



## CONTENDING RELIGIONS, IDENTITIES AND SPACE

MACERATA, NOVEMBER 12 -13, 2015

### PAPER PROPOSAL

**AUTHOR NAME** MARIA ELENA PANICONI

**INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION:** UNIVERSITY OF MACERATA

**PAPER'S TITLE:** AL-DUNYA AJMAL MIN AL JANNAH BY KHALID AL-BIRRI (2006): THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A FORMER JIHADIST

#### ABSTRACT:

In this paper I undertake a critical reading of the autobiography *Al-dunya aġmal min al-ġanna* by Ḥālid al-Birrī (2006) which was at first published as part of a series of “Testimonies” by the journal *an-Nahar* in July 2001. At the time of its publication as a book, this autobiographical account of the author’s juvenile militancy in the Islamist group *al-ġamā’a al-islāmiyya* caused quite a stir inside and outside of the Arab world for his journalistic and uninhibited descriptions.

First of all, I focus on the dialectics the book establishes with two well-established literary *genres* within the Arabic literary tradition: the autobiography and the apprenticeship account. Secondly, through a close-reading of the text, I aim at explaining how al-Birrī’s autobiography expresses through a complex system of intertextual hints, a dialogue with two different ideological horizons, both present in the private life the everyday experience of the author, in the socio-political context of the Nineties. In narrating his Islamic militancy, the author makes clear how he refused - as a new adept of *al-ġamā’a al-islāmiyya* - his secular / national background. Such a background, however, was later recovered by the young Ḥālid after his enfranchisement from the group, when he symbolically re-discovered the literary works by Egyptian pioneers of secular modernity (such as Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm).

**AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO AND ACADEMIC PROFILE:**