

Antipode

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Book Review Symposium

Mona Atia, *Building a House in Heaven: Pious Neoliberalism and Islamic Charity in Egypt*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8166-8917-0 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-8915-6 (cloth)

Introduction

Mona Atia's book is not one about the aftermath of the Arab Spring in Egypt. But its conclusions offer a foundation for understanding a number of political-economic and religious transformations afoot in the country. Atia shows how market fundamentalism has reshaped—but certainly not colonized—Islamic traditions, and what those new practices and ideologies look, sound, and feel like. This is a book about the process, and prospects, of living religiously with capitalist privatization processes. *Building a House in Heaven* traces the shadows cast by new political-economic paradigms in Egypt, looking at the communities that have reckoned with those shadows.

Atia holds steady, as she must, certain sets of ideas to examine charitable acts as capitalist events. Some reviewers take on these strategic decisions in the forum that follows: She could have better examined gender politics or Islamic shifts in Egypt around the subject of just economies. The suggestions by these reviewers to make the book “talk” to other stories, and push the data to draw additional conclusions, attest to the richness of the text, which is a unifying force of this review symposium. Atia's project to explore faith-based social organizations contributes meaningfully to conversations about economic geography, religious studies, and

ethnographic research. In what seems like a nod to Gibson-Graham's expansion of [the iceberg of economic practices](#), *Building a House in Heaven* shows how charitable acts sit alongside capitalist economic practices and where the contours of market religions (or religious governmentalities) emerge. In the process, the book refuses to reduce Islam to a capitalist agent; Atia optimistically maintains a more hopeful, and radical, imaginary of moral/religious life. For the practice of ethnographic research, *Building a House in Heaven* also offers readers a model for rigorous investigations of street-level observations and the making of expert knowledge in archival documents.

The book will have strong pedagogical appeal for graduate and undergraduate teachers in geography, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. For research-design courses in particular, the third chapter should be required reading. There, as one reviewer notes, Atia performs thick description through a materialist-feminist-postcolonial lens. This empirical work, and indeed the book as a whole, offer an important context for current debates about economic life in Egypt, and the impetus for Atia's next project that unpacks poverty mapping as a technocratic tool with diverse impacts on the places and subjects targeted by development interventions. Above all, *Building a House in Heaven* reminds readers that neoliberalization is far from a static and finished project, as it coalesces with other forces and is refuted by its own reproduction.

Katie Wells
Metropolitan Institute
Virginia Tech
kjw@vt.edu

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