I abandoned the field before ever really entering it, making me the least likely person to discuss the contribution of fieldwork to the history of religions, and vice versa. However, this opportunity to ponder the place (or misplacement of) “the historian of religion in the field” has allowed me to peruse those dusty journals once again and reflect critically upon my reasons for aborting a well-conceived fieldwork project in mid-stream and opting for a text-based study. Through this critique of my experience, which has benefited greatly from 20-20 hindsight, I will suggest that what led in part to my ultimate disillusion with the field was a failed attempt to adapt a history of religions phenomenological perspective to the field. Here, I am defining a “phenomenological perspective” as one that moves away from determining explanatory, abstract causes to one that focuses on everyday, creative effects, “life as experienced” so to speak.

In the fall of 1990, I traveled to Cairo to study the practices, beliefs, and social importance of Sufi mystics in modern Egypt. Armed with a few responsible ethnographic studies on Islamic topics, three months of preparation in Cairo the previous summer, a handful of contacts, and a fairly competent grasp of the Arabic language, I viewed my nine-month stay with optimism. After all, I had an affiliation with Cairo University, where I was to meet with several well-known theologians and scholars of religion, among them Dr. Abu 'l-Wafa al-Ghunaymi al-Taftazani, the “shaykh of shaykhs,” or head of the Sufi Orders, and Dr. Hasan Hanafi, a highly-respected professor of philosophy. Given such prestigious contacts, I felt it was just a matter of time before I would become acquainted with those who professed to have experienced fana’, or the annihilation of the self, and those who benefited in more practical, tangible ways from their associations with a particular Sufi Order.

Although prepared for the difficulties I would face in a culture in which intricately entwined social and religious boundaries are asserted with great moral force and observed without question, I was not clear as to how to carve a place for myself in an ordinary space—
let alone a sacred one—where intrusions or anomalies were viewed as problems not easily resolved. Intrusions or anomalies can be understood in terms of what Mary Douglas describes as “dirt”:

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment. (1984: 2)

From my previous stay in Cairo, I knew I was an anomaly on several fronts, an anomaly that often invited unsolicited and unwelcome resolution. After all, I was an unmarried woman academic, well past her college years, without a man and without children. Islamic law has had little to say about women of this questionable status; the Shari'a mainly covers girls who live with their families, and women who are wives and mothers. Second, I was not a Muslim by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, whatever religious sentiment I had retained from childhood had been replaced by a cynicism proudly acquired after three years of graduate work in a Divinity School. Third, my hair was cut very short at the time, which, as far as I could tell from the frequent comments and styling advice I received, landed me somewhere between the categories of male and female.

Having read enough ethnographic studies conducted by women (e.g., Altorki and El-Solh 1988), and discussing various ways to “blend in” with friends and colleagues, I knew some of these barriers could be overcome in order to make the anomalous less of an anomaly, and thus make access easier to those I wished to observe. I knew my rather ambiguous appearance and marital status could be harnessed and corralled into a sanctified place by some conscious and conscientious management on my part. For example, I opted to wear a wedding ring so that people would be more comfortable with my presence in their midst, even though they often questioned why my husband remained in the U.S., and their eyebrows would shoot past their hairlines when they saw me talking freely with a man. Although not a Muslim, I considered veiling myself in addition to dressing modestly, a practice adopted by many western women academics who wished to don an external sign of their inner morality. Veiling afforded them a certain amount of respect and allowed them to travel or mingle in crowds often unnoticed. The choice to veil, if nothing else, would certainly resolve the hair problem. Ironically, perhaps, I decided to remain veil-less in order to preserve categorical