Seeing Lights

Healing in a Meditation Class in Beirut

JOHANNA KÜHN

Abstract This article links "sensorially engaged anthropology" (NICHTER 2008) to the research of contemporary spiritual practices in the Middle East by exploring the notion of healing among practitioners of a meditation class in Beirut. Based on ten months of ethnographic research, participants' sensory processes during the meditation class are analysed. The author shows how the central aspect of the practice, the sensation of *seeing lights*, can be understood as a bodily mediated attempt to learn and experience love for oneself. This attitude was the basis for healing, as from the practitioners' perspective only a self-loving individual could possess the ability to build a life according to one's wishes and thus heal from difficult life situations. In this way, the practice proposed a notion of healing as the acquisition of individual agency that reflected the aspirations of the primarily female and middle-class practitioners. Particularly against the backdrop of the recent economic crisis in Lebanon, efforts to build a self-determined life—one that balanced the drive for autonomy and individuality with the need for embeddedness in the social environment—played a central role in the practitioners' lives. More broadly, the article demonstrates that focusing on the sensory experiences of those involved in healing practices not only enables a better understanding of how people manage to become better, but also draws attention to the fact that repetitive learning and experience of sensations are the means by which contemporary spiritual practices (re)produce and reaffirm distinctive values centred around the question of how to live one's life.

Keywords sensory anthropology, meditation, healing, Lebanon, agency, middle class, individuality, autonomy

Introduction

> "It was Friday and we had a *Development and Enlightenment Program.* This is one of the most powerful programs in meditation that Rayhan gives. So I entered. [Rayhan said:] 'You are welcome! Please have a seat!' [I answered:] 'Okay!' I have no clue what's gonna happen. [He said:] 'So, lay back!' Well okay. He started talking and I just went flowing from place to place. [Afterwards Rayhan asked:] 'What did you see?' [I answered]: 'I've seen lights.' He was like: 'It's your first time? [...] you've seen lights? […] For *Allāh*, I think you are ready! You're ready for what you find out yourself!' So I kept coming to meditation." (Nabila, 6 December 2017)[1]

Rayhan, a single man in his early thirties with experience in the sales and tourism sector, was first introduced to meditation courses and energy-based healing methods (*e.g.* Reiki) in the expat community of Dubai. After his return to Lebanon he created his own kind of meditation, and—backed by silent partners and with the help of his family—opened a spiritual centre. In a flat in a newly constructed apartment building in the south-west of Beirut, a short walk north of the National Museum, he offered meditation sessions up to three evenings a week from Monday to Friday for a fee of 15–35 US dollars.[2] The mostly female audience experienced a two-hour class encompassing two elements. One involved using angel tarot cards[3] to answer practitioners' questions or advise them on challenging situations by delivering messages from angels. The other element was a combination of incense sticks, loud relaxing music (to drown out the traffic outside), the sound of singing bowls, and the emotionally loaded voice of Rayhan guiding the participants through a journey to imaginary environments. In this part, attendees sought the sensation of *seeing lights*—an

experience that provided the jumping off point for the following analysis of this meditation practice.

Rayhan's meditations are part of Beirut's flourishing field of yoga classes and meditation courses (henceforth referred to as contemporary spiritual practices).[4] Despite criticism from some Christian and Muslim religious authorities, who see these practices as incompatible with religion, such leisure activities are increasingly popular among the middle classes of Lebanese society. Though they vary in content and procedures, a prominent feature of these practices is the idea of healing; whether they be physical illnesses, psychological problems or social conflicts, practitioners are seeking healing for troublesome aspects of their lives. This focus on healing is not specific to Beirut. In his study on the *New Age* movement in the Global North, Heelas (1996: 81) states that "[i]n a general sense of the term, the entire New Age has to do with 'healing'."

The conference *Aesthetics of Healing: Working with the Senses in Therapeutic Contexts* called for the "black box" of healing to be opened. It drew on sensory anthropology, a field that invites us to integrate the study of sensory processes and conceptualisations into anthropological work (cf. Bull & Mitchell 2015; Pink 2015; Pink & Howes 2010). Central to the conference were the bodily processes and sensory experiences of those involved in healing. The inclusion of sensory approaches is not only relevant for the analysis of healing practices, where ideas of sickness and notions of "becoming better" are manifold in their forms, their purposes and the sensory perceptions they trigger. It also offers a fresh look at contemporary spiritual practices. By paying attention to "the embodied sensibilities the practice cultivates" (Dox 2016: 3), contemporary spiritual practices become embodied experiences that are entangled with the social, political, religious and economic circumstances in which practitioners are living (cf. Nichter 2008: 186) rather than "representations of something" (Kurz 2017: 202).

In the academic literature, much has been written about *New Age* practitioners in the Global North (Aupers & Houtmann 2006; Hanegraaff 1996; Hauser 2013; Heelas 1996; Redden 2005), but except for Israel (Ruah-Midbar 2012; Ruah-Midbar & Zaidman 2013; Werczberger & Huss 2014), little has been said about those in the Middle East.[5] With the analysis of Rayhan's meditation class, I contribute a sensorially sensitive insight into the field of contemporary spiritual practice in Lebanon. I begin my analysis by describing the practitioners' life situations, which were characterised by challenges stemming from social expectations and the economic crisis. I then analyse the centrepiece of Rayhan's meditation class, the sensation of *seeing lights*. I show that it can be understood as a bodily mediated attempt to learn and experience love for oneself. In the practitioners' perception, self-love was the basis for healing: only a self-loving individual had the ability to build a life according to one's wishes. Thus, the practice's notion of healing can be understood as establishing oneself as a powerful agent in order to shape a self-determined life. To conclude, I discuss the wider implications of the practices. I show that the meditation classes centred around specific values that informed the practitioner's aspiration of living an individual life while maintaining social embeddedness. In this sense, contemporary spiritual practices may be considered a leisure activity that expresses and reproduces the middle-class lifestyle of the practitioners, which is itself informed by the drive for individuality and autonomy.

The data presented are part of my research on contemporary spiritual practices and energy-based healing methods in Lebanon.[6] During ten months of ethnographic research carried out between March 2017 and December 2018, I conducted (mostly English-speaking) narrative interviews with 46 spiritual practitioners, participated in weekly yoga, meditation and Kabbalah classes, and attended multi-day workshops on energy-based healing methods in public centres and in private meetings of practitioners. My research approach is based on the understanding of "learning and knowing as situated in embodied practice and movement" (Pink & Howes 2010: 332). I was not only a participating observer, but an active apprentice of the aforementioned practices (cf. Pink 2015: 103–107; Kanafani & Sawaf 2017: 8f). For instance, I sensorially engaged myself in Rayhan's meditations with the aim of "grasp[ing] the task that the field subject must master in order to be minimally competent in his or her domain" (Luhrmann 2010: 220). Through this "emplaced and active participation" (Pink 2015: 116), I aimed

to better comprehend the sensory dimensions of my interlocutors' narratives and thus their spiritual practice itself.

Spiritual Practitioners in Beirut

Referring to *New Age* practices in the Global North, Fedele & Knibbe (2013: 7ff), Heelas (1996: 137), Sutcliffe & Gilhus (2014: 5ff) and Utriainen (2014: 243) have argued that participants are predominantly urban middle-class women, and navigate their lives in an uncertain, paradoxical and complex world. Also, Zhang (2015, 2018) demonstrates how a mixture of spiritual practices, psychology and (neuro)science gained popularity among China's urban middle class as its members strive for happiness and well-being "in a time of profound urban restructuring" (*ibid.* 2015: 316).

My interlocutors shared similarities with the examples outlined above. Practitioners lived in various parts of Beirut and its suburbs. Many rejected sectarian self-perceptions such as Sunni or Maronite[7], and through this expressed their stance against political sectarianism[8] and the ways in which it is reflected and reinforced in everyday life. While rejecting the politicisation of religious belonging, practitioners identified as Muslim, Christian or Druze. Nonetheless, they distanced themselves from established religious authorities and institutions, not least because they were considered to be (potentially) enmeshed with the sectarian political leadership of the country. In this sense, interlocutors understood contemporary spiritual practices as a way to independently seek an understanding of their faith and its practices, *e.g.* praying and fasting.

The majority of practitioners I met during my research were single women in their twenties and thirties or divorced single mothers aged around fifty to sixty. Their marital status was not only a shared aspect of their lives, but also a topic often raised in the interviews. Many interlocutors talked about problems centred around the issue of marriage and, relatedly, reproduction (cf. Inhorn 2012): the inability to marry, the wish not to marry, increasing social pressure because of advancing age and the absence of a marital partner and offspring, the social and personal consequences of a failing marriage, resulting expectations on a potential new partner, or life as a single mother.

These narratives crystallised certain challenges the interlocutors faced in trying to balance the expectations of their social environment and their drive for an autonomous and self-determined life. While interviewees considered family ties, for example, an important source of emotional support and closeness, and a reliable safe haven in (recurring) times of political crisis and insecurity, they also pointed to the negative aspects: expectations and control. Difficult decisions—*e.g.* quitting a long-hated but secure job—were not easily taken when facing the needs of (dependent) loved ones or the risk of being left without any support. A few interlocutors openly expressed the feeling of being held to social and moral standards by their wider social environment which they did not consent to and that in fact stood in opposition to the life they wished for themselves. Examples ranged from everyday questions of whether to engage in party-related leisure activities or move out of the parental home, to more structural factors such as career choices or, as mentioned, questions of marriage and reproduction. Indeed, it seemed that for the mostly female practitioners, many of the problems of negotiating individuality and autonomy within one's social environment were intertwined with the questions of marriage and relationship—a struggle that was further intensified by economic problems.

Lebanon has public debts of more than 150% of its GDP (Farha 2019: 220–221), dramatic inflation, "failures in public services, health, education, and social welfare" (Baumann 2019: 61), an estimated 60% of the population living under the poverty line defined by the World Bank and a 40% unemployment rate (Chikhani 2020).[9] Additionally, the country has faced widespread political protests since October 2019. During the time of my research in 2017 and 2018, the economic downward spiral had already begun. For my interlocutors, the most immediate consequence was unemployment. Finding a job in one's field of study for an adequate salary became an increasingly difficult endeavour. Even those who counted themselves lucky enough to be employed were seeking further sources of income to cover the rising cost of living.

With the debts of their educations on their (parents') shoulders, the promise of education as the key to a decent life slowly crumbled. For qualita-

tive reasons, private education is favoured over the public schools and universities in Lebanon, and a semester at one of the private universities costs anywhere from around 4,000 US dollars to 15,000 US dollars depending on the institution's reputation. As such, getting a (private) education means making a substantial financial investment, but one considered likely to pay off. As Baumann (2019: 69) states, "[e]ducation is the key to reproduce middle class existence and to economic security" (cf. Zbib 2014). However, at least for my interlocutors, the recent economic crisis cast doubt on the inevitable link between high-quality education and future employment. Given salaries of, for instance, 1,000 US dollars per month for a full-time position held by an early career employee, investment in education, a value which had been held in such high esteem, turned out rather ambivalently in reality (cf. Sengebusch & Sonay 2014: 8).

Unemployment had consequences beyond the lack of a prestigious job. Financing one's own room or apartment, conducting a master's programme and travelling abroad became difficult for the younger generation. For some, participating in everyday (leisure) activities that required money (*e.g.* meeting friends in cafés in other parts of the city) had to be calculated wisely. Older interlocutors were confronted with failing family businesses or shrinking maintenance from (ex-)husbands. On a day-to-day level, the economic crisis reduced the means available for living an autonomous life, and even intensified dependence on the social environment from which the interlocutors sought to become more independent.

While telling me about their profound struggles and expressing feelings of exhaustion and being overwhelmed (some having been diagnosed with depression), practitioners left no doubt that in their view there was only one sustainable way to approach their current situation: to distance themselves from the "low energy discussions"[10] of political problems, economic dead ends and social expectations of how to live one's life, and immerse themselves in the individual "spiritual journey," *e.g.* by practicing meditation, in order to create the life they desired.

Seeing Lights

Nabila, a single woman in her twenties who lived in the southern suburbs of Beirut, had pursued a university degree in the medical sector, but struggled to find employment in that field. When I first met Nabila in December 2017, she had only recently started to attend Rayhan's classes. Nonetheless, she attributed major changes she undertook in her life to meditation. In the absence of employment options, she worked as a teacher, an occupation she severely disliked. Shortly after starting meditation, she quit that job. Additionally, she took off her veil—a decision that not all of her close family approved of. In our interview, she spoke of broad support, but also of rejection from her social environment. Nabila adamantly stated that "spirituality doesn't stand in the face of any religion" (Nabila, 6 December 2017). She explained that she had long been dubious about wearing the veil, but only through meditation had she found the strength to take this step and "confront everyone that might stand in my way" (*ibid.*). For Nabila, meditation was the practice that enabled her to realise her goals despite obstacles. Accordingly, she spoke enthusiastically about Rayhan's classes and her ability to see lights (see the introductory quote of this article).

In general, great significance was attached to the sensation of *seeing lights*. The ability and intensity of *seeing lights* was subject to ongoing discussion among practitioners inside and outside of class, as it was a desired experience that Rayhan encouraged his students[11] to seek out. Furthermore, it served as a marker of progress for an apprenticeship in the spiritual realm. Listening to conversations between Rayhan and his students after class, I learnt that the practitioners literally saw lights behind their closed eyes. Other practitioners told me about additional "messages", such as letters, a silhouette of an angel, or the face of an important religious figure. Those visual sensations were accompanied by feelings of warmth, stillness and relaxed limbs. I additionally heard practitioners sighing, starting to breathe more deeply, and occasionally crying. In this sense, *seeing lights* was a complex array of bodily sensations experienced by the practitioners during the meditation session.

More precisely, the sensation of *seeing lights* took place when Rayhan vocally guided the participants through imaginary environments. He gave a brief outline, while attendees had to add supplementary details based on their own ideas and wishes. The imaginary environments were landscapes or buildings, occasionally inhabited by animals or otherworldly beings. In addition, Rayhan's guidance was filled with descriptions of various forms of light and prompts for his students to "feel" those lights. Sometimes Rayhan centred these journeys around a specific question, such as "What do you want to have in your life?", asking participants to furnish the environments with items representing desired characteristics or life situations. Nabila contrasted the peaceful experience of these imaginary environments with the chaotic real environment around her:

> "It is really addicting, because in the chaos, in this world, you find peace, you create peace, a reality of your own. Everything is realistic, but a touch from inside, spiritual touch, because you decide what you want to have in your life, whom do you want to have in your life, what things to accept and what others things to not accept." (Nabila, 6 December 2017)

Nabila's self-created environments had similarities with her everyday surroundings but contained something beyond them: "a touch from inside, a spiritual touch" that originated in the fact that she decided how things were, including her relationships with other people and her own capabilities. In this sense, imaginary environments were a model for the real environment Nabila desired and the corresponding version of herself that she sought to create. As she suggested, these imaginary environments were a source of "peace" for her, but were also informed by a version of herself that possessed unlimited agentive power. Against the backdrop of economic uncertainty and a drive for individuality and autonomy, the imaginary "spiritual" environment became a refuge where desired but hard-to-achieve life goals were visualised.

In this way, sensations during meditation intersected with practitioners' visions of their desired lives. The experience of *seeing lights* affirmed the practitioners' meditation experience. Moreover, the meditation experience encompassed the practitioners' desired life situation. In the view of the participants, it was meditation, understood as the nexus of *seeing lights* and the visualisation of one's desired life, that enabled them to realise the life they were aspiring toward. As Nabila emphasised:

> "Because really, from inside, I became stronger. Stronger, more confident, self-accepting. Actually brave, courageous. I can come up and do whatever I want. So this is how meditation opened a door to life changing" (Nabila, 6 December 2017).

What, then, is the link between meditation and life changes? Or, to put it another way, how exactly did meditation and its centrepiece *seeing lights* become a life-changing force for the practitioners?

Cultivating Love

A frequently used statement among practitioners was the phrase "I work" (or *'anā beshtighil*). In fact, working seemed to be the *modus operandi* of the practitioners (cf. Heelas 1996: 28f). It took the form of a teacher's encouraging invitation for his (struggling) students to continue their spiritual work, or an interlocutor's summary of what had happened in her life during my absence from Lebanon ("I worked on myself" (Hadiya, 2 December 2018)). An aspect of this work on oneself was the act of facing unpleasant and painful aspects of one's life (cf. Heelas 1996: 4). More precisely, the practitioners aimed to let go of negative memories from the past and ideas about themselves, which were perceived as false beliefs that were blocking them and preventing healing from taking place. During his classes, Rayhan led the attendees to their childhood memories and invited them to take a look at unhappy experiences in order to leave them behind: "We are willing to clear what is no longer serving us right now, in this session, through the divine energy, love and light, peace, trust" (Rayhan, 26 January 2018). As a substitute, he urged his students to adapt a view of themselves and of their lives that was inspired by love.

The desired experience of and capacity for love were discussed prominently among the practitioners. Many named it as a goal of their spiritual apprenticeship. Love was directly linked to sensations experienced during the practice which, in the long term, developed into a state of being, a perspective on life and a general attitude with

which situations, people and problems were best approached. Rayhan also repeatedly referred to the concept of love as a centrepiece of his practice: "We're only searching for light and love and happiness and joy" (Rayhan, 12 December 2017). As this quote indicates, the concept of love was frequently mentioned in the same breath as the concept of light and the idea of reaching a state of well-being and comfort. By inviting the attendees to see light and feel love, Rayhan connected the sensation of *seeing lights* with states of being protected and of giving and receiving love. As he wrote more recently:

> "It's okay to get lost in the darkness for few seconds [...] those seconds can be weeks or months but when you choose love only [then] you will survive [...] the light will come ... the light will shine [...] you can only survive if you choose love again and again and again" (Rayhan, 3 July 2020).

When I asked for a verbal description of love, many interviewees struggled to find an answer. While some explained it as an everyday guideline of how to treat people respectfully, or equated it with other concepts such as "the source," the universe or God (*Allāh*), most interlocutors described love as a state of being that could only be felt bodily, not explained in words. When asked what love is, Leyla, another spiritual practitioner I interviewed during my research, paused, closed her eyes, breathed in and out slowly, opened her eyes, smiled faintly, and said: "That!" (Leyla, 22 November 2018). Instead of a verbal explanation, Leyla literally demonstrated to me her understanding of love, which was first and foremost a sensory process within herself. The fact that she circumvented a verbal translation, and instead used bodily movements to make me understand what she perceived as the aim of her practice, shows that for my interlocutors, love was less of a cognitive construct in the sense of Heelas' (1996: 2) *lingua franca* of the *New Age* movement and more of an individual, sensorially defined, embodied part of their practice.

The significance of emotions such as love has been analysed with regard to (contemporary) spiritual practices. Albanese (1999) states that within *New Age* practices, love is overwhelmingly promoted "as the resolution for human ills" (*ibid.* 319), with the absence of positive emotions perceived as the cause of various illnesses. Chen (2014) shows how *New Age* practices in Taiwan encompass "feeling rules" that are centred around the self-reflexive observation and management of emotions that are said to induce self-transformation. Neufend (2019: 105f) demonstrates how Lebanese Sufi practitioners (re)produce emotions through the practice of vision: gazing at items considered and named beautiful is a routinised way to evoke happiness (*ibid.* 108). In her analysis, Neufend draws, *inter alia*, on Scheer's (2012) conceptualisation of emotions from a Bourdieuian perspective. Scheer perceives of emotions as an embodied practice that is socially and culturally shaped and continuously managed via the body *(ibid.* 193ff, cf. Bourdieu 1997). In this context, Scheer (2012) understands "the use of rituals (in the broadest sense) as a means of achieving, training, articulating, and modulating emotions for personal as well as social purposes" (*ibid.* 210).

Considering both the aforementioned literature and the practitioners' practices and discourses, I argue that *seeing lights* can be understood as a routinised bodily mediated attempt to experience (self-)love. By aiming for the sensation of *seeing lights*, the abstract goal of love was brought into a bodily form, a do-able sensation that the practitioners could learn by way of a routine weekly practice. In particular, the practice was meant to evoke an immediate form of love: the practitioner's love for herself. The desired consequence of this acquisition was a respectful appreciation of oneself, including one's physical appearance, abilities, (emotional) characteristics and past. In this way, the practitioners collectively developed a new form of sensual self-perception that was informed by an accepting and compassionate stance towards oneself. The significance of Rayhan's practice laid, therefore, within its repetitive sensory processes (cf. Downey 2015) which constituted the way in which the spiritual goal of self-love was learnt by the practitioners. This was especially true given that a self-loving stance towards oneself was considered a requirement for becoming an individual with the power to overcome obstacles and realise one's desired life situation—in short, to enable the process of healing to take place.

Healing

Amira, a single woman in her mid-thirties with a university degree in the field of humanities who had resigned from what she described as a well-paid but unbearable job abroad, loved to talk about her spiritual practice. In the course of our conversations about her experiences with and opinions about various "modalities," two topics recurred in her narrative: her difficulty in finding permanent employment—a job that could support her and that matched her idea of meaningful work—and her situation as a single, unmarried woman. The latter aspect increasingly evoked questions within herself about the importance of a relationship and marriage, as well as inquiries from her social environment commenting on her age and the reasons for her marital status. While Amira emphasised that she was neither willing to settle for an unhappy marriage nor comply with unbearable working conditions, her narrative highlighted the consequences her decisions entailed: the unresolved wish for a family of her own and the fear of being a (financial) burden to her parents. Even so, she said she was confident that everything would work out fine in the end. According to her, every development in her life was not only meant to be, but held a necessary "learning experience" that would trigger her personal development and eventually bring her closer to her goals. Her spiritual practice was an essential part of this ongoing process of self-improvement. By meditating she aimed to construct the desired version of herself:

> "With meditation, I was like a puzzle, with every time you put a piece in the puzzle you have a clearer picture to your image. So, for me this is meditation. It helps me to bring out the best of me. […] I am making Amira, a new Amira that is best for me and for everyone around me. But first it's for me. I don't do it for anyone, for my parents, for my society. I'm doing it for me. If I'm not good, I can't love God. I can't be a good daughter. I can't be a good citizen. So first, I have to be me and to love myself. If that's what they call selfish, okay. I'm selfish. I don't mind. I love myself. If I don't love myself, I can't love you, I can't love God" (Amira, 22 January 2018).

Amira compared her weekly meditation practice to the completion of a puzzle. According to her understanding, in every class she revealed another (hidden) aspect of herself, which would eventually uncover the best version of herself: someone who is "best for me" and the people around her. Even though she referred to becoming a contributing member of her family and her society, and even to deepening her relationship with God, Amira stated that she pursued this process for herself first and foremost. In this way, she prioritised her individual goals over the (possibly divergent) expectations of her social environment. This was a potential source of conflict she implicitly addressed: in her view, being herself and loving herself might be interpreted as being "selfish" by her social environment. Nonetheless, she was convinced that she had to "be me" and love herself before she was able to be "a good daughter," "a good citizen" and a faithful Muslim. Thus, she not only expressed her desire for individuality and autonomy, but also understood a self-determined life as the basis of, and not the opposite of, becoming a contributing member of her social environment.

As became clear in Amira's quote, self-love was crucial for the transformation of herself and her life. The ability to love herself was a basic requirement for becoming a successful person in multiple realms—realms that had so far been characterised by challenges and problems. In other words, the "new," self-loving Amira would be able to become whoever she wanted to be and obtain whatever she wished to have. At the end of 2018, I learnt what the life of the "new Amira" encompassed. Amira happily told me that she was engaged to a Lebanese-Canadian man. She was adamant that it was due to her constant meditation practices and the resulting transformation of herself that she attracted the attention of her husband-to-be. Thus, her continuous healing process and her efforts toward making "a new Amira" had finally paid off. The marriage was planned and she intended to move to Canada as soon as her immigration papers were ready. There, Amira joked, she would fulfil her dream of opening a spiritual centre and sharing her ideas about education. Thus, the "new Amira" would be healed from what the "old Amira" suffered from: the lack of a job and marital partner that suited her wishes and expectations while also answering the (un)spoken questions and comments from her social environment.

Agency

Utriainen (2014: 242) argues that the core of *New Age* practices is "religious agency," which she understands as "making things happen" with the support of otherworldly entities. The aim of those endeavours could be "personal healing," "transformation of the whole universe" or "a way, or a style, of sensing oneself and the world around oneself a little differently" (*ibid.* 243). Similarly, my interlocutors mentioned healing as a goal of their spiritual practice. My analysis illustrates that their spiritual practice fostered the cultivation of self-love while aiming to transform the practitioners and their lives. In fact, Amira's story demonstrates that the ability to love oneself, the power to realise the life one desired, and the practice's aim of healing were all closely entangled. Experiencing and successfully establishing love for oneself was considered the core of healing, as only a self-loving individual would be able to take action when wanted and needed, and thus be able to transform the troublesome aspects of the practitioners' lives that they sought healing from. I therefore argue that in the course of Rayhan's classes, healing can be understood as a form of acquiring individual agency. More precisely, the successful cultivation of self-love provided the practitioners with "a disposition toward the enactment of 'projects'" (Ortner 2006: 152). These "projects" were concrete individual goals such as finding a job or a partner, pursuing their desired career or developing a new perspective on their religion.[12] By emphasising their ability to act and to transform themselves and their lives according to their wishes and against all odds, Nabila, Amira and Hadiya turned precarious situations into a menu full of options while establishing a picture of themselves as powerful autonomous agents.

The fact that some individual problems stemmed from circumstances that were simply beyond the power of an individual was rarely mentioned among my interlocutors—despite practitioners' long narratives about the economic and political crisis and the double-edged sword of social embeddedness. Rendering social and economic circumstances invisible and ascribing failure to lack of will and commitment, and therefore as individual responsibility, has been identified as part of the neoliberal discourse (cf. Glauser 2016). Also, the practitioners' perspective covered structural aspects by portraying both the problems and their solutions as residing solely within (the sphere of) the individual. As a result of this viewpoint, "one is always faced with one's self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles" (Gershon 2011: 539). In the framework of contemporary spiritual practitioners, this meant that the practitioners were "perceived as the 'owner' of their condition[s]" (McClean 2005: 643), and healing was fostered or prevented by the performance of the practitioner herself (cf. Heelas 1996: 82).

Consequently, a fellow practitioner's lack of healing was addressed in the form of appeals to continue the work on oneself. It was common knowledge that healing required time and effort. Practitioners stressed the individuality of the healing process: everyone would receive healing and transformation of their life at their "divine timing," i.e. when they were ready for it. And being ready, in turn, required work and effort. This meant that in addition to the teleological path of *seeing lights*, cultivating self-love and therefore healing, practitioners sometimes also had to develop perseverance. Dealing with challenging life situations in an active, self-determined way could also mean, above all else, to learn something from the situation. Actively working with this "learning experience" meant taking a cue as to where further work on oneself was necessary in order to successfully complete the healing process within the individual "spiritual journey."

Meditation and Faith

Healing, viewed as the acquisition of individual agency through self-love, not only concerned mundane aspects such as gaining a job or a marital partner, but also encompassed religious aspects. For instance, Hadiya, a part-time life coach and single mother in her fifties, emphatically described the moment when she sensually experienced and verbally expressed her love for God after meditation—a state of being and an attitude towards God that she was not able to reach during years of textual study of Islam.

> "Hadiya, now? Now you are saying *beʿbadak* [I worship you]? Now? What were you doing there,

> studying religion? There you should say this! I didn't. This is my special experience, my own experience that I didn't get to this point through years of studying religion. I had it through meditation. I went directly to God. I loved him. I adored him and worshipped him. I was shocked! Really! This [studying religion] is the time we learn, but I didn't feel it. I didn't know the meaning! It's only words, passing, passing." (Hadiya, 29 January 2018)

Hadiya contrasts her study of Islam with her sensual experience during meditation. She critically asks herself why her studies were "only words, passing, passing," which neither evoked any bodily or emotional reactions nor made her understand the meaning of loving God. She had previously engaged in intensive religious practice and expected to be able to experience a deep relationship with God through that—a hope that was not fulfilled and, as a result, made her increasingly question the ways in which her faith was interpreted and taught to her. Hadiya did still emphasise the importance of the knowledge she sought in her previous studies and religious practices, as it enabled her to make connections between Islam and meditation practices. Nonetheless, she made clear that only her personal experience during meditation provided her with the toolset needed to bodily experience her adoration of God in all its depth. In that sense, meditation was her own distinct "experience"—an intimate sensation that altered her faith (cf. Bull & Mitchell 2015: 3) and constituted a way to seek a religious and individual understanding of Islam separately from established religious practices, authorities and norms.

Like Hadiya, many interlocutors had a spiritually informed view of their Islamic, Christian or Druze faith that emphasised individual autonomy over religious authorities. In fact, they explicitly distanced themselves and their practice from established religious practices. This became visible in the terminology used by practitioners. Most interviewees used the English term spirituality and rejected the common Arabic translation *rūḥāniyya* (cf. Chodkiewicz 1995) as an inappropriate description of their practices. *Rūḥāniyya* is what is done in churches and mosques, as some interlocutors curtly stated. In contrast, spirituality was the broad field of the interlocutors' individual practices (meditation among them), the associated sensual experiences, and autonomous interpretations of scriptures, religious practices and norms. Many practitioners considered the latter as more "modern" and "free" and less "conservative." They also emphasised that such a stance towards religion was free from political-sectarian implications.

The aim of distancing oneself from sectarianism and the religious networks (considered to be) entangled with it also became visible in Rayhan's classes. Although he frequently referred to figures and stories from the Bible and the *Qur'ān*, he never discussed religious issues (let alone differences) in class. Similarly, personal positioning within the courses took the form of mentioning one's general faith if necessary, namely Druze, Muslim or Christian, while avoiding explicit sectarian self-description (even though names or residential areas could speak louder than words). Furthermore, participants made sure to talk respectfully about each religion, regardless of whether a member of that faith was present or not. I interpret this behaviour on the practitioners' part as an attempt to establish the meditation practice as outside of sectarian politics and different to established religious practices. Firstly, courses had to be accessible and comfortable for people of any faith and background. Secondly, engaging in a leisure activity that was spiritually informed and offered links to one's faith, but expressed distance from sectarianism and established religious practices, was especially appealing to those who understood themselves as cultivating a way of living individually and beyond the sectarian-political separation of the country and the associated power structures (cf. Neufend 2019: 107). I therefore argue that, in a broader sense, the meditation practice was centred around distinct values, namely the drive for individuality and autonomy in mundane and religious aspects of life.

Individuality and Autonomy

I have illustrated that the aim of living one's life according to individual desires, even in opposition to one's social environment, was central to the practitioners' narratives and life trajectories. As Amira stated:

> "For me you have to be a leader, because God creates leaders. We came to life as leaders. So why do we restrain ourselves to traditions, and society and this stuff? They turn us into followers and I don't wanna be a follower." (Amira, 22 January 2018)

Both this quote and her story as presented earlier strongly reflect the ethos of a person who reaches the life they aspire to through constant effort and, if necessary, in the face of opposition—a life in which she can then give back to society while maintaining individuality and autonomy. A similar focus on life becomes visible in Rayhan's meditation. The practice encompasses a notion of healing that can be understood as the acquisition of individual agency through constant self-improvement, more precisely through the bodily mediated process of learning self-love through the sensations of *seeing lights*. By way of this, it aims to enable the practitioners to shape their lives as desired. As such, constant work and learning, individuality and autonomy seemed to be part and parcel of the meditation practice in the sense that they permeated the practitioners' attitudes towards their lives. Thus, attending meditation classes constituted a leisure activity that fostered the practitioners' aim of realising a life as "a leader," to borrow Amira's term.

However, practitioners' narratives also hinted at a careful balance of individuality and autonomy on the one hand and social embeddedness on the other. As Nabila, Amira and Hadiya's stories show, marriage was an important goal for them and belief in God was beyond question, even if whom to marry and when, and how to express faith, were considered to be first and foremost individual decisions and only to a lesser extent a concern of one's social environment. As such, living a self-determined life while securing the desired amount of social embeddedness encompassed a respectful manner of distancing; practitioners stressed the importance of respecting divergent world views and ways of life (especially with regard to religiosity). Furthermore, they aimed to encounter possible differences in a way that circumvented open conflict. This approach became clear when Rayhan discussed his way of dealing with members of his extended family who had religious ideas he could not agree to:

> "I go inside the thing. When I start to see things that are not matching, I grab my learnings and I say goodbye [laughing] […] I run quickly. I tried to be as gentle as I can to leave with easiness" (Rayhan, 12 December 2017).

Although Rayhan was clear about where to draw a line between his faith and other people's (stricter) religious viewpoints, he found it important to distance himself in a smooth and peaceful way that did not render future interactions impossible.

Authors have stressed the entanglement of leisure activities, values and middle-class identities (cf. Deeb 2006; Heiman *et al.* 2012; Neubert 2014). In their work about young pious Shi'ite Muslims in Beirut's southern suburbs, Deeb and Harb (2013) show how consumption and leisure activities serve as a marker for a distinct middle-class identity informed by both a religious stance and mundane expectations. Kaplan and Werczberger (2017) argue that the rise of a "Jewish New Age" among secular middle-class Israelis can be interpreted as a class-specific way of answering the intensified pressure to frame one's identity in religious terms. Winegar (2016) asserts in her analysis of Egyptian demonstrators' practice of cleaning the spaces of their political protests in Cairo that "[b]ecoming middle class […] in many contexts, is a deeply moral project" insofar as those people "often seek to distance themselves from what they view as rich people's immoral extravagances and poor people's lack of sophistication" (*ibid.* 611; cf. Birkholz 2014; Liechty 2012: 271f).

Inspired by this body of literature, I propose the idea that my interlocutors' emergence in contemporary spiritual practices also served as a form of (re)assuring "middle class subjectivities" (Heiman *et al.* 2012: 5). Based on their cultural and economic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1992), the spiritual practitioners may be considered middle class – though due to the recent economic crisis, this might be an endangered position in terms of their economic capital. Against this backdrop, the practices both expressed and reaffirmed the practitioner's (desired) way of living, which was based on constant learning and work on oneself, and which centred around individuality and autonomy: a life according to one's own wishes and desires, em-

bedded in familiar and social networks but not dependent on them, while expressing one's faith independently from interpretations and practices of established religious institutions and authorities. In this way, fundamental identificatory values were expressed and reproduced in the course of the consumable leisure activity of meditation: the drive for autonomy and individuality based on individual work and learning. Also, the practice of balancing social embeddedness with autonomy and individuality may be interpreted, in Winegar's (2016) sense, as a careful and morally anchored positioning between divergent pools of society. Against the backdrop of the groups and individuals of society that Amira termed "followers" and those that Baumann (2019: 72) describes as "self-serving elites," achieving a self-determined life by individually shaping e.g. one's career and relationship, all while contributing to and supporting the social surrounding on one's own terms, indeed claims a moral position in the middle of Lebanese society. From that position, contemporary spiritual practices serve as one means of successfully completing this project of a self-determined middle-class life, while at the same time reifying the importance and significance of the underlying values informing that lifestyle.

Conclusion

Contemporary spiritual practices are popular among the middle classes in Lebanon, where they are understood as a way to increase well-being and foster healing. Based on ethnographic material collected in 2017 and 2018, I showed that the meditation sessions offered in a spiritual centre in Beirut aimed at a specific form of healing: the acquisition of individual agency. The core of those classes consisted of the routine pursuit of *seeing lights*, a complex array of bodily sensations. I argued that the practitioners' goal of *seeing lights* can be interpreted as an embodied form of experiencing and learning self-love. This attitude was the basis for healing, as—from the practitioners' perspective—only a self-loving individual could possess the ability to create a life according to one's wishes and, thus, heal from troublesome life situations. In other words, the meditation practice with its sensation of *seeing lights* was "an art for crafting lives and futures" (Utriainen 2014: 254) for the participants.

The practitioners' narratives show that their goal was to live a self-determined life centred around the aspects of marriage and employment. Efforts to individually shape those aspects stood in potential conflict with the expectations and obligations of the social environment. In fact, balancing the drive for individuality and autonomy in mundane and religious aspects of life with the need for social embeddedness and the concerns of economic shortage was a constant challenge for the practitioners. Against this background, the meditation sessions that centred around constant learning and self-improvement were not only a way of achieving healing by acquiring individual agency, but in a broader sense a leisure activity that fostered the practitioner's aim of living a self-determined life by reassuring and reproducing underlying values such as individuality and autonomy.

Heelas (1996) states that in *New Age* practices, "*authority* lies with the *experience* of the *Self*" (*ibid.* 29, emphasis i. orig.). For the meditation classes analysed in this article, this statement is valid in a very literal sense: individual sensory experience constitutes the centrepiece of the practice. The sensual procedures that were collectively shared and individually experienced were what enabled healing to take place. In this way, the practitioners' senses and bodies were rendered the instrument through which the goal of the practice—healing in the form of individual agency—was reached. Thus, my analysis underlines the necessity of a "sensorially engaged anthropology" (Nichter 2008: 186) in the study of of contemporary spiritual practices and their associated healing procedures. Integrating the inquiry of sensory experiences and processes into the research not only enables us to grasp "the sense of spirit people cultivate in the practices" (Dox 2016: xxi), but also broadens our understanding of the notions of healing within contemporary spiritual practices, showing that healing is achieved in manifold ways. For the meditation practice I analysed, it is the sensory experience that eventually delivers the abstract (spiritual) goal of love, and from a wider perspective individuality and autonomy, into something doable. However, with a disastrous economic crisis and a tumultuous political landscape, further re-

search is needed to investigate how contemporary spiritual practices and their form of "self-cultivation" (Zhang 2018: 46) will continue to shape the ways in which Lebanese women like Hadiya, Nabila and Amira go about their lives.

Notes

1 Names of interlocutors and meditation classes are changed.
2 The US Dollar and Lebanese Lira are used interchangeably in Lebanon. Fees for the classes varied depending on individuals' financial situations.
3 Rayhan used the angel tarot cards of Doreen Virtue, a US American author of multiple *New Age* self-help books and angel tarot sets. The cards consist of a small picture showing humans, angels or human-angel interactions along with a short paragraph written in English that deals with either a specific topic such as authenticity, self-care, relationships, etc. or delivers a message ascribed to a specific (arch-)angel.
4 In academic literature, *New Age* is a common term for these practices, but it was used by my interlocutors only as a discrediting description, *e.g.* for practices of teachers who were suspected to be primarily interested in economic benefits. I use *New Age* (practices/movements) when referring to the respective academic literature. When discussing my research, I use the term contemporary spiritual practices (cf. Dox 2016; Fedele & Knibbe 2016: 196) to describe the yoga, meditation and Kabbalah lessons I attended, and the term energy-based healing methods for practices like Reiki and Pranic Healing. This distinction is helpful because the latter practices were not necessarily framed or understood in a spiritual sense.
5 Notwithstanding the work on established forms of spirituality, *e.g.* Sufism (cf. Clarke 2014; Neufend 2019).
6 The research is part of the project *Private Pieties. Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics* funded by the European Research Council (grant agreement no. 693457).
7 The Syriac Maronite Church of Antioch is a Christian religious group and one of the 18 sects officially recognised by the Lebanese state.
8 The *Tai'if* agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), in which sect served as an axis of differentiation and mobilisation, aimed to ensure the peaceful coexistence of the 18 different religious groups by way of institutionalised power sharing, *e.g.* in the form of a sectarian quota for political positions (Traboulsi 2012: 250f). Aside from this, social and economic relations are often established along sectarian lines and corresponding clientelistic structures (cf. Kriener 2019; Nucho 2016; Salloukh *et al.* 2015; for an analysis of anti-sectarian protest cf. Sengebusch 2019). Thus, religious affiliation is an ever-present factor in everyday life, although rarely verbalised outside of one's "own" sect because of its conflict-laden and potentially divisive consequences.
9 Several factors led to the economic crisis: after the Lebanese civil war, the period of reconstruction under prime minister Rafik al-Hariri was based on a neoliberal agenda of privatisation, massive international borrowing and government debt (Baumann 2016). Economic problems intensified during phases of internal political instability, the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 and, most recently, the Syrian war and the associated refugee crisis (van Vliet 2016: 96ff). Additionally, corruption and "self-serving elites" (Baumann 2019: 72) contributed to the country's disastrous situation (Salloukh *et al.* 2015: 2; Chikhani 2020). The Lebanese economy generally relies on remittances from the diaspora and the banking and real-estate sector, which is closely entangled with "government debt management" (Baumann 2019: 66) and offers investment only for those who already have substantial financial means and social connections (*ibid.* 66ff; Farha 2019: 219ff).
10 Rayhan's language was shaped by technical expressions. For instance, "low energy" or "high energy" beliefs that had to be "erased" or "downloaded." His terminology underlines the interlocutors' emphasis on pursuing practices that are based on science and hard facts rather than "blind belief" (cf. Voss 2013: 119f), but may also be read as a mechanical approach to the project of self-transformation.
11 Rayhan referred to the participants of his meditation classes as "students."
12 Rayhan's mediations may also form part of what Illouz (2008) termed "therapeutic emotional style"—a set of "'techniques'—linguistic, scientific, ritual" (*ibid.* 14f)—centred around the management of individuals' emotions in order to provide "a way for actors to devise strategies of action that help them implement certain definitions of the good life" (*ibid.* 20).

References

Albanese, Catherine L. 1999. The Subtle Energies of Spirit: Explorations in Metaphysical and New Age Spirituality. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, 2: 305–325.

Aupers, stef & Dick Houtman 2006. Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21, 2: 201–222.

Baumann, Hannes 2016. *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction*. Oxford: University Press.

Baumann, Hannes 2019. The Causes, Nature, and Effect of the Current Crisis of Lebanese Capitalism. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, 1: 61–77.

Birkholz, Sina 2014. Struggles of Distinction: Young Women Constructing Their Class Identity in Egypt's Americanized Milieu. *Middle East: Topics & Arguments* 2: 46–62.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1992. Ökonomisches Kapital – Kulturelles Kapital – Soziales Kapital. In: *ibid. Die verborgenen Mechanismen der Macht: Schriften zur Politik & Kultur*. Hamburg: VSA: 49–79.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1997[1980]. *Sozialer Sinn: Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Bull, Michael & Jon P. Mitchell 2015. Introduction. In *ibid.* (eds) *Ritual, Performance and the Senses*. London: Bloomsbury: 1–10.

Chen, Shu-Chuan 2014. Theorizing Emotions in New Age Practices: An Analysis of Feeling Rules in Self-Religion. In: Steven J. Sutcliffe & Ingvild S. Gilhus (eds) *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*. London: Routledge: 227–241.

Chikhani, Nicolas 2020. *Whither Lebanon? Crises and (Re)Solution*. Talk at the Orient-Institut Beirut, 21 July 2020 (accessed via live stream).

Chodkiewicz, M. 1995. Rūḥāniyya. In: C.E. Bosworth *et al.* (eds). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition, Volume VIII*. Leiden: Brill: 593–594.

Clarke, Morgan 2014. Cough Sweets and Angels: The Ordinary Ethics of the Extraordinary in Sufi Practice in Lebanon. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, 3: 407–425.

Deeb, Lara 2006. *An Enchanted Modern. Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton: University Press.

Deeb, Lara & Mona Harb 2013. *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*. Princeton: University Press.

Downey, Greg 2015. The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind. In: Michael Bull & Jon P. Mitchel (eds) *Ritual, Performance and the Senses*. London: Bloomsbury: 45–61.

Dox, Donnalee 2016. *Reckoning with Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Farha, Mark 2019. *Lebanon: The Rise and Fall of a Secular State under Siege*. Cambridge: University Press.

Fedele, Anna & Kim E. Knibbe 2013. *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*. New York: Routledge.

Fedele, Anna & Kim E. Knibbe 2016. From Angel in the Home to Sacred Prostitute: Unconditional Love and Gendered Hierarchies in Contemporary Spirituality. In: Lena Gemzöe *et al.* (eds) *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan: 195–216. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-42598-6.

Gershon, Ilana 2011. Neoliberal Agency. *Current Anthropology* 52, 4: 537–555.

Glauser, Laura 2016. *Das Projekt des unternehmerischen Selbst: Eine Feldforschung in der Coachingzone*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill.

Hauser, Beatrix (ed) 2013. *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*. Cham: Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-00315-3.

Heelas, Paul 1996. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Heiman, Rachel, Mark Liechty & Carla Freeman 2012. Introduction: Charting an Anthropology of the Middle Classes. In: Rachel Heiman *et al.* (eds) *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press: 3–29.

Illouz, Eva 2008. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Inhorn, Marcia C. 2012. *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies and Islam in the Middle East*. Princeton: University Press.

Kanafani, Samar & Zina Sawaf 2017. Being, Doing and Knowing in the Field: Reflections on Ethnographic Practice in the Arab Region. *Contemporary Levant* 2, 1: 3–11.

Kaplan, Dana & Rachel Werczberger 2017. Jewish New Age and the Middle Class: Jewish Identity Politics in Israel under Neoliberalism. *Sociology* 51, 3: 575–591.

Kriener, Jonathan 2019. When Crisis Promotes Proximity: Patterns of Social Control at the Lebanese University. *Middle East: Topics & Arguments* 13: 64-76.

Kurz, Helmar 2017. Diversification of Mental Health Care: Brazilian Kardecist Psychiatry and the Aesthetics of Healing. *Curare* 40, 3: 195–206.

Liechty, Mark 2012. Middle-Class Déjà-Vu: Conditions of Possibility, from Victorian England to Contemporary Kathmandu. In: Rachel Heiman *et al.* (eds) *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press: 271–299.

Luhrmann, Tanya 2010. What Counts as Data? In: James David & Dimitrina Spencer (eds) *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*. Stanford: University Press: 212–238.

McClean, Stuart 2005. 'The Illness is Part of the Person': Discourses of Blame, Individual Responsibility and Individuation at a Centre for Spiritual Healing in the North of England. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 27, 5: 628–648.

Neubert, Dieter 2014. What is 'Middle Class'? In Search of an Appropriate Concept. *Middle East: Topics & Arguments*, 2: 23–35.

Neufend, Maike 2019. The Practice of Vision: Sufi Aesthetics in Everyday Life. In: von Scheve, Christian *et al.* (eds) *Affect and Emotion in Multi-Religious Secular Societies*. London: Routledge: 96-113.

Nichter, Mark 2008. Coming to Our Senses: Appreciating the Sensorial in Medical Anthropology. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 45, 2: 163–197.

Nucho, Johanna R. 2016. *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power*. Princeton: University Press.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1996. Making Gender: Toward a Feminist, Minority, Postcolonial, Subaltern, etc., Theory of Practice. In: *ibid. Making Gender. The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press: 1–20.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2006. Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency. In: *ibid. Anthropology and Social Theory. Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press: 129–153.

Pink, Sarah 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography.* 2nd Edition. London: Sage.

Pink, Sarah &David Howes 2010. The Future of Sensory Anthropology / The Anthropology of the Senses. *Social Anthropology* 18, 3: 331–340.

Redden, Guy 2005. The New Age: Towards a Market Model. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, 2: 231–246.

Ruah-Midbar, Marianna 2012. Current Jewish Spiritualities in Israel: A New Age. *Modern Judaism* 32, 1: 102–124.

Ruah-Midbar, Marianna & Nurit Zaidman 2013. 'Everything starts within': New Age Values, Images, and Language in Israeli Advertising. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, 3: 421–436.

Salloukh, Bassel F. *et al.* 2015. *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. London: Pluto.

Scheer, Monique 2012. Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion. *History and Theory* 51, 2: 193-220.

Sengebusch, Karolin 2019. *Die Proteste gegen den libanesischen Konfessionalismus: Die Politik und das Politische in einer sozialen Bewegung*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Sengebusch, Karolin & Ali Sonay 2014. Caught in the Middle? On the Middle Class and its Relevance in the Contemporary Middle East. *Middle East: Topics & Arguments* 2: 4–10.

Sutcliffe, Steven J. & Ingvild S. 2014. Introduction: "All mixed up"—Thinking about Religion in Relation to New Age Spiritualities. In: *ibid.* (eds) *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*. London: Routledge: 1–16.

Traboulsi, Fawwaz 2012. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Second Edition. London: Pluto.

Utriainen, Tehri 2014. Doing Things with Angels: Agency, Alterity and Practices of Enchantment. In: Steven J. Sutcliffe & Ingvild S. Gilhus (eds) *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*. London: Routledge: 242–255.

van Vliet, Sam 2016. Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Coping with Unpreceded Challenges. In: Maximilian Felsch & Martin Wählisch (eds) *Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings: In the Eye of the Hurricane*. London: Routledge: 89–103.

Voss, Ehler 2013. From Crisis to Charisma: Redefining Hegemonic Ideas of Science, Freedom and Gender among Mediumistic Healers in Germany. In: Anna Fedele & Kim E. Knibbe (eds) *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*. New York: Routledge: 115–125.

Werczberger, Rachel & Boaz Huss 2014. Guest Editors' Introduction: New Age Culture in Israel. *Israel Studies Review* 29, 2: 1–16.

Winegar, Jessia 2016. A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt. *American Ethnologist* 43, 4: 609-622.

Zbib, Youssef 2014. Public Education: A Route into Lebanon's Middle Class in the 1960s and Early 1970s. *Middle East: Topics & Arguments*, 2: 63–73.

Zhang, Li 2015. Cultivating Happiness: Psychotherapy, Spirituality, and Well-Being in a Transforming Urban China. In: Peter van der Veer (ed) *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century*. Oakland: University of California Press: 315–332.

Zhang, Li 2018. Cultivating the Therapeutic Self in China. *Medical Anthropology* 37, 1: 45-58. DOI: 10.1080/01459740.2017.1317769.

Manuscript received: 03.02.2020
Manuscript accepted: 25.12.2020

JOHANNA KÜHN is a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and a research fellow and scientific coordinator in the ERC-project "Private Pieties, Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics" at the University of Göttingen. She studied Social Anthropology, Sociology and Economics at the University of Bayreuth, the University of Göttingen and the University of Haifa. Her regional focus is on the Middle East, where she has conducted ethnographic research on gendered political protest. In her dissertation, she focuses on contemporary spiritual practices in Lebanon's capital Beirut. In particular, she is interested in the gendered facets of these practices and their link with established belief systems among urban middle-class females.

University of Göttingen, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology
Theaterstraße 14, D-37073 Göttingen
e-mail: johanna.kuehn@sowi.uni-goettingen.de