

Rethinking an Islamic “Moral Economy”

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This paper examines discussions of Islamic practices for dealing with wealth, poverty, and material desire in Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s—a time in which the country’s “economic conditions” were at the forefront of debates about Egypt’s future. It selects from Arabic texts written by classically trained Muslim scholars, who were also committed social activists with close relations to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, including Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996), al-Bahi al-Khuli (1901-1977), al-Sayyid Sabiq (1916-2000), and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926). A close reading of their texts shows that these scholar-activists regarded material desire and wealth as necessary conditions for the acquisition of true belief. Indeed, they regarded Islamic practices for working with wealth and desire—practices that fall in the domain of belief (*iman*) and worship (*ibada*)—as the means through which one not only obtained belief, but also learned how to live virtuously. They argued that one must experience Allah’s material blessings in order to develop essential qualities of true belief, including certainty of His greatness and thankfulness towards Him. They also considered wealth a tool with which to worship Allah. How one uses it, or relates with not having it, reveals the veracity of one’s belief. Likewise, they held that the ability to master one’s material desires, but not repress them, and channel them to God-ordained outlets, demonstrated the extent of one’s belief. Furthermore, they argued that the knowledge of how to manage wealth and desire and, therefore, live virtuously, derived from Islamic practices of belief and worship.

Although these scholar-activists devoted considerable attention to practices of Islamic belief and worship in their writings on Egypt’s social and economic ills, the secondary literature on contemporary Islamic economic thought rarely addresses them, especially that scholarship which takes up the so-called “moral economy” in Islam. This is because this scholarship focuses almost exclusively on the symbolic appeal and resonance Islamic language and concepts are alleged to have with Muslims. To understand the centrality of Islamic practices for scholar-activists like Ghazali, Khuli, Sabiq and Qaradaw, I draw upon the work of the anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, who have both shown that different religious traditions considered the proper fulfillment of practices of belief and worship as essential pedagogical components in the process by which believers acquired the capacity to experience religious truth. Although I deploy a different methodology, my reading of texts by these Muslim scholar-activists yields a similar conclusion. In other words, they did not devote such attention to Islamic practices of belief and worship in their discussions of Egypt’s “economic conditions” because they wished to appeal to an Islamic moral economy, but rather, as I show, because they regarded wealth, desire, and Islamic practices for working with them, as essential conditions for the acquisition of true belief and for the learning of how to live virtuously.