes such as the intercivilizational dialogue and human rights. Almost all the guests on *Perspectives* were recruited by an independent producer hired by the channel. After the initial controversy subsided, *Perspectives* episodes were shot in bunches depending on the availability of recruited guests. At these later stages, the topics for episodes were determined by the expertise of the guest rather than any set agenda. The independent producer often prepared a list of questions in Arabic that were translated by channel staff. The author, as host, would occasionally use the prepared questions but more often edited and rewrote them. A good portion of the invited guests had previously served in Egyptian government positions, particularly in diplomatic positions abroad.

The program also included academics, activists, and journalists. While the author played a major role in directing this program, it was also tightly bound by the contextual limitations that are the focus of this section. Additionally, channel management often played a role in the selection of topics, and in editing or censorship decisions on the program, so it was far from the sole product of the author's imagination.

*Perspectives* represented a unique foray into current events for the channel, and topics included a range of controversial issues. That said, in extending the content beyond strictly religious topics, the channel also opened itself to political pressures that were not as significant in other programs. This dynamic created a range of clear limitations that offer a helpful illustration of the political-economic context and its impact on the channel's work. First, *Perspectives* gives a clear view of the process of self-censorship, one of the persistent qualities of Arab media, even in the satellite era. Next, in direct contrast to the radical, critical approach of the American staff members at the channel, *Perspectives* revealed closed and fairly predictable tactics that are used to explain the Muslim world's subjugation to Western political ascendancy.

**Self-censorship:** Self-censorship on *Perspectives* can be roughly divided into three categories – issues that are automatically viewed as controversial due to the political climate, issues that are not addressed because of channel policies, and topics that are problematic due to specific guests on the program. As mentioned in chapter four, the policies of censorship at Huda TV have to be understood as both enabling and restrictive. Some were natural outcomes of the channel's Islamic character. Others were governed by the political-economic context of production. When examining the processes of self-

censorship on *Perspectives*, it is important to keep this full complexity in focus.

However, given the current events focus of the program, the restrictive elements were much more apparent than religious programs, and they marked clear limits on the range of Islamist discourse permitted at the channel.

Several guests for *Perspectives* boasted extensive diplomatic credentials and had served in official government positions based in Europe. The standard preparation for such guests included questions about the clash of civilizations thesis and general themes of intercultural dialogue. In general, there was a very limited range of discourse that was seen as appropriate for these guests. Inevitably, they spoke as representatives of Egypt as a Muslim land, and by extension, Islam itself. Their messages were almost universally conciliatory and somewhat shallow in terms of articulating a common vision with the West. For instance, some guests spoke about the hospitable treatment that they received while working in the West, while underlying political issues were ignored. A few guests possessed such extensive expertise in a field (e.g. as human right negotiators or free trade advocates) that the conversations were able to touch upon more sophisticated and nuanced topics. That said, to have Egyptian diplomats posing as definitive representatives of Islam is highly problematic. Egypt's notorious human rights abuses have historically been directed at Islamist activists of all stripes. The topic of Islam itself is highly sensitive in Egypt. That is not to imply that only certain Islamic organizations, or Huda TV itself, should have a rightful monopoly on religious discourse. However, on *Perspectives*, it was inconceivable that the topic of religious legitimacy be broached on air. Although some of the guests may have been able to offer insightful and informed

critiques of Islam in Egyptian politics, the questions never would have been asked. It was the consensus opinion of the author, management, and staff that any venture into such sensitive political issues could have resulted in the channel being shut down.

Despite the channel's sensitivity to topics that might rouse government ire, it was ironically a government-affiliated guest who presented the most dramatically unacceptable content. He was a former ambassador who had served in Europe as well as contemporary hotspots such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Before his scheduled episodes, it was expected that he would offer a humanizing portrait of Muslims in war-torn lands as well as the usual conciliatory comments on Muslim relationships with the West. Instead, he invariably launched into diatribes directed at Americans and Zionists. He also put forth some common conspiracy theories related to the CIA's relationship to Al Qaeda and US policy in Afghanistan. The author, as host, attempted to redirect the topic to more acceptable areas, in an effort to salvage the episode. In many cases, problematic comments were edited out of other Huda TV programs before airing. In this case, all efforts to soften the message were fruitless. The episode was a complete loss and was never aired.

Huda TV policies prohibited defamatory statements toward other faiths and only countenanced religious debates that maintained a civil and respectable tone. The channel was highly sensitive to any statements that could be perceived as derogatory to Christians and Jews, in particular, since they were thought to represent a major portion of the channel's imagined audience in the West. Before going on air in fall 2005, staff members were instructed to closely scrutinize virtually all prepared material and edit out

any problematic content. This often included statements that accurately represented Muslim critiques of Judaism and Christianity. However, if a statement was made too bluntly, without contextual explanation, or stated as an overgeneralization (e.g. “The Jews think” or “The Christians believe”), it was removed. These policies were conceived in reference to Huda TV’s English-speaking audience. However, they also reflected core Islamic principles on interreligious dialogue. For instance, the Quran states: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best...”<sup>49</sup> The American staff members were highly attuned to the way that more aggressive attacks might be interpreted in Western contexts. Likewise, they also understood the general limits to political speech in Egypt, and were acutely aware of the potential consequences in crossing the government. What the aforementioned *Perspectives* guest brings into focus, however, is the extent to which the acceptable range of speech in Egypt, in reference to government pressure, is quite different from the channel’s own internal regulations.

The guest’s comments were entirely inappropriate for a Western audience, and this was agreed upon by channel staff. However, his tendency to externalize blame for problems in the Muslim world, particularly by accusing Zionists and America, is a common trope in official and opposition discourse. Such ideas are often viewed as a convenient pressure release valve for oppressive rulers throughout the Arab world. By externalizing blame, attention is directed away from internal corruption and despotism. True to form, the guest’s comments were as exaggerated and delusional as they were inappropriate. They offered no real basis with which to begin an assessment of either

internal Muslim ailments or the combative relationship with Western powers. Again, it would not have been possible, at Huda TV, to challenge the guest on these points. In this case, the government-affiliated guest presented far more radical views than those permitted by the orthodox, religious channel. This seems to violate a common view of the government as a force of moderation against religious extremism. Moreover, there is a strong religious basis with which to criticize the guest's approach, but there was no option to voice such a perspective on the channel. Inasmuch as the guest felt comfortable making wild claims about parties and groups external to the Muslim world, the channel would have felt equally uncomfortable to shine a light on internal corruption within Egypt, which is arguably constitutive of both Muslim decadence and extremism.<sup>50</sup>

Even among guests who engaged in more sophisticated discussions, it would have been impossible to voice any criticism of Egyptian (or for that matter, Saudi) political authority. For instance, one guest was actively involved in promoting free trade agreements across the Arab world. His professional expertise and gregarious personality made for excellent episodes. The host was able to discuss several critical issues of national and regional development, including the impact of free trade agreements with the US and Europe, and the dilemma of burdensome national debts across the Arab Middle East. Of course, the rampant corruption present in the region's elite business quarters was never mentioned. Similarly, another guest had extensive experience in international human rights negotiations, and had also worked on intimate details of peace negotiations with Israel. He was able to explain human rights as a negotiated discourse that allowed Muslims to safeguard their sacred principles. As mentioned in chapter five,

this type of argument, when applied to the Danish cartoon crisis, helps to recast human rights as a universal discourse to which Muslims can contribute, rather than a proprietary virtue of the West. This guest also provided multiple quality episodes for the channel. However, the author would not have considered addressing human rights abuses in Egypt, considered by some to be among the most severe in the world. In each of these examples, the political-economic context of Huda TV exerted a stunting effect on any critical discussion of problems facing the Muslim world. There was a constant awareness that Egyptian and Saudi officials held the ultimate keys to the channel's survival. Staff members justified their approach in this regard by saying that current events issues are not the channel's primary mission. However, there are clear costs that result from these omissions.

An episode of *Perspectives* featuring an Egyptian government official presented a particularly sensitive dilemma. Other guests had retired from public service, and were therefore perceived as somewhat distant from the immediate circles of power. In addition to his official position, this guest's comments on Islam posed a particular problem as they seemed to echo current policies of the Egyptian regime. Specifically, he stated that Islamic rulings (fatawa) should only be issued by competent authorities. This particular point is commonly recognized as a government propaganda device in contemporary Egypt. In principle, the notion that fatawa must originate from qualified scholars is fully in line with orthodoxy. Many Islamic scholars lament the current trend for untrained individuals to assert Islamic ruling on the basis of their own limited knowledge. However, in the hands of government officials, this critique takes on a different meaning.

As in most Muslim countries, the government must assert religious legitimacy to maintain power. The Egyptian religious establishment is closely tied to the government, though the relationship is by no means simple or deterministic.<sup>51</sup> However, when a government official attempts to police the qualifications for issuing fatawa, it is fair to assume that he is doing so with the interests of the ruling elite in mind. Huda TV existed in a gray area of Egyptian Islamic discourse. The channel represented a view that is more conservative on many legal issues (e.g. applying the classical prohibition on interest to modern banking) than many of the official government positions in Egypt. Significantly, it also included voices that fall outside the officially sanctioned discourse in Saudi Arabia (which also exerted real and imagined authority over the channel). Internally, there was a distinct awareness that the channel had to operate under the radar, focusing on issues that are relatively uncontroversial, avoiding those that may bring additional scrutiny or even persecution. To sit face-to-face on set with a government official, who is spouting slogans on religious authority that could be interpreted as hostile to the channel's mission and activities, is obviously a highly sensitive position. The author, as host of the program, attempted to direct the conversation toward those areas where there would be general agreement, rather than giving a free voice to a potential adversary of the channel, and at the same time guarding the channel from any potential, negative reaction. Again, this type of activity had a stunting effect on the critical discourse that might have emerged around a given topic. Even more illustrative, however, is the reaction that this specific program elicited from a viewer.

After this episode was aired, an angry viewer wrote in complaining that the channel should not showcase representatives of the Egyptian government. His list of grievances focused on the severe oppression of Islamist movements within Egypt. Additionally, he included a lengthy treatise arguing that contemporary Arab governments are apostates from the faith, an accusation whose corollary, according to his perspective, necessitates rebellion against the state. This declaration of disbelief, *takfir* in Arabic, is a major cornerstone of militant radicalism in the Muslim world. Orthodox Islam supports political quietism, even under oppressive conditions, if the ruler maintains certain Islamic parameters. However, apostasy can be grounds for political upheaval and revolution. This is a very controversial perspective among Muslim scholars, but one that is almost universally present among militant groups working to overthrow or combat the established authorities in Muslim lands. In this case, the author of the letter was an American convert to Islam who resided elsewhere in the Middle East. According to many scholars, his view is a pathway to extremism and social turmoil. While no self-respecting Muslim scholar would align himself with the corruption and oppression of the Egyptian regime, *takfir* is considered a highly dangerous practice with woeful implications. In this case, one of the scholars closely associated with the channel responded to the viewer's challenge privately. What is significant, in this case, was the way that certain contextual factors strongly limited the range of discourse.

Like previous examples, this episode of *Perspectives* operated within a very restricted discursive frame. Moreover, because the guest chose to address issues of Islamic authority, the channel was placed in a very sensitive position. He might have

been able to exert political pressure against the channel if he deemed its message threatening. Additionally, as indicated by the viewer's email, the channel's credibility with some viewers was compromised. The viewer in question clearly felt that the channel went too far in trying to accommodate the government representative. Both options skew the discussion toward an extreme: either the reinforcement of a dubious government message, or the validation of extremism that only finds self-expression through violence and rebellion. Self-censorship motivated by this kind of political sensitivity is not surprising or novel within the Egyptian and wider Arab media context. The question here, however, is how does this culture of censorship impact the way that an orthodox Muslim message is articulated and conveyed.

The character of the stunted discourse on political and social issues is another constitutive feature in the crisis of theorization in Islamism. It is a widely articulated principle of Islam that the faith is a complete way of life and offers guidance for all realms of human activity. However, this principle can easily become a platitude when major areas of discourse are preemptively closed off from consideration. While *Perspectives* offers a snapshot of how self-censorship can impact a program, the processes observed therein were not absent from the wider dynamics of the channel. As mentioned in chapter five, ethnic and national identity often exerted an influence in how the contemporary world was analyzed and interpreted by channel staff. The tendency toward conspiratorial thinking and the irrational assignment of culpability to imagined external foes were not absent at the channel. Again, ethnicity is not deterministic in this regard, but generally, those with the critical Western experience, either as Americans, or

as staff members whose educational and life experiences had provided concrete interaction with the West, were much less inclined to explain the contemporary world through such mechanisms. This analysis of *Perspectives*, though limited to the dynamics of this case study, helps to identify some of the contributing factors to this crisis. An Islamist critique, grounded in orthodoxy, was not given adequate space to engage crucial social and political issues.

### Discussion

In reference to Huda TV's articulation of Islamic orthodoxy within contemporary life, the critical Western experience was an enabling factor, while the contextual features of the Egyptian and Arab world, and their impact on social discourse, ultimately subverted the ability to effectively and authoritatively communicate Islam. It is important that the ethnic and national identity factors are not understood in essentialist terms. There is nothing about a generic "American" experience that makes it a superior vehicle with which to convey the Islamic message. Many of the processes identified as problematic in Egyptian media and society may be equally present in American media, albeit under the banner of free expression and democracy. It was the particular experience of the channel's American converts that enabled an articulation of orthodoxy that is often muted in the historically Muslim world. Likewise, it is particular contextual factors of modern history and politics, enacted within a highly restrictive discursive space that can stunt a more critical theorization of Islamism.

The processes at work support the concept of hybridity as a typical element of cultural identity. It is cultural contact and conflict within the West that informed the

American staff members' conversion and subsequent perspectives on the Muslim world. Likewise, it is decades, even centuries of modernism, put forth by and within a variety of political formations, that inscribe the limits of the Egyptian context. However, this is not the crucial issue at stake in this work. The significant question is how these cultural and discursive dynamics inform the expression of an orthodox Islamic message within the specific context of Huda TV.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, Bourdieu and Wacquant complain that radical American perspectives are able to exert hegemonic influence on ostensibly resistant thought in other corners of the world. At a surface level, the processes that they identify were evident at Huda TV. American staff members, for a variety of reasons, were encouraged by the channel to exert a strong influence over the creative process, and the manner in which the message of Islam was conveyed through a global medium. Tremendous resources were invested to operate and maintain the channel, and during the author's term of employment, the salaries of Western staff were disproportionately larger than those of other Cairo staff. Likewise, in the case of *Untold Stories of World History*, it was the American experience with racism, and its transformation through the encounter with Islam, that drove the program's message. The presenter even went so far as to diagnose the Muslim world's contemporary political and social woes as a product of racism. So are Bourdieu and Wacquant correct? Was this just another example of the power of American hegemony to transcend and influence even apparently radical discourses? If the question was solely directed to a dynamic of culture and power, their critique might be valid. In a way, the American staff members were using their

privileged position to diagnose problems in the Muslim world. However, with the added element of creed, orthodox Islamic beliefs, texts, and laws, to which all participants at Huda TV were firmly committed, the dynamic changes. Faith takes precedence over culture.

It is through these examples that the complex relationship between creed and culture comes into clearest focus. The channel represented a case of American hegemony reproducing itself in an environment ostensibly characterized by a radical, alternative, non-Western identity. Yet, the Islamic identity proved to be more adaptable to cultural difference, and even apparently hostile imbalances of cultural power. At some level, the channel's staff all recognized this capacity for the particular cultural experience of American converts to serve as an effective means for conveying the immutable faith and practices of Islam. However, the Western staff went beyond the concept of cultural or linguistic skill to actually claim a more authoritative understanding of orthodox Islam than is commonly available in its historical cultural home. And unlike the poorly theorized and defensive obsession with compatibility that categorized *Health and Islam*, the American staff members were less concerned with meeting a perceived standard of civilizational competence. They were equally critical of the West and the contemporary Muslim world. However, it was very much their particular Western experience that enabled a fuller articulation of Islam's relevance to contemporary life. Conversely, the immediate political-economic context limited the range of discourse to acquiescence to political authority or the equally unacceptable extremist alternatives. The "pristine cultures" that, according to Roy, constitute Islam as an accepted part of the social fabric,

can in fact serve as a notable hindrance to the message of Islam articulated on a global platform (Roy 2004, 118-24).<sup>52</sup> The “decultured” Islam of the West, therefore, is not an empty shell, as Roy implies, but rather a dynamic re-articulation of the orthodox faith. Finally, although the claims presented in this chapter may hit on sensitive issues of authority and the cultural ownership of religious tradition, they are not outside the realm of orthodoxy. Islam has often been revived by those outside the ethnic or geographical core. The findings in this chapter do not go so far to say that the traditional Muslim lands are no longer the seat of orthodoxy and the source of traditional scholarship. They are. However, the critical cultural experience of American converts may also represent a unique catalyst to Islamic renewal.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

As noted in chapter two, the term “Islamic” is a neologism with an often ambiguous and uncritical deployment (Jackson 2005). This dissertation asks: **How does Huda TV assert an Islamic presence in the satellite television arena?** The analysis in chapters four through six reveals several layers to this conception of “Islamic” media. Huda TV’s engagement with Sunni orthodoxy reveals a much more sophisticated portrait of Islam than the common caricatures of academic and popular discourse. Additionally, this dissertation examines the complex interaction between Huda TV’s understanding of orthodoxy and the wider intellectual, political, and cultural context. These dimensions of analysis offer significant contributions to media theory and highlight important areas for further research.

Chapter four shows that Huda TV defined Islamic television as an alternative to the perceived immorality that characterizes the medium at large. This alternative was not conceived in terms of cultural autonomy or authenticity, but rather under the rubric of legal permissibility according to the channel’s interpretation of Islamic law. This approach actually accommodated a great deal of cultural and stylistic diversity. These findings offer some important challenges to the broader academic discussion of culture and power, particularly the notion of hybridity. While academic debates on American cultural hegemony have faded with the diffusion of media production and access across the globe, Huda TV seems to reveal a contemporary case of American cultural influence. However, this factor was deployed in support of a larger Islamic mission. And although this mission was couched within a conservative perspective of Sunni orthodoxy, Islam

proved to be remarkably flexible in accommodating cultural diversity. Chapter four also shows how the channel overlooked some of the structural elements of television that may in fact have impacted its stated mission. The simplistic view of media as a transparent vessel and the unrecognized influence of post-colonial religion raised questions about the channel's ultimate effectiveness in conveying the message of Islam.

Chapter five shows that the channel's conservative orientation did not preclude a serious engagement with other belief systems. The dynamics of compatibility and superiority guided the active dialogue between Islamism and ostensibly authoritative discourses of contemporary life. The social status of modern medicine in Egypt illustrated the crisis of authority in Islamism. Significantly, the conflict between doctors and the self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy in the program office was amplified by the absence of religious scholars in the production process. This challenges notions that religious learning is a source of obscurantism and intolerance. In the discussion of the Danish cartoon crisis, the channel was more at ease in engaging human rights as an authoritative discourse. This can be explained by two factors. First, human rights, and particularly notions of free expression, were perceived as open and capable of incorporating Muslim standards. Additionally, the active involvement of religious scholars helped to recast the terms of debate while remaining on a firm orthodox footing. In both cases, the cultural backgrounds of staff members proved to be an influential factor in how these discourses were approached. The Americans at Huda TV showed a greater ability to engage, and more willingness to dismiss, the aspects of Western thought and experience that challenged the channel's mission. Conversely, the political and

cultural sensitivities of Egypt and the wider Middle East illustrated a lack of theorization on crucial contemporary issues, further illustrating the crisis of authority in Islamism.

Finally, chapter six shows the highly flexible role of cultural authority in communicating the channel's religious message. Ironically, the American cultural experience was valued as perhaps the most appropriate and authentic means with which to convey Islam. However, it was not an essentialist American identity, but rather the uniquely critical convert perspective, that proved so empowering to the channel. As concerns about American cultural hegemony relaxed in media studies, there was an accompanying populist tendency to dismiss the enduring power structures of global media. This chapter does not support the populist approach. Huda TV operated in new spaces opened up by technological and social transformations in the Middle East. Structurally, it stood outside of regional and global media conglomerates. It also represented a highly critical position toward the prevailing character and content of satellite television. In this sense, the compatibility of American culture with the Islamic message was not an instance of active audiences or resistant readings. Rather, it illustrates the necessity to decouple culture and creed in analyses of hybridity and broader aspects of media power. Scholars must exercise caution when speaking of all forms of identity – cultural, national, religious, etc. – as if they represent interchangeable categories. This study reveals a much more complex interaction. In this sense, common notions of hybridity can be understood as empirically strong but theoretically limited.

Conversely, chapter six also showed the repressive dynamics of the political-economic context that inhibit the channel's ability to address many significant

contemporary issues. As Naomi Sakr points out, the power dynamics of media are not erased by rapid technological change and the proliferation of new content (Sakr 2001b). These findings add weight to her conclusion. That said, Huda TV represents a qualitative change in Middle East television and a new genre that will continue to develop. However, the project of Islamic media must take seriously the limitations on expression in the Middle Eastern context. While there was a tendency to compartmentalize the political and religious at Huda TV, this approach is not true to claims of Islam as a total way of life. The vacated voice of orthodoxy empowered the distortions of political elites and may have enabled extremist alternatives to fill the void. For this reason, it is reasonable to ask whether the enabling factors of the Egyptian production context did not come at too great a cost.

Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic transformation of the global mediascape. Direct-to-home satellite technology enabled transnational, even transcontinental broadcasting with unprecedented volume and diversity. To a certain extent, the diffusion of new content reflected historical power imbalances. However, traditional models of media power are holding less and less in the current era. In addition to the rise of new regional centers of media and alternative models of broadcasting such as Huda TV, the Internet's multimedia capacities have matured, with audio-visual production and distribution increasingly accessible to the public. Simultaneously, the boundaries between traditional media formats continue to dissolve. This empirical study of Huda TV provides useful data in tracking these dramatic changes in global media. For instance, Lerner's concept of development has been turned on its head. Islamic media

ventures such as Huda TV represent an alternative concept of development – based on the faith of Islam – that is being conveyed to the English-speaking West. The teleological march to American modernism has clearly lost its footing. However, to effectively understand this transformation in its full richness, it is necessary to carefully plot out the discursive limits of media studies. By identifying the biases inherent in the humanist consensus, this dissertation was able to embark on new paths of inquiry into Islamic media. Additionally, it has been clearly demonstrated that Islamism does not exist in opposition to the poles of humanism, but it does operate from a different center. Ironically, this very approach can yield the greater levels of understanding and mutual dialogue that adherents of the humanist consensus aim to realize. This study can therefore serve as a useful theoretical model with which to examine various modes of expression that do not neatly align with the dominant discursive framework of communication research.

Beyond academic literature in media studies, this dissertation also contributes to the Islamist discourse itself. As Said notes, Orientalism attempts to explain despotism in the contemporary Muslim world as a natural expression of Islam (Said 1997). Although the findings of this study are limited to a specific case, they suggest that the opposite is true. In fact, the Islamic intellectual tradition, which has long dealt with complicated issues of social change, political authority, and even epistemological crises, continued to play an active role at Huda TV. However, it is evident that Huda TV often overlooked important contextual, structural, and discursive factors that exerted a major influence on the channel's programming and production decisions. The lack of critical engagement

with such issues as the epistemological authority accorded to modern science, or the unwillingness and inability to address complicated and sensitive political issues, inhibited the channel's Islamist project. Chapter one mentions Hassan Turabi's encapsulation of the challenge facing contemporary Muslims: "God, praised and exalted, does not let us choose our new challenges. Instead, he expects us to choose our responses to those challenges" (Voll and Esposito 2001, 127). From the findings of this dissertation, it is clear that a greater critical engagement is necessary for Huda TV to meet those challenges. The Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan conceives of social science as a field with a tense but important relationship to orthodox Islamic scholarship. He states that "the scope for interpretation, subjectivity, and ideological orientation is considerable...(a particular view of the world may influence work in these sciences)" (Ramadan 2004, 60). This study offers an example of how these sometimes competing discourses and bodies of thought can meet for mutual benefit.

While the author's role as participant-observer at Huda TV yielded rich data with which to answer the research questions, certain limitations are evident in the findings. Most notably, the researcher's lack of access to the Saudi head office left many important questions unanswered. The role of Saudi Arabia in defining the contemporary discourse of Islam is a point of intense controversy. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has been one of the nation-states most obsessed with conveying a religious legitimacy for its political order. Finally, although the channel was not formally linked to the Saudi government, the repressive political climate of Saudi Arabia likely influenced decision-making in the Riyadh office. These dynamics could be discerned at times, but rarely with the level of

detail that could have yielded even tentative conclusions. Likewise, there were indications that the religious character of the Saudi head office was in fact more diverse and dynamic than stereotypical depictions. Several members of the head office had extensive cross-cultural experience. One was an ethnic Sudani who grew up in the United States. The channel was not managed by obscurantist Bedouins trapped between spiritual literalism and modern materialism. However, the head office was required to interact with various elements of Saudi society to secure financing and support. Those dynamics were not accessible to the researcher.

In addition to the head office's inaccessibility, the sensitive Egyptian political climate created obvious methodological challenges. Self-censorship was a powerful dynamic at the channel, but it was largely observed through winks and glances rather than concrete statements or conversations. The discussion of politically sensitive self-censorship in chapter six was only enabled by the researcher's direct involvement in the production of relevant programs. Additionally, the reporting of self-censorship, or other politically sensitive findings, creates obvious ethical dilemmas. This methodological challenge might be tackled by casting a broader net over Islamic television and confidentially interviewing media professionals, thereby ensuring a level of anonymity that is not available in a case study of one channel. However, such an approach would likely run into barriers of trust that did not exist for the researcher at Huda TV. This challenge is applicable to the study of media across the Arab world and requires creative methodologies to meet it more effectively.

The absence of women at Huda TV also left unanswered many latent questions about gender, power, and faith. However, as noted in chapter four, women seemed to constitute the majority of Huda TV viewers. This segment of the audience obviously identified with the channel and felt that it was represented in some way, even with the absence of women on screen. As shown by Sreberny's critique, gender is a lens through which Islam continues to be degraded within academic literature. Some might see confirmation of that view in Huda TV's gender policies. Therefore, it would have been useful to interact with Huda TV's female audience members in order to understand their conception and critique of the channel. Unfortunately, this type of research would have extended far beyond the author's role with the channel, and was therefore not feasible given the constraints of full participation.

Finally, the researcher collected many interesting observations on the professional culture of Huda TV, particularly competing conceptions of authority, teamwork, and ethics for American and Egyptian staff members. These dynamics held important implications for how Islamic media was defined in terms of practice, rather than content. Again, however, there was no ethical way to address these observations through the research questions or analysis. Some of the internal conflicts were quite intense and even led the departure of several staff members. However, a detailed discussion of these tensions might offend or embarrass those involved. Again, the case study approach would not sufficiently protect anonymity and confidentiality in discussing these sensitive matters.

Huda TV represents a small but illustrative instance of Islamic satellite television. Further research of Islamic channels and programming would help to expand the current analysis. For instance, Islamic channels such as Ar-Risala and Iqra are small components of the broader media empires of Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal and Saleh Kamel, respectively. Such a significant structural factor would obviously hold implication for those channels' conception of Islamic television. Likewise, channels representing other perspectives within the spectrum of orthodoxy would likely illustrate a different approach to law, authority, and creativity. Finally, the religious components of other satellite channels, such as MBC or Al Jazeera, also represent a unique conception of Islamic television. As mentioned in chapter two, Al Jazeera, a channel primarily devoted to news and current events programming, has also featured the renowned Muslim scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in his own program about Islamic law. Likewise, the channel MBC featured a series, *Rihla Ma' Ash-Shaikh Hamza Yusuf* (Voyage with Shaikh Hamza Yusuf), that followed a popular American imam on his journeys through the United States and Muslim world. As a Saudi-owned channel, it is significant that MBC would feature a program on Hamza Yusuf, who follows a form of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) that is often criticized in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Hamza Yusuf has often been vocally critical of Saudi religious hegemony. These types of programs paint a much more complicated picture of power and faith than what is commonly asserted in popular and academic literature. That said, it is likely that they would also engage many of the same issues, and employ many of the same strategies, as Huda TV. This broader examination of Islamic satellite television is the logical step for further research.

Returning to Curran and Park's call for de-Westernization, this study contributes to an expanding body of research on global media while illustrating clear limitations in the field's discursive framework. For this reason, media studies as a whole would benefit from a more reflective and critical engagement with those underlying beliefs and ideals that guide research. In other words, the distinction between creed and culture is not limited to the study of Islamic media, or even religious practices in general. There is an underlying tension in the field of media studies in accommodating diversity while reaffirming social and political ideals. However, by assuming a universal value system through the generic invocation of humanist values, communication research discourages contributions from beyond the humanist consensus. There is a subtle assertion in communication theory that scholars must either embrace a form of rehabilitated Enlightenment values or otherwise consign themselves to rudderless relativism. Hopefully, this dissertation will reveal that dichotomy as a false choice.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Known in Arabic as ‘ulama (literally: those who know), Muslim scholars hold a critical role in the interpretation and application of the religion. For an account of how present scholars engage structural, social, and historical pressures, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). For a geographically diverse account of modern methods and institutions of Islamic learning, see Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> For an insightful survey of Muslim reform movements in recent centuries, see John Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994). For an explanation of the epistemological challenges of the contemporary era, and an account of how Islamic scholarship may relate to other fields of knowledge, see Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Examples of reform immediately preceding the rise of Muslim modernism might include the eighteenth century reformers Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul-Wahhab, in eastern Arabia and ‘Uthman dan Fodio, in West Africa. See Natana DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) for an examination of ‘Abdul-Wahhab’s movement. John Ralph Willis explains how dan Fodio’s movement stands apart from later, modern reform movements in “Jihad fi Sabil Allah-Its Doctrinal Basis in Islam and Some Aspects of Its Evolution in Nineteenth-Century West Africa,” *The Journal of African History*, 8:3 (1967), 395-415.
- <sup>4</sup> The vast majority of the world’s Muslims fit within the broad spectrum of Sunni Islam. The other major sectarian division of the Muslim world – Shi’a Islam – is not referenced, as its conception of religious authority is unique in many respects.
- <sup>5</sup> The term “Blackamerican” is drawn from Sherman Jackson, who explains its use as follows: “...the explicitly American context of American Islam is also what prompted me to vex my reader with the neologism, ‘Blackamerican’...My use of the term is based on the following considerations. On the one hand, to speak simply of ‘black Americans’ as the counterparts of ‘white Americans’ is to strengthen the hand of those who wish to deny or hide white privilege. On the other hand, to speak of African Americans is to give short shrift to almost half a millennium of New World history...I emphatically recognize, wholly embrace, and celebrate the African *origins* of Blackamericans. But in my view, the force of American history has essentially transformed these erstwhile Africans into a new people. This is especially so with regard to their religious orientation” (Jackson 2005, 17).
- <sup>6</sup> When speaking of the Islamic religious tradition, this dissertation refers specifically to the broad spectrum of Sunni thought, rooted in the orthodox scholarship, within which Huda TV operates. As a case study, it is not possible to offer evidence across the full range of Sunni Islamic thought. This methodological limitation is addressed explicitly in chapter three.
- <sup>7</sup> Lerner quotes from G.E. von Grunebaum, *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, 1955.
- <sup>8</sup> The Egyptian Minister of Information at the time.
- <sup>9</sup> Fatwa is a scholarly opinion issued by a qualified expert in Islamic law.

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- <sup>10</sup> This is the practice of removing “bad blood” from the body through small incisions. It is considered anathema to modern medicine in Egypt despite being indisputably encouraged in the Prophetic narrations.
- <sup>11</sup> During the early days of Huda TV, the foreign program staff members were all American. Toward the end of the researcher’s employment at the channel, a Canadian convert and a second-generation South Asian British Muslim joined the channel, but their influence and contribution were not documented during the time of approved human subject research. For this purpose, the dissertation focuses exclusively on the American influence, although the ethnic and national makeup of the channel changed significantly in the years after the author’s departure.
- <sup>12</sup> This may include, for instance, special soap opera series for the month of Ramadan. Although many religious scholars would view such material with contempt, they are still packaged with the religiously-mandated month of fasting.
- <sup>13</sup> [http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/miscellaneous/miscellaneous/0000513\\_12.htm](http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/miscellaneous/miscellaneous/0000513_12.htm)
- <sup>14</sup> [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543096](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543096)
- <sup>15</sup> [http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue\\_view.asp?HD=3&ID=3895&CATE=382](http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp?HD=3&ID=3895&CATE=382)
- <sup>16</sup> [http://www.islamtoday.com/show\\_detail\\_section.cfm?q\\_id=49&main\\_cat\\_id=1](http://www.islamtoday.com/show_detail_section.cfm?q_id=49&main_cat_id=1)
- <sup>17</sup> There was discussion that Huda TV would eventually add program content in French and Spanish, thus the use of the term “non-Arabic” rather than English.
- <sup>18</sup> The channel goals highlight the multiple, perceived audiences of Huda TV. During production, the West was always conceived as the primary audience. Ironically, the Western audience accessible through the NileSat platform, originally the channel’s only means of transmission, was quite limited. Based on call-in programs, Anglophone viewers in the Middle East – often educated elites or non-Arabic speakers from South Asia – seemed to constitute the bulk of viewers. However, no formal audience data were maintained.
- <sup>19</sup> Quran 24:30 Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their chastity: that is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what they do.
- <sup>20</sup> These are the four primary schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. See Bilal Phillips, *The Evolution of Fiqh: Islamic Law and the Madh-habs* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2000) for a brief survey of the legal schools of Sunni Islam.
- <sup>21</sup> The term “creed” is used throughout this dissertation instead of “theology”. Creed is broader and refers to all those aspects of faith that a Muslim is required to believe, rather than just the principles of monotheism or the nature of God.
- <sup>22</sup> United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist, U.S. Department of the Treasury website, published February 24, 2004 (<http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1190.htm>)
- <sup>23</sup> “WHO denies knowledge of Al-Zindani’s HIV/AIDS cure”, Yemen Times, April 13, 2008, (<http://yementimes.com/article.shtml?i=1146&p=local&a=4>)
- <sup>24</sup> This is the practice of removing “bad blood” from the body through small incisions and suction. It is considered anathema to modern medicine in Egypt despite being encouraged in

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the Prophetic narrations. Its practical application, in the light of other medical alternatives, is legitimately contested by orthodox scholars.

- <sup>25</sup> The author would like to thank Sheikh Yasir Qadhi, a Ph.D. candidate in Islamic Studies at Yale University, and a graduate of the Islamic University of Madinah, for clarifying the parameters of discourse of this topic. For instance, program staff members did not effectively consider the difference between the *permitted* and *prescribed* in Islamic law. Prophetic medicine may actually fall under the prior category, while it was often treated as the latter during production of *Health and Islam*.
- <sup>26</sup> See Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) on the manner in which such a view of science and expertise was implemented within Egypt during the twentieth century. In this case, science is viewed as an abstraction that human reason brings to light. It is seen as a single heritage in which Muslims hold a profound stake.
- <sup>27</sup> Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi explains the nuances of contemporary rulings on smoking in a fatwa available on islamonline.net (link below). In his view, there are gradations in the prohibition of smoking that may not render it absolutely unlawful. However, he does demonstrate how the understanding of *harm* has impacted contemporary rulings on this issue.
- Link: [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503548726](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503548726)
- <sup>28</sup> Quran 2:219
- <sup>29</sup> Quran 16:69
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted in Bilal Phillips, *The Evolution of Fiqh*, from the hadith collection *Sahih Muslim*.
- <sup>31</sup> Quran 53:3-4
- <sup>32</sup> The author would like to thank Sheikh Yasir Qadhi for this explanation of the date palms.
- <sup>33</sup> A fatwa located at this site gives some textual evidence related to these previous points: <http://www.islam-qa.com/en/ref/14325/>
- <sup>34</sup> Shawn Powers and Amelia Arsenault astutely summarize the cartoon crisis and document a wide variety of reactions and responses in “The Danish Cartoon Crisis: The Import and Impact of Public Diplomacy April 5, 2006,” published by the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy ([http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/pdfs/The\\_Danish\\_Cartoon\\_Crisis.pdf](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/pdfs/The_Danish_Cartoon_Crisis.pdf)).
- <sup>35</sup> This acronym (PBUH) means “Peace Be Upon Him.” It is the rough translation of an invocation that is prescribed for Muslims to say whenever the Prophet’s names is stated or written. When read from the printed translation, the full phrase is mentioned.
- <sup>36</sup> Some Muslim groups are much more critical of efforts to reconcile Islam with modern political and social values (democracy, human rights, etc.). This perspective is often associated with militant groups who were obviously unable to have a voice on Huda TV. What is significant here is that a conservative religious orientation does not necessitate a particular position on such issues.
- <sup>37</sup> One of the reasons for this crisis reaching a global level was the aloof dismissal of Muslim activists and leaders by the Danish government after the cartoons originally appeared.

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<sup>38</sup> The attribution to Western thinkers appeared in the question sheet, though no specific reference was offered. However, it is commonly recognized that the Prophet Muhammad's life was recorded in extensive detail.

<sup>39</sup> These questions are quoted verbatim from program preparation materials. They are translated from Arabic by non-native English speakers and were rephrased in the actual program.

<sup>40</sup> This suggestion was mentioned by a caller, and credited to one of the most famous popular preachers in the Arab world. The religious advisor approved the suggestion, and used it as an opportunity to reinforce the core religious message.

<sup>41</sup> Quran 3:110

<sup>42</sup> Quran 13:11

<sup>43</sup> In orthodox Islam, Jesus and Moses are recognized as prophets who conveyed the same basic message of monotheism as the prophet Muhammad. However, the current manifestations of Christianity and Judaism are deemed as partially true, yet fatally flawed, mutations of the original faith. Using other prophets is therefore perceived as a means to effectively communicate with other faith groups although the exclusivity of Islam is not abandoned.

<sup>44</sup> See Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop and the Gods of New York* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2008) for an explanation of the five percenter movement's evolution as a Nation of Islam splinter group to an influential force in hip hop music.

<sup>45</sup> Sherman Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican* describes the origin and growth of the Blackamerican Muslim community over time. Much like the discussion of post-colonial religion in chapter four, Jackson also discusses how Islam can also be understood and implemented through "Black Religion," which he defines as "a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism" (4). Jackson's concept is applicable to the critical stance of American staff members at Huda TV. However, these individuals, and the presenter of *Untold Stories*, did not represent the full spectrum of Blackamerican Muslim thought, and they also included cultural identities and experiences that Jackson does not explicitly address in his work.

<sup>46</sup> Jihad is a complex term that includes everything from self-purification to physical combat. Particularly after the 9/11 attacks, the prior meaning has often been emphasized over the latter. In this instance, the term is rehabilitated in reference to slave rebellions, which is widely recognized as a legitimate form of resistance.

<sup>47</sup> Quran 42:30

<sup>48</sup> Ironically, explicit historical narratives of racism in the Muslim world, such as the Arab role in the African slave trade, were muted in this program. In past lectures, the presenter of *Untold Stories* had addressed these issues quite clearly, drawing a clear distinction between the status of slavery in Islamic law and the practices of Muslims throughout history. These aspects of history may have simply been viewed as a component of the stereotypes that the program was trying to dislodge. However, there may also have been an effort to avoid offending the channel's Arab management and staff. It is hard to draw a clear conclusion on this specific issue. However, the next section of this chapter will deal directly with the inhibiting factors of Huda TV's immediate context of production.

<sup>49</sup> Quran 16:125

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- <sup>50</sup> Tales of Egyptian government corruption are legion. See Lawrence Wright's acclaimed journalistic work, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006) for a convincing explanation of how Egyptian government policies have precipitated some of the most virulent strains of violent extremism in the Muslim world.
- <sup>51</sup> Zaman (2002) writes about the relationship between the semi-autonomous Al Azhar and the Egyptian government. While the government has power to control certain top positions and advance its own perspectives, resistant elements are also represented within the institution.
- <sup>52</sup> In *Globalized Islam*, Roy astutely describes the process of "deculturation, in which none of the previous cultural markers is retained" (108), that occurs among today's globalized Muslims, particularly those who constitute minorities in Western lands. According to Roy, the corresponding process of "acculturation" (117) can result in both liberalism and neo-fundamentalism. He concludes that "practicing Muslims are embroiled in a struggle less to promote a minority culture against a dominant one than to define their own relationship with the very concept of culture" (121). Roy's depiction of this crisis as historically unique, however, is open to critique. He does mention the ways that culture, ethnicity, and geography have been conceived throughout Muslim history. He also rightly explains how those categories and conceptions have been radically destabilized by "deterritorialisation" in the current era. Yet, while Roy recognizes that "Muslim theologians have been adamant that Islam as a religion should not be identified with a specific culture" (108), he concludes that "this stance was more a methodological approach than a real social experience." Oddly, he cites a ninth century theological debate on the createdness of the Quran in support of this point, but he elides the very radical break with ethnic identity that characterized the original Muslim community in seventh century Arabia. As the data in this section shows, it would be reasonable to assume that Sunni orthodoxy is more at ease with the "concept of culture" than Roy allows. Again, Muslims scholars face the unprecedented elements of contemporary life as a unique challenge, but they still operate within the framework of orthodoxy.

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### Vita

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