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Faith Development beyond Religion

The NGO as Site of Islamic Reform

Nermeen Mouftah

Cairo, Egypt, September 2011. The branch office of Life Makers, an NGO, pulsed with energy. When Ahmed, a twenty-three-year-old engineering student, showed up for work at noon, rail-thin and looking as though he had not slept, I mistook him for any other volunteer. He slipped into an office, and some minutes later I was told that the director of the Life Makers' Giza branch was ready to meet with me. In that first conversation, Ahmed, who turned out to be the director, explained what he looks for when he interviews potential volunteers. The concerns he brought up in our first encounter were threads that wove between our many long tea breaks together over the next four years. Ahmed said, "I want someone who believes in the idea of our organization. This is the important thing—that they truly believe in what we are doing. Life Makers is a new idea of how to do good works (*khayr*).¹ We are not like other organizations that believe in the traditional ways of doing good. Their ways are old fashioned [*taqlidi*]. They think it's religious—that they're following this path because it's how God wants us to help—but it's only repetitive. We're not a religious [*dini*] organization. We're faith development [*tanmiyya bi'l-iman*]." Ahmed underscored volunteers' self-understanding and the organization's ethic of action. He explained more than an abstract ideology: he articulated recurring debates and invocations, values and critiques that characterize Life Makers. This chapter discusses the organization's reinterpretation of the Islamic conception of "good works" (*khayr*) by investigating how they marshal "faith" (*iman*) rather than and in contrast to "religion" (*din*). Life Makers seek to redefine what constitutes Islamic good works and, more ambitiously, to reevaluate what agendas and actions are "Islamic." In this way, the NGO, rather than, say, a mosque, a religious lesson, or a religious rite, is a crucial site for the making of new forms of religious practice. For Life Makers, faith development transforms

good works from the donation and distribution of goods or money to the needy, to volunteerism, where they give of their main resources: time and energy. Established in 2004 by the prominent Muslim preacher Amr Khaled, Life Makers has had a tumultuous history with Egyptian authorities for over a decade. The main source of the conflict is how the organization mobilizes Islam in their activities in a country now wary of political Islam. Life Makers offer a distinct ethics and politics of faith development, one that redefines traditional Islamic alms practices, while critiquing the entanglements of politics and religion. While volunteers, mostly youth in their twenties and thirties, distinguish their good works activities through innovative projects like building rooftop gardens and spearheading antidrug campaigns, their most potent critique of Islamic good works organizations is in their emphasis on faith rather than mere religion. Life Makers' leaders call attention to the organization's dual goals: on the one hand, to give youth meaningful work through volunteerism, and on the other, the urgent need to respond to poverty by helping disenfranchised people through charitable giving, particularly through programs that innovate.

The organization calls on its volunteers to exhaust themselves in the service of God to develop Egypt. They commonly described how through their exhaustion they were energized. Volunteers transform the practices of good works through new community projects as well as through their effort to embody the ideal volunteer, including the virtuous affects of a believing Life Maker, namely optimism.² I heard persistent *talk* about their work. I dwell on these self-reflective and aspirational conversations as they reveal how volunteers understood faith as the source of their action. Through their activities they sought to make faith legible. The challenge to make one's faith materially tangible was not an abstract or esoteric concern—indeed it was a major preoccupation for many Life Makers.

As volunteers worked out their values through conversations like the one I had with Ahmed, they practiced critique. Not all acts of distinction are acts of critique, although distinction is pivotal to the organization's mission. Life Makers distinguish themselves from political Islam, other iterations of Islamic good works, and what they view as the apathy of large swaths of the Egyptian public. By exploring volunteers' engagements through the lens of critique, I demonstrate how Life Makers upend assumptions of critique as necessarily intellectual and secular by tracing their activities and affects (Asad et al. 2009; cf. Said 1983). Critique is not only to question established frameworks, as Michel Foucault points out (1997), but also, as Judith Butler elaborates, it is "a mode of living and even a mode of subject constitution, critique is understood as a 'practice' that incorporates norms into the very formation of the subject" (2009, 114). For Butler, critique both questions

and looks for future models of political action. Life Makers not only distinguish themselves from others but in doing so they crucially weigh in on ongoing debates in Egypt about the proper relationship of religion and politics. Significantly, for volunteers, critique is not an analytical exercise, it is to be physically *practiced* as well as *felt*.

When Ahmed said Life Makers is not a religious organization, he was not saying that it is not Islamic. As will be seen, his is not a secular critique of religion, but rather the expression of an Islamic reformulation of imagining care for the poor through an idiom of “development.” For volunteers, faith is not a privatized interior condition or aspiration, rather it is what propels them to action. Their turn to faith over religion should not be likened to a Western discourse of “spiritual but not religious,” but should instead be appreciated with respect to the confluence of two major trends: Egypt’s Islamic Revival that began in the 1970s, as well as international economic priorities that made Egypt a strategic center for regional development (Atia 2013; Elyachar 2005). Egyptian good works organizations are profoundly shaped by these significant social and economic transformations.

In the following section I argue that the anthropology of religion and development can productively come together to shed light on the significance of NGOs in the renegotiation of religion in public life. I situate Life Makers in the context of post-Mubarak Egypt, including the organization’s establishment and rapid rise in popularity, as well as its early tensions with authorities. I then examine what faith development looks like through the emergence of volunteerism as an act of worship. In the final section I examine the predominance of happiness talk as volunteers cultivate optimism as a virtuous sensibility and as the basis of personal and national progress. While positivity is often associated with new age religion, for Life Makers happiness is the virtuous expression of Islamic faith and central to their teachings, both in how they are trained to lead and in how they reach out to the people they work with. The words of two volunteers who began their work with Life Makers following the January 25 uprising, a watershed moment for the NGO, are presented. While both Amal and Umar are conversant in the language of hope and optimism, they discuss and embody these ideal affects in ways that reveal how recourse to faith is an unsettled project.

In this chapter, Life Makers is an organization, as well as the name of those who volunteer for it. While I write of volunteers as a collective, this does not imply that they were at all homogenous. The high turnover, especially for particular campaigns, means that volunteers represent a diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints. It is worth noting then that critique was especially vital among Life Makers leadership. Indeed, many short-term volunteers saw Life Makers as any other Islamic good works organization. In

this way, Life Makers is compelling not because they are profoundly unique, but in many ways, because they are indicative of thousands of other religiously inspired civil society groups in Egypt today. This plurality and contestation over Islamically inspired modes of social and political intervention lead me to offer no definition or genealogy of faith, development, religion, or politics; instead, I sketch how Life Makers seek to modernize and reform good works through their conceptualization of and attempt to forge the boundaries of these spheres.

The NGO at the Intersection of the Anthropology of Religion and Development

The following discussion crystallizes the NGO not only as a site that draws on religion to motivate and mold development initiatives but also as a locus for defining, delimiting, and disciplining religion in public and political life. Drawing on Theodore Schatzki's concept of social sites (2002), I understand the NGO as a space that enables us to interpret reconfigurations of Islam through the prism of civil society. The NGO is a site where the very understanding of religion and the place of religion in the public sphere are worked out both discursively and in practice. My emphasis on the NGO as a social site builds on recent work on the subjectivities of Muslim charitable workers (Hafez 2011a, 2011b; Jung, Petersen, and Sparre 2014). While I am very much interested in volunteers' conceptions of faith and its appropriate expression, I do so by situating the NGO as a crucial site for cultivating a particular religio-political sensibility. Faith and positivity became pillars of a faith development that immunizes against political Islam.

Based on seventeen months of fieldwork between 2011 and 2015, my analysis of Life Makers is set against a backdrop of revolution and counter-revolution, the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the strengthening powers of Egypt's military elite. It was a period of intense contestation over what role Islam should play in charting the future of Egypt and indeed the region. My interest in NGOs during this period emerged through my fieldwork on religiously sponsored adult literacy, particularly campaigns that articulated the uprising as a watershed moment for the country to address its massive rate of illiteracy, officially some 30 percent of the adult population.³ I set out to focus on two sites where literacy development in Egypt is concentrated: among women in a slum of Old Cairo and workers at a shipyard. While I anticipated working with Life Makers in their roles as teachers, I discovered the NGO itself pronounced on reformulating a productive Islam for Egypt's better future. I interviewed approximately forty volunteers, most of them from two branch offices in Cairo. Of those forty, about

a dozen were close interlocutors who I saw every other day at regular meetings, training sessions, Islamic lessons, and a swath of social events from potlucks to birthday parties. For many, their lives beyond school and family were spent almost entirely among Life Makers. For others, they volunteered with other organizations and had hobbies and interests outside of Life Makers. I also worked with half a dozen other NGOs—Coptic and Muslim, local and international, as well as with the state institutions tasked with adult education. This perspective exposed me to outside views of the organization. Life Makers is widely recognizable in Egypt. Most Egyptians with whom I discussed my research had opinions about the group, ranging from praise for a Muslim group “doing something beneficial” to skepticism of their motives and the sort of Islam they promote through their work. Government employees questioned their efficacy and ability to carry out their work with unskilled volunteers.

Within NGO studies, the role of religion is most commonly discussed in the analysis of faith-based organizations (FBOs), while “religious NGOs” (RNOs) is the more common term among development practitioners (Occhipinti 2015; cf. Berger 2003). Still, definitional distinctions between the two are not substantive. Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings’s often-cited definition of FBO illustrates some of the conceptual limitations of studying religion within NGOs. They explain that the FBO “derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teaching and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within a faith” (2008, 6). Faith is a self-evident category that supersedes religion. However, as I will show, by paying attention to the distinction between faith and religion we are better equipped to grasp how NGOs and FBOs, in particular, are fault lines in the contestation over how religion should best be practiced and expressed in civil society.

Studies of FBOs foreground the theological commitments of volunteers as well as the underlying motivations, agendas, and actions of organizations. These studies investigate religion in international development and yet offer limited insight into the dense interplay of how local politics shape articulations of religion within the NGO. Attention to this interplay also means detailing how the NGO shapes religious practice, and as the case of Life Makers reveals, how the NGO becomes a crucial site for reimagining Islam. Life Makers’ explicit recourse to faith not only distances them from other Islamic good works organizations but situates the organization within the orbit of mostly Christian FBOs. The organization’s founder, Amr Khaled, is a media phenomenon and part of a current of Protestantizing Islam within contemporary reformist movements; analysis of his media productions highlights similarities with American televangelism (Moll 2010). The study of

Life Makers alongside FBOs is therefore productive in exploring the translation of “faith” across religious traditions. The FBO literature is notable for its focus on Christian individuals and organizations in the United States (Alahyari 2000; Elisha 2011), Africa (Bornstein 2003; Freidus 2010), and Latin America (DeTemple 2005; Hefferan 2007; Occhipinti 2005), as well as on the transnational reach of the global North to the South (Bornstein 2003; DeTemple 2006). However, work on Muslim charitable, philanthropic, and development programs only occasionally refers to Muslim third-sector organizations as “faith based” (Atia 2012) but rather emphasizes “activism,” “Islam,” and “religion.” In other words, when it comes to Muslim civil society, analysis of faith is rare. Instead, Muslim development and aid are usually associated either with the state or its opposition.

Historical work on Islamic alms draws attention to scripturally grounded ethical and legal terminologies, such as good works, giving (*birr*, *mabarra*), charity or alms (*zakat*, *sadaqa*), and charitable endowments (*awqaf*) (Benthall 2007; Ener 2003; Ibrahim and Sherif 2008; Sabra 2000). As I demonstrate, Life Makers’ faith development mobilizes these terms in their plan to reform the practice of good works and to introduce volunteerism (*taw’ia*) to this critical vocabulary of Islamic giving. Studies of Muslim practices of giving are notable for their interest in the social and political history of these terms and their enactments, particularly their frictions and synergies with the state (Bonner, Ener, and Singer 2003; Singer 2008). Over the last decade, the politics of Muslim philanthropy in the post-9/11 era has given rise to Western governments’ surveillance of Muslim organizations and the effects of this surveillance on Muslim charity (Atia 2007; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009; Lacey and Benthall 2014). As an organization, Life Makers illustrates the effects of the fear and censure of a Muslim FBO in a Muslim-majority country, where organizing with any reference to Islam is perceived, to varying degrees, as a threat to the state.

Insight from Egypt’s Islamic Revival significantly informs theoretical debates in the anthropology of Islam and indeed of the anthropology of religion, secularism, and modernity more broadly, particularly through attention to embodied practice in the cultivation of ethics and virtuous dispositions (Hamdy 2012; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005). By moving away from what is commonly understood as religious, such as prayer, fasting, and other authorized practices within the tradition, we attune ourselves to important trends in Islamic reform. In this way, Life Makers offers a particularly rich case study to further the ongoing work of undoing binaries of the secular-religious (Agrama 2012; Asad 2012; Bender and Taves 2012; Starrett 2010). Khaled and many volunteers cite verses from the Quran and sayings of the prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) in order to explain their efforts. At other mo-

ments, they draw on UN reports that promote women's empowerment, or cite techniques of effective leadership that can be found in self-help books like Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. These multiple references demonstrate more than a hybridity or intersection of values, rather they reveal the contemporary contours of lived religion. Life Makers undermine prevailing assumptions of secular scripts of development through definitively Islamic practices essential to their work. Recourse to faith then is at moments specifically Islamic, while in other instances it is an ambiguous gloss for hope or happiness. In this way, it is crucial to investigate precisely how faith becomes principle for the reform of religion and the best plan for developing a country. Thus, while Talal Asad cautions against a shift within the study of religion to examine faith as an interior state, Life Makers call attention to the negotiation of what constitutes faith as it is worked out through their lives and in their work.⁴ For volunteers, faith can be a feeling, but it is best enunciated, whether in casual conversation or in more formalized statements of intention. For Life Makers, faith is seen through action.

Islam and Civil Society in Post-Mubarak Egypt

Since the establishment of Life Makers in 2004, the organization has calibrated its activities with the vicissitudes of a rapidly changing political climate. Following the January 25 uprising, Egypt witnessed the rise to power and later the persecution of political Islam. While a history of the post-Mubarak political landscape is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief sketch of the regime change and laws governing NGOs offers a backdrop to understand the pressures on both religious and political spaces at this juncture and the restrictive religio-political context in which Life Makers and other NGOs operated. My point is to underline how the politics of contemporary Egypt shapes possibilities for NGOs to undertake particular projects, as well as to shape and remake individual and collective self-understandings of Islam. Following Mubarak's ouster, the country was first governed by the interim government of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), while newly emergent Salafi (Sunni neotraditionalist) political parties consolidated. Most notably, the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed since 1948, gained popularity as an alternative to the old regime and formed the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). The FJP performed well in the parliamentary elections, and in June 2012 the party's presidential candidate, Mohamed Morsi, narrowly defeated a former Mubarak-era minister. The Brotherhood's electoral success was widely credited to the popularity they gained during the Mubarak years when their welfare networks provided essential goods and services (Clark 2004; Harrigan and El-Said 2009; Wickham 2002). Yet, after

a year in power widespread dissatisfaction with the Brotherhood coalesced with the June 30, 2013, protests calling for his resignation. In addition to complaints about continued infrastructural failures, demonstrators complained that the FJP put Brotherhood priorities ahead of national interests in the FJP's bid to "Islamize" the country and change the essential character of the people and state. Three days after the protests that Egyptian media reported as the largest in Egyptian history, the military stated that the president and his government failed to meet the demands of the people and removed him from power. Adly Mansour acted as the interim president, although Egyptian media lauded the minister of defense, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, for responding to the will of the people. In June 2014 he was elected Egypt's sixth president in an election criticized within and beyond Egypt as squelching opposition voices. In the year leading to his presidency, Egypt came under fierce criticism by Egyptian civil society and international observers for the regime's massacre of Muslim Brotherhood members in August 2013 and their continued illegal imprisonment alongside unionists and leftists.

While Egypt has a long history of closely monitoring and stifling civil society, Mubarak's fall, and especially Morsi's removal, marked a sharp increase in the attack on nonstate actors. For over a decade, Egyptian civil society has been governed by the Law on Associations and Community Foundations (Law 84 of 2002). The vague regulatory laws require organizations to register with what is now called the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Justice (MSSJ, formerly the Ministry of Social Solidarity). The law does not ban NGOs outright but instead employs bureaucratic mechanisms and grants vast interpretative powers to the ministry. In 2014 the government estimated that forty thousand civil society organizations (including NGOs, law firms, and unions) were registered with the MSSJ. While numbers reported by different agencies vary, critics of heavy state regulation explain that the government inflates national statistics in order to boast that civil society is free and flourishing (Abdelrahman 2004). The political turbulence of the last half-decade has further blurred the lines of what organizing can be deemed permissible or can be deemed an affront to authorities. Indeed, many complained not of repression but of their vulnerability to navigating opaque regulations in a climate of insecurity.⁵

While both media and scholarly attention frequently cite the attacks on human rights organizations, less consideration is given to religiously affiliated NGOs, despite Islamic philanthropic organizations making up the vast majority of the country's NGOs. Despite many volunteers' attraction to Life Makers as a way to continue the revolution through nonconfrontational methods, their work is increasingly risky. As of May 2015, with the shuttering of 430 Muslim NGOs accused of being associated with the Muslim

Brotherhood (Aswat Masraya 2015), Ahmed's comments reveal Life Makers' pragmatism and flexibility for survival. So, when in 2011, he dismissed "Islamic" and "religious" charitable giving, his anxiety over the place of religion in their work anticipated a sentiment that became increasingly common. Many of Life Makers' activities in fact resemble Islamist social welfare programs like those run by the Muslim Brotherhood, yet their emphasis on faith seeks to avoid censure and court state favor.

To understand Life Makers' politics, it is important to examine who they do and do *not* critique as they position themselves beyond the fray of politics. This positioning has not always been the case. In spring 2012 Khaled launched the Future Party, with a platform that sounded like much of his Life Makers' speeches on optimism for Egypt's potential development. A year later, with the arrest of Morsi and other Brotherhood members, Khaled dissolved the party explaining that his primary work would concentrate on development through Life Makers. The following year, with pressure on religiously affiliated NGOs, Khaled resigned from his position as chairman of the organization. For Life Makers, distinction making is not exclusively a matter of ideology but is essential to their adaptability and survival. While they were keen to exercise critique of other good works organizations, and political Islam, their criticism was notably not directed at the regimes in power. Life Makers is distinct from Islamist charitable organizations who, as Janine Clark explains "attempt to create a seemingly seamless web between religion, politics, and charity and all forms of activism" (2004, 14). Life Makers, like other Egyptian good works organizations, offer services that the state fails to provide; however, this is not how they explain their work. Rather than pointing to the failure of public health and education, they work for the nation to, as they put it, "build Egypt." In this way, critique is pivotal to demonstrating who they are not—Islamists—while aligning their efforts with strategic national priorities.

The Making of Faith Development

Life Makers evolved from a nearly defunct disparate collection of activities and offices under Mubarak, into a nationally recognizable, revitalized good works organization in the wake of the January 25 uprising. The organization is the product of Khaled's television program by the same name that aired in 2004. The series sparked thousands of young people to get involved in grassroots organizing and marked the introduction of Khaled's message that civic responsibility is an Islamic duty. This shift marks a significant transformation from his previous stress on righteous etiquette (*akhlaq*). The se-

ries appealed to bored youth by calling them to replace the humiliation and frustration of unemployment with the purpose and dignity of volunteerism. Ehab, a longtime volunteer who rose through different roles within the organization before taking on a leadership position at the national level, recounted to me the earliest days of Life Makers' activities. He described how their rapid growth and popularity were a cause of concern for government officials who closely monitored their activities and posed various roadblocks. Their pilot program, an antidrug campaign, recruited more addicts for recovery than there was space available in rehabilitation centers, creating early friction with various state institutions. He and other Life Makers leaders saw the government's antipathy toward them as the result of their effectiveness through activities that unintentionally uncovered the state's shortcomings.

As one of the world's most familiar religious preachers and a leading voice in Egypt's late Islamic Revival, Khaled is best known for his propagation of Islam through his television programs that are immensely popular with young Egyptians. With no Islamic training, his mode of speaking is persuasive, and he is widely credited with making religion accessible, especially to elite classes.⁶ The successful television series *Life Makers* was extended into a second season as local initiatives gained momentum and the slogan "Together We Make Life" caught on in neighboring countries.

Khaled sets himself apart from strong currents within Egypt's Islamic Revival that give great attention to the proper performance of ritual acts. Khaled's program of reform offers distinct theological and political aims for the proper Muslim subject. Still, he does not eschew ritual altogether. In fact, particular traditional practices such as supplication are central to Life Makers' activities.

Before disembarking from a bus to begin a day's work promoting their literacy campaign, volunteers paused to supplicate. With their hands raised in front of their faces, eyes steady on their palms, a group leader led the day's supplication (*du'ā*). She asked God to bless and reward their effort. Those around her followed: "Ameen." They asked that their work benefit the lives of the people they were about to meet. *Ameen*. They hoped to please God in what they were about to do. *Ameen*. And be granted paradise in the hereafter. *Ameen*. This moment was essential to how they performed their work. Through supplication volunteers aimed to purify their intentions and dedicate their work to God. As one of their slogans intoned, "Makers makes us sincere" (*suna' khalitna mukhlisin*). Statements of intention and imploring God for blessings in the temporal world and the afterlife were significant to volunteers as they strived to develop their piety through volunteerism. At the same time, many critiqued Islamic charity as backward and disingenuous.

Volunteers incorporated rituals, like supplication, into their good works as a way to create an authentic Islam where one's pietistic improvement is tethered to the progress of the community and nation.

For Life Makers, faith must be made manifest in the person, and through that believer in what they do to improve Egypt. So while supplication was a critical practice of their faith work, other practices and characteristics also defined and distinguished Life Makers. The exemplary volunteer was cheerful, organized, and productive. They were meticulous in their grooming and performed their five daily prayers on time. Volunteers showed dedication to their work, but also took their family responsibilities seriously. For Life Makers, faith was in their whirr of activity: a constantly ringing mobile, running from a fund-raising meeting to a soft skills training session. The intricacies of a refined Islamic faith could be seen in volunteers' actions, and in how they imagined, hoped, and prayed that these efforts—physical and emotional—would amount to something.

The organization's agenda is consonant with Khaled's critique of traditionally trained Islamic scholars who teach "faith for faith's sake," rather than what he argues is a *truer* faith—one that seeks to do good works. In his remissive he engages a centuries-long quarrel in the Islamic tradition as to what makes an action an act of faith. The debate turns on the question of internal conviction (*tasdiq bil-qalb*), verbal expression (*iqrar bil-lisan* or *qawl*), and the actual performance of the deed (*'amal*) (Gardet 2012). In Khaled's lessons he teaches how faith in God requires the obligation to respond, not only through obligatory acts of worship like prayer but through good works as the highest act of worship, superior to mere ritual. In his preaching on the necessity of performing good works, he underlines the phrase repeated *throughout* the Quran "those who believe and do good works" (*al-ladhina amanu wa amilu al-salihat*). Volunteerism is the contemporary method of good deeds (*salihat*) and a practice of faith.

Life Makers emerged as a significant strand of Khaled's program for Islamic reform at the same time a shift was happening in national policies on charitable giving. Their activities responded to the MSSJ's appeal to charitable organizations to adopt developmental values and practices through microfinance projects, capacity building, and other methods (Atia 2007). In this way, Life Makers was exemplary, taking up the government's effort to supplant charity with development. Although the organization runs traditional good works activities, such as their annual distribution of food bags in the holy month of Ramadan, organization leaders typically background these projects to what they view as their more original activities, like their campaign against dropping out of school and their classroom visits to teach civic culture. Ehab explained Life Makers' persistence of traditional chari-

table activities as being in dialogue with Egypt: “We are a traditional society, and good works must function within its environment to create opportunities for giving that are familiar to Egyptians.” For Ehab and other Life Makers leaders, the projects that they understood as Life Makers’ signature contributions were those that departed from traditional forms of giving, but for many new recruits the distinction was not important, nor was it what attracted them to volunteer. Particularly in the days and months following the eighteen-day uprising, Life Makers offered a chance to do something, to feel connected to a project for changing Egypt.

The appeal to faith rather than religion was also an ecumenical move. Through faith, Life Makers sought to include Copts as volunteers and recipients of their programming. The organization draws on a nationalist unity discourse that promotes the values of piety and devotion rather than the specificity of a religious tradition. In this way, Life Makers appear quintessentially Egyptian in their bireligious appeal. Faith was part of an effort to integrate religious communities in social development works that are typically run separately and that usually cater to their own religious communities. Life Makers’ administrators were particularly sensitive to attracting Coptic volunteers and were keen to learn from experienced Coptic social service organizations, like the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services. Despite the rhetorical emphasis on religious cooperation, I did not encounter any Coptic volunteers during my research. Coexistence remained an unrealized ideal of faith development. By highlighting the resonances between Life Makers and state discourses of religious coexistence, I do not suggest that Life Makers were co-opted by the state or that their appeal to faith was somehow disingenuous. Rather, my point is to underline how appeals to faith can at moments materialize as a pliable and even clichéd rejoinder, just as at other moments faith can be part of a specific vision for the reformulation of Islamic giving.

Reforming Good Works: Volunteerism

Following Mubarak’s ouster, with the revitalization of Life Makers’ branches throughout the country, the *amrekhaled.net* website—one of the most visited Arabic language sites on the web—incorporated a feature for volunteer registration. For several months, visitors to the site encountered a banner that read: “Pay your alms, donate by becoming a volunteer” (*idfa’ zakatak, tabarra’ tatawwa*). The rejoinder to pay alms (*zakat*), the obligatory tithe, makes volunteering an obligatory donation. Yet, according to a jurisprudential perspective, volunteerism is not *zakat*, since it does not conform to the specified portion of food or money that fulfills the legal requirements.

At the same time, volunteerism takes on a meaning distinct from voluntary charity, called *sadaqa*. The organization extends the language of good works beyond a jurisprudential framework of obligatory giving to include volunteerism. Through television programming and volunteer training, Khaled's audience was reminded of the right (*haqq*) of the poor and the obligation to help those in need. The necessity to respond to the right of the poor then made volunteerism compulsory, and not optional, or "voluntary." The requirement to respond to the person in need sets up a faith development that blends traditional terminology for alms with a contemporary discourse on the value of volunteerism. Their volunteerism is less about the agency of the actor, as their labor is the necessary response to encountering need. Volunteers' recourse to faith does not dispense with an Islamic vocabulary of giving but rather adapts traditional key terms and values in how they participate in good works. They make "paying zakat" not a financial responsibility but the duty of giving one's time and energy. As unemployed people with little or no income, young people are not required to pay the zakat, which makes the call to donate their available time, often through laborious physical activity, all the more galvanizing.

In Ahmed's crowded office, Maha, his fiancée and another long-term volunteer, joined us. She listened as Ahmed explained how not all good works are equal. Volunteers emphasized an ethical hierarchy of good works that placed activities that give opportunity to encounter others as superior to those that do not. For example, literacy teachers commonly spoke of learning more from their students; Ehab described the significance of working with Bedouins in a Sinai project initiated in 2014. The Bedouin, like the nonliterate or the poor, were figures for volunteers to learn from and grow through. These intersubjective encounters were essential to volunteers' understanding of what is gained through new modes of serving their communities. They sought to help others with an awareness that through these efforts they aimed to improve themselves.

As Ahmed and I reflected on this feature of Life Makers' volunteerism, Maha interjected: "Most people work here to please God and enter paradise." Maha's intervention did not undermine Ahmed's point on the social potentials of volunteerism, and yet, it exposed the critique of forms of giving that do not lead to new relationships as secondary to volunteers' primary motives. As Maha pointed out, to get carried away with critique of other forms of good works, as Ahmed and others did, was to risk losing sight of the ultimate goal. While Ahmed demonstrated shifting priorities of the ethical and practical manifestations of good works, Maha illustrated how not all volunteers espoused the dominant organization's discourse that prioritizes distinction from other Muslim organizations. The exchange was illustrative

tive of debates about the value of good works as volunteers negotiated the significance of their actions on others as well as for themselves and in relation to God. The question of how good works should be performed, and with what intentional and material goals, raised the issue of what working for God means, and what it should look like.

Adept at recruiting and motivating his peers, Ahmed drew attention to an intersubjective value of volunteerism that while significant among Life Makers, was less prevalent in practice. In this way, Life Makers are distinct from what Erica Bornstein describes as the “volunteer experience,” a secular practice, even while it resonates with religious transformative experience (2012b). Based on fieldwork in Indian volunteer organizations, Bornstein details volunteerism as a secular transformative experience, one distinct from traditional modes of donating, such as *dan* (122). For Life Makers, their self-improvement included the aim of developing their piety. As we saw with their supplication, volunteer activities were not denuded of Islamic referents but rather became a method for fulfilling a religious duty and acting for God. Volunteers understood their labor as an expression of faith that differentiated their activities from a secular organization, even when at moments their reform of Islamic practice pointed outside of the tradition.

Unlike Bornstein’s volunteers, Amira Mittermaier argues in her account of charitable giving that volunteerism is distinct from a “moral economy of compassion” (2014, 518), one distinct from Christian and secular genealogies of the value of volunteerism. She describes how volunteers are illustrative of “nonliberal and nonhumanist” ideals and draws out the “Islamicness” of their work (518). Mittermaier describes a volunteerism embedded within a spiritual economy that disrupts and “radically diverges from a secular humanist ethics” (520), one that is instead part of a response and obedience to God. Like Mittermaier’s interlocutors, God was central to Life Makers’ volunteers, who downplayed their agency and foregrounded accountability to the poor and ultimately God. The conversation with Ahmed and Maha revealed the interplay between so-called secular humanist virtues of the intersubjective experience with volunteers’ sense of duty to God. Notably, Ahmed did not object to Maha’s interjection, and the conversation demonstrated a tension that runs through Life Makers’ efforts that see value in immanent social relationships and yet draw meaning from a transcendent sense of working for God. Their volunteerism does not break away from a secular ethic of volunteerism that invests in the transformative experience of participating in good works, and yet at moments their God-centered orientation obscures this very desire to work with and for others. In the next section I move from volunteers’ engagement qua volunteers as a critique of traditional good works to examine how faith was felt and expressed. The purpose

is to render ethnographically how Life Makers assembles optimism to make faith a universal good. By investigating optimism as a feeling associated less so with *others*, and more so with *time*, we can better understand critique as an embodied dimension of volunteerism and the politics that it produces. I present two volunteers to demonstrate the ambivalence and flexibility of faith as a catalyst for development.

Faith and Optimism: Critique in Action

Hundreds of volunteers gathered in the auditorium at the National Council for Youth and Sport. Life Makers was celebrating its ninth anniversary. To mark the occasion, it held an event to recognize the major initiatives under way. Video clips with emotional soundtracks narrated their endeavors. A popular leader within the organization took the stage and the crowd cheered. She thanked the volunteers for their efforts and encouraged them in a refrain familiar to Life Makers' events: "When I first began, I couldn't believe all of the obstacles we would face. If I knew how difficult it was going to be, I might not have tried. But I was optimistic. This is our secret tool that makes us different. Don't forget your optimism. For life, and in each day. Let's keep going." The audience clapped. Although some volunteers questioned the celebratory tone of Life Makers' activities, instead preferring a more sober sense of responsibility, the organizational norm was overwhelmingly one of positivity. By focusing on their pedagogy of optimism, we attune ourselves to how Life Makers embodied and instructed feelings of happiness, optimism, and hope to motivate volunteers and propel their projects. Life Makers' promotional materials and volunteer Facebook memes repeated the mantra of these values, sometimes with "faith" mentioned alongside them, and other times when these sentiments were expressions of faith.

Positive affects were central to Life Makers' distinction from oppositional movements that gained traction in early 2011, as well as Egyptians who did not support the uprising in any way. Optimism was significant in volunteers' articulations of faith as a constructive sentiment. As Maha remarked, they did not succumb to worries and frustration and did not let anger immobilize them. This was a pointed departure from the atmosphere they worked in. Graffiti in Tahrir Square declared: "I'm angry" (*ana ghadban*) with an incitement to continue demonstrations. Evening talk shows implored their viewers to recognize various threats to the security and unity of the country. For Life Makers, optimism was not an interior state but was integral to the realization of faith through action. Volunteers drew on a wide repertoire of self-help literature, including translations of English best sellers like *The Secret*, as well as Arabic self-help books, some of which are in conversa-

tion with the Quran and the prophetic tradition, like A'id al-Qarni's popular *Don't Be Sad*. Their persistent positivity at that political juncture made their critics perceive them as naive and willfully disconnected from what was happening in Egypt.

While volunteers spoke of the more pious disposition of hope (*amal* and *raja'*), happiness and optimism were predominant. While *amal* and *raja'* describe a longing for God and the afterlife, optimism echoes trends in personal development that are aimed at improving life. Life Makers' happiness is also part of global marketing trends, and popular culture, while at the same time it emerged in a region in which, following 9/11, happiness was promoted through public relations campaigns that regarded Arab and Muslim cultures as obsessed with death. Life Makers' affective pedagogies resonated with initiatives like the 2008 "Culture of Optimism" campaign launched in Egypt (Sukarieh 2012; Sukarieh and Tannock 2011), although they were not explicitly involved in any of these internationally sponsored programs.

Life Makers' happiness contrasts with Islamic rhetorical strategies in Egypt that emphasize fear of God (*taqwa*) and fear of the afterlife (*tarhib*) through detailed images of death and punishment. Indeed, the cultivation of particular affects for ethical ends is a dominant feature of contemporary Islamic reform movements. Charles Hirschkind (2006) describes how listeners cultivate awe and fear by attentively listening to cassette sermons. The acoustic practice tuned in to the sermon's content and rhetorical styles to instill virtuous affects. My interlocutors similarly aimed to cultivate particular virtuous sentiments, although they were explicit in setting themselves apart from this major trend in contemporary Islamic preaching. So, while optimism was not unique to Life Makers, it was part of their particular critique of other reformist techniques of cultivating piety and a way of being that distinguished them from other iterations of Islam.

"Are You Optimistic?": Two Volunteers

In May 2013 I reunited with Amal. It had been nearly a year since we last met. Amal was twenty-nine when she first began as a volunteer immediately following Mubarak's ouster. She graduated from the Faculty of Law eight years prior and had since been unemployed. She lived with her mother and two brothers in a low-income neighborhood at the end of the metro line. Her family lived on remittances sent from her father who worked in Saudi Arabia. To reach the Life Makers' office near Tahrir Square, I walked past security roadblocks and wall graffiti depicting the revolution's martyrs and the latest satirizations of the president of the moment, Mohamed Morsi. As Amal and I settled into a storage room—the only available space—Amal's

first question was one I hoped I would not have to answer: “Are you optimistic?” She was inquiring into something other than my opinion on politics, the subject of most of my conversations those days. As I had learned over the course of my time with the organization, Amal was asking something about me, about my faith. To not be optimistic meant that I was not a part of the same project that she hoped I had embraced through my time with her. She was asking if I shared her ontology. For Amal, to not be optimistic meant I did not believe in their vision. It meant that I was stuck in this world, with the bad news that newspapers bring.

Like Hirschkind’s cassette-tape listeners, who understood fear as the appropriate disposition toward God and the next life, for Amal, optimism was both a technique to cultivate piety and essential for true faith. She embodied Life Makers’ expression of faith by cultivating optimism as integral to her voluntary work. She also taught optimism in the literacy classroom. She, like other teachers, structured lessons around happiness: stressing the importance of being happy and creating happiness, as well as instructing her students in techniques for raising happy families. Yet, for Amal’s students, optimism was of little interest. Happiness lessons appeared to be quaint signals of volunteers’ disjunctures with their students that highlighted optimism as a classed refrain. It was not that Life Makers were among Egypt’s privileged classes. Coming from an array of social backgrounds, volunteers’ university educations alongside their mantra of positivity meant that many imagined themselves as upwardly mobile. They anticipated work opportunities, marriage, and other ways to improve themselves in a near future. While volunteers saw themselves as sacrificing their time, they also had expectations of how time would bring about God’s reward (*thawab*) in the form of worldly blessings.

As an organization that attracted seventy thousand volunteers in the months following the January 25 revolution, not all volunteers were equally committed to its ideals. In this way, faith was less a critique of available forms of action and more of a pliable platform for positive outreach. Another volunteer, Umar, was ambivalent about Life Makers’ specific faith project, while conversant in the language of positivity that intersected Life Makers’ expression of faith. Umar was a photographer and a consummate observer who struggled to make decisions. He was less confident and less certain than many of his Life Makers friends. He felt caught between wanting “to do something” and not knowing the best thing to do. He explained that while Khaled “is a little bit religious,” he watched his television programs because they made him feel better when he was depressed about school. When we first met, Umar was completing his studies at the Faculty of Architecture. He barely looked forward to graduation because it meant that he would be-

come eligible for military service. He was anxious while waiting to discover if he would be enlisted. Still, it was important to him to maintain a particular form of greeting. “When people ask ‘How are you?’ I always say, ‘wonderful.’ It’s a strong response to a casual question. It makes me feel good. It helps me pause to appreciate what is wonderful in my life. And it makes my listener stop and think, too.” Umar’s outlook resonated with many other Life Makers, and yet, he was less interested in discussions about the best way to perform Islamic good works. For Umar, optimism was not the virtuous expression of Islamic faith as it was for Amal. Instead, his repeated appeals to happiness were aloof from faith and religion. For Umar, not every aspect of life, even his volunteerism, needed to invoke Islam.

Umar’s ambivalence toward Life Makers’ ethic of action was not part of a discomfort with the Islamic character of their good works. For Umar, the prevalence of faith talk was redundant. As he explained, volunteerism was something he did as a Muslim, but he did not see the need to repeatedly speak of faith. “It’s good to please God and get closer to Him, but that doesn’t need to be so formalized.” He described how he tried to make the intention to do his good works for rewards but concluded that even these statements of intention were extraneous: “People say God gives great rewards for many reasons, not just one, so it shouldn’t be a problem how I do my [volunteer] work.”

Umar revealed the bind that Life Makers found themselves in when faith became the touchstone of the organization’s discourse—through its publicity it risked the volunteer’s authenticity. Faith talk risked ossifying feelings into the dogma of religion. Umar underlined the ambiguity of faith development beyond religion. He shared the correct feeling of Life Makers’ Islamic faith, one based on self-reflection and positivity, but did not share the same critical orientation. Through him, we see how within Life Makers, faith was a foil to political Islam and apathy. Amal and Umar reveal how optimism is more than an inner state but is enmeshed in the making of a particular politics, one that saw possibility in the future. Unlike other activists who spoke of anger, or other Egyptians who spoke of confusion and heaviness, optimism was Life Makers’ expression of their nonconfrontational politics. Indeed, their apolitical stance was its own position.

Conclusions: The Politics of Faith

Lauran Berlant’s felicitous term “cruel optimism” captures the political effects of Life Makers’ affective pedagogy. For Berlant, optimism is cruel when the desire for an object impedes the very aim of initial attraction. Life Makers’ optimism is cruel in how they not only refrain from critique of the state

but in how their works seek to support it, despite state surveillance and regulation that makes their work precarious. Berlant explains that cruel optimism can be a “desire for the political itself” (2011, 12). Life Makers are enmeshed in a definition of the political that disciplines their work and shapes their understanding of religion as a narrow repertoire of politically exploitable practices from the past. Despite their optimism, even patriotism, Life Makers’ efforts to circumvent religion and politics strengthen the boundaries they seek to undo. Their optimism is cruel in its bind to support the state through their good works, while subject to the whims of state power.

Life Makers creates a form of Islam that eschews not only political ambition but even the claim to religion. For volunteers, faith development is not only an alternative to the machinations of Islam for political power but it is an authentic version of Islam. Young volunteers reformulate traditional forms of obligatory charity to make volunteerism the most valuable form of giving. Their volunteerism straddles an idea of *voluntary* work with the *obligation* to work for others. Their reconfiguration of good works and attendant virtuous affects underline the need to scrutinize the FBO as a category of analysis. As they demonstrate, religion and faith are not synonymous. By investigating how they mobilize these categories, we attune ourselves to what is at stake in the ongoing negotiation of the role of Islam in contemporary Egypt. The story of Life Makers reveals how, when prodded by our interlocutors’ terms of engagement, we can uncover the NGO as a pivotal site for renegotiating religion and politics today. Life Makers can help NGO studies develop a more precise vocabulary and analytical approach for understanding the complicated role of religion in civil society. Volunteers alert us to multiple and overlapping idioms of development from the Islamic tradition, international development, and the pervasiveness of self-help techniques in which volunteers refine and redefine themselves in close relation with notions of national progress. As Ahmed eloquently began this chapter, such an investigation lays bare the commitments and tensions, structures of feeling, as well as implicit and explicit critiques that guide not only the articulation of Islamic faith-based development but the effort to reform Islam itself.

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tions I ask here, or search out their answers, without the generosity of the volunteers who welcomed me into their worlds.

Notes

1. I follow a simplified version of the standard system of Arabic transliteration used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

2. I refer to sentiment, affect, emotions, and feelings interchangeably, not as psychological states but rather as social practices (Lutz and Abu Lughod 1990; Ahmed 2004; cf. Richard and Rudnycky 2009). In so doing, I tend to the ways my interlocutors understand how language creates and communicates feelings.

3. For statistics on Egyptian adult education alongside other UN high-priority countries, see Huebler and Lu (2012). On the relationship between revolution and major gains in literacy, see Arnove and Graff (1987).

4. See Asad's discussion of W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), where Asad argues that the analytic move to examine "religion as faith" overemphasizes inner states without proper attention to practice (2002).

5. For an account of the effects of changes to the NGO laws, see the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law's analysis of Egypt (2013).

6. Popular media and scholarly publications alike describe Khaled as an influential Muslim reformer representative of devolving Islamic authority, particularly among affluent urban youth (Haenni 2005; Moll 2010; Sobhy 2011; Winegar 2014).