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### Religious act, public space: reflections on some Geertzian concepts

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# Religious act, public space: reflections on some Geertzian concepts\*\*

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This paper examines theoretical and methodological implications of Clifford Geertz's approach to religion as he formulated it in 'Religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1966), where religion and culture seem to be defined as functional equivalents. The paper considers religious symbols in the public space, using two examples from contemporary reality – one being a certain expression spoken by the copilot of Egypt Air Flight 990, the other being the headscarf controversy in France – in order to explore how the anthropologist relates the microsituations he observes to an all-embracing context.

**Keywords:** Clifford Geertz; religion; culture; Egypt Air 990; headscarf; thong

In this paper I will consider religious symbols in the public space, understood essentially in its conflicted and controversial aspect. In doing so, I take inspiration from several notions developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. My purpose is to answer the question of how we account for human action, how we fathom the meanings behind it. In short, how does the anthropologist produce his interpretation? These notions in turn will be subjected to a critical reading. I will illustrate my points using two examples from contemporary reality, one being a particular expression used by Muslims in various situations in daily life, and the other being the French controversy over wearing hijab in the public space.

In 'Thick description' (Geertz 1973), Geertz espouses the idea of culture as public, writing that 'culture is public because meaning is,' it being understood that meaning is incorporated into action and can be deciphered from it. If we can read human actions, it is because they have 'texture,' they present themselves as 'discourse.' To put it another way, ethnography begins with the actors' discourses and is carried out as the anthropologist contextualises them. Given these preliminaries, and following André Mary (1998), we ask, what is the connection between what a social actor 'says' through words, gestures, and behaviour, and the 'cultural forms,' 'symbolic systems,' or 'structures of meaning' that inform the 'said' of the social actor?

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\*\*Translation by Diane James

In point of fact, the notion of 'social discourse' is not very explicit in Geertz. What do we make of multiple contradictory interpretations, particularly concerning social actors, and how do we decide between them? Paul Ricoeur (1984) emphasised the multivocality of actions as of texts and the polemical nature of interpretation. So what do we make of social discourse? Is it the social actor's discourse, or is it already the 'context' created by the anthropologist in order to read a person's action? This raises the question of how the anthropologist relates the microsituations he observes, describes, and contextualises, to an all-embracing context – e.g. religion or culture – and what he does to avoid taking this referential context as an invariable background and thereby ossifying it.

In this connection, I will look at Geertz's approach to religion as he formulated it in 'Religion as a cultural system,' his contribution to the collective work, *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion* (Geertz 1966), in order to underline the obvious tension in Geertz between a conception somewhat influenced by an intellectualist bias and a conception oriented more toward the logic of action, which latter I shall draw on to support the development of my argument. In his essay, Geertz offers a first definition of religion as a system of representations:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1966, p. 4)

This amounts to making religion and culture equivalent, at least in the sense that Geertz defines culture in the same essay, where he writes that it

denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (1966, p. 3)

The definition of both religion and culture as 'world view' places them in the position of equally satisfying the same functional requirements. Yet such a definition of religion (or culture) would only be relevant were it not only the dominant but the only world view within a society. In that case, and only in that case, the definition of religion as 'that which explains the world and orients the action of men' would relate to a character specific to it. But such is not the case, since societies are for the most part pluralist, in one way or another, when it comes to 'world views.'

This is a shortcoming that has characterised traditional approaches to religion, and Geertz appears to have been caught in the same trap, at least in certain formulations in his famous paper. In confounding religion and culture, the traditional approach to religion essentialises the collective identity as a form established once and for all and often conceived independently of any historicity. The Muslim culture (or religion) is thus considered to be a substance that inscribes individual behaviour in a quasi-integral social habitus. We seem to be dealing with a separate world inhabited by beings whose mentality is totally different from ours, one where the specialists apparently do not know how to 'put religion in its place,' for example, considering it merely a 'belief in superhuman beings,' in the manner of Edward Tylor (1871). On the contrary, they allow it to float here, there, and everywhere. Such an overly inclusive definition of religion forecloses the possibility of exiting the separate world created by Orientalists. Such a definition cannot conceive that religious behaviours are perfectly distinguishable from other social behaviours even when the latter are religious in form.

On the level of this new formulation of religion we meet Geertz again, now with considerations that contradict his first approach. In the same essay, he shows how the impact of religious ritual has its greatest effect outside of religion per se:

The dispositions which religious rituals induce thus have their most important impact – from a human point of view – outside the boundaries of the ritual itself as they reflect back to color the individual's conception of the established world of bare fact. (Geertz 1966, p. 35)

In other words, the particular atmosphere that characterises certain religious practices permeates many spheres of people's lives, far beyond what is strictly religious, endowing those spheres with a particular style, a predominant tone. Thus we can say, for example, that if a Muslim recognises certain practices in the formal code of Islam, he lives them essentially as an aesthetic form of action (Ferrié 1991, p. 232); hence his preference for using the right hand rather than the left, the fact that he avoids a puddle of blood, does not eat rare meat, kisses people on the cheeks twice rather than thrice, is buried and not cremated, recites the *bismillah* (in the name of God) before taking an action, etc. All of these apparently religious behaviours are simply instances of civil conduct. This is congruent with Geertz's analysis of Balinese rituals in which he sees first of all an expression of ordinary life (Geertz 1966).

Looking through this new prism, we see that religion, which in the traditional approach and in the first Geertzian version is supposed to engulf 'the total person, transporting him, so far as he is concerned, into another mode of existence' (and which, as such, truly occurs only in strictly religious practice), has nothing to do with 'the pale, remembered reflection of that experience in the midst of everyday life' (Geertz 1966, p. 36). Such a change in perspective allows us to move from a conception in which the symbolism would be 'in the mind' (borrowing Ricoeur's term), to one in which the meaning is 'incorporated into action and decipherable from it by other actors in the social interplay' (again using Ricoeur's terminology 1984, p. 57). It follows that religion as a social phenomenon must be seen as thought in action, rather than as a system of thought that imposes itself upon the actor's consciousness.

Such a readjustment assumes the adoption of the social actor's point of view, or the 'native's point of view,' as Geertz suggested again in one of his last essays (2007, p. 432). In this operation, it is a matter, on the one hand, of 'putting ourselves in contact with the human subjectivities in play, with what the believers really think and feel' (this is the phenomenological analysis), and on the other hand, of 'exposing and describing the interpretive frames through which they understand and judge acts and events' (the hermeneutic analysis) (p. 432). This means that we must examine the actors' mental states, intentions, and perceptions of the environment, and refrain from any kind of global reasoning as to what might be the general way of thinking of any particular group. This implies bringing together the explanation of the structuring anteriority – appropriate to the approach of sociological holism – and the logical structure of the situation, as it impresses itself upon the perception of the actor in a given context – an approach appropriate to methodological individualism.

In order to illustrate these various considerations, let us now focus on some ordinary forms of 'religious' expression taken from Islam. As we consider certain phrases that people utter daily in countless situations, such as *bismillah* (in the name of God) or *tawakkaltu 'al allah* (I rely on God), we will attempt to grasp their meaning in the various contexts in which they occur and highlight their divergent interpretations in cultural spaces where they take on unexpected meanings, such as in Europe or the United States. The crash of Egypt Air Flight 990, a Boeing 707 en route from New York to Cairo that went down in the Atlantic Ocean on 31 October 1999, gave rise to a controversy between Americans and Westerners on one side and Egyptians, Arabs, and

Muslims on the other, which even now has not subsided, some eight years after the incident. In the following analysis, I focus on words spoken in the public arena by various actors, essentially media professionals, cultural experts, and civil society representatives.<sup>1</sup> My analysis neither comments on the official investigation reports nor assesses the relevance of their conclusions. At the very most, I will cite the reports where they enter into the polemic. It is the public controversy provoked by the event that is the primary object of my analysis, even though it clearly reinforces the discrepancies between the conclusions of the US and the Egyptian reports on their respective investigations, the former concluding that the copilot was responsible for the crash, and the latter exculpating him from any malicious act.<sup>2</sup>

Attention quickly focused on a brief utterance attributed to the copilot. The phrase *'tawakkaltu 'al allah'* (I rely on God; I trust in God; I put myself in God's hands), decoded from the recording of the final words exchanged between the two pilots, came to symbolise the 'cultural gap' that supposedly divides America from the Arab world. Because God was invoked, the American investigators hastily characterised the phrase as a 'prayer.' Some in the American media translated *'tawakkaltu 'al allah'* as 'I have made my decision, I place my faith in the hands of God,'<sup>3</sup> and described it as a formula that a Muslim would pronounce when preparing to commit the irreparable, in this case, an act of suicide.<sup>4</sup> Confusion was sown between the words 'faith' and 'fate,' producing the phrase, 'I place my fate in the hands of God.' Indeed, this was how the American investigators first translated the transcription of the copilot's utterance, before they revised it as 'I rely on God,' apparently under the influence of information provided by the official Egyptian investigators.<sup>5</sup> One can imagine that if the expression inspired a certain interpretation on the American side, it was because it referred to God and was spoken by a Muslim, and whenever a Muslim is involved, suspicion turns toward extremism.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, the Egyptians were immediately skeptical of the American investigators' impartiality. They disputed the suicide theory that was based on this Arabic phrase being repeated eleven times. According to the Egyptians, the suicide theory could even be a cover-up for something the manufacturer, Boeing, might be responsible for, or some other cause of the disaster that could be laid at the feet of the United States. Under questioning, the Arab experts insisted that the phrase in question is not a prayer but a formula that can be used in numerous ways in very different contexts.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the context, it could even mean that the copilot was trying to save the airliner. In everyday life, the expression *'tawakkaltu 'al allah'* is a way of entrusting one's soul to God before a journey, an exam, or an ordeal, but it can also be used before an ordinary action with no particular risk. In the context of the airline disaster, it would seem perfectly normal for the copilot to use the expression in response to the situation of extreme danger and attendant stress, although the report on the American investigation repeatedly indicates that no evidence of this type of response was recorded,<sup>8</sup> just as it notes that the copilot's reactions to the first sign of a problem (before the pilot returned to the cockpit) did not indicate that he was surprised or upset by what was happening.

As in English or in French, likewise in Arabic, many religious expressions have been secularised and are commonly used without the least religious import, even though religious hardliners may assert the contrary, that every such utterance necessarily expresses an absolute state of belief and should be taken literally. But here as elsewhere, the social actor who uses such expressions does so within the logic of the situation. The Arabic language is rife with the name of God, whether in the ubiquitous *insha'allah* (God willing), or *al-hamdu li'llah* (praise God, thank God), *astaghfiru'llah* (I ask God's forgiveness), or *a'udu bi'llah* (God forbid, God help me). Other common expressions include 'God keep you,' 'God protect you,' 'God save you,' 'God spare you,' 'God help you,' 'God be with you,' etc. In short, *tawakkaltu*

'*al allah* seems to be the type of religious expression spoken in practically any situation in Arab and Muslim countries, somewhat as people in the Christian West might use the expression 'My God,' or 'Jesus,' or 'Holy Mother.'

In her novel, *Lettre posthume*, Dominique Eddé very judiciously brings out the point that there is enough 'God in God to suffice for all the world.' God is 'a rallying point, a password, an indestructible absence. . . . ' God is 'an absolute word that answers for nothing and no one,' because "'Allah" is not only the Arabic name of God, it is what we call the ineffable, everything within a hair's breadth of existence or non-existence.' Allah is 'the flight of thought in the midst of speech,' 'the god of words,' 'religion in language' (Eddé 1989, pp. 65–68):

'Allah' when the light is beautiful, 'Allah' when the light fails, 'Allah' to question catastrophe, 'Allah' to run for your life, 'Allah' to applaud the artist, 'Allah' to conjure the future, 'Allah. . . ' when you remember something, 'Allah, Allah' when nothing happens, 'Allah' if you trip, 'Allah' if you fall, 'Allah' if you don't fall, 'Allah' whatever happens, 'Allah' when a beautiful girl walks by, 'Allah' to break the silence, 'Allah' at the end of a sigh, 'Allah' when you learn the truth and 'Allah' when you discover a lie. . . (Eddé 1989, pp. 66–67)<sup>9</sup>

In summary, we can say that the phrase spoken by the copilot neither proves that he had suicidal intentions, nor that he was a Muslim extremist, any more than it proves the reverse. The issue is whether he uttered the phrase after having determined that the end was inevitable because of some kind of technical malfunction, or if the phrase was an invocation preceding an act of suicide, as the American theory would have it, even though that theory was categorically ruled out by the Arab and Muslim side. The Egyptian investigators argued that it would be impossible for a Muslim to associate the recitation of this phrase with the intention to commit suicide,<sup>10</sup> and certain Muslim commentators went so far as to assert that Muslims never commit suicide because their faith forbids, assuming that what is forbidden never happens. Nevertheless, there is a phrase that would have been conclusive concerning the copilot's suicidal intention if he had in fact uttered it, and that is, 'I have made my decision.' Indeed, at the beginning of the affair, certain American media outlets quite wrongly attributed this phrase to the copilot.<sup>11</sup> Without such 'conclusive' evidence, however, all the anthropologist has to work with is the social discourse and the contradictory interpretations that such an incident occasions on the part of the various actors. The anthropologist's task is to contextualise the various meanings while trying to find a middle way between the raw experience of the actor – to which, in any case, he has no access – and the experience he reconstructs.

At this point, it is useful to recall what Geertz thought of the ethnographic account. According to him, its value

does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. (Geertz 1973, p. 16)

For our purposes, this suggests that we adopt a semiotic concept of culture understood, again as Geertz specified, as 'interworked systems of construable signs.' Culture as such 'is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described' (Geertz 1973, p. 14). Consequently, cultural analysis would consist in formulating conjectures and evaluating them in relation to the context.

Obviously this raises the question of verification, or, to retain the interpretive perspective, the question of the plausibility of the proposed explanation. Following Arnold Davidson (2005),



who himself built upon ideas developed by the historian Carlo Ginzburg, I do not believe that the researcher can discover clear proof that allows direct access to the reality. He can only approach the reality through the mediation of contradictory voices clashing in a given situation. If there is a 'common ethic,' it is accessible only through the social actors who construct and reconstruct the reality through the intermediary of their mutual relationships. These are 'thick' relationships: they are made of relations of strength and negotiation, expectation and frustration, understanding and incomprehension. Each actor projects his own conceptual categories on the others, and through a game of reflecting back and forth the actors together reconfigure the reality. Like a detective, the anthropologist must be alert to the discrepancy between the various voices expressing themselves in a given context. It is this discrepancy that allows him to read beneath the smooth surface of image and discourse the subtle interaction between threats and fears, attacks and projections, scorn and admiration, certainties and misunderstandings. It is this same discrepancy that will help the anthropologist give meaning to phenomena that would otherwise remain obscure or whose meaning would be subject to endless controversy; balancing between a naturalistic representation according to which only rational observation is capable of deriving the organising principles of the domain under study and deducing the native interpretation (Guille-Escuret 2000, p. 199), and a relativistic representation that disbelieves in the possibility of attaining the reality and thus confines itself purely to reconstructing the social actors' subjectivities which it juxtaposes one beside another, regardless of any 'common ethic.'

Having considered these methodological issues, let us move on to the second example, which concerns the wearing of the 'veil' by young women of Muslim origin in France. Here I will focus on the contradictory 'social discourses' produced by various actors around this 'object,' and attempt to relate them to the contentious sphere of contemporary culture. To this end, I will examine conflicts arising from the question of the visibility or the invisibility of a 'religious' expression – the analysis of which must determine its true meaning – and how these conflicts concern French society as a whole. The lines of reflection concern the boundary between public and private space, between global and communal cultural norms, between socially dominant and socially dominated groups.

Can we assign a single function to the 'veil'? In the course of the debate over the ban on the Islamic headscarf in France, some analysts claim to have pinpointed the 'true' and 'ultimate' meaning of the veil, that is, 'a sign of woman's subjection, of the archaism if not the radical Islamism that would manipulate young women for political ends' (Khosrokhavar 2004, p. 90). This desire to fix the ultimate meaning of wearing hijab is problematic on two counts. On the one hand, it results in the 'refusal to hear what the women who wear it have to say' – women who say they do so voluntarily and on their own initiative, whatever the reasons they cite – and, on the other hand, it constitutes 'a denial of the diversity of situations in which the headscarf is worn,' including those situations in which the motivation is primarily religious (Nordmann 2004, p. 165). The result is that neither the social logics that lead girls and young women to wear a headscarf nor the conditions of their existence are taken into account; indeed, these are of no interest; they are relegated to the background of stereotypes linked a priori to this wardrobe accessory.

Emerging from behind this lack of interest in context is the central interest in this conflict which is, at least on the majority side, 'to tone down the Islamic appearance of certain distinguishing practices in order to make them socially tolerable' (Tersigni 2003, p. 116), and confine them to the private space. That is the intent of the law against wearing hijab in the public space (schools, government offices, hospitals, etc.) in the French Republic.

The republican doctrine of assimilation effectively privileges the relationship of the individual citizen and the state, hoping to ban any overt demonstration of communal membership from the public space, while passing over the fact that the society has never stopped classifying individuals according to ethnic, religious, or cultural group. In practice, the republican principle of equality can tilt toward the suspicion that some people, even though legally French, tend in their 'cultural' behaviours to alter the republican order and the universally secular character of the public space. In the headscarf debate, the majority national cultural norm discounts the strategy of young women who wear hijab in response to specific social situations and who seek to challenge certain forms of discrimination. Taking full political stock of the veil is difficult because it shakes the foundations of secularism, in particular its neutrality with respect to personal associations. Paradoxically, this failure to consider hijab in the political context, thus confining it to the religious context, is in alignment with the position of Muslim fundamentalists, notably the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, who consider it to be no more than the observation of a religious requirement and the sign of woman's submission to man – whereas in Turkey or Tunisia, the very rationale for banning the headscarf in universities and government offices is political. One more example, if one were needed, to illustrate the pertinence of the logic of the situation to understanding why women wear the headscarf and why the headscarf is banned.

To return to the French context, wearing a headscarf must in many cases be seen as a political statement grappling with two 'normative powers': the French model of integration which organises and defines the public space by excluding certain groups, and the Muslim parental figure who has heretofore put forward a somewhat private Muslim identity. Wearing hijab in public – reinventing a tradition in the context of contemporary France – is not necessarily a challenge to the separation of public and private. It is an attempt to make visible a minority, a 'culture,' a 'religion' that until now have been condemned to invisibility and secretiveness, and to connect them to modernity, notably through the civic engagement of young women who wear hijab. This spectacular 'showing' of the veiled body of women in the public space might seem paradoxical in light of the unilateral reading of the veil as signifying the seclusion of women in the domestic space. In any case, we can say that this intrusion of the 'private' into the 'public' (Babès 2004, p. 94) represents a real change in the status of women within both spaces, a change toward liberation rather than confinement, with the headscarf suggesting emancipation rather than seclusion.

In keeping with the suggestion that cultural analysis gains insight into meaning by examining discrepancy, let us extend the reading of the veil in the public space by placing it in perspective with another feminine sign that involves the female body, i.e. the 'thong,' a bottomless panty that allows skin-tight pants to be worn without showing any lines; this too is part of the private/public, emancipation/domination debate. The veil and the thong are generally read as mutually exclusive vestimentary features because of what they supposedly represent: on the one hand, submissive religious conduct; on the other, liberated behaviour. Behind these representations we find the 'great divide' between Muslim 'sexism' in the *banlieues* and 'equality of the sexes' in the secular space.

And while feminist criticism of the 1970s pointed out the hypersexualisation of women in the public sphere of consumer society, few now theorise that those who wear hijab 'could be proceeding from the same critique,' since everyone knows 'their motivations have nothing to do with ours,' as Christine Delphy asserts (2006, p. 63). Hijab is reduced to an unequivocal sign of masculine sexual domination and attributed to an Other culture, reputedly a harshly sexist culture, whereas the thong, despite its sexy reputation, is not considered sexist apparel because it is a matter of secular vestimentary conduct. Yet wearing a thong isn't always innocuous; it can be part of a system of corporeal techniques and modifications to which a woman's body



and sexuality must be subjected, which in this context at least would make it the same sign of woman's domination as wearing a veil.

At this point we might well ask whether identifying markers that are culturally familiar more easily pass unnoticed than those that are culturally unfamiliar. The answer is probably yes, yet it is not quite so simple with regard to the thong, which is still considered 'indecent' in the public space, something that women need to be protected from. Even when emancipated, women are not seen as full subjects, but rather as minors, victims whose innocence must be protected if they dare to wear an outfit that is too 'provocative,' whereas boys' clothing, even when considered indecent, is not as readily associated with 'sexual provocation.' When we compare these different perspectives and open up the aperture, it appears that the question of hijab raises the question of the difference between the sexes in secular, hedonist, postmodern society, a society in which, despite everything, woman's body remains subject to man's omniscient gaze and constitutes a measure of power and domination.

An anecdote I heard from several sources in different contexts will serve to illustrate the simultaneously protective and concupiscent attitude with which a man may speak of the subjugation of a woman's body. It takes place in the souk of an Arab city – Cairo, Damascus, Algiers, or other – where a bearded salesman is trying to overcome the last reservations of a young woman in hijab who is contemplating the purchase of a thong. He touts the effect it will have on her husband: 'You'll drive him crazy with this tonight.'<sup>12</sup> Cover the body in public space, the better to reveal it in private!

Veil or thong, thong or veil, both wardrobe items inevitably raise the question of woman's status. Can she reclaim herself as a woman and not be prevented from being a man like any other? Can she be recognised both as particular (woman) and universal (*homo*), a condition apparently taken for granted with respect to a man (*vir*)?

Clearly Geertz's influence throughout this paper has been essentially heuristic, allowing us to clarify the type of question to put to the real – not why the actor acts, but what is the situational logic according to which he acts – and to define the (interpretive) position from which to answer the question. This in turn raises the question of the value of the ethnographic account, particularly with regard to its plausibility. From this point of view, the notion of discrepancy also seems to offer a certain heuristic value. One characteristic of discrepancy is its dynamism. Making discrepancy work (*faire travailler l'écart*), to borrow a phrase from François Jullien (2007), consists in comparing two positions, not in order to reify or essentialise their difference, but the better to show the persistence of the discrepancy between them, which allows us to better understand the discrepancy, not from a perspective of growing distance, but of thicker description.

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## Notes

1. See, e.g., Wren 1999, Piotrowski 2000, and Mari 1999. See also 'L'énigme des derniers mots du copilote d'EgyptAir oppose Égyptiens et Américains,' *Le Monde*, 19 November 1999, and 'L'Égypte s'interroge sur de mystérieuses images radars "classifiées" de l'US Air Force,' *Le Temps*, 15 August 2000.

2. The report on the US investigation (NTSB 2002) concludes that the crash of Egypt Air Flight 990 was not the result of any mechanical cause, but of the manipulation of the airplane controls by the copilot (first relief officer). The reasons for his action were not determined. The report on the Egyptian investigation (ECAA 2001) holds, on the contrary, that no evidence indicates the copilot could have plunged the airliner into the ocean, and emphasises instead the accumulation of technical failures as the probable cause of the accident.
3. This translation was offered by the American daily *USA Today* and by several television networks including ABC.
4. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, in the midst of the crisis the copilot even recited the *shahada*, the Muslim statement of faith ('I bear witness that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God'), which reinforced suspicions of suicide or sabotage. According to the experts, however, when a Muslim recites the *shahada*, it does not generally precede any kind of action. Moreover, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) intervened several times to quash this story, which was based on 'unidentified sources.'
5. See NTSB 2002, 4 n 11: 'This phrase (recorded on the CVR [cockpit voice recorder] in Arabic as "Tawakkalt Ala Allah") was originally interpreted to mean "I place my fate in the hands of God." The interpretation of this Arabic statement was later amended to "I rely on God." According to an EgyptAir and ECAA presentation to Safety Board staff on April 28, 2000, this phrase "is very often used by the Egyptian layman in day to day activities to ask God's assistance for the task at hand".'
6. Ibrahim Hooper, National Communications Director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, pointed to 'an information gap when it comes to Islam and Muslims, and this gap is easily filled with ignorance.' He added, 'If the inference was by a Christian pilot who said, "God help me," we wouldn't even have this conversation.' Quoted by Wren 1999.
7. The report on the Egyptian investigation puts great emphasis on the very common use of this expression in Egypt, and underlines the fact that it is only used in the context of a 'good action,' e.g., when preventing someone from falling, or in a more routine manner, when embarking on a journey by bus or by train (see ECAA 2001, p. 83).
8. Based on the rate of the copilot's speech and the frequency of his repetitions of the phrase, the report on the American investigation concludes that there was no significant increase in his level of psychological stress.
9. I would like to thank Kenneth Brown who alerted me to this passage during the UCLA conference on Clifford Geertz. Tunisians, in their everyday lives, use the word *wallah* (or *wallahi*) as an opening to lend more weight to their words, make themselves more interesting, swear their loyalty, affirm their reliability, threaten someone, impress the public, express admiration, show astonishment, declare love, hail a person, warn them, convince a partner, attract their attention, etc.
10. The Egyptian report emphasises the fact that the phrase is only used in the context of a good action and never in that of a bad action, and provides examples of situations in which it could never be used, such as killing someone or planning a robbery, etc. (see ECAA 2001, p. 83).
11. According to Jean-Paul Mari (1999), the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* reported this story based on a leak from the American investigation, but then 'a new "leak" explained that the terrible phrase, "I have made my decision," never even existed on the tape! It wasn't just a mistranslation but a big lie. NTSB president Jim Hall expressed outrage' over these media reports.
12. Here I would like to thank my colleague, the linguist Khaoula Taleb-Ibrahimi, who, during the January 2008 Lyon conference on Clifford Geertz, reminded me of this incident, a scene she had witnessed and one that others had also described to me.

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