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Transforming Personal Death into Public Martyrdom
Sacralization in Downtown Cairo after the 2011 Uprising

By
Daniel Enstedt & Giulia Giubergia

Abstract

This article examines ways to analyze and understand the social and cultural transformation that occurred after the 2011 uprising in downtown Cairo. We argue for a cultural sociological perspective using a renewed version of the concept "the sacred" for analysis. Visual material – graffiti and murals on the walls of Cairo – is discussed in relation to the process of transforming the death of an individual into collective martyrdom. The role of social media, public rituals, and celebrations in the events in Tahrir Square is also discussed. This article shows how the process of sacralization follows a recurring pattern in which individual deaths transmigrate into new collective, ritualized memories through the use of aesthetics in social media and on murals. Using different types of field-based and online material, this article argues for a cultural sociological perspective whereby individual death also can be understood on a more general level as a constituent part of the existing and contested societal order. The emphasis on a processual view of social and cultural transformation is equally important. This view includes a dialectical perspective, which together with an awareness of spatiality, materiality, new media, and embodiment, is essential for an understanding of what happened in downtown Cairo after the uprising in 2011.

Keywords: Arab Spring; Cairo, Sacralization; Social and cultural transformation

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Introduction

In 2011, a wave of protests, sit-ins, public demonstrations, and gatherings engulfed Egypt. A number of people died in the often violent confrontations between groups, usually positioned as the protesters and the police/military – that is, representatives of the government. In normal circumstances, death is a personal affair; the deceased is commemorated by family and friends in private ceremonies that are rarely described in newspapers or spread on the Internet. In the context of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, however, death became political, collective and, we argue, sacralized. This was especially the case with the death of young people, usually young men, making them martyrs of the revolution. In order to examine the social, collective processes of sacralization whereby individual, personal death becomes political, collective and sacred, we will return to the Egyptian uprising in 2011 and discuss a variety of material, including online and media material, graffiti and murals, public monuments, and manifestations.

The so-called Arab Spring has drawn scholarly attention and has been studied from a wide range of theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary perspectives (see Erdogan 2021, El Issawi & Cavatorta 2020, Eid & Fahmy 2019, Giubergia 2018). What has been lacking in previous research is an analysis of the social and cultural transformation from a religious studies perspective. We will therefore embark on this study from a religious studies perspective, more specifically, drawing on a renewed understanding of the concept "the sacred." We will also argue for a dialectical understanding of the social transformation and sacralization in which online and offline activities, as well as collective memory formation, public ritual, and spatial, aesthetic and visual perspectives are taken into account. In short, this article aims to contribute a processual understanding of the events during the uprising in Cairo, drawing on a variety of material that is not limited to texts or beliefs, or any one type of material. The question raised here is how events were sacralized dialectically in Cairo during the 2011 revolution, and whether it is possible to discern a common pattern from several empirical examples. Before we turn to the empirical material, we will identify the central theoretical perspectives that have influenced the analysis.

Social Dialectics and Public Sacralization

The category of the sacred is a central concept when discussing the events of the 2011 uprising in Egypt. We do not, however, want to simply replace "religion" with "the sacred," and in so doing retain the problematic, essentializing and ahistorical implications of the concept "religion," or the Protestant Christian connotation of religion as religious texts and beliefs.[1] The concept of the sacred employed here owes its development to Gordon Lynch's theory of the sacred presented in his 2012

books *The Sacred in the Modern World* and *On the Sacred*. Like Émile Durkheim and Jeffrey Alexander before him, Lynch does not consider the sacred to be linked with "the mysterious" or "the otherworldly," but sees it as deeply embedded within society. Moreover, the sacred is primarily experienced collectively, not individually, even though the individual may experience something as sacred if it is framed as such within a larger group. This is how Lynch puts it:

> The sacred is defined by what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life. *Sacred forms* are specific, historically contingent, instances of the sacred. Sacred forms are constituted by constellations of specific symbols, thought/discourse, emotions, and actions grounded in the body. These constellations of embodied thought, feeling and action recursively reproduce the sacrality of the sacred form and constitute groups who share these discourses, sentiments and practices. The normative reality represented by a sacred form simultaneously constructs the evil which might profane it, and the pollution of this sacred reality is experienced by its adherents as a painful wound for which some form of restitution is necessary (Lynch 2012: 29)

Certain realities are perceived as non-negotiable and organize the worldview of the people who hold them as sacred. However, sacred forms are not permanently and globally relevant but are developed within specific cultural and historical settings, and their significance can vary with changing circumstances. When they are relevant, sacred forms are markers of collective identity that express themselves in the worldview of those who identify with them. Ritual performances of the sacred help people to identify with a group and strengthen its recognition of certain realities as sacred. The sacred is therefore, in Lynch's words, a "moral boundary," that divides people into an in-group and out-group according to their association with a specific sacred form. That point is clearly made in Jeffrey Alexander's analysis of the Egyptian uprising in the beginning of 2011, where he identifies two distinctive and contrasting narratives aligned with the protesters on the one hand and with the government on the other (Alexander 2011). Giulia Giubergia sums up Alexander's results:

> These two opposing narratives identify in-groups that are bearers of sacred values (Mubarak's self-identification with stability, duty, and responsibility; the protesters' self-identification with democracy, freedom, and social justice) worth protecting at any cost, and

> deeply polluted (and polluting) out-groups threatening these values (Mubarak's description of the protesters as outlaws and thieves; the protesters' description of Mubarak and his regime as corrupt, violent, and oppressive). (Giubergia 2018: 40–41)

However, the narrative of "good vs. evil" should not be taken at face value. In fact, asserts Gordon Lynch, the sacred is morally ambiguous. It not only animates people with positive emotional energy, but can also incite and legitimize violent behaviors against whoever comes to be associated with the profane (Lynch 2012: 118-129). Lynch adds that if the violation of the sacred occurs within the community, the breach will often be attributed to 'something other' because of the difficulty of associating one's own community with the profane (Lynch 2012: 32-33).

In addition to Gordon Lynch's cultural sociology of the sacred, and the notion that sacred forms may be manifested through public rituals, we want to emphasize the *performative* aspect of the sacred and argue for a more processual understanding of sacralization. Following Judith Butler's view on performativity, we strive to understand how the sacred is *done*, as performance online, on the walls, as monuments and in embodied public rituals in Cairo (Butler 2000: 27-28, Butler 1990). The sacred is not a given but is performed, even though it has a cultural, religious and social history that sets the frame for, but does not necessarily determine, its performance. The performativity of the sacred is, however, "neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation," as Judith Butler puts it concerning performativity in general (Butler 1993: 95). Following Butler, one can ask how sacred ideas, norms, values, and symbols are played out, performed and manifested in a social context such as downtown Cairo. The central question is then *how* the social production of the sacred should be understood both theoretically and in relation to the events that occurred in Egypt and on the streets of downtown Cairo during the uprising that started in 2011. We suggest that this process is best understood dialectically.

A dialectical understanding of the reproduction and change of a social order has long been discussed in sociology. One of the influential texts on the subject is Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) where they argue for a dialectical understanding that contains three aspects: *externalization* (society is a human product), *objectification* (society is an objective reality), and *internalization* (humans are a social product). Importantly, the dialectics between these three aspects are a constantly ongoing process (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 145-146). According to Berger and Luckmann, the ongoing dialectical process of externalization, objectification, and internalization

is what constitutes society and humans within it, in everyday actions, political struggles, and upheavals (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 325). Warren S. Goldstein makes two statements about dialectics that are important for the scope of this article. The first concerns the non-deterministic nature of the dialectical process: "A dialectical understanding of the process […] is not necessarily occurring in a linear manner, but can also be marked by contradictions, progress as well as reversals." (Goldstein 2009: 175). His second point concerns the collective aspect of the dialectical process. He stresses that we need further investigation regarding how secularization and sacralization happen on both an individual and societal level (Goldstein 2009: 175-176). Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead do bring some clarity to these issues, as they develop a dialectical model of the relation between agent, symbol, and community (Riis & Woodhead 2010: 118). Of particular interest for the argument of this article is their distinction between a balanced and unbalanced religious emotional regime:

> an agent's emotions are shaped by internalizing norms enacted by a community, and by subjectifying emotions related to sacred symbols. The agent may objectify religious emotion by creating or appropriating symbols that are emotionally meaningful to him or her. Feelings relating to such symbols are shared with others in the process of insignation, and insignation is disciplined by consecration. (Riis & Woodhead 2010: 118)

Importantly, in an *unbalanced* emotional regime, such as existed in downtown Cairo during 2011, some of the collective sacred symbols are no longer internalized, and new collectives with alternative sacred symbols are emerging. The new sacralized symbols – symbolic actions, rituals, monuments, visuals, and aesthetics – that are emerging in a situation of an unbalanced emotional regime work as consecrated signifiers for the same community. The agent that is part of the community shares the consecrated and sacred meaning of the symbols, and manifests it through bodily and emotional expressions. Hence, the social conflicts that became obvious during the so-called Arab Spring are also about people in a community becoming "disconnected," at least to some extent, from other parts of the community (Riis & Woodhead 2010: 123-146). There can still be overlapping ideals, values, and understandings shared between different groups in a society such as Cairo.

Furthermore, the events in downtown Cairo can be seen as an expression of a "contested place," and as a claim for the "right to the city," where different norms, values and practices are expressed side by side in a symbolically laden place (Enstedt 2015, Magnussen 2013, Lefebvre 1996). As geographer Lily Kong puts

it, "there are many ways in which everyday spaces can be implicated in religious meaning-making, legitimating, maintaining, and enhancing, but also challenging religious life, beliefs, practices and identities." (Kong 2010: 757). Bodily practices and emotions, together with materiality and aesthetics, stand in relation to sacred values, norms, and ideals. These values and ideals are expressed not only by religious groups and traditions, but also by other groups that gather around sacred values and narratives that are intertwined with the particular setting – its history, architecture and collective memory – of which it is a part. The myriad of parallel meaning-makings and the struggle for sacred spaces that is unfolding in downtown Cairo is, as Kong puts is, related to the fact that "sacred spaces are often at the heart of intense contestation, with wider community resistance to the establishment of 'unfamiliar' religious sites or sacred sites of minority groups" (Kong 2010: 757).

Following the theoretical outline above, the question that arises is how the sacred was dialectically and socially produced in downtown Cairo during the revolution in 2011. Let us now turn to the cases to explore this.

Transforming Personal Death into Collective Martyrdom

Khaled Said was a 28-year-old man living in Alexandria. On June 6th 2010, he was sitting in a cybercafé when, according to eyewitnesses, a group of police officers dragged him out and beat him to death. Afterwards, the authorities asserted that Khaled had died because he tried to swallow a packet of hashish. However, a picture of his badly beaten face was released by his brother to the media, raising doubts about the official story and causing uproar over the brutality of the police and the attempt to cover it up (Ehab 2010). The picture of Khaled was posted shortly after on a newly opened Facebook page, the "We are all Khaled Said" page. In a short time, the page received over 250,000 likes and the picture was widely circulated, especially on social media. Even though Khaled Said was only one of many people beaten by the police in the years preceding the uprising, the picture of his deformed face, together with the reach of the Facebook page, made him *the* martyr of the Egyptian revolution (Preston 2011).

It has been argued that one reason Egyptians easily identified with Khaled was the fact that he was portrayed as a "normal guy". He was not politically engaged and belonged to the Egyptian middle class, which was usually shielded from police violence and would later make up a consistent part of the protesters, at least in the first days of the uprising in January 2011 (Fahim 2010).

Many who died during and after the 2011 uprising in Egypt were discussed on social media. Their pictures were posted on Facebook or similar social media

platforms. These pictures usually depicted the deceased when they were alive. However, in several cases the images distributed online also included pictures of their badly beaten and bruised bodies. Both kinds of images, as in the Khaled Said case, found their way to the walls of Cairo in the form of graffiti. The online threads and discussions about Khaled Said and other killings express a discourse that is embedded in cultural collective norms and values that also express a narrative about the situation in Cairo and Egypt. It is a narrative about the oppressed and the oppressors in which the deceased is portrayed as an innocent victim. Even though the online discourse is not formulated as a traditional narrative, it is not difficult to distinguish a plot with the martyrs and protesters as protagonists, on the one hand, and the police and government as antagonists, on the other. Importantly, even though the narrative and discourse are about a specific person, the general, not person-specific, aspects are of interest here, in other words the collective narrative and discourse. The story of the death of Khaled Said is one pivotal example of this narrative and the elevation of an ordinary person's death to symbolic martyr status. His death became the country's collective death, a death that, in the narrative of the uprising, affected each Egyptian who considers themself on the side of justice. After being portrayed as a revolutionary martyr, Khaled Said was no longer only a son, a brother, or a friend. Instead, he became an exemplification of the Egyptian police's brutality and the injustice perpetrated by the state on its own citizens. One emblematic way of portraying the deceased as martyrs in graffiti or murals at the walls of Cairo was by giving them angel wings.

Shortly after a variety of online activities, there was usually a transition from online forums and pictures to the streets of Cairo. This was primarily done through mural representations on the walls in downtown Cairo. The graffiti were concentrated in downtown Cairo, especially, on the long perimeter wall that surrounded the American University in Cairo on Mohammad Mahmood Street. This wall hosted some of the most complex and widely discussed graffiti of the Egyptian uprising. The street itself was the site of some of the most violent clashes between protesters and the Egyptian security apparatus. On 25 November 2011, during a demonstration in Mohammad Mahmoud Street, a banner carried by protesters read: "Martyrs Street. Previously Mohammad Mahmoud." (Sheshtawy 2011). It thus gained the designation of "martyr's street".

The first full-wall memorial of martyrs appeared in Mohammad Mahmoud Street in February 2012 (see Hamdy & Stone 2014: 138-142). It was painted after an incident in the coastal city of Port Said on 1 February 2012 when supporters of the al-Masry and al-Ahly football teams clashed after a game. Seventy-four fans of Cairo's Ahly football club were killed by supporters of the al-Masry team or in the panicked stampede as they attempted to escape the violence. The police were accused of letting the al-Masry supporters into the stadium without

searching them and of locking some of the emergency exits to trap the al-Ahly supporters, in retaliation for the al-Ahly Ultras'(organized fans') participation in anti-government demonstrations (*BBC News* 2012, Elmeshad 2012, Hussein 2012). The images of some of the al-Ahly supporters who died that day were painted on a long stretch of the wall in Mohammad Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo.

The graffiti of the martyrs of Port Said include sixteen portraits of young men plus a variety of stenciled faces, flowers, decorative patterns, and other anthropomorphic figures. The depictions of the young men, smiling or serious, are realistic, based on photos that had spread on social media and were carried on placards and banners during the street protests that followed their deaths. Ten of the martyrs' portraits are in painted frames, either hanging from the wall or leaning against it. These frames evoke the feeling of being inside a home, in front of a row of family pictures. These family pictures are adorned with black ribbons in the upper left or right corners, a symbol of grief and mourning. Moreover, the framed portraits remind spectators that the people who died were all members of families, and that their photos are hanging on the walls of Cairo as well as on the walls of their family homes. All but two of the martyrs' portraits are captioned with their names and their identification as martyrs. Finally, all sixteen young men are depicted with colorful wings on their backs.

By positioning the graffiti on Mohammad Mahmood Street in dialog with other graffiti in downtown Cairo, it is possible to draw some conclusions about general trends in commemorative graffiti in Cairo. We can also formulate hypotheses about the use of these graffiti in collective memory building. Several of the graffiti representing casualties of the uprising portray the young man with angel wings. Islam does not sanction depicting dead people as angels. Rather, it is part of the recent popular growth of unofficial forms of commemoration. The representation of the uprising's casualties as winged beings is part of this reworking of tradition in a new form in contemporary times. It is common for people who died prematurely or in the context of an unforeseen violent death to be referred to as "angels" and to be portrayed with wings. The "angelification" of the people who died during the 2011 revolution and its aftermath refers, on one hand, to their perceived innocence and, on the other, simply stresses the fact that they are dead. In fact, most of the graffiti that portray deceased protesters do not represent them as corpses. Without the angel wings, it would be impossible to distinguish the portrayal of a dead person from one of the many jailed political prisoners whose faces have been stenciled nationwide on the walls of Egypt's largest cities. Finally, angel wings can be considered an artistic device, used to catch the eye of passersby. The wings decorating the graffiti analyzed here are, in fact, aesthetically refined and often colorful, drawing attention to the graffiti.

Another common characteristic is that the individualized and accurate

portrayals of the people who died in clashes can be understood as attempts to humanize them: the deceased are not distant, extraordinary, idealized heroes; they are ordinary people. The realism of those portraits makes the martyrs more relatable to the wider public. The martyrological narrative calls the public to be inspired by the martyrs' stories and follow their example, putting their lives on the line to defend the shared sacred values of those opposed to the government. Moreover, it reminds the onlookers that the unjust oppressor, that is, the government and its security apparatus, could kill anyone: anyone's son, brother, or friend could be the next martyr memorialized on the walls. This is also the case with the phrase "We are all Khaled Said", mentioned above. It works as a signifier and a consecrated symbol for an emerging collective and its sacred values. Such an imperative encourages the population to a necessary mass mobilization against injustice.

On the other hand, the individuality of the martyr is at the service of another important function as a symbol. The individual martyr's stories – their lives before death, their hopes and dreams – are not of central importance within the wider revolutionary narrative. Nor it is significant whether they truly died defending those values. The individual martyr rather becomes entrenched in a general public martyr figure who embodies the sacred values of the uprising. In short, in the narrative of the revolution, the martyrs are innocent men fighting on the side of the "Good Protesters" against the "Evil State". Their death is the proof of the injustices perpetrated and will be avenged by the righteous allies of the Good, who will fight to protect the same values. In other words, the deceased becomes an icon of the revolution and by becoming a mural he (very seldom she) is no longer an expression of the personal grief of a loved one's death, but rather a collective memory in the making.

The mural representation – the hagiography of the deceased – of the collective martyr of the revolution, that is, the transformation of personal death into collective death and grieving, is by no means the endpoint. First, the wall was not a neutral place before the mural was made; it is in itself a place with symbolic associations related to its location and its history, and of course its character as a "wall" (as materiality), separates people, things, and neighborhoods. Mohammad Mahmoud Street, whose walls have often been used as a canvas for graffiti, for example, takes its name from the four-time prime minister Muḥammad Maḥmūd Pasha (1878–1941) who, together with Sa'd Zaghlul (d. 1927), was at the forefront of the movement to demand independence from the British Empire in 1919[2]. Mohammad Mahmoud Street is a pivotal access point to the main administrative and government buildings such as the ministries of Interior, Justice, and Higher Education, as well as the Cabinet Office, Parliament, and many other official buildings. In Mohammad Mahmoud Street lies the revolutionary wall *par*

excellence, the exterior wall of the Tahrir Campus of the American University in Cairo (AUC). At the end of the nineteenth century, the area that was to become the site of the first AUC campus in 1920 was home to a palace, some accessory buildings, and a large portion of unoccupied land. The palace had allegedly been built for one of Khedive Isma'il's concubines and then given to the Khedive's trusted friend Ahmed Khairy Pasha, or possibly built purposely for him in the 1870s. It was transformed into a cigarette factory before the turn of the century. The building complex was also the first seat of the Egyptian University, starting in 1919. The lot was bought in 1919 by Charles Watson, secretary of the United Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, for building an "American Christian University in Egypt," which opened its doors on October 5, 1920 as the American University in Cairo (Murphy 1987).

Both the street and the wall were significant before becoming, respectively, the site of violent clashes during the uprising and the canvas for numerous revolutionary graffiti. Unlike art pieces exhibited in a museum, a street mural is ephemeral and open to further interaction. After it is created, the image or part of it can be erased or changed, painted over, commented on, or whitewashed. That means there is an ongoing interaction and negotiation on the wall when it comes to aesthetics, as well as political, religious, and sacred ideals. If we consider the martyrs' portraits as symbolic representations of the sacred values of the uprising, these acts of destruction can be read as instances of iconoclasm (the word iconoclast derives from the Greek *eikon*, meaning image, and *klastes*, meaning breaker) (Rambelli & Reinders 2007: 17). In the context of a general debate about iconoclasm, not specifically related to a single religious tradition, Noyes defines the term as describing "an attack against and often the destruction of a physical object, be it a statue, a painting, a tomb, a building, or a natural object like a tree that is believed to have some kind of spiritual power or sacred significance and which is worshiped in the place of the 'true' God." (Noyes 2013: 3-4). However, it is important to note that iconoclasm is not only confined to the religious world. A flag, the statue of a political leader, or a building can all be objects of iconoclastic attacks. In the context of the destruction of the graffiti representing the martyrs of the uprising, it is possible to argue that the relevance of the representation is mirrored in the frequency of erasure. Most of the graffiti representing people who died in clashes with police and security services were erased or damaged in some way, commonly immediately after their production. It is often impossible to know who damaged the graffiti, but it is possible to argue that the people who were accused of the murder of the protesters (i.e., the government) considered the images dangerous. As mentioned before, representations of people who are considered martyrs remind the public that anyone could be killed by the unjust oppressor and aim to mobilize the population to act against injustice and state

prevarication.

Destruction aimed at neutralizing the mobilizing action of commemorative portraits of martyrs is not the only instance of graffiti-erasure and modification observed after the 2011 uprising. Often, graffiti were painted over by the same artists or groups that had painted them in the first place and new graffiti were layered on top of the older one. This was done because the older graffiti had become "mute" – detached from or irrelevant in new historico-political circumstances. An example of this type of layering is the so-called graffiti of the mothers of the martyrs painted in Mohammad Mahmoud Street on top of mural representing the people who died in Port Said in February 2012. The new graffiti displayed three women, dressed in black with black headscarves, interposed within a slogan, written in large letters: "Forget the past and stay with the elections". The three figures and the writing constitute a new layer painted on top of the graffiti of the martyrs of Port Said, which could be seen clearly underneath it. The sentence "Forget the past and stay with the elections" can be read as encouraging the people of Cairo to engage in the upcoming election while remembering the events of the recent past. It can also be read ironically, pointing to the allegedly forgetful nature of the Egyptian people, accused of being more interested in the outcome of the presidential elections of 2012 than in remembering and vindicating the deaths of the people killed in the previous year and a half. The women represent the mothers of the martyrs, both those who died in Port Said and more generally everyone who died during and after the uprising. In the graffiti, their grief is coupled with the perceived indifference to the martyrs once some other political event – in this case the presidential election – has captured media and popular attention. By not completely covering the earlier mural, the second layer is put in conversation with the older one, making the connection between the women and the young martyrs immediate.

The murals communicate and exist in relation to other murals, posters, and writings on the wall; in short, the murals have an aesthetic context. In other words, paintings that are changing on Cairo's walls through erasure, defacement, and whitewashing have to be analyzed in relation to each other in order to grasp the complex trajectory of public memorialization after the 2011 uprising. However, the murals also have an indirect context – worldwide pop-culture, religious iconography and other types of references – political, cultural, and religious. Although these other references are not on the wall, they are part of the wider culture in which the murals exist. Religious symbols are, like other symbols, not preserved and controlled by religious communities but become disembedded and are used in different ways, both conventional and unconventional (See Giddens 1991, Bryman 2004, Lyon 2000).

Some of these indirect and direct references are difficult to decipher, while others are more obvious. Pictorial references that need previous knowledge in order to be interpret include scenes inspired by Ancient Egyptian art that were painted on both sides of the martyrs of Port Said. In one example, a mouse wearing a long garment akin to a skirt smells a flower while a cat brings it food (probably a chicken or a duck) while waving a fan. According to Yasmin El-Shazly, the image is inspired by a scene frequently depicted on Ancient Egyptian satirical ostraca, that is pottery pieces or limestone shards used as cheap writing and drawing materials. The image shows a mouse being served by a cat, reversing the natural order and insultingly comparing the ruler to a mouse (El-Shazly 2014: 6-7). The scene derives from a fable and was used by Egyptians, according to El-Shazly, to mock their rulers in various historic periods.[3] The transposition of this Ancient Egyptian motif to a wall in Mohammad Mahmoud Street in 2012 transfers the mockery of the Pharaoh to contemporary Egyptian rulers and to Egyptian society, which is subservient to them. In fact, Mubarak, and other modern Egyptian rulers before him were often called "Pharaoh" to mock their autocratic rule (Vick 2011). Both the visual reference to the ostraca and the use of the term "Pharaoh" to describe Egyptian rulers would be hard to spot without knowing the Egyptian cultural environment.

As these examples show, the personal death of an individual is transformed into a collective death by an ongoing dialectic discourse and non-verbal practices in which aesthetics play a central role in portraying, narrating, and remembering the deceased. The fluidity between the images, signs and actions on the walls in downtown Cairo and the online discourses also needs to be taken into account, especially when the topic is heated and emotional. What happens on the walls is by no means an isolated statement by anonymous and faceless protesters or graffiti artists; it is also a subject for discussion online where sacred norms and values are expressed and also questioned.

Public Commemorations in Downtown Cairo

The process of making a public martyr does not stop with the walls. Another central aspect in the collective remembrance and expressions of the sacred needs to be taken into consideration: the collective and public rituals of commemorations in downtown Cairo. After the completion of the mural of the martyrs of Port Said in Mohammad Mahmoud Street, flowers were brought and left leaning against the wall right under the portraits of the martyrs. The bringing of flowers to the murals recalls public rituals of creating unofficial memorials at public sites of violent and unexpected deaths (see Santino 2006, Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011, Doss 2010), Maddrell & Sidaway 2010). In the case under consideration, the flowers

were placed in front of the mural representing the people who died in Port Said, emphasizing the function of the graffiti as the unofficial space for mourning the victims of the incident. Unlike official memorial plaques, statues, or monuments, unofficial memorials are temporary and bound to decay and disappear with time. However, they usually have higher emotional valence than official memorials, and are often considered sacred and untouchable by the people who share the values materialized in the memorials (Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011: 21). Authorities are usually cautious about disturbing or destroying an unofficial memorial, because of "the sacrality it generates and the respect it evokes." (Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011: 13). This emotional charge is typical of the "graffiti of the martyrs" that, unlike other types of graffiti in downtown Cairo, elicits more intense reactions from the viewer.

Public rituals are often conducted in Tahrir Square on special occasions, as well as annually. Commemorations of crucial moments throughout the year are common among diverse cultural and historical groups. Such anniversaries celebrate both religious and secular events, such as the birth of a saint or the liberation of a country from foreign rule. These anniversaries acquire memories associated with the events commemorated, and the events are usually seen as pivotal to the creation of a collective history or the development of a particular religious tradition. Additional significance is attributed to the place where these celebrations are held. These locations can accrue sacred connotations due to the importance of the events commemorated there and their significance for constituting the celebrating community. This layer of meaning is not necessarily permanent; it may be limited to the time of the celebration. However, the commemoration can also be performed in a space that already had special significance for the group performing the celebration. If an anniversary celebration is sanctioned or tolerated by state institutions, it is possible to assert that the event is, at least partially, included in the official collective memory of the country. Conversely, a commemoration that is opposed, whether by the dominant segment of society or by minority groups, provides an occasion to observe the dynamic working of multiple collective memories. Two anniversaries related to the 2011 Egyptian revolution are particularly suited to see multiple memories in action. These are 25 January 2012, the first anniversary of the uprising, and 17 November 2013, the second anniversary of the so-called battle of Mohammad Mahmoud Street, both of them commemorated in Tahrir Square.

On the first anniversary of the uprising, on 25 January 2012, a procession of thousands of people coming on foot from Shubra – a neighborhood north of downtown that has a substantial Coptic presence – was led to Tahrir Square by a truck carrying a 40-meter long obelisk (see *The Telegraph* 2012). The obelisk, made of cardboard and wood and bearing the names of those who died in the previous

year in clashes with police and military forces, was erected at the center of Tahrir Square. Obelisks are part of Egypt's ancient heritage. They were made of stone, usually positioned in pairs in front of temples, and inscribed with hieroglyphics often conveying religious and/or political dedications. The obelisk erected in Tahrir Square can be considered a symbol of a shared national past of Egypt. The nation at that time was greatly divided due to the polarization of various political and religious groups because of the first parliamentary elections that had just ended, and the first presidential elections that were underway. Based on this observation, the decision to erect an obelisk in Tahrir Square to commemorate the first anniversary of the uprising can be interpreted as an attempt to link the event to a non-divisive symbol. People of various religious confessions would have been excluded by the erection of a memorial in the form of either a cross or a *darih*, that is, an Islamic mausoleum, usually the resting place of a saint. Moreover, different political groups would have been marginalized or even offended by a more overtly political symbol being raised in the middle of Tahrir Square. However, Ancient Egyptian symbols are not regarded as neutral by the Egyptian population. Conservative Muslim groups see these symbols and traditions as threatening Islam because of their pagan connotations. On the other hand, Coptic Christians hold a widespread belief in the existence of ancestral ties between Ancient Egyptians and Copts. It is thus possible to construe the erection of the obelisk in Tahrir Square, disregarding the possible objections of conservative Muslim groups, such as Salafi groups, as the willful exclusion of these groups from the narrative of unity that the obelisk seems to be constructing.

On 17 November 2013, the interim military government inaugurated a monument in Tahrir Square commemorating the protesters who died during the overthrow of Mubarak and the clashes during Morsi's presidential mandate.[4] The Square was covered in grass and decorated with flowers and plants, and at the center a stone memorial with steps leading to a podium was built. On the night of the inauguration, after the ceremony had ended and darkness fallen, hundreds of people converged on the Square and destroyed the monument.[5] Moreover, the remnants were splashed with red paint and red handprints were stamped on them. Red handprints can be related to those made during Aid al-Aḍḥā (the Feast of Sacrifice) with the blood of slaughtered cows, sheep, or goats in order to keep evil spirits away (Mittwoch 2012, Huart 2012). A fake coffin was placed on the ruins of the monument and several sentences were sprayed on the podium, including "Down with all who have betrayed: bloody al-Sisi or Morsi" and "Retaliation (*al-qaṣāṣ*) oh sons of foul [women], down with all who have betrayed: the military, the remnants [of the Mubarak regime], the [Muslim] Brotherhood."[67] The words highlight the fact that the protesters do not distinguish between the interim military government, the remnants of the old regime of Mubarak, or the Muslim

Brotherhood. They are all considered part of the enemy who are accused of having killed protesters, and they will be called to pay for their crimes.

In the monument that was built and then destroyed, two different memories of the uprising are materialized: the built monument as an expression of governmental memory juxtaposed with the same monument in its changed form, after the protesters altered it. The two can be characterized, in Jan Assmann's words, as "irreconcilable, mutually opposed memories of winners and losers, the victims and the perpetrators." (Assmann 2006: 7). On one hand, by constructing the monument in Tahrir Square, the government was commemorating the people who died fighting in the 2011 clashes and during the last phases of Morsi's rule, culminating in the mass protests of June–July 2013, as explained by the promoters of the monument's construction (Bird 2014). On the other hand, the words sprayed on the remains of the monument seem to stress that both the interim military government, which was then holding power in Egypt, and the Muslim Brotherhood, the majority party before the July 2013 military coup, had betrayed the values and memories of the uprising. Moreover, the writing illustrates how the erection of the monument was interpreted as a way of deciding who had died "righteously," and who were to be accused of being thugs and troublemakers and then forgotten (Bird 2014, Kortm 2013).[8] Finally, the protesters read the building of the monument to the martyrs as a material sign of the government's attempt to claim ownership of the memory of the revolution and of the martyrs (Mackey & Stack 2013). By destroying the monument, the protesters responded with a material statement against the co-opting of the memory of the uprising by the government. They thus accused the government of changing the uprising's narrative and denying the responsibility of the military and police for the deaths of many of the protesters that the monument was to remember and celebrate. The fact that the monument had been erected at the center of one of the most symbolically charged "places of memory" heightened the emotional reaction of the protesters, who felt that the government was attempting to "forget" part of the national past because it did not fit the ideal image of a strong nation united under just military rule (Misztal 2003: 121).

These public rituals gather many people and do not follow a planned script, even though it might seem like it. Songs are sung, candles lit in front of images of the deceased, people move in certain directions, and so on. In addition, these public manifestations are also mediated online, which underlines the fluidity between actions downtown and online media. The mediatized public rituals become scripts for future manifestations, which underlines the importance of understanding the production of the sacred, the sacralization, as an intrinsic public and collective affair embedded in politics, religion, culture, aesthetics, and not least, media.

Concluding Remarks

The social production of the sacred, sacred norms and values through collective rituals, manifestations, aesthetics, stories and memories should not be essentialized or be taken as a given. Instead, it should be made clear that the sacred is articulated in intentional and unintentional social actions; online, offline, on the streets of Cairo, and even in peoples' homes. A few questions arising from the above examples need to be addressed. What general patterns emerge in these examples? To what extent are these patterns a result of coincidence, or are they more or less predetermined to unfold the way they do? This is, in other words, a question about causality. However, the overarching question is what implications do the examples have for understanding the social and cultural transformations in downtown Cairo?

The results of the analysis shows that the social and cultural transformations in downtown Cairo after 2011 should be understood as an ongoing dialectic process of sacralization in the making and celebrating of public martyrs. The overall pattern can be described as follows. After a young person is killed, the event is discussed on social media while photos of the deceased are circulated online, sometimes associated with a short phrase like "We are all Khalid Said." During the next step, which occurs shortly after the online discussion has begun, images of the deceased that have been posted online are made into murals. As we have pointed out above, the aesthetics of the murals, together with the position, history, and materiality of the wall itself, elevate and transcend the deceased into collective martyrs of the revolution. Culturally and aesthetically, making martyrs is embedded in the sacred values (such as freedom, liberty, and autonomy) that are expressed online, on the streets of Cairo and elsewhere. Importantly, the wall is a specific place that played a central and emblematic part in the uprising. The wall also involves cultural imaginations, negotiating ideals, contested images, political irony and critique, humor, and sacred ideals, to mention but a few aspects of what is going on. Equally important is the changing character of the wall by the layering, the defacement, and the whitewashing. One last aspect that we would like to stress is the ritual and commemoration that occurs at the wall itself. Candles are lit and flowers are placed next to the wall. The remembrance of the dead is also celebrated in public rituals and manifestations in the streets of Cairo, for instance at Tahrir Square. Songs are sung, pictures of the deceased and posters with usually politically messages are raised, and slogans are chanted. The commemoration of the deceased happened on a yearly basis, as an annual ritual of sorts.

The non-linear but ongoing dialectical process between online activities, the aesthetics of the deceased as martyrs on the walls, and the public commemorations are at the center of the social production of the sacred and public martyrs. The public commemorations and murals are mediatized and repeatedly discussed

online. If a mural is erased, the erasure is also mediatized and discussed. The commemorations of pivotal events are often repeated yearly in the streets, and those commemorations too are mediatized and discussed. The events, murals, and public commemorations mentioned here are also analyzed in newspapers, journal articles, and academic and non-academic publications. This pattern has been drawn from several empirical examples, with numerous variations gathered through extensive fieldwork in Cairo after the uprising, some of which have been mentioned.

It is not enough to conduct separate analyses of images, social media or public rituals. These different expressions need to be analyzed together to be able to discern more general patterns in which recurring narratives, sacred norms and values are expressed, challenged and negotiated. One central question here has been about how we can understand what is happening in the collective making of a martyr after a personal death in Egypt. We have striven to avoid a cross-section, where a social process is treated as a social situation frozen in time. Instead we have argued for a more dynamic, processual and dialectical understanding of the events that followed the uprisings in Cairo 2011. In a schematic way, we have outlined a dialectical perspective and a preliminary flow of events in an attempt to understand them in relation to each other, not as directly impacting each other but rather as expressions and parts of a larger social change. We have highlighted the process whereby something that happens in the streets is rapidly mediatized, usually through social media, and thereafter manifested on the streets again through rituals, songs, and graffiti. When it comes to graffiti one can also notice the ongoing change on the walls of Cairo as a constantly changing canvas where conflicts, opinions and positions are manifested.

In this article, we have showed how religious studies may be used to analyze social changes on a macro level in Egypt that not is limited by "religion" or "religious groups" (e.g., Salafis and Copts). We argue for the need to empirically and inductively examine how events unfold in a specific cultural and societal situation. Taken together, these different cultural expressions (social media, public rituals, murals, graffiti, and similar types of manifestations) could be put at the center of the analysis to better understand the unfolding events in Cairo. With the concept "the sacred", we are able to analyze the core norms and values in these types of material in order to extract common traits concerning what is sacred after the Egyptian uprising, as well as what the struggle is about.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Daniel Enstedt is Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies in the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His current areas of scholarship are contemporary religion in Western Europe, examining lived religion and social mobility among migrants in Sweden, spiritual health practices in Zhineng Qigong, and religion and spiritualities in healthcare encounters.

daniel.enstedt@lir.gu.se

Giulia Giubergia achived her PhD in Religious Studies at the University of Gothenburg. Giubergia completed her thesis *The Making of Martyrs: Uprising, Cultural Sacralization and Death in Downtown Cairo after 2011* in 2018 and is today an independent researcher.

Notes

1 In the field of "critical religion", severe critique is directed at the sui generis model of religion and the tendency to comprehend religion as an essence. The sui generis model of religion, aligned with the so-called World Reli-gions Paradigm (WRP), downplays the diversity, complexity, and contextuality of religion and religiosity. The critique of a sui generis understanding of religion and the WRP problematizes the understanding of religion that ascribes it an abstract and homogenous essence, where it is the religions themselves – not human beings – that have agency and interact with other religious and non-religious entities (see Cotter & Robertson 2016: 9, McCutcheon 1997).

2 Sa'd Zaghlul was the leader of the Egyptian nationalist movement that led, at least on paper, to Egyptian inde-pendence from Britain in 1922. To read a brief biography of Sa'd Zaghlul, see Marlowe 2020, Little 2020).

3 The ostracon reproduced by Alaa Awad on the wall on Mohammad Mahmoud Street and referred to by El-Shazly was found in Deir el-Medina and dates from the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1080 BC) (El-Shazly2014: 7).

4 The interim military authority took power after the July 2013 coup that resulted in the incarceration of Mo-hammad Morsi, the president of Egypt from June 2012 to July 2013 (BBC News (2019)

5 A before and after picture of the monument was posted on the Twitter account of Amro Ali Amro Ali @_amroali, Twitter. November

18, 2013.

6 Al-qiṣāṣ is used in Islamic law for the form of punishment commonly known as "an eye for an eye," or lex talionis, which allows equal retaliation as a punishment for a certain category of crimes (e.g., the killing or physical injury of a Muslim or damage to his/her property). In the context of the spray-painted words on the monument in Tahrir Square, the protesters are probably wanting to hold the people who killed the protesters legally accountable.

7 The sentences are transliterated as following: "Yaskuṭ kul min khan kussumm al-Sīsī ʿalā Mursī", "Al-qaṣāṣ yā wulād al-wiskha, yaskuṭ kul min khān ʿaskar fulūl ikhwān." As translated in the text, the insults are much less offensive than the Arabic originals. The phrase kussumm (usually spelled "kuss umm") literally translates to "mother's vagina" and it is a frequently used vulgar expletive in Arabic. We have added punctuation in the translation in order to clarify the meaning of the sentences. They are visible in the video: The Mosireen Collective (2013).

8 From July 2013 when a military coup put an end to Mohammad Morsi's presidency to November 2013, hun-dreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were killed and thousands detained (for more information, see Kings-ley 2014, Hellyer 2014).

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