



Ninety-Nine

A Kaleidoscopic Portrait of Allah



AMIRA MITTERMAIER

Ninety-Nine



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AMIRA MITTERMAIER

DUKE

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Preface

There are two sounds that fill my memories of childhood in Germany: the click of the typewriter from my mother's office and Umm Kulthum blasting from a tape player. Umm Kulthum was an Egyptian singer, a diva really—maybe the most famous Arab singer of all time. Her father was an imam, a prayer leader, and she is often described as pious and patriotic. But mostly she sang about love and loss and longing. Her songs tasted familiar before I could understand them. Her voice is what populates my memory. Not Sufi music. Not Quran recitations. Songs of longing and my mother's typewriter.

My mother grew up in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s—before the time when Egyptian labor migrants went to Saudi Arabia and returned with money, dual cassette players, and a louder brand of Islam. Islam was lighter back then, says my mother. It was quiet and gentle. God was there but not talked about constantly. No one made a big fuss. No one yelled into microphones: “GOD IS THIS,” “GOD WANTS THAT.” Then came the Islamic revival, and the volume was turned up. The 1970s seemed to burst with religious movements. The Arab world, like so many other places around the globe, went through an “awakening”—*sahwa* in Arabic. The Islamic revival shaped the Egypt I would come to know.

During our family visits to Cairo in the 1980s and early 1990s, the call to prayer wove its way from the neighborhood mosque through the mosquito screens into my grandfather's apartment and merged with the call to prayer emanating from the television set. Many women veiled, and many men sported dark calluses on their foreheads from praying. God-phrases pervaded most of the everyday speech that my mother translated for us from Arabic.

After graduating from high school, I went to Cairo on my own to study Arabic, and since then I have been returning to Cairo almost every year, often for short visits, sometimes for longer stretches. Egypt continues

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changing—the uprising in 2011 certainly shook things up—but God-talk has remained a constant. God is everywhere in Cairo: in the air, on people’s tongues, on signs and stickers. God traverses the city on the rear windows of taxis, buses, and *tuktuks*, three-wheeled motorized rickshaws. God is graffitied onto walls and carved into tree trunks. *Uzkur Allāh*, the walls and trees say: “Remember God! Say God’s name!” God is woven into greetings, curses, and laughter.

Ever since my first visits I have wondered: What is it about Egyptians and their God-talk? What does it mean to remember God? Who or what is Allah? I have asked my mother, repeatedly, and I have asked many other Egyptians. It has become an obsession of sorts: collecting God stories, chasing after God.

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Islam is the second largest and fastest-growing religion in the world. Nearly two billion people practice Islam, about 25 percent of the global population. While being worshipped by many, the Islamic God is often described as far removed from the earthly realm and beyond human comprehension. At least that’s what textbooks tell you, and some Muslim scholars too. If you listen to ordinary Muslims in Cairo’s streets, homes, and coffee shops, you get a different picture. You learn of people saying “good morning” to God every day, sleeping in God’s palm, and feeling God pat them on the back. You learn of divine interventions, big and small. You learn of daily struggles, even fights, with God. In Egypt, a country that is 90 percent Muslim (the other 10 percent are largely Coptic Christian), God is intimately present.

Besides listening to God-talk on Cairo’s streets, over the past few years I have asked over one hundred people in Egypt about what God is to them, how they imagine God, and how their feelings toward God have changed over time. Almost all the people I spoke to were Muslim. Some were deadly serious about God; others joked about God. Some were pious; others, agnostic. Some praised God relentlessly; others were fed up with God. Some claimed privileged access to God; others have been accused of blasphemy. I learned something from every single person I talked to—tiny fragments that make up an ever-shifting kaleidoscopic portrait.

I began collecting God stories right after the Egyptian uprising (2011) and continued into the period of Muslim Brotherhood rule (2012–13) and under military rule (2013 onward). I collected more God stories during



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Wall in downtown Cairo: *Uzkur Allāh* (“Remember God/
mention the name of God”) next to Coca-Cola.

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the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–23) and during the latest Israeli war on Gaza (2023–2025). History ebbs and flows in the background of these stories. In each historical moment, in each conversation, God is remade and reimagined. Some tell you that God is loving; others, that God is cruel. Some tell you that God’s hand is in everything; others, that the affairs of the world seem to have slipped out of God’s hands. Some say that God watches every move you make, even every thought you have; others contend that God is a friend. Some speak of power and punishment; others, of light. Some insist that strict rules of etiquette need to be followed when addressing God; others advise following your heart.

Multiplicity is integral to the Islamic tradition. In the Quran and classical Islamic texts God has ninety-nine names. They describe God’s seemingly contradictory attributes—from Forgiving to All-Powerful, from Life-Giver to Death-Bringer. God remains elusive but comes to life by way of the names. Allah’s names—their logic, their number, their manyness—inspire this book, even though the stories I tell don’t follow the names religiously.

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When my mother talks about her life, God comes in and out of focus. Her childhood memories aren’t all happy. She contracted polio as an infant and had trouble walking and climbing stairs. There was friction in the family about her condition: “It’s God-given,” said her father; “Let’s fight this,” said her mother. My Egyptian grandmother wrote poems praising the Algerian women standing up to French colonizers. She supported my mother fiercely and worked for a few years as a school principal in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia so she could send my mother abroad. The destination was somewhat random. What mattered were the medical facilities. Because they knew someone in Munich, my mother, eighteen years old at the time, ended up in Germany, arriving in the midst of a cold winter. After months in the hospital and multiple surgeries, she decided to learn German and study medicine. In medical school she met my father. He had grown up in a Bavarian town with a population of about fifteen hundred. My parents moved to Regensburg, my hometown. Regensburg is said to feature as many churches as there are days in the year. There are at least four mosques and one synagogue, and there are chocolate Easter bunnies and big Christmas markets. But there isn’t much God-talk.

My mother became a psychoanalyst and joined a global healing network. Sometimes when we visited Egypt, she taught courses on spiritual

energy. “God is energy,” she told her students. Miraculously, she managed not to offend too many religious sensibilities. My mother feels ambivalent about what Islam is today, but she tells me that sometimes Quranic verses pass through her head. She likes God’s ninety-nine names. She often calls on God: *yā rabb*, *yā Allāh*. She regrets that she didn’t teach my sister and me anything about Islam when we were growing up. In our home, religion was a distant backdrop; it didn’t stand a chance against Umm Kulthum.

Throughout my years in school, I went to ethics class instead of religion class (for “religion” there were two options: Protestant and Catholic). When I was about seven, I prayed once. I didn’t know how to, but I borrowed a prayer rug from my mother’s closet. It was red and unused and featured an image of the Kaaba. I unrolled the rug, covered my hair with a scarf that I also borrowed from my mother’s closet, and prayed as best as I could, copying what I had seen people do in Egypt during our annual visits. What ensued was a random combination of standing, kneeling, prostrating, and pleading. I don’t think I was even facing toward Mecca. When I was in third or fourth grade, my teacher took me aside one day and apologized for not having given me a day off to mark the end of Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting. Knowing little about Ramadan at the time, I wasn’t sure how to respond. In my teenage rebel phase, I talked my family out of celebrating Christmas one year (“It’s all about consumption, and we’re not even Christian”). That same year I fasted for some, but definitely not all, of Ramadan.

Later, under the guise of anthropology, I kept returning to Cairo for fieldwork. I spent one year as a visiting student at the Islamic Al-Azhar University. I spent another year running after people’s dreams—the kinds of dreams that are believed to come from God. I spent a third year tagging along with people who give food to the poor but understand themselves as giving to God. Throughout those years I was determined to find an Elsewhere, a *more*—call it God if you like. It wasn’t always easy. Fieldwork was code for hanging out, drinking lots of tea and Turkish coffee, and having hour-long conversations disrupted by minute-long silences. At times I’d join in, praying alongside, fasting alongside, reciting alongside, blaspheming alongside, but I never had control of whether I would *feel* alongside, *experience* alongside, whether I was ever really part of anything.

Among my favorite fieldwork memories are the nights when I would meet up with my mother in Cairo and we would go to *mawlid*s together, saint’s day celebrations that run until the early morning hours, filled with loud *inshād* music, Sufi chanting that praises God and expresses love for the Prophet Muhammad.

.....

Allāh simply means “God.” Muhammad’s father was named Abdullah, literally the “servant of Allah,” before the future prophet of Islam was even born. Pre-Islamic Arabia was a world of many gods. It featured a mix of Judaism, Christianity, and polytheism. Among these many gods, the belief in a high god emerged over time. That high god was called Allah.

Etymologically Allah is a contraction of *al-ilāh*, “the god.” Allah is God with a capital *G*. Slowly that God crowded out the other gods. Some argue that the emergence of a higher god laid the foundation for Islam. Because Allah was already a thing, Muhammad was able to speak about Allah in a way that his audience found compelling. One theory holds that the other pre-Islamic gods were later subsumed under the categories of jinn and angels. Others highlight differences: Pre-Islamic religiosity was shaped by the harshness of desert life—spirits and ghosts were everywhere, as was the threat of famine, tribal wars, and uncertainty about the future. Fate was central, but it wasn’t personified. No one prayed to Fate. The point was accepting unpredictability. Islam introduced a different type of god, one that places expectations on humans, a god who wants us to worship Him, who gives us rules, who judges us. God became an entity one can interact with.

As an entity with expectations and maybe even feelings, the Quran’s God shares commonalities with the God of the Torah and the Bible. The Quran tells us that the message sent to the Prophet Muhammad was intended to complete, not erase, the previous monotheistic revelations. Those invested in interfaith dialogue insist that Muslims and Christians (some add Jews) do, indeed, believe in the same God. The Second Vatican Council, addressing Catholics in 1964, affirmed that Muslims “together with us adore the one, merciful God.” Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar signed a Declaration on Human Fraternity in 2019: “We, who believe in God and in the final meeting with Him and His judgment.” People in Egypt tell me that the source is one, but the manifestations are many. Some cast the net even wider, like Samira, a young Egyptian woman who told me that the Hindu gods and goddesses equal Allah’s ninety-nine names.

Polemicists see things differently. They juxtapose a Christian God who forgives and an Islamic God who threatens His creation with severe punishment. Some emphasize that whereas the Christian God can be painted, you’re not allowed to represent the Islamic God. And then, of course, there’s the doctrine of the Trinity, which Muslims reject as a form

of idolatry or polytheism (*shirk*). Distinguishing “our God” from “their God” is a routine move across religious communities.

Some play up similarity; others trade in difference. I tend to think that the devil is in the details—and God is too. We need to pay attention to nuances, to the textures of God-human relations, the different images, stories, expectations, hopes, and disappointments spun around gods in different places and times. Islam’s Allah wasn’t a straightforward continuation of the pre-Islamic Allah, and Muslims in Cairo who describe how God pats them on their back aren’t describing the exact same thing as evangelicals in Chicago who speak about having coffee with God.

One could write a book about sameness: *God equals God*. Or one could write a book about Otherness: *Allah is different*. I’d rather do neither. I’d rather listen to how Allah shows up for people—how God is encountered, felt, talked about, argued about, and imagined amid people’s busy lives. Neither sameness nor Otherness can do justice to these stories.

.....

There is an obvious source for learning about Allah: the Quran. In Islam’s holy book, God talks about Himself extensively. There are countless clues about God’s nature: eternal, incomparable, omniscient, kind and merciful, powerful and almighty. Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything in between. The one who created humans and jinn with the sole purpose that they may worship Him. The Quran is central, but the portrait I offer is grounded in people’s stories, not one single text. It is grounded in fieldwork, conversations, and interviews.

Egypt is an ideal place for composing a kaleidoscopic portrait of Allah. A Muslim-majority country, Egypt offers a miniature view of the Sunni Islamic world. It features a range of Muslim religiosities: from strict literalism to ecstatic Sufism. Many Muslims in Egypt simply practice—they pray, fast, and give alms without making a big deal out of it. Others have strong views on what is true Islam and what isn’t and don’t hesitate to share these views. What’s left of the secular nationalism and pan-Arabism that marked my mother’s childhood coexists with residues of the Islamic revival from the 1970s. Muslim Brotherhood remnants endure alongside the Salafi dream of returning to the earliest generations of Muslims. In the early 2000s Muslim televangelist preachers appeared on the scene, wearing jeans and T-shirts instead of formal robes, preaching on YouTube instead of in mosques, soft-spoken and often close to tears. They promoted

a direct line of easy and uncomplicated communication with God, and they were quite popular for a while. There are also agnostics and atheists and a vibrant Sufi tradition. About fifteen million Egyptians—roughly 10 percent of the population—are members of seventy-seven different Sufi orders. A more expansive and less orderly Sufi life unfolds around the saint shrines in which descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*ahl al-bayt*) are buried. At the shrines you're also likely to meet dervishes, men and women who are full-time travelers on the spiritual path. On top of this colorful picture sits a version of official Islam, represented in Egypt by the state and by Al-Azhar, the leading Sunni institution in the Arab world. Al-Azhar issues fatwas and sometimes intervenes in politics; it is often aligned with the state but not always. Within this broader landscape, I tried to stick closely to individuals and their stories.

The people I spoke to appear under pseudonyms unless they wanted to be named. They all knew I was doing research, but several suspected that my relentless God questions were about more than that. They are an eclectic mix. Some I knew from my previous research on dreams and charity. Others are relatives or people I know through family connections. Most are friends of friends. I wanted a broad sense of what Allah is in Egypt today and tried to talk to different kinds of Muslims: young and old, progressive and conservative, dervish and Salafi, working class and residents of gated communities. I sought variety but at the same time felt drawn to a particular crowd: the postrevolutionary generation. By this I mean mostly middle-class millennials who participated in the Egyptian uprising in 2011 and who, in the years that followed, actively rethought and recrafted their relationship to God. Many members of the postrevolutionary generation embarked on a spiritual search and tried to build a new, personal relationship with God. A striking number of them joined Sufi orders; others experimented with yoga and meditation. Some studied at new religious institutes or traveled to places like India to learn about other gods. All this happened against the backdrop of the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in 2012 and being overthrown by the military in 2013. Cairo subsequently became the playground of an authoritarian state, and most former revolutionaries withdrew from politics. In post-2013 Cairo, Allah shows up in unexpected places: yoga classes, overpriced coffee shops, and therapy sessions. Some might dismiss the postrevolutionary God-imaginaries as fringe, consumerist, or tied to privilege, but to my mind they are nevertheless part of the Islamic tradition.

When I wasn't in Cairo, I relied on the help of research assistants who conducted interviews for me. Whenever possible, I later followed up with face-to-face conversations. My research assistants are themselves former revolutionaries and trying to figure out their relationship to God. Often they connected me to friends of theirs. Millennial Sufis and seekers feature prominently in my kaleidoscopic portrait, as do doubters and people who won't stop asking questions.

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Some of my older friends in Egypt think it's funny that I'm writing a book about God. That job, they are pretty sure, is better left to someone with firm belief. Or at least someone with real roots in the tradition. I, it seems, have neither.

"Do you even believe in God?" they ask me.

In their view the belief question deserves a straightforward answer. Either you believe in God, the Prophet Muhammad, and revelation, or you don't. If you do, you should follow the rules; at minimum you should pray. If you don't, suit yourself; you'll pay the price later.

But I have other friends, the postrevolutionary crowd, who disagree. For them, there is room for play, uncertainty, oscillation—especially after the Arab Spring, when an entire generation began questioning the taken-for-granted, their teachers and preachers, sheikhs and clergymen, and the God-images from their childhood.

For the postrevolutionary generation—those who fought and chanted and dreamed at Tahrir Square—belief can be complicated. It's not a one-time decision, a switch you can flip, a yes/no question. It's part of a deep and existential search, a never-ending and sometimes agonizing process that can lift you up or weigh you down. For many of this generation, faith is unstable. Some pray, hoping that prayer will lead to belief. Others believe but don't pray. Some believe but experience God as painfully absent. Others can rattle off proofs for God's existence but are shaken when they stare into the abyss of someone else's unbelief. To me, such instability feels familiar.

I am definitely not pious. And I am definitely not an atheist. I suppose that means I'm agnostic, but that category has never felt quite right to me. Agnosticism, I find, can itself become fixed and rigid: *I know that I don't know*. Personally, what I'm attracted to is more akin to a deferral, throwing the question "Do you believe?" up in the air and never letting it settle. An

evasion? Fair enough. Cowardice? Also true. But I'm more at ease with uncertainty than with fixity. For me, the most compelling moments are those when "belief" isn't allowed to be the gatekeeper—the moments that redirect our curiosity away from the question of what is or isn't real toward the unfathomable richness of the world. Far wilder stories can be told about God than the ones contained by the question of belief—stories that revolve around searching for God, coming to terms with God, struggling with God, loving, rejecting, and dismissing God. Stories of ecstasy and apathy. Incredibly loud stories and impossibly quiet ones.

For some of the people I spoke to, belief is indeed a yes/no question. But for others—and for me—it's not. It's a far messier process, pulling you forward not toward certain knowledge but toward all you don't know. Sometimes an image comes into view, but then you turn the kaleidoscope, and things look different yet again. My own ongoing quest to figure out God might have begun with the seven-year-old version of me throwing on a scarf and mumbling a prayer (in German) on my mother's unused prayer rug. It continues today with me talking about God (in Arabic and English) with Egyptian believers and nonbelievers. Child or adult, trying my hand at prayer or studying it, attempting to figure out where I stand in life or listening to other people's life stories, ultimately it's all part of the same journey—set to the soundtrack of Umm Kulthum, a typewriter, the call to prayer, academic lectures, Cairo traffic, and *inshād* music.

.....

Disorientation is unavoidable when searching for something as elusive as God in a city with more than twenty million inhabitants. My stories take us all over Cairo, and they don't follow a strict chronology. I do not promise a clear picture. What I can say is that there are ninety-nine stories, loosely grouped into seven sections: "Where," "Up There," "Somewhere," "Right There," "Everywhere," "Nowhere," and "Maybe Here."

"Where" offers an introduction of sorts. First, to the place: Egypt shaped by the Islamic revival of the 1970s, the 2011 uprising, and the 2013 military coup; Cairo's streets, walls, hospitals, coffee shops, saint shrines, and malls. Second, to God's ninety-nine names, or the "beautiful names," as they are called in the Quran. God as such cannot be grasped, but God's names offer a way in. They bring God down to earth. They invite us to look here and there, up and down.

“Up There” is about older God-images that Egyptian millennials are trying to leave behind: God as a judge, on a throne, threatening sinners with the punishments of hell. This All-Powerful God—a God who causes earthquakes, wars, death—isn’t easy to live with. But an All-Powerful God can also be reassuring, even uplifting.

“Somewhere” opens into uncertainty and playfulness. If God is no longer “up there,” then one can look for new ways of relating to God. One can experiment. Former revolutionaries are rethinking God via therapy, travel, and anarchism. Instability is the name of the game. God comes in and out of view. Because of God’s elusiveness, revolutionary and nonrevolutionary Muslims alike seek bridges to God through sheikhs, saints, or the poor.

“Right There” is about the tension between immanence and transcendence—God as almost human and God as a far-removed and complete Other. This tension, which runs through different forms of Islam (and many other religious traditions), is the bread and butter of everyday religious life. It means that even though the Islamic God is often portrayed as unreachable, Muslims can feel God’s hand or receive a phone call from God.

“Everywhere” takes us more deeply into Egypt’s Sufi worlds. It’s about recitation, everyday miracles, and the divine spilling over into material form. It’s about experience and affect and excess. It’s about God being everywhere. The trick, as Sufis will tell you, is to remember this—to tune in.

Then comes the flip side: “Nowhere.” We meet doubters, people feeling alienated from God, agnostics, and a couple of atheists. In the wake of a failed revolution, the Rabaa massacre, and Gaza, people are grappling with a God who has turned His back on creation, who is depressed and can’t be bothered, or who might not even exist.

“Maybe Here” takes up the theme of multiplicity that runs throughout the book. It’s about the idea that Allah is bigger than what humans can grasp. God is (not) this, and God is (not) that, and the list goes on and on. The fact that God is elusive doesn’t have to lead to silence. It can lead to an embrace of multiplicity, even to imagining an Islam that doesn’t take humans quite so seriously. It can invite endless storytelling—ninety-nine stories and many more.

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Key Texts by Story

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- 2 Böwering, “God and His Attributes”; al-Razi, *Sharh asmā’ Allāh ta’āla*; Gimaret, *Les noms divins*; al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*; Nasr, *Study Quran*.
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- 8 ‘Abd al-Hamid, *Ribla ila Ma’rifat Allāh*; Hallaq, *Impossible State*.
- 10 Hoffman, “Devotion to the Prophet”; Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints*; Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*; Reeves, “Power, Resistance, and the Cult of Muslim Saints”; Muhammad, *Ahl al-Bayt Fi Masr*.
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- 21 Dawkins, *God Delusion*; Lehner, *Gott ist Unbequem*; Otto, *Idea of the Holy*.
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