The success of transnational religious and feminist movements throughout the globe is simultaneously endorsing the tension between essentialised notions of Islam and the “west” and directing the move towards reinterpreting modernity and redefining the religious sphere. Feminist scholars from within and outside Islamic faith are placing women’s rights issues at the heart of the ongoing debate on gendered Islam and multiple modernities.

This collection of articles, emanating from a seminar organised by TAPRI in August 2007, shows a multiplicity of contexts and social locations within women’s movement inside an Islamic framework. The struggles and negotiations are situated in diverse settings and geographical scales: in the debate concerning the conception of ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Islamic feminists’; in national contexts of Morocco and Turkey; in the narration of committed Muslim women living in France and in Germany; in a university setting in Italy; and in critical engagement with scholarly texts on religion. The diversity of the sites has been chosen so as to illustrate some of the variety of ways in which patriarchy, along with other axis of domination, is being challenged in an Islamic framework. At the same time, the articles portray different ways of understanding what constitutes ‘Islamic feminism’ in the wider context of debates concerning gender and religiosity.
ISLAMIC FEMINISM: CURRENT PERSPECTIVES
ISLAMIC FEMINISM: CURRENT PERSPECTIVES

Anitta Kynsilehto (ed.)
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 7

I  Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives. Introductory Notes .............................................. 9
   Anitta Kynsilehto

II  Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing Feminism as a Master Narrative .................. 15
   Asma Barlas

III  Engaging Islamic Feminism .................................................................................................. 25
   Margot Badran

IV  Implementing Islamic Feminism: The Case of Moroccan Family Code Reform .................. 37
   Souad Eddouada

V  “Equal but Different:” Women in Turkey from the Islamic Point of View .......................... 47
   Tuula Sakaranaho

VI  Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany ................................................................. 57
   Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami

VII  Why Keep Asking Me about My Identity? Thoughts of a Non-Muslim ............................. 91
    Renata Pepicelli

VII  Rethinking “Islamic Feminist Hermeneutics:” The Case of Fatima Mernissi ..................... 103
    Raja Rhouni

Authors ......................................................................................................................................... 117
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editor and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the article "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany" by Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, first published in *The Muslim World* 96:4, October 2006, pp. 617–642.
Islamic feminism has been a widely discussed phenomenon since the emergence of the term in 1990s, oftentimes subject to a heated debate. On one hand, this debate is due to the ways in which it is embedded in the wider discourses concerning women’s rights and Islam, and the position of women in Muslim-majority societies as well as of Muslim women in societies where Muslim populations constitute a minority. On the other hand, the debate entangles to the controversies between the labelling practises and the positionalities of those who seek to resist the given labels: who is entitled to speak as and/or name someone else as an “Islamic feminist?” How are these labels accommodated, contested and eventually resisted? With these questions in mind, providing an exclusive definition of the term 'Islamic feminism’ would raise numerous concerns, given also the multiplicity of definitions concerning different ways of conceptualizing feminism, or different feminisms, and the debates concerning 'Islamic’ or 'Islamist’ in connection with feminisms.¹ Scholars challenging patriarchal readings of the Qu’ran and the Hadith² have demonstrated how it is not the texts themselves but rather their interpretations that have allowed for patriarchal traditions to persist.

¹ For a discussion on Islamism and Islamic feminism, see Badran 2001; on the debate in the context of Iran, see Moghadam 2002.
The Qu’ran contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, thus laying grounds for challenging patriarchal traditions. Therefore, for some scholar-activists, referring to feminism in order to challenge patriarchy would not be necessary. For others, what has been called – for descriptive and analytical purposes – as ‘Islamic feminism’ explicitly focuses on the process of unmasking these principles from the confines of patriarchal traditions; as an extension of the faith position instead of a rejection of this position.

The struggles and negotiations explored in this book are situated in diverse settings and geographical scales: in the debate concerning the conception of ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Islamic feminists’; in national contexts of Morocco and Turkey; in the narration of committed Muslim women living in France and in Germany; in a university setting in Italy; and in critical engagement with scholarly texts on religion. The diversity of the sites has been chosen so as to illustrate some of the variety of ways in which patriarchy, along with other axis of domination, is being challenged in an Islamic framework. At the same time, the texts portray different ways of understanding what constitutes ‘Islamic feminism’ in the wider context of debates concerning gender and religiosities.

The first two articles provide part of a continuum of a debate between two internationally leading scholars of the field: Professor Asma Barlas and Senior Research Fellow Margot Badran. Asma Barlas, while critical to being labelled as feminist due to the ethnocentric, not to say racist, undertones the notion and practices of feminism has got to represent for many non-white women, has been widely cherished as the Islamic feminist par excellence. Her work in unreading the patriarchal interpretations of the Qu’ran has provided great inspiration for many Muslims and non-Muslims, interested in critical hermeneutics and in discovering egalitarian ideals in the Qu’ran. As a historian, Margot Badran has elaborated on the emergence and the notion of Islamic feminism, conceptualizing it as

---

3 Barlas 2006; see also Barlas’s contribution in this volume.
5 Cooke 2000, 151. Italics in the original.
6 Barlas 2002.
“feminist discourse and practice grounded in an Islamic paradigm,” and she has studied the phenomenon in different parts of the world: for example, in Egypt, in South Africa and in the United States. While it is not possible to retrace here the whole debate between these two scholars, their articles provide with an insight into the discussion which is likely to go on in other forums and to inspire yet again new audiences.

Two country contexts from the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, Morocco and Turkey, have been selected in order to illustrate the debate on gender and Islam in different Muslim-majority societies. The 2004 reform of the Moroccan Family Code, the *Moudawana*, has been heralded as the victory of women’s movement in the Muslim world, setting an example and source of inspiration for transnational feminist activism throughout the globe. The reform was a result of many struggles, where Moroccan feminist associations proved to be very active. However, despite a victory at the legislative level, there remain many challenges ahead in the process of implementation of the *Moudawana*, as PhD Souad Eddouada demonstrates in her article.

In the spring 2008, the Turkish parliament voted in favour of eliminating the law forbidding covered Turkish women from wearing the veil in the university premises, thereby bringing the dispute between secularism of the Kemalist state and Islamic practises into a new phase. In June 2008 the Constitutional Court in Turkey dismissed these reforms as unconstitutional. The ruling Justice and Development party (AKP) advocating the initiative was charged for violating state-secularism and threatened with a ban on its activities. Discussing the 2004 case of Leyla Şahin (Leyla Şahin v. Turkey) at the European Court of Human Rights as a famous example on the debate on veil in Turkey, Professor Tuula Sakaranaho contextualizes this debate in the women’s movements in Turkey. She distinguishes three ideological groupings – the Kemalist feminists, the so-called new feminists and Islamic women; each with different approach to the issue of women and Islam in Turkey, and with different take on feminism.

---

7 Badran 2002.
Drawing on extensive fieldwork with committed Muslim women who are engaged with Islam on a collective level, in institutions and more informal groups of religious learning in France and Germany, PhD Jeanette Jouili and PhD Schirin Amir-Moazami analyse women’s strategies in acquisition of knowledge in Islam. Inspired by Saba Mahmood’s work on Islamic revival in Egypt and notably on her notion of pious subject, Jouili and Amir-Moazami discuss the process of knowledge acquisition as, on the individual level, aimed at the formation of a “pious self,” and, on a collective level, cultivated in the sense of responsibility towards the construction of a virtuous community, as mothers and as knowledge transmitters towards the wider Muslim community. The practising Muslim women Jouili and Amir-Moazami have worked with underline the requirement for women to educate themselves in Islam. This requirement does not draw on a particularly feminist agenda, neither would the women themselves call themselves Islamic feminists but, rather, their aim in knowledge acquisition is nourished by a sense of responsibility as a believing person.

Making explicit her perspective as a non-Muslim scholar studying the phenomenon of Islamic feminism, PhD Renata Pepicelli engages the question of identities, identifications and positionalities concerning the debate on women and Islam. In this debate the question of ‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking about’ becomes central, concerning which Margot Badran has asked: “how to support the struggles of others when one cannot claim an ownership in these struggles?” Rejecting the idea of societies composed of closed and separate identities and communities, Pepicelli argues that participation of both Muslims and non-Muslims in the debate is necessary given that these questions touch upon the societies constituted in pluralist terms; the societies in which we live.

In a concluding chapter, PhD Raja Rhouni examines the possibilities of post-foundationalist feminist hermeneutics through her analysis of Moroccan feminist writer Fatima Mernissi’s work on women’s rights in Islam. Criticising the essentializing tendencies

in much of the scholarship and practice conceptualized as Islamic feminism, Rhouni argues that Islamic feminism should move beyond the search for truth and authenticity – what she calls foundationalism – towards “post-foundationalist islamic gender critique.” This would mean engaging in dialogue with the tradition and applying contextual approach in order to expand the methodologies of exegesis, rather than undermining foundations and traditions. Along with rethinking gender in Islamic thought, Rhouni argues that the contextual approach would help in complicating political and ideological instrumentalizations of religious texts.

The present book results of an international seminar Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives, held in Tampere, Finland in the end of August 2007. As the person in charge of the local organisation, I wish to thank the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland for supporting our initiative and for generously agreeing to finance our efforts. I also wish to thank my colleagues at the Tampere Peace Research Institute for all support in making the effort to become a reality. Special thanks go to our Research director at the time, Academy Research Fellow Tarja Väyrynen, for encouragement and practical support throughout the process of putting together the seminar. Finally, I wish to thank my colleagues and dear friends, PhD Souad Eddouada and PhD Renata Pepicelli for all their efforts in developing ideas, inviting speakers and believing in our ambitions. Without your collaboration, none of this would have been possible.

REFERENCES


ENGAGING ISLAMIC FEMINISM: PROVINCIALIZING FEMINISM AS A MASTER NARRATIVE

Asma Barlas

As you know, both Margot Badran and I chose to offer our keynotes under the same title, “Engaging Islamic Feminism,” even though we approach the subject rather differently. As a feminist historian, she theorizes, analyzes, and documents Muslim women’s struggles for equality, and in particular, the advent of Islamic feminism. I, on the other hand, have been doing the kind of work she defines as Islamic feminism; i.e., trying to open up the Qur’an to anti-patriarchal readings. However, as a result of dialogues with her, some public and others not, I have become increasingly interested in trying to clarify why I resist being called a feminist.

This is always an awkward place to start at a conference on feminism since, to most people, my resistance seems inexplicable and even pointless given how useful some feminist theories are for engaging Islam in liberatory modes. Besides, the phenomenon Badran calls Islamic feminism seems to be an actually existing reality, so why obdurately refuse to accept it? This is the question I’m going to engage and, to give you a sense of the direction of my talk, I want to share its subtitle with you: “Provincializing feminism as a master narrative.” (This is, of course, an homage to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe from which I have borrowed some of my arguments.)

1 Borrows from Chakrabarty 2000.
2 I want to thank Anitta Kynsilehto and Renata Pepicelli for inviting me to this workshop and for putting the hard work and energy required to organize it.
I should also clarify that most of this talk is based on an earlier response to Badran (in October 2006) which I had called, quite self-indulgently, “Four Stages of Denial or my On-again, Off-again, Affair with Feminism.” Even though we’ve both moved on in our thinking since then (and I have revised my comments to reflect the changes in mine), I still thought it worthwhile to share that essay for two reasons. First, some of the issues I’ve been struggling with remain the same and, second, that talk gives a chronological account of the different stages in my approach to feminism and therefore provides a context for explaining my latest stance on it.

FIRST STAGE:

The first stage was soon after my book was called feminist by some people, in both the positive and negative sense of the word. I was upset. This is because I thought I had acknowledged my debts to certain feminisms in the book but I had also tried to differentiate myself from feminists by calling myself a believing woman. So my reaction to being called a feminist was both visceral and mono-logic and it essentially boiled down to asking a whole series of “what” questions though mostly rhetorically, as in:

“What? How can people call me a feminist when I’m calling myself a believing woman?” “How can other people tell me what I am and what I’m doing?” “So what if I use some of the same language as feminists? Can’t one do that without buying into an entire ontology or epistemology!” “What? Do feminists think that they discovered equality and patriarchy?!” And, eventually, “so what if they did? I derive my understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur’an, not from any feminist text!”

So, there was much indignation and not much analysis during this first stage.

SECOND STAGE:

But, of course, once labels get stuck, it’s hard to shake them off and, over time, more and more people began to call me a feminist. Eventually, I had to abandon outrage as a permanent political strategy
and start explaining more carefully than I had in the book why I resisted being called a feminist.

In part, my resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white. Although I’m sure they were and remain well-meaning, many of them seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color like myself and that too in our presence, as if we didn’t exist.

Anyone who has been silenced in the name of sisterhood can understand how strange and difficult that is and it wasn’t until I read black feminists like bell hooks that I could give voice to my discomfort at being seen as the Sister Other.

So, it was hard for me to celebrate feminisms’ liberatory stance when liberation entailed a loss of voice and sense of self for women like me and it has taken some practice to look beyond actual feminists to appreciate certain feminist principles. (I guess many of you must feel the same way when you hear me speak about the Qur’an’s liberatory stance in the face of Muslim misogyny. It must be equally hard for you to look beyond the reality of Muslims to the theory and potential of Islam.) But, of course, there are always slippages between theory and practice and, in theory, I have always been committed to the concept of sexual equality, which is at the core of feminist theory.

Even so, I felt that the insistence on calling my work feminist denied something very real and specific about my encounter with the Qur’an and I tried to express this by comparing myself to Muslim feminists who believe that Islam is a sexist and patriarchal religion that puts a “sacred stamp onto female subservience,” in the words of Fatima Mernissi.

In contrast to such feminists, my own stance is that Muslims read Islam as a patriarchy partly because of how they read the Qur’an, who reads it, and the contexts in which they read it. In other words, I believe that texts are always read from and within specific material and ideological sites and that we need to be aware of these sites when attempting to understand readings of scripture.

In passing, I should note that in the years since I wrote my book I have come to appreciate its limitations in exonerating the Qur’anic text itself from charges of being anti-women. Still, I think that it is
wrong and misleading to speak about texts without also considering issues of context and inter- and intratextuality. Especially where the Qur’an is concerned, a whole host of scholars has shown that it has been continually de-contextualized and re-contextualized in light of Muslim sexual politics. And this politics is overwhelmingly male-centric.

In any event, during this second stage of my response to feminism, I began to clarify the differences between myself and feminists like Mernissi and to point out that it was possible to speak the same feminist language, of patriarchy and sexual equality, and yet have completely different readings of Islam.

THIRD STAGE (TORONTO):

It was at this point that Badran and I began a dialogue via email while she was in Egypt. I specially recall an email in which she wrote that she was listening to the muezzin’s call to prayer as she was reading my book. And the part she was reading was my interpretation of Abraham’s story which tries to show that, far from being the archetypal patriarch, Abraham was not a traditional father, or a father in the traditional sense. This is because his rights as father, as indeed the rights of all fathers, were and are, circumscribed by the rule of God and a God who is neither father nor son nor man nor male nor human and nor even created.

That I didn’t see the Qur’an as privileging fathers or fatherhood and, indeed, read it as subverting the concept of father-right and father-rule which is at the heart of traditional patriarchies was a building block in my claim that the Qur’an is anti-patriarchal.

It is precisely such arguments that Badran eventually came to view as evidence and incidences of Islamic feminism which she defines as a “discourse of gender equality that derives its mandate from the Qur’an and seeks rights and justice for all human beings across the totality of the public-private continuum.”

In effect, rather than locate the Qur’an within feminist discourses, this definition re-locates feminism in the Qur’an though Badran is careful to point out that many Muslim women have been engaged in recuperating this sort of Qur’anic discourse much before the advent of feminism proper.
I was utterly captivated by her definition both in the sense of being fascinated by it and in the sense of being made captive by it. I was fascinated because it was the first time that anyone had offered such a concise and yet comprehensive definition of Islamic feminism. And I was made captive by it because, if my reading of the Qur’an is feminist simply by virtue of being based in and on the Qur’an, then, clearly I am an Islamic feminist and there’s no escaping that fact!

So I stood alongside Badran in Toronto some years ago and said as much publicly. I guess our dialogue could have ended at this point but then she and I decided to make a joint presentation in Ithaca, my home institution, in 2006 and both of us brought some new thinking about feminism to that encounter.

FOURTH STAGE (ITHACA):

I describe this as the fourth stage of my affair with feminism and the point of departure for my response to Badran was her conclusion that “Because feminism provides a common language, and for analytical reasons, the term Islamic feminism should be retained, firmly claimed and repeatedly explained.”

Although I agree with her that Islamic feminism needs to be repeatedly explained I also argued that the language of feminism does not always allow us to explore commonalities and, more to the point, that shared languages also create analytical and political problems. Therefore, if we want to build solidarity with Muslim women, we need more than the shared discourse of feminism. We need to be able to understand the specificity of their movements and while I did not give a name to this specificity, I asked some new what and how and why questions in making my argument.

For instance, even if historians must name patterns in order to see them, doesn’t the naming also run the risk of flattening out important differences? As I’ve said, one can use feminist analysis to recuperate the Qur’an’s egalitarianism and also to re-present Islam as patriarchal. While the plurality of feminism is said to be its strength, how useful is a big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between feminists?

Of course, Badran’s definition of Islamic feminism gives one a way out of this conundrum by distinguishing between Muslim and
Islamic feminists. Yet, given that most people don’t know what this distinction even means, how does calling oneself an Islamic feminist render one’s work any more transparent or legitimate to Muslims? To me this isn’t just an existential anxiety but also a practical issue in that I think many of us who are working on the Qur’an are trying to speak mainly, though of course not exclusively, to our own Muslim communities. And the fact is that most Muslims do not make such fine distinctions between feminisms.

Just as importantly, if we change the world by naming it—as Paulo Freire says—then how do we change something by calling it Islamic, or Qur’anic, or feminist? That is to say, do we redeem the Qur’an by mapping feminism onto it? If so, how? As Badran’s own work shows some Muslim women were reading liberation into and out of it much before feminism. Why not just call their stance Qur’anic or Islamic since, after all, it is both? Or, do we redeem feminism when we locate it in the Qur’an? If so, what are the implications of this redemption for feminist theorizing?

Here again, Badran offers something tempting by de-secularizing the project of women’s liberation. As she makes clear, it is not only Westernized secular humanism but, also a specific mode of God-consciousness that can lead us to emphasize justice and rights for all human beings by affirming the unity and equality of human life. So, why then do I continue to dither in my embrace of feminism?

In Ithaca, I gave two reasons: first, calling myself a feminist was never a choice I was given. And, as I said, perhaps it was the combination of a perverse post-colonial sensibility and personal stubbornness that kept me from giving away my right to even name myself. Particularly at a time when a self-defined West has unleashed such bloodshed against Muslims everywhere there is some comfort in such seemingly small acts of individual resistance. Of course, as Ashis Nandy says, the West is now “everywhere, in structures and in minds,” and there is simply no escaping it, but I still seek to protect my sense of self from parts of the West by refusing to speak some common languages.

Secondly, I said that to the extent that feminism in any form is complicit with this violence—which I believe it is when it reads oppression into Islam and reads liberation out of the West’s imperialist depredations—I feel the need to resist it in all its forms. And, if in the
end, this is a self-defeating strategy, it shows just how narrow the world has grown for many of us, especially those who call ourselves Muslim.

**CURRENT STAGE: (TAMPERE)**

This is how I ended my response to Badran in 2006 and here we are again, this time in Finland and, once again, I’ve had to stretch myself to engage feminism since I did not want to end on the same note as I did in the U.S.

In some ways, I’m clearer about why I resist the feminist label even though I don’t pretend that the answers I have come up with are in any way definitive.

For one thing, I am clear that the focal point of my resistance has never been the idea that women and men share in an indivisible and equal humanity; rather, the focal points of my resistance have had to do with some of the accoutrements of feminism. Then, too, I understand that Islamic feminism as Badran defines it is liberatory in the sense both of being inclusive and being based in notions of justice that cut across spurious and unproductive binaries and divisions. And, I expect and hope that many Muslim women will continue to extend and refine this project of Islamic feminism in meaningful ways.

However, even though I believe deeply in Islamic feminism’s advocacy of sexual equality and I recognize the very real political necessity of certain feminisms, I am troubled by the extent to which feminism as a discourse has foreclosed the possibility of theorizing sexual equality from within alternative paradigms. An obvious sign of this is the fact that one can’t avoid being called a feminist any time one speaks about women’s liberation or equality, no matter what sort of language one speaks in. In fact, feminism simultaneously usurps and silences critiques that fall outside its own discursive framework.

Even if we believe that reality exists independently of how we choose to define it, as we know, the very process of defining it also gives it a particular shape. So, when we call something Islamic feminism we close off the possibility of seeing it as anything else and it is this closure that I find problematic.
When we ignore how people choose to name themselves, their work, and their struggles, we necessarily do some epistemic violence to them. Besides, the autonomy to define oneself seems to be an important principle to defend irrespective of how honest self-definitions actually are. After all, naming other people, or the world on behalf of other people, isn’t any more honest.

In a sense, then, it is the very inclusivity of feminism—its attempt, as a meta and master narrative, to subsume and assimilate all conversations about equality—that I find both imperializing and reductive.

Here, I’m reminded of Chakrabarty’s argument that the Western “investment in a certain kind of rationality and in particular understanding of the ‘real’ means that history’s—the discipline’s—exclusions are ultimately epistemological.”\(^3\) It seems to me that we can make exactly the same argument about history’s inclusions. That is to say, feminist history can only regard Muslim women’s encounter with their religion and sacred text as being real in an ontological and epistemological sense if it can name that encounter feminism.

I realize that Badran is too careful a historian to be comfortable with how she names the world and too critical not to question her own naming. But, speaking more generally, one could argue that history’s—the discipline’s—inclusions as well as exclusions have become the ultimate marker of all our realities. To Chakrabarty it is clear that we cannot respect the “diversity of life practices or life-worlds” so long as we embrace the “universalizing political philosophies, which remain the global heritage of the Enlightenment.”\(^4\)

Granted feminism isn’t a direct heritage of the Enlightenment, but, as long as it functions as a universalizing political theory, I don’t think it can accommodate the “diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to ‘world the earth’ in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging.”\(^5\)

---

\(^3\) Ibid., 98.

\(^4\) Ibid., 148.

\(^5\) Ibid., 254.
I guess where Chakrabarty and I differ is that, for him, provincializing Europe, and hence it’s universalizing narratives, is a project born out of gratitude and love. I am less politically charitable than he is. While I have always acknowledged my intellectual debts to feminism, and to individual feminists, my critique isn’t based so much in love as it is based in a sense of being wronged, and hence in some notion of justice. To me, justice in this instance means being able to give voice to my own loving engagement with my scripture in whatever language I find meaningful. So far, I have called myself simply a “believer.” But this doesn’t mean that I’m always comfortable with the epistemological closure that this term implies either. But then belief isn’t so much about certainty as it is about an open-ended willingness to go on searching after what one considers the truth. Perhaps a more appropriate way to define myself therefore would be as a seeker of God’s grace, a supplicant for it.

Reference


---

6 Ibid., 255
Engaging Islamic Feminism¹

Margot Badran

Feminism as a phenomenon engaging with issues of women’s rights, women’s liberation, and gender equality as part and parcel of the rights, liberation, and equality of all was constructed and shaped concurrently by Muslims and others in the East (I use this term in contradistinction to the West, referring to countries of Africa and Asia) and by westerners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. History attests that feminism is the creation of both easterners and westerners, of Muslims and those of other religions, of the colonized and colonizers, and of women of different races and ethnicities. Those who claim that feminism is ‘western’ and ‘white’ do not know their history and perpetuate the circulation of myths.

Until today feminism remains in many ways a prisoner of colonialism. Feminism first appeared during the heyday of colonialism and its moment of birth has left long shadows. Early in the 20th century feminists from different parts of the world made efforts to join hands in international meetings and conferences to strengthen the cause of women at home and abroad even as they were positioned on either side of the colonizers/colonized divide. Emergent feminisms in Africa and Asia were nationalist feminisms while emergent feminisms in the colonizing western countries were variously implicated in colonialism and were later referred to as imperial feminisms. The

¹ This paper is a combination of my presentation at the seminar on Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives organized by the Tampere Peace Research Institute and of my reflections and thoughts triggered during and after the event by other presentations and by the debates and exchange. My paper is thus an engagement with Islamic feminism in part produced by and reflecting the dynamism of the event. I would like to thank Anitta Kynsilehto and Renata Pepicelli for organizing this seminar and the Tampere Peace Research Institute for hosting it and for their warm welcome.
very coming together of eastern and western feminists in international forums throughout the 20th century testified to each other’s existence. Yet, a brew of arrogance and ignorance led westerners at large to assert that feminism was western, insisting that it was beyond the imagination and will of non-westerners. Meanwhile, in the West and East alike, feminists were up against home-grown patriarchalist opponents who used sundry means to denigrate feminism and its supporters. In the West, detractors portrayed feminists as man-haters. In the East, enemies branded feminists as perpetrators of cultural treason and, ironically in so doing ‘colluded’ with westerners in declaring feminism western.

In 1990 when religious identity politics in general, including political Islam or Islamism, was rampant a group of international scholars, mainly women, gathered in Helsinki for a Roundtable on Identity Politics and Women organized by sociologist Val Moghadam at the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics (WIDER). We came together to examine women and identity politics. We wanted to compare ways identity politics shaped and controlled women and were concerned how women themselves were often complicit in supporting identity politics and its patriarchal agenda. It was in this context that some of us reported that Muslim women were subverting the patriarchal Islamist project through what appeared to be a new form of feminism-in-the-making which Muslim women in different parts of the world would soon call Islamic feminism. Iranian sociologist Nayereh Tohidi told us how some women in the Islamic Republic of Iran growing increasingly restive under gender restrictions were beginning to re-read the Qur’an in order to claim rights accorded to them by Islam. I shared

---


4 See Tohidi 1994. She talks of a reformist approach to Islam among women of the elite in the Islamic Republic saying “I tentatively call ‘Islamist feminism.’” (p. 139). Later she would use the term Islamic feminism. Islamist feminist refers to as a femi-
my discovery how some new ‘religious women’ (al-mutadayyinat, then a neologism) in Egypt, close to or affiliated with the Muslim Brothers, were embarking upon a re-examination of the Qur’an to work out a new “feminist” paradigm grounded in scripture. They abhorred the term “feminism,” while acknowledging that some of the work of feminists at home and abroad had done had been useful, but were hard-pressed to come up with a satisfactory alternative. I had unexpectedly stumbled upon this effort in the late 1980s while investigating contemporary feminism in Egypt. It is perhaps hard to imagine so many years later the excitement produced by this new turn.

Now seventeen years later, in 2007, at a moment when Islamic feminism had become widespread and at the forefront of attention, women gathered once again in Finland. This time we convened take part in a seminar hosted by the Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) in order to discuss current perspectives on Islamic feminism, now nearly two decades old. By now there are two generations who are engaging in a variety of ways with Islamic feminism. Eager for a cross-generational dialogue, Souad Eddouada, Anitta Kynsilehto and Renata Pepicelli, scholars of the new generation, spearheaded our event. Together our two generations bracketed the life-span of Islamic feminism. As participants in the seminar we included Muslims and non-Muslims, women born in Muslim majority countries and those born in the West, and women, who change locations within and beyond East and West with frequency and apparent ease. We juggle multiple identities shaped by location, time, circumstances, and by our own proclivities. We include those who use the term Islamic feminism and those who do not, and those who identify as Islamic feminist and those who do not. We came as scholars who

ivist operating within the context of Islamism or political Islam, in the Iranian case in control of the state, and in most other instances as movements of political Islam. Many see the term “Islamist feminism” as an oxymoron. However, women from Islamist movements may leave them and become ‘Islamic feminists,’ something Nilufer Göle alerted us to in The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling (Göle 1996).

5 See Badran 1994. I devised the term “gender activists” as a blanket term to include women across the political spectrum who acted or thought as feminists.
operate in and out of our ivory towers because we feel we have a stake in Islamic feminism, indeed, multiple stakes.

As a member of the older generation it is instructive to learn how younger scholars come to Islamic feminism: what their issues are, how they produce their own discourse, ways they enter and shape the debates, and what the stakes are for them. The first generation of women engaging with Islamic feminism includes those who created seminal texts of Islamic feminism now regarded as classics, and those who chart and theorize Islamic feminism. The new generation builds upon earlier work and carries it in their own directions. We of the two generations who are in dialogue are mutually enriched and become part of the dynamic of re/defining and enacting Islamic feminism. Those of both generations and of many backgrounds who engage with Islamic feminism may be seen as forming a kind of community.

Engaging with Islamic feminism as a historian I would like to do what historians do: look at what has come before and at how, in complicated ways, past and present intersect. In the early 1990s when Muslim secular feminists—scholars, journalists, and writers—from various countries in Africa and Asia observed the process begun by some Muslim women to explicate gender equality and social justice grounded in re-readings of the Qur’an and other religious texts, they immediately recognized this as a new form of feminism and called it “Islamic feminism.”

Secular feminists in Muslim societies were heirs to feminism/s first articulated earlier in the 20th century made up of a composite of Islamic modernist, secular nationalist, and humanist discourses. It was a feminism that emerged in territorial nation-states whose citizens were bounded by a secular covenant guaranteeing the equality of all citizens irrespective of religion and at the same time was equally protective of all religions within the polity. Muslims’ feminisms were secular, like the secular nation-states in which they were located, that is, they included space and respect for religion in a

---

6 I pointed to early examples of the use of the term Islamic feminism in Badran 1999, 166–67. During a trip to South Africa in 1999 I found the term Islamic feminism current among progressive Muslims.
religiously pluralistic entity. Secular feminism/s, however, re-thought religion while the secular state regulates religion and determined the limits of religious freedom. Muslims shaped their secular feminism/s together with compatriots of other religions.7

The Islamic modernist strand of foundational secular feminism aimed at activating rights accorded to women in the Qur’an, in so doing, freeing women and society at large patriarchal practices masking as Islamic which sustained constraints on women and burdens on men. Central to the project of Islamic modernism, articulated by Shaikh Muhammad ‘Abduh of Egypt, widely influential in the Muslim world in his day—the late 19th and early 20th centuries and after, was the recuperation by Muslims of the practice of *ijtihad* or independent critical examination of religious texts. *Ijtihad* would assist individuals and society to be both modern and Muslim; it would help Muslims shape the dynamics of change within a renewed understanding of Islam. For Muslim women under the dominion of patriarchal restrictions imposed in the name of religious prescription, the insights of Islamic modernism helped them to expose the patriarchal intrusions into Islam and their own lives. The early feminists were not equipped by education and training to engage in direct examination of religious sources, themselves. This would fall to women at the other end of the 20th century—the Islamic feminists of the future—who would be so equipped and would feel the urgency in the context of the resurgence of patriarchal political Islam their own personal motivations to engage in *ijtihad* and to conduct their own *tafsir* (Qur’anic interpretation).

Secular feminists used Islamic modernist arguments in tandem with secular nationalist and humanist arguments during the 20th century to successfully promote rights to education and work and a variety of other women’s rights. In the process Islamic modernist thinking on women and gender became internalized or ‘naturalized’ among certain classes and segments of the population. In the domain of the family, however, patriarchal beliefs and practices were highly resistant to Islamic modernist thinking. Thus, feminists

---

7 On the historical trajectory of Muslims’ secular and Islamic feminisms, see Badran 2008.
were unsuccessful in effecting the reform of Muslim personal status laws in those Muslim majority countries where they existed. It was harder for feminists to dismantle patriarchy in the family or private sphere than in the public sphere, that is, the secular but not religious parts of the public sphere.

Along with growing increasingly impatient over the decades for an amelioration of Muslim personal status codes, women accumulated further demands, such as gaining admittance to the positions of judge (who adjudicated in both secular and religious courts) and mufti (the official who issues religious opinions called fatwas), which, as they could see, was possible in some Muslim countries and not in others. To argue their cases more persuasively women needed to draw upon deeper knowledge of the Islamic sciences. With the onslaught against women and their already won rights mounted by Islamists from the latter decades of the 20th century, advocates of women’s rights felt the urgent need for a powerful gender-sensitive Islamic discourse to counteract the patriarchal resurgence imposed in the name of religion.

It was at this moment that a plethora of Muslim women’s writings discussing issues of women and gender within an Islamic discourse began to appear. Writers in Zanan (est. 1992) in Iran offered Islamic readings of gender equality and justice.8 Sisters in Islam, founded in Malaysia in the mid-1980s, issued pamphlets discrediting wife-beating condoned in the name of Islam. Fatima Mernissi published Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry (1991) exposing the fraudulence of misogynist hadiths (sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad). Amina Wadud published Qur’an and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective (1992, 1999) elucidating the message of gender equality and social justice found in the scripture. It was the discourse on women and gender located within an egalitarian reading of Islam expressed in such works that Muslim secular feminists identified as Islamic feminism.

The term Islamic feminism was well-established by the turn of the 21st century when in 2002 Asma Barlas published ‘Believing Women in Islam: Un-reading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an’, disentangling patriarchal meanings projected onto the Qur’an, which was immediately heralded as another work of Islamic feminism. In 2006 Wadud published Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam further elaborating her hermeneutic work on women and gender and bringing to wide attention the meaning of gender jihad which some might think better captures the project of ‘Islamic feminism.’

Word of the new Islamic feminism and its compelling texts spread rapidly through cyberspace where it appeared on Muslims’ e-journals, listservs, and websites of Muslim women’s organizations. The circulation and enthusiastic reception of these new works on women and gender under the banner of Islamic feminism was testimony to their relevance to Muslim women, and many men, and indeed, to an urgent need. A spontaneous ‘Islamic feminist’ community appeared to be in formation.

Although writers in Zanan publically identified with feminism, along with some others, those revered as creators of seminal texts of Islamic feminism firmly rejected the term. Amina Wadud placed her work in the context of tafsir (exegesis) carefully noting, however, its departure from classical Muslim scholarship. Although she does not choose to use the term Islamic feminism in relation to her work, in the 1992 preface to Qur’an and Woman she declared that her hermeneutics “...can be viewed as part of a larger area of discourse by feminists [emphasis added] who have constructed a valuable critique of the tendency in many disciplines to build the notion of the normative human from the experiences and perspectives of the male person.”9 As we learn from Gisela Webb’s Windows of Faith a number of North American Muslim women engaged in new gender-sensitive ijtihad in the mid-90s (Wadud among them) referred to their work simply as scholarship-activism.10 The generic term,

---

9 Wadud 1999, ix.
10 Webb 2000; Wadud was among the contributors.
‘scholarship-activism,’ it will be remembered has been a hallmark of feminist studies which has always connected theory and praxis.\textsuperscript{11}

The question of “Islamic feminist” as an identity label has been more contentious than the term Islamic feminism. Most authors of texts of ‘Islamic feminism’ adamantly objected to being labeled Islamic feminists. Over time, however, some like Wadud have become more accepting even though they do not elect to call themselves Islamic feminists. Wadud writes in the 1999 preface of \textit{Qur’an and Woman}: “The two names most consistently hurled at me are “Western” and “feminist.” “Western” could mean that I can only be who I am: a daughter of the West, born and raised American of African descent. It is reduced however to mean anti-Islam. “Feminist” is used in a similar reductionist manner. No reference is ever made to the definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are human beings.”\textsuperscript{12} However, Barlas remains perturbed at being referred to as an Islamic feminist, even when the term is used purely analytically. There are different reasons people object to being seen an Islamic feminist, or a feminist for that matter. Some feel that they are being reduced to a single identity. Many strategically object to any kind of feminist label for political or professional reasons. However, people also realize that there is urgent work to be done and many have moved on.

The past twenty years—the life-span of Islamic feminism—has seen a significant dent in the patriarchal narrative of ‘Islam’ as the egalitarian version of Islam steadily takes wider hold. At the core of Islamic feminism, and its major breakthrough, is a stringent Qur’an-backed doctrine of gender equality enunciating the full equality of women and men across the public-private spectrum that includes gender equality in the religious part of the public sphere (in the religious professions and in public religious ritual). The Islamic feminist formulation of gender equality is more radical than that of Muslims’ foundational secular feminism which argued for full gender equal-

\textsuperscript{11}It is interesting to note that feminist studies came out of the movement of second-wave feminism (first in the United States) while Islamic feminism as a theory and discourse preceded Islamic feminist activism—although the activist application was very soon part and parcel of Islamic feminism.

\textsuperscript{12}Wadud 1999, xviii.
ity in the public sphere, excepting the religious part of the public sphere, while acquiescing in the notion of gender complementarity or gender equity in the private sphere and in so doing accepted a patriarchal model of the family. Using the tools of Islamic religious sciences together with those of modern social sciences, Barlas was able to forcefully demonstrate that patriarchy in family, as well as in society was un-Islamic. Early secular feminists, like Muslims in general, had been led to believe that the patriarchal family was Islamic and strove to make the regime of complimentary gender roles function optimally. However, second-wave Muslim secular feminists later questioned the notion of the patriarchal family, attempting, like their predecessor to reform it piecemeal through legal reform of Muslim personal status laws until later secular and Islamic feminists joined forces in some places. Islamic feminists not only connected the public and private as the indivisible terrain of gender equality but also elucidated the necessary linkage of gender equality and social justice. Gender equality is integral to the Islamic feminist notion of equality of all insan or humankind transcending tribe, class, ethnicity, and race.

Islamic feminism has seen successful applications of gender equality in the 2004 revision of the Moroccan family law called al-Mudawwana whereby the two spouses become co-heads of the family, polygamy is made virtually impossible, and women are able to initiate divorce. While the moment must be politically ripe for such a change to occur, the ideological framework must also be in place. The revised Moroccan family law is presently the most advanced shar’iah backed family law in existence and is the culmination of a long feminist struggle by secular feminists and Islamic feminists. In Egypt a similar combination of secular feminist and Islamic feminist forces and argumentation resulted in the successful outcome of the long struggle for women to be eligible to be judges and for khul’a, a mechanism by which women can initiate the dissolution of a marriage, became part of the Muslim Personal Status Code.

Islamic feminism continues to gain an ever higher profile and with this increased public space for extending debate among schol-

---

13 See Sadiqi 2006; Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006.
ars and activists. The past two or three years has witnessed a proliferation of transnational conferences, workshops, and seminars. I observe two recent trends.

One is a tendency by Islamist women, instead of absenting themselves from Islamic feminist events as they did previously, are now attending open forums taking advantage of an opportunity to make their views known and to challenge Islamic feminist thinking. These forums provide an opportunity for Islamist women to put forth another definition of Islamic feminism that dilutes its core tenet of full gender equality. It is interesting to note that Islamist women who enter the arena of gender debates typically call for gender equality in the secular part public sphere—they do not seek equality in the religious domain, and uphold the notion of the patriarchal family promoting an optimal performance of differential gender roles, replicate the foundational secular feminist approach first articulated a century ago, which by now most secular feminists have moved beyond.

Secondly I observe a tendency by some analysts of Islamic feminism to broaden the arc of what they regard as Islamic feminism and Islamic feminists. Thus, women who join Islamist movements and in so doing move beyond the confines of the family to assume new functions in the domain of public activism in the process gain more control over their lives are sometimes seen as de facto ‘Islamic feminists.’ Such women, however, do not challenge the idea of a patriarchal family as religiously ordained. Thus to place them within the circumference of Islamic feminism would be in the eyes of many Islamic feminists to call into question Islamic feminism’s core notion of full gender equality. Such women might be more appropriately seen as incipient Islamic feminists, especially if they become disaffected by male Islamists’ treatment. Arat and Göle pondered this earlier in the case of Islamist women Turkey in the early 1990s as Islamic feminism was emergent.14

Islamic feminism is very much a work in progress. To engage Islamic feminism is to stretch our minds and to expand the parameters of knowledge, and to develop and refine new analytical and con-

14 See Arat 2005; Göle 1996.
ceptual vocabulary. It is to forge new bonds and extend the scope and forms of our collective and everyday activism. It is also to enter an embattled arena and perhaps this is a sign of Islamic feminism’s urgency and relevance.

REFERENCES


IMPLEMENTING ISLAMIC FEMINISM: THE CASE OF MOROCCAN FAMILY CODE REFORM

Souad Eddouada

In her *Imra’atu -l’ijmâ*, the Tunisian writer Latifa Lakhdar argues that with the growth of global religious fundamentalisms, rethinking religion has become a necessary path for feminist criticism within Muslim majority and minority Muslim countries. The achievement of a critique of religion from within, independently from the fundamentalist thought, is no longer a paradox, but a nowadays possibility. Accordingly, the deployment of social sciences tools of analysis is allowing Muslim feminists to build up multiple dialogic connections between Islam and feminism and disclaim both the orientalist and fundamentalist thesis of antagonism between an essentialized notion of “Western feminism” and a timeless “Islamic patriarchy.” The presumption that the doors of *ijtihād* were closed and that there is an ontological enmity between Islam and critical thought has contributed in maintaining the progressive custody of the European reason while the achievement of a sovereign Muslim-based open and progressive universalism is possible for Muslim feminists.¹ One of the main tasks for such a project is, according to the Tunisian historian of religion Latifa Lakhdar, to deconstruct the notion of Muslim woman and the symbols associated with this identity based construct.²

¹ Lakhdar 2002, 8.
Following this statement, this paper will engage with essentialist identity-based categories as frameworks within which the notion of "woman" is constructed and maintained, and so I will take apart the compound construct “Muslim Moroccan woman." Although the incorporation of two specific qualifiers (Muslim, Moroccan) may seem to endow the woman in question with an authentic identity; the assertion of a singular coherent identity that can be described as “Moroccan Muslim woman“ yet upholds the framework within which an essentialized notion of woman is constructed, and impedes reading gender outside identity-based categories. This insight invites the critical reading of discourses that produce and endorse an androcentric determination of the “Moroccan Muslim identity.”

Chief among these discourses is the theological discourse that has framed women within the realm of the sacred which escapes the rule of historicity and therefore rejected the notion of change that would question the continuity and the stability of the notion of Muslim woman. The notion of Woman was frozen in a kind of ideology and inserted through jurisprudence into a moralizing pedagogical discourse that aims at determining a feminine codified single form. Despite their dialogical logical connection, the tension between the sacred and the historical has been a persistent element within the family law texts especially. Some theologians have tried to activate this dialogue sometimes on the basis of the ascendancy of the historical over the sacred and the subordination of the latter to the former as it happened for economic issues, governance. Yet, the same theologians made sure to keep the absolute upper hand for the sacred over the historical in issues related to the relationship between the sexes. This by no means, however, indicates that theologians or Ulema are a homogenous anti-feminist group. Some of these religious scholars advocated advanced rights for women like the 16th century Alem Ibn Ardoun whose fatwas advocated gender justice and individual women’s rights as early as 16th century rural Morocco. Yet, the state’s appropriation of the Ulema’s voice implied the marginalization of the progressive religious scholars alems or their recuperation and so the religious scholar’s legitimacy largely

3 Lakhdar 2002, 54.
depended on the contemporary nation-state projects and their historical development.

Urgently codified in 1957, the first Moroccan Family Code that had to be drafted in fifteen days and three meetings among ten conservative religious scholars *Ulema*, was only slightly amended in 1993. The political and historical context in which the text of the Family Code was produced was largely determined by the requirements of homogeneity of the nation. From the Nationalists’ standpoint, the Berber decree issued by the French colonial authorities that meant the formal institutionalization of local independent customary laws was manipulated by the colonial enterprise in order to cause division among the Arab and the Amazigh populations.\(^4\) From this perspective, the Berber decree induced the reaction against the prevalence of customary laws during the pre-colonial period and so the main concern for the codification of the Family Code was unity of the nation. The heads of tribes were necessary political actors for the unification of the country and so the monarchy needed their alliance to establish order and rule.

This power of mobilization was necessary in order to fulfill the objectives of unity during the period of post-independence. The centrality of tribal kin-based alliances in the constitution of influential powerful groups determined Moroccan politics and illustrates the way the legal system underwrites their interests. The codification of the 1957 Family Code was, then, largely shaped by the requirements of national homogeneity that was determined in terms of the tribes-monarchy alliances and so the law came to serve a particular perspective of justice, that of the rural extended patriarchal family.

This analysis of the political and historical circumstances within which the 1957 Family Code was produced, although not completely inappropriate, in fact overlooks “the urban voice.” One of the main urban voices at that time was Allal Al-Fassi, a contemporary Moroccan religious scholar who advocated the rights of the Muslim Moroccan woman, arguing for the abolition of polygamy in his writings and supporting it during the codification of the 1957 Family Code. His contradictory positions, especially with regard to the

---

\(^4\) Charrad 2001.
polygamy, were mainly due to the fact that he had to adjust his position to the logic of the State.

Since the 1970s with the gradual integration of the theme of development, the idea of infitah or openness to the market and the adoption of a policy promoting private investment found its way within the political power and the socialist opposition as well. The commitment to political and social reform has produced a political context more open to women’s demands especially during the 1990s with the coming of the Socialists to the government after the King’s decision to have what he called gouvernement d’alternance. The 2003/4 reform of the 1957 Family Code happened within a complex context of the interaction between two trajectories of change: 1) processes of political openness initiated by the monarchy in the 1990s; and 2) the growing trend of state-sponsored institutionalization of religion announced in the aftermath of 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks in the name of the reform of the religious sphere. The 2003/4 Family Code amendments emerged after decades of polarized public exchanges between religious fundamentalists and feminists regarding the secular and/or religious foundations of the Family Code change. The reform of the Family Code initiated by King Mohamed VI was part of a more general shift in the state’s policy on gender, based on the “egalitarian spirit of Islam and universal human principles.” In the same spirit as the Family Code reforms, the King had earlier initiated the 2002 quota-based election of 33 women to the parliament. (The Moroccan parliament had usually around two women out of its 250 members). In another move emphasizing women’s new civic and religious responsibility, in 2005, the ministry of religious affairs recruited the first group of women religious mosque preachers. Each of these three landmark state initiatives had been undertaken in the name of the “democratisation process” and “the implementation of the national modernization political and religious projects.”

5 Saaf 1999.
6 The 1998 newly designed Prime Minister received women’s organization delegates and asked them to cancel their scheduled “Marche Féminine.” Instead, the Prime Minister promised a gender-based policy through a government mechanism for women’s issues in addition to the reform of the Family Code.
Previously constructed as the symbols of national Muslim identity by the postcolonial nation state, women are also used to foreground claims for modernization imposed by the necessity to integrate into the global economy.

The pre-2003/4 gender-discriminating Family Code and the previous absence of any state programs for the elevation of women’s status had been justified by a sense of the sacred and private status of “women issues” and the “political incorrectness” within the public debate on the “women’s question.” This construction of religious specificity in opposition to gender equality had for decades been used as legitimization for maintaining misogynist laws. Within the Family Code, texts of laws regulating family relationships including marriage, divorce, and inheritance are anchored in religion, and more specifically the Maliki doctrine. Within the Moroccan theocracy, the “Muslim family” is granted a central status where woman is considered to be the rampart against “westernization” of society, but also the bearer of moderate or modern Islam promoted by the state to counter the fundamentalist discourse.

The centrality of the Family Code in the State’s religious determination raises the question of the political meaning of the Family Code reform. Since the 1990s there was the growth and public presence of political Islam and feminist activism. Both of these movements have differently challenged directly and indirectly the political regime’s power, sometimes in conflict but most of the time in dialogue that,

---

7 The pre-2003/4 amended Family Code clearly identifies women as inferior to men. For instance women could not contract marriage without a male tutor and men had the unilateral right for divorce. See Moudowana. *Code de statut personnel et des successions. Effets de mariage et de sanctions des conditions de validités* (Rabat, 1993).

8 Four main schools have evolved within the Muslim Sunni jurisprudence. These schools present few distinctions, but significant differences in legal regulations concerning women, the family and kinship. The Maliki School, which is named after the religious scholar Malik, is officially adopted by the Moroccan State. Thus, the Family Code and all legal regulations concerning the family and women are based on the Maliki school’s interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunna, or the model behavior of the Prophet Muhammed (Charrad 2001, 31). This, in fact, indicates the political significance of the Family Code as a text that presents the state’s attitude towards gender.
except with the radical Adl wal-Ihsan, does not threaten the regime’s political and religious authority, but which poses the question of relationships between Islam, power and gendered democracy.9

During the same decade that is the 1990s and with the emergence of the first women NGOs such as the l’Union de l’Action Féminine (UAF) and l’Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), the reform of the Family Code became the main battlefield for Moroccan feminist activism. The involvement of women’s organizations with the social implications of unfair legal texts and procedures on women’s conditions has enabled them to ground their political and social legitimacy on articulating women’s perspective of legal gender justice. Their argument is, however, very problematic in a context in which the unifying, broad political projects are very often gender subsuming.

The emergence and existence of these women’s organizations seemed to be a reaction against an existing cultural, social and political context of gender hierarchy especially, but not exclusively, embodied by the Family Code. The existence of such a gender-discriminating text provided one of the main issues upon which these organizations based their proximity or advocacy work which has contributed to the visibility of the gender question.10

Besides their advocacy work, most of these organizations are hosting listening centers of aid for women, which is allowing some of them to be close to the problems of the implementations of the 2003/4 amended text, and so some organization such as Ligue Des Femmes du Maroc (LDDF) and Association Marocaine de Lutte contre la violence a l’égard des femmes have published reports on the problems and the resistances the amended text is facing. The reports show strong opposition to the amended text from some judges who are enjoying lots of power in interpreting the text since the major amendments such as the marriage age and restrictions on polygamy leave it to the judge to interpret the law according to particular circumstances. Even if some judges are trying to learn about the new text, some are still using the philosophy of the old text to interpret

---

the amended one. Reports on the implementation of the amended text show that the exception mentioned by the law has become the rule: the number of girls under the age of eighteen authorized to get married is alarming. According to the same report, out of 3730 marriage applications 3606 were accepted and only 3.44% were rejected. The reasons given for these authorizations:

- The physical capacity and the socioeconomic conditions of the juvenile girl, the existence of family relationships between the two fiancées, the dominant traditions in some regions or that the juvenile would be close to marriage age. Following the assessments of the implementations some feminists are questioning the training of the judges that would allow them to decide the juvenile’s capacity to get married.
- The other point is that the report shows that the law made polygamy almost impossible, whereas reports from Marrakech tribunals show 85% of accepted applications of polygamous marriages.
- As for divorce, the absence of information explains that most women still resort to Kohl to get the divorce.

Yet, the major point of dispute seems to be around economic issues. The courts are, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini contends, spaces of renegotiating power relationships and so to react against a violent husband the woman would usually ask for *nafaqa*.¹¹ *Nafaqa* or alimony cases constitute 30.82% of judged cases in Casablanca and 26.51% of the family cases in Tetouan. The conflict between the ideal image of the family where the man is only economic agent and the woman is the unpaid domestic worker seems to be the origin of the dispute. Despite women’s growing presence in the workplace which has now reached 26% of the working population and that the new law in clause 51 opts for the possibility for women to be responsible for the family alongside their husband, the Family Code still considers marriage as a source of *nafaqa* for women paid by men. On the other hand, Article 49 provides a contractual framework independent

from the marriage contract for the accumulated property during the marriage. This however goes against what people believe marriage should be, as nobody wants to think about divorce options the day of their wedding, and so out of 2159 marriages in 2005 in Casablanca only fourteen couples opted for the prenuptial contract, which is around 0,65 %. Then there is the question of the assessment of the property for the post-marriage division and the problem of how to calculate women’s contribution to the family property; the definition of the criteria to be relied on. To deal with this problem the expert consulted by the tribunal usually calculates women’s contribution to the family property through counting the salary of a domestic worker. Following this principle of obedience next to economic security, the old Family Code’s texts maintained that women could not give individual consent to marriage; only the tutor (wali) she delegated could do that for her. Male supremacy was based essentially on a gendered division of labor, even if the conveyed image of the man as the breadwinner is not always factual.

Marriage was defined as a contract under the leadership of the man where the woman is subjugated to the man’s economic agency: “La fixation d’une dot (Sadaq) donnée par l’époux à l’épouse est obligatoire. Tout accord impliquant la suppression de cette dot est interdit.”

This economic agency was expanded to a social and a legal agency, which endorses the institution of masculine tutorship during the marriage conclusion: “Le Wali agissant pour sa pupille et le futur époux peuvent donner mandat en vue de la conclusion du mariage.” Tutorship is often the only recourse a woman has to her rights. Marriage is subject to financial conclusions between the wali (guardian) and the future husband. The dowry (Sadaq) is again defined as a woman’s property, whose amount is concluded by the two men. Within the institution of marriage, the woman was defined as the obedient domestic worker taken in charge by an authoritative


pursuer husband. Such a division of gender roles was translated into the man’s unilateral right of divorce (Repudiation).

In addition to obedience and guardianship (*wilaya*), repudiation was particularly subject to the 2003/4 amendment. Men’s leadership of the family was replaced by the husband-wife joint leadership, and women do not have to obey their husbands. Women can legally contract their marriage without a male guardian. While announcing the reform, the King specified that the egalitarian amendment was founded on both the human women’s rights’ principles and the Prophet’s saying [peace be upon him]: “Only an honourable man will honour them (women); and only an ignoble man will humble them.”

The text’s tervigation between equality and discrimination has been interpreted by various scholars as a reconciliation attempt between the majority of “conservative” religious scholars and the minority of Islamic feminists within the royal committee of the Family Code change, but also between antagonist positions to gender equality within the country. The main issue was not women’s status since everybody agree to reform, but the question was cultural codes and in deity blocks to which the rules for reform are founded, whether Maliki Islam or universal human rights and so, in a sense, strategies connected to political positions triumphed over judicial reflection and frozen religious positions that are much more flexible in order to fit within Islam and modernity promoted by the state.

The woman that emerges from the new text is that of the modern responsible autonomous Muslim citizen. This underlying assumption of Moroccan women as autonomous individuals is based on an understanding of a single meaning of citizenship premised on a presumed and already existing “autonomous, detached, contract-making, individualized person.” Such an assumption, in addition to the fact that it relies on nonexistent conditions of citizenship within the context of a theocratic State, glosses over the diversity of ways and meanings of rights for the illiterate, rural factory worker, housewife and single mothers whose plights seem to be absent from the amended text.

---

14 See Maghreb Press Arab website: http://www.map.co.ma
15 Zeghal 2005, 250.
REFERENCES


Maghreb Press Arab http://www.map.co.ma


“Equal but Different:”
Women in Turkey from the Islamic Point of View

Tuula Sakaranaho

LEYLA ŞAHIN

According to the press release of 29 June 2004, Leyla Şahin, born in 1973, is a Turkish national, who is a student of medicine in the University of Istanbul, coming from a traditional family of practising Muslims and considers it her religious duty to wear the Islamic headscarf.¹ On 23 February 1998, the Vice-Chancellor of the university issued a circular which warned students wearing headscarfs or having beards that they would be refused admission to lectures, courses and tutorials. Due to wearing a headscarf, the applicant Leyla Şahin was denied access to lectures and exams, and was also issued a warning for contravening the university’s rules on appropriate dress. Finally, she was suspended for a term because she took part in an unauthorized assembly, gathered to protest against the university dress code.

Leyla Şahin appealed to the European Court of Human Rights and complained under Article 9 of the Convention that she had been prohibited from wearing the Islamic headscarf at the univer-

¹ See Sakaranaho 2006, 111–114. See also www.echr.coe.int/eng/press/2004/june/chmaberjudgmentssahinandtekin.htm [accessed 30 June 2004]. This decision was briefly reported in the main newspapers of both Finland (Helsingin Sanomat 30 June 2004) and Ireland (The Irish Times 30 June 2004). The European Court of Human Rights delivered its Grand Chamber judgment in the case of Leyla Şahin 10 November 2005. For the appraisal of the judgment, see, for instance, the Strasbourg Conference Forum on Freedom of Religion or Belief (www.strasbourgconference.org).
sity (Leyla Şahin v. Turkey). She also complained of an unjustified interference with her right to education under Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention. In addition, she complained together with Article 9, about the violation of Article 14, claiming that since the prohibition on wearing the Islamic headscarf forced the students to choose between education and religion, it discriminated between believers and non-believers. Finally, she also relied on Articles 8 and 10. However, the Court dealt with the case under Article 9 because it did not find any additional questions arising in relation to the other Articles.

The European Court of Human Rights decided in June 2004 that the universities in Turkey have the right to prohibit Muslim women from wearing a scarf on the university premises. Hence, a dispute which has been raging in Turkey for over two decades got a verdict – in defeat of Muslim women who, in order to have a right to dress in accordance with their belief in Islam, have fought many court cases in Turkey. With regard to these court cases they have, among other things, appealed to religious freedom which they, in their opinion, are entitled to according to the Turkish Constitution. However, they have regularly lost their appeal on the grounds that a scarf, worn by them, signifies Islam and hence is a religious symbol which violates the secular sphere of the Turkish state, including state-run universities.\(^2\) Now, they have lost their case also in the European Court of Human Rights, which undoubtedly is a victory for the Turkish state but a sad defeat for the women themselves, and for their cause in defence of their religious rights.

The Court did not take any position whether it was necessary for a Muslim woman to wear a headscarf in order to fulfil a religious duty, but it acknowledged all the same that Miss Şahin ‘was inspired by a religion or belief.’ Accordingly, it assumed that the university’s dress rules, prohibiting Islamic headscarfs, interfered with her right to manifest her religion. However, the Court also acknowledged the view represented by the Turkish state that this sort of interference had a legal basis in Turkish law, and that Islamic headscarfs were incompatible with the fundamental principles of the Republic. In

short, the ‘necessity’ to limit the manifestation of religion was justified by the principles of secularism and equality. Secularism was seen as one of the main values underpinning the Turkish Constitution for its necessity in the protection of the democratic system in Turkey. Moreover, the Turkish Constitution emphasised gender equality and the protection of the rights of women. The Court was concerned about the impact on others of the compulsion attached to wearing an Islamic headscarf. Thus, it referred to the protection of the ‘rights and freedoms of others’ but also to the ‘maintenance of public order’ in a country with a population strongly supporting the rights of women and the secular way of life, while at the same time adhering to Islam. It was also pointed out that a headscarf as a religious symbol had taken a political significance in Turkey, and that there were extremist political movements in Turkey aiming at imposing their religious conception of society on others. As against this, the aim of the decision was to preserve pluralism in the university.

The case of Leyla Şahin is only a tip of an iceberg of a debate on the role of religion and the position of women in Turkish society which has been going on in Turkey for decades. Moreover, Islamic women wearing headscarfs are also only one group among different ideological groupings of Turkish women. In addition to Islamic women, one can also distinguish women who adhere to Kemalist ideology, as will be discussed in the following.

**Women’s movements in Turkey**

In the 1980’s women from three different ideological backgrounds began to organize themselves and actively take part in discussions about women in Turkish society. Women’s activism in the 1980’s got off the ground when women, formerly active in the leftist movements, started to gather in small consciousness-raising groups. This happened after the leftist organizations, together with all other political parties, had been suspended as a result of the coup d’état of 1980. In such groups these women analyzed and criticized the position of women in the leftist movements and studied feminist litera-

---

ture from Europe. Gradually they began to call themselves feminists and as their numbers grew they became known to the larger public as well. In their politics of women, these new or neo-feminists emphasized that they were creating an autonomous women’s movement. During the 1980’s feminists launched several campaigns in relation to different issues concerning Turkish women and published feminist magazines such as *Kaktüs* and *Feminist.*4 In the beginning of the 1990’s they founded the Women’s library and Information Center and opened a private shelter for women. Originally, the main center for feminist activism was Istanbul, but it soon spread to other big cities such as Ankara and Izmir.5

However, the new feminists were not the only group of women that became visibly active in the 1980’s. In the mid-1980’s there was a growing number of university students and teachers who covered themselves with big scarfs and long overcoats as a sign of their affiliation to Islam. As a reaction to this, the Council of Higher Education banned the wearing of the Islamic headscarf on university premises and this in turn led to the so-called *türban* or veiling movement in which Islamic women protested against this dress code. Eventually, the wearing of Islamic dress (*tesettür*) was allowed in most universities, and towards the end of the 1980’s women covering themselves became a common sight in big cities such as Istanbul. Moreover, the number of different women’s magazines and institutions edited and run by Islamic women greatly increased. Çihan Aktaş, one of the Islamic activists, refers to their activity as a “white women’s movement” which emphasizes co-operation between men and women. It claims that in Islam men and women complement each other, and therefore they are seen as equal but different.6

The dispute on headscarfs was a part of the growing visibility of Islam in Turkey and consequently the conflict between Islamic activists and secularist nationalists has become noticeably more intense.

---

4 Since 1995 feminists in Istanbul have published a new feminist magazine called *Pazartesi – Kadınlar mabsus gazete* (Saturday – A Newspaper for Women).


in recent times. The rise of Islamic movements on the political scene caused alarm in Kemalist circles in particular. In the end of the 1980’s Kemalist women mustered their forces and began to defend Turkish secularism. In addition to this, they were consciously working within the framework of Kemalism with respect to women and aimed at promoting the status of women according to the principles outlined in the Kemalist reforms of the Turkish Republic. They call themselves equality or liberal feminists and operate in the Istanbul University Women’s Research and Education Center, as well as in different associations.

To sum up, the activism of Turkish women is divided along similar lines as is the case in other Muslim countries where there exists two separate women’s movements, one that is secular and liberal or leftists and the other which is Islamic. However, in Turkey, the ideologies of Kemalism, feminism, and Islam operate as a further divider of women’s political identity. In addition, there is a strong state tradition, with its own particular gender ideology, that women have to challenge when they reinterpret or rearticulate the issue of women in Turkey. In this matter, women representing these main ideologies nonetheless take a different position. Kemalist women represent the official dominant ideology of the Turkish state, whereas the new feminists and Islamic women put forward counter-ideologies challenging the dominance and legitimacy of Kemalism. Consequently, the issue of women in Turkey forms an ideological terrain upon which contested views are argued and debated.

**Identification with Islam**

As mentioned above, since the middle of the 1980’s women covering themselves with big scarfs and long overcoats has become a prominent sight not only in the streets of Istanbul and other larger cities but also at universities. In Turkish society, this kind of Islamic

---

dress, or veiling, has a strong symbolic significance; it is a visible reminder of religiosity and the traditional roles of women in the modern social context. By veiling themselves, educated women blur the clear-cut opposition between religion and modernity and also question the notion of women’s emancipation.

Çihan Aktaş complains that the promotion of the issue of women in Turkey has been identified with opposition against Islamic dress and general criticism of Islam. In this criticism freedom for women is defined as freedom from headscarfs. Aktaş claims that those who are against veiling do not believe that any girl would cover herself of her own free will. The secularists therefore claim that religion oppresses women and restricts them from being full members of society. Moreover, they claim that religion does not give women the right to think with their own brains, and thus, in their view, the Islamic scarf not only covers women’s heads, but their minds as well. While in the secularist argumentation veiled women are seen as victims of Islamic tradition, Aktaş prefers to see them as victims of discrimination. She maintains that both Western and native secularists attempt to dominate Muslims, who are compelled to defend their rights. For veiled women, veiling is a question of their identity as Muslims and they defend their mode of dress as a basic right to show their affiliation with Islam. However, it is also a practical measure, and can be viewed as a kind of a uniform which makes it easier for women to move about in the streets without being disturbed by men. In other words, veiling is a sign of women’s social respectability.

As Muslims, it is important for both women and men to aspire to be good persons, which according to Islam means being compassionate, generous, God-loving, committed to Allah, fighting for Islam, loving the faith, doing good for others, and gaining knowledge.

---

11 During recent decades in Turkey manipulating one’s appearance has become a commonly used strategy in a highly politicized and culturally diverse society (see Sakaranaho 1998, 168).
12 Göle 1996, 4.
We do not talk about women’s rights but prefer to speak about human rights. If you give rights to human beings, then also women and men will gain their rights. What is a human being? This is the most important question … First we must know what being a human means and then we can give rights to everybody, whether they be men or women.\textsuperscript{14}

Being a full human being is seen as a synonym for being a good Muslim. In this line of reasoning, the concept of equality between the sexes carries with it a negative meaning, \textit{Eşitlik haksızlık} (equality means injustice) because what matters is the goodness of the person, woman or man, not gender. In other words, a person with good characteristics is always better than a person with bad characteristics. The argumentation concerning gender is therefore expressed in terms of morality rather than equality. In respect to sexual morality in Islam, Aktaş\textsuperscript{15} refers to the “obligation of \textit{tesettür}” that is binding not only on women but also on men. In other words, she widens the question of veiling into a moral principle that concerns both women and men.

**DIVISIONS BETWEEN ISLAM, SECULARISM, AND FEMINISM**

Islamic women have received a lot of publicity in Turkey, and in the media they are sometimes referred to as \textit{türbanlı feminists} (veiled feminists). However, they themselves do not want to be called feminists, and neither do they want to emphasize gender in their way of thinking. Aktaş maintains that Western-type feminists have been alienated from their nature in their fight against male hegemony. However, Islam has granted men and women equal rights, and therefore women are not men’s enemies, but rather their friends and helpers. Thus, the Islamic women’s movement (\textit{İslâmî kadın hareketi}) emphasizes peace and harmony in gender relations. Symbolically, the Islamic women’s movement “is not black, red, or purple, but rather

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
a white movement”\textsuperscript{16}. This white women’s movement places importance on the personal freedom of both men and women, and its aim is to promote freedom also in gender relations. It gives recognition to the separate natures of men and women, and perceives women’s rights in light of the common humanity of men and women, who are held to be “equal but different.”\textsuperscript{17}

The main adversary for the Islamic cause in the present situation is, naturally, the secular state of Turkey. The Islamic women see it as an imperialist system which does not guarantee for its citizens actual freedom of thought. From the Islamic activists’ point of view, there is only a semblance of freedom and democracy in Turkey. The malady of the Turkish state is the contradiction inherent in it. Outwardly it is modern but in actual fact it is a Muslim society that has forgotten that its roots lie in Islam, and for this reason it is haunted by problems. Thus, the Islamic women point out the negative sides of modernization in Turkey (çağdaşlaşma) on people and society.

Because of their adherence to Ataturkian secularism, Kemalist women are the real target of criticism by the Islamic women. Even though the Islamic women cannot accept the aims of the new feminists, it is admitted that some of their analyses are very pertinent. The new feminists are said to make the right diagnosis of the situation of Turkish women, but the medicine they offer for it is the wrong one. In their fight against women’s oppression, new feminists are seen to be at war with men. This, however, is contrary to the teaching of Islam, where men and women should be friends and helpmates to each other. The Islamic women therefore promote harmony between women and men, in similar fashion to Kemalist women, and reject the conflictive model of gender relations espoused by the new feminists.

\textsuperscript{16}The black colour refers to a demonstration organized by the new feminists for the rights of prisoners; red indicates socialist feminists, and purple, feminists in general. At one time, new feminists carried a purple needle with them in order to defend themselves when groped by men in crowded busses and trains. Cf. also Mor Çatı (the Purple Roof), the shelter for women run by the new feminists. The white colour refers to the white scarf worn by Muslim women when they pray.

\textsuperscript{17}Aktaş 1991, 252.
REFERENCES


In both France and Germany, as probably elsewhere in Europe throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a sizable number of mosques and Muslim organizations opened their doors to women and started to provide prayers rooms, religious instruction, and other services exclusively for female believers. In both countries the number of women benefiting from these services, in particular from religious instruction, has clearly reached that of male Muslims. In addition, as on a global level, in European contexts the spread of media technologies has facilitated knowledge acquisition among lay Muslims,

1 We would like to express our gratefulness to Elena Arigita and Frank Peter as much as to the anonymous reviewers of The Muslim World for their helpful comments on this article. For her language corrections we would like to thank Gwen D’Arcangelis. For the financial support for the research projects on which this article is based S. Amir-Moazami would like to thank the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, the European University in Florence and finally the Berliner Programm zur Förderung und Lehre at Humbold University in Berlin.

2 Under the umbrella term of religious instructions, different offers are subsumable, ranging from simple Qur’anic lessons to a profound study of and hermeneutic approach to the sacred texts.

3 According to a study by Gerdien Jonker (2004) in mosques in Berlin, for example, two-thirds of the young generation of Muslims, benefiting from religious instructions, are female.
male and female alike. One could conclude from there that a “democratization” of religious authority was about to emerge, as the pluralization of knowledge diffusion enables the believer to engage individually with the inherited religious tradition and to thereby increase her own interpretative authority. One could further argue that this process would sooner or later contribute to shifts in the very structures of authority, opening the path for women to become authorized interpreters of religious sources.

Looking at the current academic investigations of Muslim women, especially in European contexts, we can indeed observe a tendency to draw a linear linkage between knowledge appropriation and transformations of religious authority. While public opinion, supported by populist academic studies, anticipates that the dissemination of religious knowledge would lead to a new subjection to authority (and thereby prevent women from following dominant Western gender conceptions), scholars working in the field have started to issue a sort of counter-discourse, tending to draw an immediate causality between knowledge acquisition and shifts in religious authority in favor of women’s participation in the production and circulation of religious discourse.

However, we should add that the relationship between knowledge acquisition and religious authority or modes of religious authority in more general terms has so far only rarely been systematically addressed in studies on Muslims in Europe; the main focus of investigation has remained on processes of identity formation and reconfiguration of Muslims (both male and female) in non-Muslim

---

4 Mandaville 2002; Allievi 2003.
5 See, for example, Spuler-Stegemann 2002; Altschull 1995.
6 See Amiraux 2001; Bouzar 2004; Jonker 2004; Venel 1999. On a global scale this is reminiscent of what Charles Hirschkind (2001a, 3) has labelled the “deliberative” and the “disciplinary” interpretation. In the first approach the role of print and other media technologies is regarded as a means to enable the lay believer to critically engage with religious authorities, becoming herself a legitimate interpreter of the discursive tradition. Meanwhile, in the “disciplinary” approach the dissemination of knowledge is regarded as a new means to objectify the religious discourse and thereby to reaffirm hierarchical authority structures.
7 For exceptions, see Roy 1999; Peter 2006b.
European contexts. Moreover, in most studies religious authority has mainly been used as a synonym for “leadership,” while authority has either been interpreted as something imposed on the subject or something against which one attempts to resist. In order to go one step further, and to address the relationship between knowledge appropriation and religious authority aptly, it seems necessary to (re)turn to some basic questions, such as how authority is constituted through knowledge, how it is mediated, how it is challenged, reconfigured, but also how it is reconfirmed.

Rather than tackling these questions on a purely theoretical level, we focus on young Muslim women in two national settings: France and Germany. This is based on separate investigations conducted between 2000 and 2001 (Schirin Amir-Moazami) and between 2003 and 2005 (Jeanette S. Jouili) in various Sunni-Muslim organizations in France and Germany. While a certain bias lies in

---

8 On this point, see Peter 2006a.

9 S. Amir-Moazami’s fieldwork is based on semi-structured interviews with practicing, and publicly committed, Muslim women, engaged in the Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüs (IGMG), the Verein der Islamischen Kulturzentren (VIKZ) and Anstalt für Religion e.V./Diyanaet Isleri Türk Islam Birligi (DITIB) in Germany. In France they were part of a small centre for Islamic instructions, located in Marseilles or of informal women’s groups, or engaged in the Jeunes Musulmans de France (JMF). All together S. Amir-Moazami conducted 40 interviews, 20 for each country. Jeanette S. Jouili conducted her fieldwork between 2002 and 2003 in Paris and in the region of Cologne/Bonn, as well as in 2005 with women who participated in diverse Islamic organizations with the objective of Islamic knowledge acquisition or dissemination. J. S. Jouili conducted 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with both covered and non-covered women, 20 in each country. In Cologne the women, of Turkish and Arabic background, were part of the female organization Begegnungs- und Fortbildungsstätte Muslimischer Frauen e.V. (BFMF), the Institute of Islamology, and the Islamische Hochschulvereinigung (IHV). In Paris, mostly of Maghribi background, they belonged to the Centre d’Etudes et de Recherche sur l’Islam (CERSI) and the Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines (IESH). All except the BFMF are mixed-gendered centres of Islamic learning and they all can be set into the wider trend towards establishing Islamic organizations which transcend ethnic, linguistic, and, at least for the German case, confessional divisions. Independently from the in-depth interviews, we have both conducted long term fieldwork that consisted of a large scope of participant observation and conversations with various people at the mosques — directors, imams and in particular women, who were in charge of the women’s sections. We also attended various meetings, lectures and teaching courses at the organisations we investigated.
the fact that we focused on Islamic organizations that all have Sunni backgrounds and that have mostly put major effort into the transmission of Islamic knowledge, we were unable to denote any major differences in the ways in which the women involved in these organizations relate to “authority” or to the appropriation and circulation of knowledge. However, we also have to admit that the main goal of our fieldwork and interviews did not consist in a comparison of different Islamic organizations, or, consequently, the role and place of women therein. The main purpose for selecting interviewees from these Islamic organizations was to gather a sample of “practicing” and mostly publicly committed Muslims who are engaged with Islam on a collective, institutionalized level.

What is interesting, however, is that although we did our fieldwork in different settings and completely independently from each other, we gathered quite similar data, and arrived at similar conclusions. We assume that this is not only the result of various discussions and common viewpoints we share about the topic, but also stems from the data itself. This does not mean that there is just one “type” of Muslimness or only one single relationship of female Muslims to knowledge and authority, but there is definitely — despite internal variations — a certain trend among institutionally organized committed Muslim women.

Since Max Weber’s well-known work, religious authority has typically been studied from the perspective of organizational stratification and many scholars have tried to get closer to some kind of “definition.” While our terminology is clearly informed by these works, we contend that it is necessary to depart from the mere equation of “authority” with “leadership.” Beyond the question of the formation or reformation of authority, what interests us is the relationship between the subject and authority. In this inquiry we will use authority both as “leadership” and as “authoritative” discourse, which is related to power, while focusing on the ways in which a particular type of Muslim — women with a commitment to piety — incorporate, give credit to and thereby also mold religious authority. It is thus not only about the internal logics of authority but mostly about the relationship between the subject and authority.

10 On this see, for example, Amiraux 2001; Bouzar 2004; Jonker 2003.
We analyze through the lens of these women the relationship between knowledge accumulation and religious authority, concentrating, on the one hand, on the way in which these women engage with religious authorities — meant as both personified and discursive authority — and, on the other hand, on their discourses situated within the religious fields in which they are involved. In order to account for their subjective motivations and desires, we attempt to go beyond the common binary drawn between subjection or resistance to authority. Instead, we show that for these women both a reflexive and also an affirmative engagement with religious authorities constitutes a necessary condition for the acquisition and circulation of religious knowledge and for processes of incorporating piety, which the women deem central for their self-understanding as Muslims.

We begin with an inquiry into the ways in which these women position themselves as knowledgeable Muslim women within the wider Muslim community. Here, we show first that the women’s engagement in the process of acquiring Islamic knowledge is largely coupled with their aim to cultivate a “pious self.” Although we are firmly aware of various other implications, we use the term “piety” here mainly as conceptualized by Saba Mahmood, that is to say in terms of a cultivation of religious virtues that are embedded in a specific Islamic tradition.\footnote{Mahmood has developed a fine notion of piety, which she uses also to engage critically with feminist thinking and, more substantially, with some of the founding principles of normative modernity, in particular individual autonomy. Her notion of piety thus clearly, and maybe even foremost, reveals a counter-conceptual idea, which she frames with politics of “social conventions” (2005, 148), to which self-declared, practising and publicly engaged Muslims have committed themselves. It embodies the self-willed obedience of pious Muslims to religiously prescribed conventions, which Mahmood juxtaposes with concepts of autonomy, deriving from liberal approaches, even those, which admit the social embeddedness of the self, but which are ultimately inscribed in the goal to liberate it from social conventions.} Beyond this individual dimension, we illustrate that the women’s aim to acquire and circulate knowledge is simultaneously coupled with a sense of responsibility towards the construction of a virtuous community, which they try to put into practice in a twofold way. First, they relate it to a reaffirmation of motherhood, and to the aim to educate the next generation. Second, they articulate the goal to transmit knowledge and Islamic virtues to
the wider Muslim community and also, to a lesser extent, to non-Muslim public spheres.

In the second part we address the question of whether, through the women’s perspective, we can speak about a feminization of religious knowledge giving rise to a feminization of religious authority. Here we show, on the one hand, that the women’s discourses, based on their appropriation of religious knowledge, put strict gender divisions effectively under pressure and potentially lead to shifts in parental and paternal forms of authority structures. Their involvement in transmitting Islam both on an informal but also on an institutional level implies a certain shift in traditional male dominated authority structures. On the other hand, we illustrate that for such shifts the recourse to a “pure Islam,” which is coupled with reflexive engagement and a confirmation of religious authorities, as well as authorized discourse, constitutes the necessary starting point. This will lead us to the third and last point, in which we show that for the women we worked with, an increased awareness of the importance of religious authorities, both for their daily life conducted within the family milieu and within the Muslim community, is crucial for processes of incorporating piety. What counts in light of the women’s priority given to the constitution of a pious self is not so much a struggle for transformations in authority structures, but an essential need for religious authorities in order to reach the desired effect of self-reform and piety.

**Women’s Participation in the Acquisition and Diffusion of Islamic Knowledge**

**Acquiring knowledge and religious sensibilities**

Most of the women we interviewed got involved in processes of “Islamization” in their adolescence. This process was always accompanied by a search for a better understanding of their religion. While often initially motivated by their experiences of ‘otherness’ and a desire to be able to better defend their religious heritage, as litera-
ture has sometimes stressed, there is another crucial aspect that the women emphasized in a more advanced stage. They came to consider the acquisition of religious knowledge as the *sine qua non* for developing a sound faith that is strong enough to enable them to resist the “temptations” of a secular environment. Although the women claimed that it was their already existing faith that encouraged them to increase their interest and commitment to Islam, they also considered a “basic” faith unsatisfactory. Thereby they repeated a well-known dictum articulated by both classical and contemporary Muslim scholars that there was “no true faith without understanding.”

They considered committing themselves to the study of their religion a basic means of cultivating their faith in order to effectively transform their lives. Islamic knowledge should immerse the believer in a permanent atmosphere filled with divine presence, which the women experience as mostly nonexistent in secularized societies.

The women’s appeal to a particular relationship between knowledge and faith refers to how Islamic thought had assessed religious knowledge (*ʿilm*) and its dissemination. The virtues of knowledge are repeatedly emphasized in the founding texts, where knowledge is understood to be in a causal relationship with faith (*imān*): Faith emerges and can grow through knowledge. This is why classical scholarship has turned *ʿilm* into a central Islamic “metaphor.”

When the women underlined the importance of knowledge for the cultivation of their faith, they generally stressed two different effects that knowledge has for the believer. First, it is the concrete knowledge of Islamic dogma, the “facts,” as the women sometimes put it, which is considered essential to understanding one’s religion, and to be convinced and therefore to believe more profoundly. Faith, instead of being a hindrance to the accumulation of knowledge in the women’s perspective, constitutes its necessary starting point and vice versa. Such assumptions challenge dominant conceptions of religion rooted in a post-Enlightenment tradition, which frames religion as a sub-category lying in semantic opposition to transcendental ideas of...

---

13 Ramadan 2004, 84.
14 Lapidus 1984.
reason and individual autonomy. Moreover, as we will show more appropriately later on, the women’s desire to approach Islam cognitively in order to better “understand” it is often paralleled by their critiques of their parents’ generation, in particular, their supposed “traditional,” “non-reflexive” emulation of religious practices.

Alternatively, ‘ilm is related to a more spiritual approach of the transmission of Islamic contents. Here, the goal is especially the cultivation of certain emotional inner dispositions, which are the very basis on which faith is to be constructed and fortified. A social worker teaching a tafsir class in an Islamic women’s organization in Cologne explained this relationship between faith and knowledge in the following way:

It is like in any other relationship. To lead a good relationship, whether as a spouse, or as a friend or in parent-children relationships, all relationships require hard work. For the God — human relationship, it is the same thing. This is work on the God — human relationship: through the acquisition of knowledge, you get closer to God. This is the interaction of the cognitive and the spiritual aspect of faith. On the one hand, it is the cognitive acquisition of simple knowledge, facts, hadiths, verses of the Qur’an and the meaning of their contents. On the other hand, it has an effect on the relationship with God. The more I have knowledge, of course, provided that I am convinced of these things, the more I am fulfilled by faith, the more proud I am of my faith, and the deeper are those roots. The more my faith becomes unshakeable. This spiritual growth is absolutely linked to this cognitive growth, which one achieves through access to the sources.

While this perception of the importance of acquiring Islamic knowledge is very much focused on the believer as she aspires to be a “pious subject,” there is yet another important dimension with a

---

15 On this point, see Asad 1993 and 1999; Casanova 1994.

16 In order to keep the anonymity of our interviewees, we only mention the first letter of their names. N., 35 years, social worker, interviewed by Jeanette S. Jouili in Cologne, 13/05/2003.

17 Mahmood 2005.
much more collective orientation involved, which we will illustrate in the next sections.

Motherhood and knowledge diffusion to the next generation

It is important to note that the women often justified their search for knowledge in a gendered way. Thus, they tended to combine notions of the “good (educated) Muslim” with that of the “good (educated) mother.” Here, their search for knowledge often goes hand-in-hand with an enhancement of the role and importance of motherhood. Rearing children in their perspective gains particular importance because the woman thereby fulfils the requirement of transmitting Islamic values and norms to the next generation.

The interviewees thus by no means conceived of the “naturally given” role of the woman as mother and “lady of the house” as a limitation; rather they saw this as a privilege, most notably because by bringing up her children the woman is esteemed as the most important person in charge of educating the next generation. She, therefore, holds a great social and political responsibility. As the “first teachers of the children” (a common reference to the sayings of the Prophet, which the women often used during the interviews), women are supposed to be in charge of the construction or maintenance of the Muslim community and of society in a broader sense. It is therefore important to underline that the high value attributed to knowledge accumulation not only contains an individual component, as described above, but also has a strong collective implication: the educated mother is in charge of serving the community through religious know-how and also through scientific and pedagogical means.

This simultaneously points to a particular understanding of private and public domains, and of the borderlines between these two spheres. Through the construction of a “private” domain that simultaneously represents and reproduces public concerns, domesticity gains a public relevance. The high status and responsibility that the women attribute to the role of the mother comes close to the concept of “political motherhood” elaborated by Pnina Werbner.18 In this

---

18 Werbner 1999.
concept, the domestic sphere constitutes both a separate entity and a sphere, which gains public or political importance. Hence, the domestic sphere, as the women conceptualized it, cannot be limited to a domain that is constitutive for processes of individualization, but instead turns out to be a space that is largely societal and political. From this point of view we can argue that the women’s discourse brings to the fore an enhancement of what is usually considered the hidden “private domain” in that their premise of the “educated mother” gains societal importance.

The importance the women attributed to the religiously instructed and well educated mother sounds like a déjà vu of the reformist discourse that emerged especially in the second half of the 19th century in most important centers of the Ottoman Empire, and which initiated a shift from the father as the legitimate educator of the next generation to the mother, who was then considered the primary instance for the transmission of moral values and religious education. As Lila Abu-Lughod’s Remaking Women suggests, the emphasis was placed on the scientific dimension of childrearing, and thereby on the importance of a new type of motherhood. The ideal of the “new” “educated” mother was related to a redefinition of domesticity as a separate sphere, which was gaining a central position in the formation of society. Similar to the women’s contemporary discourses, the emphasis by Muslim reformers on the importance of educated mothers was anchored in the resurrection of core texts and their contextualization in the new settings, hence, the re-creation and renewal of Islamic thought. This enterprise was condensed into the key notions of islah (reform) and tajdid (renewal). Moreover, Muslim reformers envisaged the domestic sphere as a space that should be the basis for the creation of a collective subject, based on Islamic virtues, envisaged for the wider Islamic (transnational) umma through religious instruction and the rediscovery of “true Islam” through appropriate knowledge and guidance. This focus is taken up today by young Muslim women residing in European societies.

With their emphasis on “scientific motherhood”\textsuperscript{21}, the women confirm traditional gender roles, as also prescribed in orthodox discourses, while simultaneously putting into question the idea of women’s confinement to a purely domestic role. Moreover, while enhancing the ideal of the educated mother, they also attributed a high relevance to their public roles beyond the idea of educating the next generation, yet referring to Islamic discourses as the main authoritative source. This introduces another dimension involved in the women’s importance attributed to knowledge acquirement and education.

**Knowledge diffusion in da’wa activities**

One of the effects of religious knowledge acquisition is that it enables women to participate in the growing institutionalized dissemination of this knowledge in the European Islamic landscape. Apart from numerous informal and semi-private initiatives that the women set up themselves, more and more female teachers are employed in the different established Islamic female and gender-mixed organizations. In both countries, several independent women-run centers have emerged during the last ten years that provide Islamic education, besides professional counseling work and secular education programs, necessary for a successful interaction with the majority society. This work of knowledge dissemination can best be analyzed in terms of da’wa work (literally: “call” or “invitation”). From the early days of Islam, da’wa has been viewed as a duty incumbent on the believers in order to encourage fellow Muslims in their struggle to lead more devout and pious lives. Today, it has become the most substantial constant factor of contemporary Islamic activism, whether in Muslim majority societies or within the migrant communities in the West. It can be considered, as Charles Hirschkind puts it, the “conceptual resources grounded in a long tradition of Islamic practice and scholarly inquiry”\textsuperscript{22}, which are now being given a new shape within the contemporary minority situation of Muslims in Europe with specific needs.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21}Shakry 1998.
\textsuperscript{22}Hirschkind 2001a, 11.
\textsuperscript{23}Ramadan 2004, 73f.
In order to better understand the contemporary dynamics of *da’wa*, one has to look back at how the Reformist Salafi thinkers of the early 20th century significantly shifted the sense of the concept. While *da’wa* was traditionally understood as an activity to be conducted under the aegis of the clerics, Reformist thinkers claimed it to be the duty of every Muslim, thereby opening the path for lay persons to be involved in it.\(^{24}\) This “democratization” of *da’wa* turned out to be particularly beneficial for women since they were now included in the *da’wa* duty and activities.\(^{25}\)

The modern shift in the understanding of *da’wa* has also been translated into the work of the Islamic teaching centers in Europe that we investigated. These centers do not limit themselves to re-Islamation through knowledge dissemination, but also encourage their students to participate in *da’wa* activities.\(^{26}\) As part of their commitment to Islam, several women who were engaged in this kind of *da’wa* work attempted to encourage their fellow Muslims to find their way to the benefits that they themselves experienced in their own religious trajectory. They described how and to what extent they felt that their knowledge encouraged them to disseminate it in their day-to-day environment. This duty is considered an Islamic obligation, as described by the social worker from Cologne, quoted above:

> From an Islamic point of view, it is ‘*khayrukum man ta’allama alqur’an wa ‘allamahu*’ which means ‘the best among you are those who learn the Qur’ān and teach it.’ This is of course for me a theological motivation. Furthermore, it is a responsibility for which one will not only be rewarded but will be held accountable if you don’t hand down this knowledge. In this respect, I see it as my duty.

---


\(^{25}\) See, for example, Mahmood 2005.

\(^{26}\) One of the primary goals of the *Institute of Islamology* in Cologne, for example, where some of the interviewees were enrolled, is the training of qualified *da’wa* workers. In France, the IESH (*L’Institut Européen des Sciences de l’Homme*) or the CERSI (*Centre d’Etudes et de Recherche sur l’Islam*), for example, even offers special classes in *Fiqh ad-da’wa*. 
It is obvious that the *da’wa* work is also encouraged by the minority situation in which Muslims live in Europe. Given this minority status, it is no longer a matter of course for Muslims to receive religious instruction. The effort must be made by the believers themselves, sometimes under quite preliminary and provisional conditions. Thus, pious Muslims feel an urgent need to transmit their Islamic knowledge to Muslims of future generations in order to encourage them to lead pious lives in an environment that they qualify as being predominantly non-religious. They see this as the condition for the survival of the Islamic minority community, for the consolidation of its identity, and as a means of maintaining the boundaries that enable it to resist the “secular Western” way of life (considered to be filled with numerous temptations) and to resist its pressures to assimilate.

Most of the women simultaneously added another aspect to these implications of the notion of *da’wa* related to the non-Muslim environment. In this respect, *da’wa* is less undertaken in a “missionary” spirit with the goal to convert, as often anticipated by public opinion, but rather with the idea of a rectification of negative representations of Islam within European public spheres. This is also why representatives of Islamic organizations, conference speakers and theologians often ask Muslims to display exemplary behavior, especially concerning those who are publicly visible through Islamic dress codes. *Da’wa*, in this sense, requires the acquisition of a deeper knowledge that enables one to refute the negative ideas stemming from the non-Muslim environment. For women, this means in particular to do instructional work in the sense of attempting to work against the widespread assumption that Islam inherently produces gender inequality.

In this regard, the women’s emphasis on knowledge and education and on the necessity to transmit it should additionally be understood as an attempt to enhance the status of Islam by detaching it from its common connotation with illiteracy. Apart from a mere ‘internal’ logic directed at the Islamic community, this argument should thus be read in its relationship to the wider public spheres of French/German society in which the women interact. Here the emphasis on the necessity of female education, prescribed by Islam,
entails a counter-discursive strategy *vis-à-vis* public opinion, which commonly associates Islam with irrationality or backwardness, and which, especially in the French case, almost categorically refuses to acknowledge that publicly committed, pious and organized Muslim women are educated and rational actors.27 Thus, the women attempt to replace the stereotype of their mere passivity through the counter-image of an educated and Islamically committed woman. *Da’wa* is thus not only experienced as an obligation imposed on oneself, but also as a very personal “desire to disseminate a word one deems useful to the individual and to society”.28 In this sense, *da’wa* becomes a “vocation”.29

So far, we have mostly focused on the ways in which the women we interviewed justified the necessity of acquiring knowledge and becoming educated believers through an enhanced consciousness of the value of their own capacities to disseminate Islamic knowledge and to actively participate, therefore, in the strengthening of the Muslim communities in France and in Germany. Although this capacity already indicates a certain degree of authority appropriation, in the next sections we will try to more systematically address the relationship between knowledge/education and authority.

**Knowledge Acquisition and “Pure Islam”**

Most of our interviewees stressed how much acquiring Islamic knowledge helped them to better appreciate their religion, which they had sometimes experienced as “oppressive” because, as they put it, patriarchal traditions were often legitimated in the family milieu with reference to Islam. Therefore, it is through their capacity to distinguish between “tradition” and “religion” that the women claimed Islam as a source for reinterpreting certain elements within the family traditions, which they perceived and experienced as being too strict. The defense of Islam is then situated in a critique of custom, or as the women put it, of tradition. In this context, the

---

29 Mahmood 2005, 64.
women frequently spoke about interference by local “Turkish” or “Arab” traditions with Islam. They stressed that it was because of their parents’ affiliations with these “migrated traditions” and with local customs that they suffered from strict gender norms, including an unequal sexual morality and restrictions for women regarding study.

The arguments used by these women recall the dominant contemporary Islamic discourse, which again emerged from the Islamic reform movement at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries and was successively diffused by Islamic movements. ‘Ilm and the corollary notion of tarbiya (education) became key terms for the goal of individual social and moral reconstruction as well as for the Muslim community, deemed in decline.\(^3\) The bad state of the umma, denounced by reformists, was a result of the “ignorance” of the Muslim populations, a condition captured by the Islamically connoted term jahiliyya. In this perspective, the dissemination of a “pure” Islam, detached from all traditional deviations, can re-establish the glorious state of past Muslim civilizations.\(^3\) It is within this logic that these women identified various problems of the Muslim community, especially the unsatisfactory condition of Muslim women not only in Muslim majority countries but in particular in the context of migration as a consequence of “ignorance” attributed to and personified in their parents’ generation. Accordingly, the women often accused non-educated Muslims (especially of their parent’s generation) of blindly adapting customs, in particular prohibitions, without having seriously studied the Islamic texts.

The entrance point through which this struggle is channeled is on the one hand the accumulation of knowledge and on the other hand the emphasis on the necessity to circulate and transmit it. For the women we interviewed, proper knowledge of Islam was regarded

\(^3\) See Shakry 1998.

\(^3\) Leading figures of this discourse were scholars like Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905). Especially Abduh is of particular importance for us, since he combined the propagated reforms in the educational domains with the idea of a renewal of Islamic thought and practice. Their distinction between custom and scripture can be regarded as exemplary, as it has become a model for the discourse on authenticity, kept alive and extended until today.
as a precondition to contribute to the welfare of the Islamic umma. “Ignorance” of the “genuine” Islam, terms often used, is considered the reason for the crisis Muslims are experiencing on a global, as well as on a local, scale, which means in this context, in their daily reality in France and Germany.

Through the politics of authenticity, gender arrangements are not necessarily directly attacked in favor of a completely reversed understanding of gender roles — for example the “Western” idea of gender equality (which is, of course, itself multiple). They are challenged from “within” and also with the internal tools of argument and confutation that are part of the tradition. This emerges most clearly through the propagated balance between the equality (towards God) and the simultaneous maintenance of certain differences between men’s and women’s social roles.

More importantly, the women’s acquisition of religious knowledge and their emphasis on the multiple implications of education potentially become a means to shift the locus of the legitimate interpreter of Islam and to question misogynistic interpretations of religion, most notably when the very life strategies of the women are on the agenda. However, in order to address the question as to whether this process simultaneously constitutes a transformation in authority, or whether the women are at all longing for such transformation, it is necessary to look more carefully at various levels of authority within the different social fields in which these women interact.

**Shifting parental and paternal authority**

The accumulation of religious knowledge potentially enhances the women’s status within their families to the extent that the legitimate interpreter of the Islamic sources in this domain becomes elusive, or at least diversified. Thinking about the content, interpretation and transformation of (religious) authority, one clearly should bear in mind the impact of women in such domains as the extended family, the life of the married couple, or other settings like secular institutions (schools, university or workplaces), which are obviously also spaces that are intermingled with community structures. These domains, while not being *stricto sensu* religious in any organized manner, are probably not less political, and have an impact on the
shaping and circulation of discourses and warrant special emphasis, especially if we do not want to reproduce the dichotomy between “private” and “public” spaces that do not affect each other.

Here we could argue that the women’s comparatively high social and cultural capital (understood in the Bourdieuan sense) — in particular, educational skills — as compared to the former generation thus constitutes a challenge to parental forms of authority, justified mostly in terms of generational and gender hierarchies, as they have often also become more knowledgeable in religious domains than their parents. The very fact that these women have increased their cultural capital, including religious know-how, not only allows them to fulfill their self-declared role as knowledgeable educators of the next generation and of the wider community, but also enables them to put forward suggestions for interpretations of the texts in favor of a more participatory notion of gender relations, even though they mostly attempt to back these up with authorized discourses.

In particular, the distinction between “pure Islam” and “custom” or “tradition” alludes to an intergenerational struggle over “right” or “wrong” versions of Islam and, within this, to an effort to enhance the status of Muslim women in the Islamic community. Hence, their comparatively higher educational skills potentially increase the women’s abilities to develop certain kinds of leadership within the particular social field of the (extended) family. Here, knowledge or being knowledgeable as cultural capital implies an empowerment towards parental or, more broadly, domestic forms of authority. Although this kind of empowerment does not immediately affect or upgrade the women’s positions within the religious establishment, it probably also contributes to the production and circulation of religious knowledge, even if this might be rather implicit and difficult to measure empirically. In order to make these assumptions more explicit, we could look, for example, at the women’s strategies to contest limitations imposed by their family milieu on their right to pursue their educational or professional careers, or at their efforts to contest forced marriages.

We can see in the previous pages how much the women we interviewed insist on the necessity of acquiring Islamic knowledge as a religious duty. The same holds true when it comes to secular knowl-
edge and education. To search knowledge, “even if it is in China” (a reference to the sayings of the Prophet, often taken up by the interviewees) proves to be one of the central elements in their life politics and is also the focal point around which transmitted forms of authority are potentially challenged or reestablished. This becomes clear, for example, through their strong emphasis on the necessity to be or become educated mothers, through which they simultaneously articulate a critique on restrictions against women acquiring knowledge, whether imposed by the family or by the community at large. The statement of a university student and mother of three children in Marseilles articulates this well:

[...] if she [the mother] hasn’t acquired the necessary knowledge, how will she accomplish her role appropriately? This is why in Islam it is an obligation to study. There is a hadith that says that searching for knowledge is an obligation for men and women, thus, for men and for women [emphasis put in by the woman], and a woman with enough knowledge can educate her children suitably, and can contribute to the positive evolution of society.32

As this quotation shows, with their emphasis on women’s role as the “first teacher of the child,” our interviewees strongly criticized the limitations imposed on women to pursue education both in Muslim majority contexts and within Muslim communities in Europe. In this regard, the enhancement of the role of the educated mother reveals an important step towards an internal redefinition of the traditions, within which these women have been often raised. But their acquired knowledge also becomes a justification for their aspirations for participating in professional activities. Having studied or received a professional formation is considered a resource that has to be put to the service of the community, once again, justified with Islamic references, notably the practice of the female companions of the Prophet, who are portrayed as having participated actively in all domains of social life in the community. The demand to work or to study (including da’wa activities) thus simultaneously reveals an outspoken or hidden critique on the limitations against women’s

---

participation in public matters, imposed both in Islamic societies and among Muslim communities in France or Germany.

As indicated above, another important example of the women’s struggle against family restrictions is their rejection of forced marriages. Having themselves sometimes been confronted with this custom, they frequently questioned and criticized the practice of forced marriages, insisting that “Islam prohibits marriages against the will of the woman.”

While contrasting their own “better knowledge” of Islam with the mute adoption of “migrated traditions” of their parents, the women often claimed that Islam provided them with rights like divorcing or choosing husbands on the basis of the principle of mutual respect — rights that although taken for granted in French and German societies, are not necessarily always accomplished within Muslim families.

The idea of marriages based on choice and mutual respect, which the women justified with Islam, is taken further when it comes to the concrete management of their lives as married couples. Those women who were already married at the time of the interview commonly claimed, for example, that they had negotiated with their future husbands before and after the wedding on the basis of sacred rules about daily life matters, particularly about their own rights as spouses — for example, the right to continue their studies or to have a professional career. Some women argued that this unwritten contract encouraged their husbands to respect them and share certain tasks around the house, after they had evoked that “the Prophet Mohammed too helped his wives in the house and used to play with his children,” as a woman in Marseilles put it.

The interviewees narrated several examples of this kind, where the claim reaffirms Islamic principles, but in doing so requests more space for participation in the process of shaping Islamic norms. Moreover, it seems that at least in some life trajectories, the women were quite successful with their Islamically justified struggle in the

---


family milieu. Both as far as the intergenerational struggle is concerned and with regard to the organization of the life of the married couple, authority is thus if not transformed then negotiated through shifts in the accumulation and transmission of Islamic knowledge.

Such observations are by no means completely new, and are confirmed in other studies conducted on Muslim women in both France and Germany.\textsuperscript{35} However, what most of them have failed to systematize is how the women’s recourse to a “pure Islam” is related to religious authority. In other words, in most works the recourse to an authentic Islam appears as a free floating set of references from which the believer is able to choose freely and in a utilitarian way what she “needs” for her daily life conduct. The reference to “true Islam” becomes, indeed, the major source of authority, appropriated through knowledge acquisition, and points to a certain degree of empowerment. However, it does not point to a detachment from religious authority, meant as “authorized discourse,” as a source of liberation, but, quite on the contrary, confirms the attachment to it. As we will show in the next sections, the women’s references to an “authentic Islam” is not based on a purely selective and pragmatic activity. To the contrary, it is inscribed in the reformist logic of revising Islam and making it fit again the requirements of their personal life contexts, instead of gradually discarding the theological and conceptual apparatus of Muslim traditions.

**The Women’s Self-Positionings vis-à-vis Religious Authorities**

In principle, it is obvious that acquiring profound religious knowledge, especially of the classical Islamic sciences, might enable women to produce and disseminate specifically feminized Islamic thought. We witness today that in different countries around the globe, in Muslim-majority countries (Iran, Malaysia) as much as in the Muslim Diaspora, where women’s participation in Islamic networks, their combined efforts in studying Islamic sciences and conducting grassroots work with other women, has engendered a trend that has been called “Islamic feminism:” women engage critically with the sacred

texts as well as with the larger corpus of scripture and claim the right to re-interpret these sources. In their approaches, these women often break (either in a more radical or in a more modest way) with past restrictions against Islamic scholarship in order to rearrange the Islamic definition of gender relations to their advantage. In this sense, “Islamic feminism” challenges traditional religious authorities in the sense of questioning their interpretations, as well in the sense of claiming authority, justified through knowledge. Moreover, while their discourse had a certain impact in the different national contexts where these women’s groups emerged, they are still rather marginalized and contested by the larger Islamic community.

Now, if we turn back to Europe, it seems that women’s participation in Islamic organizations and in the processes of knowledge dissemination so far did not have the same impact, since there are only a few individuals whose work can be compared to those of the Islamic feminists cited above. The few exceptions are rather marginal phenomena, and their work is hardly known outside their own limited circles. In Cologne, for example, we encountered the Centre for Islamic Women’s Studies and Women’s Promotion ZIF (Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und -förderung), whose members engage in this type of “feminist” method with the sacred texts and take a highly critical stance towards the male-dominated orthodoxy. Because their exegetical work is conducted in an autonomous way, which often lies in open opposition to the methods established by the classical Islamic sciences of *tafsir* and *fiqh*, they suffer from marginalization by the larger Islamic public. Moreover, their ways of contesting established forms of religious authority has brought them into conflict with other Islamic organizations in Germany. Their main audience today is thus interfaith meetings, especially with other religious feminists. In other words, the request for participation and the women’s ambitions to autonomously interpret the sacred texts might not necessarily be authorized on a broader structural scale both within the Islamic community and also within the wider European public spheres. Although the possibilities for the participation of women in the processes of knowledge transmission

---

36 See Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung 2006.
have, indeed, increased throughout the last decades, this does not necessarily imply an increase in the processes of knowledge production, which becomes part of the religious canon.

Furthermore, while one could at first glance imagine that the refusal and marginalization of such kinds of Islamic feminist movements is due to male dominance within Islamic organizations in Germany, it is interesting to observe that their work also did not seem to attract the majority of the pious Muslim women we talked to, who were engaged in these organizations. These women were either ignorant of the ZIF’s work, although the two leading figures, Amina Erbakan and Sabiha El-Zayat, personally connected with Milli Görüs’ Erbakan family, were familiar to them. Or they outspokenly disapproved of their activities as being “too radical” in the sense of stretching the limits of the established Islamic orthodoxy too far. Many women also described the ZIF as being “too feminist.” This latter critique can be better understood if one takes into account the rejecting attitude with which the women generally dealt with this notion. This mirrors a more general trend in contemporary Islam that tends to associate feminism with “Westernness” and with a hostile attitude towards men, and therefore as being potentially anti-Islamic.37

Moreover, most of the pious women we interviewed, while being sensitive to their own empowerment, do not necessarily want to “renew” Islam but rather prefer to stay inside the “consensus” of established orthodoxy. One woman, for example, described the Muslim women’s organization in which she works, comparing it to the ZIF in the following way: “This [her] group, these are women who want to bring further their stuff, too. But . . . , they don’t fall outside the frame of the Koran or of Islam.” It is with this attitude that the majority of individual Muslim women or women’s associations opt for a much more accommodative stand towards mainstream Islam and its established authorities. While their effort to instruct more and more Muslim women in Islamic knowledge is also obviously a struggle for female empowerment, within these organizations, the women quite consistently insist on the necessity of leaving the right of interpreting the texts to the ’ulama. A female conference speaker in Cologne, for

37Karam 1998.
example, warned her audience in this logic “not to engage in a personal *ijtihad,*” while at the same time rejecting what she called “blind *taqlid.*” She stressed the necessity of acquiring knowledge of the sacred texts, but simultaneously underlined that this knowledge would not enable the individual believer to draw her own conclusions. According to this view, *ijtihad* is considered the prerogative of Islamic scholars. When advice is needed, one should consult these scholars. This clearly puts into question the commonly drawn causality between knowledge appropriation and incorporation of (established) religious authority. Hence, in the women’s approaches, there is a great tension between the imperative for the individual believer to acquire knowledge and to understand it by using his own reason and the practice of relying on religious scholars for authoritative interpretation. This seems to be a phenomenon typical of contemporary Islamic movements.38

Interestingly, it even seems to be their more profound knowledge of the traditional Islamic sciences acquainting them with the *usul al-fiqh* (the Islamic law, etc.) that has encouraged these women to emphasize the importance of the ‘ulama, and of remaining inside the Islamic consensus as part of the religious dogma (*’aqida*). It is also their familiarity with the authoritative religious discourse that deepens their mistrust towards everything likely to be *bid’a* (unlawful innovation). Accordingly, those women who were most notably well instructed in Islamic theology regularly referred to Islamic authorities. They were cautious to assert that the opinions they circulated were “authorized” opinions, regularly invoking sentences like “there exists a consensus that . . .” Similarly, when asked about specific cases in Islamic law about which they felt insecure, they were reluctant to give their own opinion and advised us to consult a scholar.39 Contrary to the widespread interpreta-

---

38 See Deeb 2006, 23.

39 The women’s reference to religious authorities may concern the ‘founding fathers’ of Islamic orthodoxy of the classical age, but also the personalities rendered popular in contemporary mainstream Islam through modern media technology; either those belonging to the class of ulama in the classical sense (e.g. Yusuf al-Qaradawi), but also the more modern preacher types, such as Tariq Ramadan who is better known in France than in Germany, or the by Arabic-speaking Muslims world wide venerated Amr Khaled. In Germany unlike in France, local Islamic celebrities are rather absent, as actually regretted some of our interviewees.
tion of an increasing individualization of knowledge appropriation, we can therefore argue that the acquisition of religious knowledge, facilitated through modern communicative means, might also have an objectifying effect: the more familiar the women we interviewed got with orthodox Islamic discourse, the more they seemed to reaffirm it.

Yet, we should also not be tempted to conclude that this leads to a simple conformism or to homogenization. The women especially criticized the “traditional emulation” of their parents’ generation, and rejected conforming to the Islamic contemporary discourse inspired by reformism, or “blind taqlid.” Therefore, they claimed their Islamic right and duty to consult the primary texts in order to give credit to the opinions they heard. They also tended to consult several partly divergent opinions and compare them to each other. In addition, it is, of course, important to remember that the scholars to whom the women refer do not represent stagnant opinions but adapt themselves more and more to minority conditions and the different needs of the individual Muslim believer in the diaspora context. Given the multitude of different and changing opinions within orthodox scholarship, the women who are well acquainted with the Islamic sciences use these differences in order to search for opinions that might give them a larger scope of free action in their concrete day-to-day lives. An example of how scholars who modify legal advice become a support for women is illustrated by the example of a young student hoping to become a singer. She had been discouraged by her entourage because of the common opinion that women are not allowed to sing in front of a mixed public (according to the hadith “The woman’s voice is ‘awra” (sawt al mar’a ‘awra). Being herself very well instructed in Islamic sciences, this woman started to search for the different scholarly opinions on this issue. She had already found out that it was a “weak hadith” but one that had obviously been accepted by consensus. Only when Yusuf al-Qardawi —

---

40 The most common English translation of the term is “blemish.” When referring to a woman’s body, the interpretation is that parts of the body are a blemish which have to be concealed. For an interesting discussion of the different meanings of ‘awra’, see El-Guindi 1999, 140–143.
who himself changed his opinions concerning women significantly — issued a sort of fatwa on this question, confirming that this rule was indeed based on a “weak hadith” and was therefore null and void was she able to justify her singing ambitions to her family and in her Muslim environment.

It is interesting to note that these women sometimes take apologetic positions when repeating (with more or less conviction) the traditional rationale behind aspects of Islamic law that disadvantage women. It is the wide scope of different, modifying and adjusting juridical scholarly opinions inside mainstream orthodoxy that at certain points turns out to be beneficial to them in their day-to-day lives. However, in order to more appropriately measure why pious women attribute such weight to religious authorities and also demonstrate a certain submission to them (which can be at times liberating but at times also restricting), we have to go beyond the idea of empowerment through the incorporation of authority. This necessitates, more specifically, returning to a key aspect we touched upon at the beginning of this article: the project of self-reform. This, as we shall show in the last section, cannot be detached from an intimate relationship with religious authority.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY FOR THE FORMATION OF A “PIOUS SELF”

While trying to be sensitive to the complex relationships women enter into with regard to personified or discursive religious authority, a particular emphasis has so far clearly been on female empowerment. This focus can be considered fundamental in understanding the importance of the women’s Islamization as a locus for the negotiation of gender issues. It would, however, be too limited to leave it there, especially if one attempts to be sensitive to processes of becoming pious, which is crucial for the self-understanding of the women we interviewed. Put differently, it is necessary to move beyond the normative paradigms that conceive of shifting authority relationships towards gender equality as the only legitimate way to explain the

41 Roald 2001.
women’s Islamization processes. Such an approach prevents us from giving credit to the different virtues that are enacted in the special relationship to the authoritative discourse (meant as God’s word) and religious authorities, which are considered to speak in “God’s name.” Inspired by Saba Mahmood’s work, we show in the following sections that “submission” and “obedience” can manifest Islamic virtues, which are considered central to the formation of a pious subject.

We should remind ourselves that for most of our interviewees, knowledge acquisition should not be carried out only as an individual initiative, but under the aegis of authorized representatives of the community, because it is in this frame that an “authentic” Islam can be transmitted and faith can be most effectively cultivated and fortified. It is in this context that numerous women underlined the importance of listening to knowledgeable teachers, shuyukh or rhetorically talented preachers, either at conferences, in mosques, Islamic classes or through media technologies. Not only do these sources provide knowledge, but they are most able to engender the feelings that constitute piety, love, fear, humility, or hope. The following statement by a nurse and leader of an informal Qur’an study group for women elucidates this:

What really helped me are the conferences by Amr Khaled, you probably know him. I got to know him at Le Bourget three years ago and it was like a revelation. [...] The topic of the conference was, I still remember, about the question why Muslims back then had this strength, masha’allah, this strength and that iman, which we don’t have anymore. And he told us these stories, and it was like I was there, masha’allah. He has a way of speaking. There are a lot of Arabs like this who have a particular eloquence, and you feel that he takes you and he brings you back to the past. [...] He has a way to talk to your heart, you know. There are people like this who are talented, this is from God, alhamdulilah, it’s a gift. That day, my mother bought tapes from Amr Khaled, on the topic of adoration. I listened to it and

42 Mahmood 2005.
it helped me so much to strengthen this love for God. And all the lessons of Amr Khaled talking about God’s love for us, it helped me a lot, the conferences by Amr Khaled really helped me to develop this feeling of love.”43

In this sense, qualified knowledge transmission can become “an emotional experience of a body permeated by Islamic faith,” as Charles Hirschkind describes it so aptly.44 Many of the women we interviewed stressed how that aspect became particularly important in the context of a non-Muslim society.

If knowledge acquisition is a tool with which to become pious, the main goal consists in effecting a reform of the self. Therefore, these pious dispositions that are to be cultivated are not only ends in themselves, but are necessary to enable the individual subject to change her conduct and act properly as a Muslim, according to orthodox norms of Islamic piety. In this sense, acquiring religious knowledge becomes a “disciplinary practice,”45 a technology for ethical self-improvement. It is this emphasis on self-reform that reveals an apprehension of obedience that largely differs from the liberal understanding of the term, mostly associated negatively. In other words, the aspired refashioning of the self can only be realized through obedience and acceptance of fulfilling one’s duties, conceived of as a specific virtue of piety. A woman who teaches “Islamic Morals” in an Islamic Institute in the suburbs of Paris expressed this idea in a particularly strong way. While she very much supported the struggle of Muslim women to demand their “Islamic rights” against practices considered misogynistic, she also warned that if such an approach was at the center of one’s Islamic consciousness, one might forget the core elements of what piety was all about:

The conscious and rigorous Muslim who loves Allah and who wants to satisfy him is more in the domain of duty, no matter what domain, than in the domain of rights. [...] The woman is not there to say: ‘I have my rights,’ no, I have duties, and the

44 Hirschkind 2001b, 628.
45 Asad 1993, 125.
same is valid for the man. [...] It is much more complex, and exactly as far as the self-reform is concerned, it has to begin with myself, it is not about claiming something from someone else, I start with myself. This is why the big jihad, this effort of oneself, is about starting with me. I do what I have to do.46

It is this positive interpretation of obedience and the sense of a necessary “duty,” forming an elementary part of one’s faith, that makes it more difficult to simply link the women’s narratives to strategies of authority appropriation or contestation. In their desire to fulfill their Islamic duties, which means to adapt their lives to Islamic norms, the women accord immense importance to religious authorities, from whom they demand practical know-how, which supplies them with concrete rules to guide their behavior in day-to-day life. Countless conferences and religious classes are given with this objective. Moreover, there is a large population of Muftis among European Muslims who are consulted and asked for opinions on the most diverse subjects via the internet and during religious programs on satellite.47 In the courses given by Islamic organizations or inside peer groups, participants often openly discuss ways to bring seemingly insignificant aspects of their lives in compliance with norms of Islamic piety. We witnessed several times how the lessons shifted from their original topic to a discussion of practical issues. The young women brought these up themselves, mostly regarding the difficulties of conforming oneself to Islamic norms in everyday life, particularly in the context of contact with the non-Muslim ‘other,’ asking their teachers for concrete advice. It is especially the adaptation of a virtuous Islamic life to a Western context that the women perceive as difficult.

The statements of our interviewees suggest that especially at the beginning of their Islamization process, they needed authoritative opinions that would enable them to practice their religion “correctly.” But they indicated that they need these opinions at other moments in their lives as well, when they face particularly complicated

---
47 Caeiro forthcoming.
situations that require them to make difficult choices; they need religious authorities to help them engage in “Islamically correct” behavior. Contrary to the idea of an increasing individualization of knowledge acquisition and a gradual detachment from religious authorities, these observations suggest that engagement with religious authority is crucially important to the processes of Islamization for these women. For them, it becomes an elementary means of developing their own spiritual potentialities through which the ideal of a pious self is realized.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this article, we tried to bring into focus a quite diverse scope of aspects surrounding the complex relationship of Muslim women with concepts of piety, knowledge acquisition and religious authority. We began analyzing this relationship by first being attentive to the women’s emphasis on knowledge acquisition as a means of becoming pious and, second, by analyzing the different levels involved in the women’s aims to participate in the processes of knowledge diffusion. These different dimensions involved in the search for becoming knowledgeable and educated believers and the simultaneous aim of transmitting one’s knowledge might best be described in terms of a twofold meaning of “education,” as implied in the German differentiation between Bildung, meant as the acquisition of knowledge, and Erziehung, meant as education of the self and of others. As we showed, these two dimensions cannot be grasped without paying attention to the gendered dimension of knowledge acquisition and dissemination and the effects that it has on rearranging and reaffirming gender relations. The women’s emphasis on their responsibility as the main educators of the next generation as much as their ambition to transmit Islamic knowledge to the wider community through da’wa reveals both a reaffirmation of gender norms and a challenge to such norms, articulated from within the Islamic sources. Although a more careful analysis examining the interaction between the various social fields48 in which the women are involved

48 A proper analysis should, of course, also take more systematically into account
is warranted, we tried to show that the women’s augmentation of their roles as educated and religiously instructed believers provides them with a new role inside the Islamic community, and thereby with a particular type of agency. They contest prohibitions that are often Islamically legitimized, such as secluding women from society, restricting their knowledge, etc. Here, the “politics of authenticity” can be interpreted as a step towards their empowerment. We can thus claim that these women’s discourses largely remain within the patterns of internal change and reform of Muslim traditions, instead of simply manifesting a gradual adaptation of dominant gender notions as a result of their interaction with “liberal” European societies.  

What arises from the women’s discourses is that if we understand religious authority in the sense of having the capacity and the right to transmit knowledge and educate members of the community, including males, we can speak about a shift in the authority structures within Muslim communities in Europe. It seems that this does not necessarily encourage (in the short term) shifts in the higher

the discursive and institutional settings of the (French and German) majority societies. For example, given different traditions of church-state relationships, different experiences with immigration, and also differing discourses on gender in both countries (as, for example, in Fetzer and Soper 2004 or Koenig 2005), it would be interesting to look in a comparative fashion, whether national discursive traditions matter for the way in which forms of authority are experienced, transformed or maintained among female leadership within the Muslim organisations. What impact has, for example, the French state’s interventionist attitude, in the process of institutionalising Islam for women’s movements in mosques or organisations? To what extent has, in contrast, Germany’s model of church and state co-operation influenced the developments within women’s sections in the mosques? To what extent does the institution of laïcité matter for the structures of authority amongst young Muslim women engaged in mosque movements, etc.?  

Yet, the whole question of women’s rights in Islam and the frequent defensive position taken in Islamic discourses in response to Western accusations cannot be understood without accounting for the encounter with Western powers during colonial times. From that time on, the “West” has set the standards by which gender justice is being measured. In this sense, the evolving dominant Islamic discourse on gender questions, whose ambiguity is also reflected in the narratives of our interviewees, should also be linked to the “Western” norms, even if the modes of reasoning conform to an Islamic “discursive tradition” (Asad) and its specificity and difference is always reaffirmed.
hierarchical structures of religious authority in the sense of legitimizing female Muslims to produce legitimized knowledge, but it might contribute to a reaffirmation of the traditional prerogatives and privileges of religious authority. Moreover, as we have suggested, the women also do not necessarily attempt to remodel established forms of religious authority in order to become autonomous interpreters of Islamic sources.

At first glance, the women’s engagement with and their reaffirmation of established forms of religious authority can be read as a contradiction to their struggle for empowerment. It can even be read as a new form of submission or domination, yet, in the second regard, a more complex picture has been revealed. The inquiry into their strategies within an Islamic orthodox field and the conceptualization of their agency beyond the common paradigms of submission versus resistance might enable us to conceptualize the notion of religious authority in a more multileveled way. It could help us to understand (religious) authority as a dynamic relationship among social actors. This becomes particularly clear when we take into account that the women’s engagement with established forms of authority turned out to be a necessary condition for both becoming pious selves and for justifications of social change within the Muslim community.

In looking at the process of becoming pious, an exclusive and normatively biased focus on female empowerment reveals its limit when it comes to the personal desires of these women. The women’s aspiration to piety manifests in their desire to gradually get closer to and literally “please” God — this makes a certain degree of submission unavoidable. In turn, as shown for these women, submission to God’s authority is not only coupled with an individual enterprise of instructing oneself and others, but is also strongly linked to obedience to personified authorities whose discourses as legitimized interpreters are considered authorized. The importance the women attributed to legitimacy and authority clearly goes beyond a mere personal relationship between the subject and God. It also reveals the goal to constantly relate oneself to a religious community or a “discursive tradition,” to use Asad’s words, without however implying an unreflected adaptation to patriarchal power structures.
REFERENCES


Peter, Frank (2006a) Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17:1, 105–118.


Islamic Feminism: Identities and Positionalities

Why keep asking me about my identity? Thoughts of a non-Muslim

Renata Pepicelli

In the spring 2007 I was invited to speak about women’s movements and about the emerging Islamic feminism in a big conference on women and Islam. At the same conference a secularist Muslim feminist who has lived in Europe was invited too. Few hours before the conference, during a brief meeting, she suddenly asked me: “Are you Italian?” I answered yes. But she did not seem satisfied with my answer and asked again: “Are you Italian Italian?” I just answered: “I’m Italian Italian.” By asking that question she tried to find out whether I am Muslim. Later, when I got in the conference room, the moderator told me the other participant would not come. She had asked to split the conference in two parts. In the first she would speak by herself and the audience would be able to ask questions, while I would speak in a separate second part. She gave some reasons to justify that request. One of the reasons touched me a lot. I am not Muslim, I do not speak Arabic or Farsi, or Pakistani... and she believes that a Muslim woman can better explain the situation of Muslim women. Only a Muslim woman can tell about other Muslim women, oppressed by Islam in Islamic countries, and by the attitude widespread in Europe allowing to perpetuate patriarchy on Muslim women in the name of multiculturalism, relativism, and so on. In one of her books, she writes: “What does wearing the hijab mean? What does living in a veiled body mean? Some intellectuals
speak with pleasure at others’ place. And today they speak at the place of those who do not have voice – they take a place that, for decency, no one except them should try to occupy.” The organizers of the conference, without asking my point of view about her request, had refused to accept her proposal, and I found myself as the only speaker at the conference.

The story of this conference shows some interesting elements to point out. The first element: this conference was organized within the framework of several meetings about Eastern and Western world and this reminds us how the gender issue is central in the larger and widely debated question of whether or not Islam fits into European norms of secularity, democracy and human rights. The question of the rights of Muslim women who live under Muslim laws in Islamic countries, or who left these countries in order to emigrate to Europe is today a paradigmatic expression of the wide debate on human rights within which interconnections and conflicts between global and local are in play, wars are justified and carried out, opposing and contrasting identities are claimed. In particular, after September 11th 2001, the discussion on the condition of women has become central in the debate on the compatibility or not of Islam and democracy. Consequently, the image of women has become a matter of flag-waving since the beginning of the 1990s and more evidently after September 11th. International cooperation plans, in the same way as armed intervention, justify themselves for their defence of human rights, and of women’s rights in particular. The debate on democracy, both during the war in Afghanistan and in Iraq, has had more importance than the war against terrorism decreed after September 11th. Both of these conflicts, although entered into a war against terrorism, soon turned into struggles to affirm human rights and women’s rights.

The second element is the growing attention Islamic feminism is drawing in Europe and elsewhere. People want to know more about this topic, because it challenges many stereotypes on Islam and feminism. Even if the idea of an Islamic feminism is still considered an oxymoron for many from East and West, and many Muslims and non-Muslims are strongly criticising faith-based feminism, the number of people familiar with this subject is increasing. Many
people are paying attention to those men and women that “by both uncovering a hidden history and rereading textual sources, (they) are proving that the inequalities embedded in *fiqh* are neither manifestations of divine will nor cornerstones of an irredeemably backward social system; rather, they are human constructions.”¹ Islamic feminists are, in fact, “showing how such unequal constructions contradict the very essence of divine justice as revealed in the Koran and how Islam’s sacred texts have been tainted by the ideologies of their interpreters.”²

The third element, the rejection of some Muslims to speak together with non-Muslims, shows how the issue of identity and positionality of who studies feminism, women and Islam is fraught today. Many people, from different perspectives – traditionalists, secularists, conservatives – would like to close the debate about women and Islam, making only Muslims able to speak about or, at best, putting non-Muslims into a marginal position in the debate. Often, they accuse that Muslims are not able to speak for themselves, because others, western scholars, western feminists, speak on their behalf. So, what happened at that conference brings up the following central question: who has the right to speak on women and Islam and on Islamic feminism? In this paper, I want to address this controversial topic. By doing so, I will make my own positioning explicit. Quoting the self-positioning of the Muslim South African feminist Sa’diyya Shaikh, I claim, “I am not only intending to situate my own ideological and personal positioning, but also make salient the notion of plurality.”³ Therefore, my positioning is an explicit rejection of those who think that the issue of women and Islam, and Islamic feminism are questions only for Muslim people. My positioning is a rejection of the idea that the society in which we live is composed of close and separate communities, cultures and identities.

Positioning ourselves and the others in the field of women’s studies and Islam is not easy at all, and in front of the Islamic feminism, things become also more difficult. Islamic feminism’s identity

---

¹ Mir-Hosseini 2006.
² Ibid.
³ Shaikh 2003.
is still very fluid and the debate about what it is and who belongs to is still really open. Consequently, the positions in the movement are fluid, there are different points of view, and often those who are considered Islamic feminists do not recognize themselves under this label. So if you wanted to take a picture of the Islamic feminists, it would not be easy. The picture would change according to the photographer. If there are many who support Islamic feminism or at least are neutral towards it, there are also many critics, such as, for example, the Iranian scholar Haideh Moghissi who, criticizing the idea of an Islamic feminism, asks “how could a religion which is based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men?”4 According to Moghissi, in fact, “regardless of the interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sha’ria, if Qur’anic instructions are taken literally, Islamic individuals or societies cannot favour equal rights for women in the family and in certain areas of social life.”5 But taking a picture is not only controversial because of the view of the photographer; there is a problem in the subject itself. In fact, if you tried to take a picture, the result would be an image in movement. You would see steady people but others who are trying to enter in the shot, others who are coming out. Some who are in group, others who are alone. You would find clear subjects, and others not clear at all. Moreover, this picture could describe just a particular moment; if some months or one year later you tried to take the same picture, it would be impossible.

In Islamic feminism, as in other social movements, identities and discourses are fluid. During the twenty years of history of the movement, positions have changed. There are new knowledges and awarenesses. A clear example is offered by Amina Wadud. As Margot Badran emphasized: “In the past, Amina Wadud, the African-American Muslim theologian and author of the landmark 1991 book Qur’an and Woman adamantly objected to being labelled an Islamic feminist.”6 Now, instead, Amina Wadud is more comfortable with

---

4 Moghissi 1999, 126.
5 Ibid., 140.
6 Badran 2002a.
this label. Despite the fact that she still refuses to call herself Islamic feminist, she describes herself as a pro-feminist. About the label of Islamic feminism, the debate is very intensive. There are those who accept this term, many who refuse it, others who are in the middle, others who have a problem with the word ‘feminism,’ and also those who have problems with the adjective ‘Islamic.’ A good example is Asma Barlas’s self-positioning. Barlas, who is acclaimed everywhere as one of the most famous and influential Islamic feminist, is quite critical of the label ‘feminist.’ Answering to Margot Badran, who has been among the first to call her an Islamic feminist, she writes: “Feminism doesn’t always provide a common language and, more to the point, that common languages also create analytical and political problems. So we may need more than the shared discourse of feminism to understand Muslims and build solidarities with them.”7 Instead, the Iranian scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini, based in London, seems to be more comfortable with the label of feminism and has recently chosen to call herself Islamic feminist. While another Iranian scholar Val Moghadam writes: “Although I have been placed (by Moghissi and Mojab) in the first camp [she means the camp of the Islamic feminists], I (and others) situate myself somewhere in the middle of the two [meaning the camp of the Islamic feminists and the camp of the secular feminists]. I too was part of the student movement, and I remain a Marxist-feminist.”8 Finally, there are also scholars who are trying to position in the field of the Islamic feminism some Islamists, such as the Moroccan Nadia Yassine and the Egyptian Heba Raouf Ezzat,9 who address gender issues inside their wider Islamist political projects. Including such Islamists among the feminists is a choice completely contested by Margot Badran, but not so strongly by Ziba Mir-Hosseini.

In front of such a big plurality of identities and positionalities, Ziba Mir-Hosseini suggests not to focus too much on labels and categories. Mir-Hosseini, in fact, writes: “It is difficult and perhaps futile to put the emerging feminist voices in Islam into neat catego-

7 Barlas 2006.
8 Moghadam 2005.
ries and to try to generate a definition that reflects the diversity of positions and approaches of Islamic feminists. As with other feminists, their positions are local, diverse, multiple, and evolving. Many of them have difficulty with the label and object to being called either Islamic or feminist. They all seek gender justice and equality for women, though they do not always agree on what constitutes justice or equality or the best ways of attaining them.”

In this plural and evolving situation, it is not easy to position myself. During my research, several times I have been asked to make clear my position, answering questions as: “Why are you studying Islamic feminism? From which view or perspective? On behalf of whom do you speak? Whom do you, a westerner, want to save? Are you trying to rescue, taking care of Muslim women and their struggles against patriarchy?” For a long time, I have been reticent to position myself. I did not want to have to justify myself. Bothered by all these questions about my identity, I wondered, in Nawal al Saadawi’s words: “Why keep asking about my identity?” Through studying, I claimed my right to be in the field. But after the conference in which someone openly refused to speak with me because I am not Muslim, I thought that the moment had arrived to address this topic openly and to engage in a debate on it. I have thought of my positioning very carefully, being aware that positioning means exposing oneself and thus taking a risk. I have been speaking about this issue privately with many persons and in particular with Margot Badran who, since years, deals with the problem “of how to honor the rights of people and groups to speak for themselves without delegitimizing the rights of others to speak, without denying our ability to speak about each other as well as ourselves.”

I am not a Muslim; I do not consider myself either a feminist, or an Islamic feminist. However, as Lila Abu-Lughod says, concerning the work of the feminists in different parts of the world, I find “myself simultaneously sympathetic to and uncomfortable with their

12 Badran 2002b, 109.
My interest in Islamic feminism is the result of my previous research on women’s movements and on the Mediterranean and Euro-Mediterranean region. But my interest in Islamic feminism comes also from other sources. It comes from the idea that Islamic feminism could be a “door of passage” into a culture, a thought, an identity that affects my life. With the emergence of a European Islam, the interconnections between Islamic countries and Europe, and the re-positioning of religion in public sphere, I believe that Islamic feminism can help me understand better what is happening around me, in my society. For me, studying Islamic feminism does not mean studying the “Others,” the “Other Societies,” but it constitutes working on “My Society.” It is a commitment to “researching myself/ourselves.” Speaking about Islamic feminism I am telling about my/our present, about the challenges, the opportunities, the risks of my/our future. I argue that I can study the issue of women and Islam, because I am part of a society made up by different identities, including the Islamic one. Among my friends some are Muslims, among my colleagues some are Muslims, among my students some are Muslims, among my neighbours some are Muslims. The majority of the books I read are written by Muslims. Often the food I eat is cooked following the Islamic tradition. Since I was child I have travelled in Muslim countries. I have lived for periods of time in different Muslim countries... I could continue with this list, but I do not think it is very useful. What I want to say is that Islam is not something apart from Europe, apart from a majoritarian “us,” but it is part of “us,” part of the new European identity. It is not only part of the European present; Islam is also an element of our past. In fact, until the 15th century there were many Muslims who lived in Spain. In fact, many of the new Spanish converts to Islam claim that their conversion is a return back to their roots. But Muslims did not live only in Spain. In Italy, for example, an important Islamic community was based in the southern region of Sicily during the 9th–11th centuries. So, Islam has already been part of Europe and

13 Abu-Lughod 2005, 82.
14 Badran 2002b deals with the idea of feminism as a door of passage.
today it plays a new important role. In many countries of the continent, it is the second religion. Therefore, it is not anymore possible to consider Islam as the religion of temporary migrants. There are second, third generations of immigrants. It means that those women and men are full European citizens. And also those who have been in Europe for few years are however part of this geopolitical identity in construction, at which they contribute in many ways, also through their religion and culture. Moreover, we cannot forget that in Europe the number of converts is increasing. Their presence is another confirmation that Muslims are not apart from Europe. Inside the European Muslim community, there are many Muslim feminists, some of whom are or can be considered Islamic feminists. Already some years ago, Margot Badran wrote: “Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West. As already hinted, Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and convert communities in the West.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact, if we wanted to draw a geographical map of Islamic feminism, we would see that it is spread all over the world, in the East as in the West, and we would notice that it is widely spreading in Europe and North America as well. A great number of Islamic feminists live in the Western world, permanently or temporarily, and many who live in Muslim countries regularly travel for research, conferences, work, and personal reasons to the West. It is no accident that in the last two, three years many conferences on Islamic feminism have taken place in Europe: two in Barcelona, one in Paris, one in Amsterdam, one in Berlin, one in Tampere.

So, Islamic feminism, with its commitment to “re-dynamizing Islamic thought within the framework of a double critique of modernity and Islamic orthodoxies,”\textsuperscript{17} is reshaping also the place in which I live. Islamic feminism is something that concerns me directly. It offers a point of view on my present that cannot anymore be

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Badran 2002a.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Rhouni 2005.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
read through the binary and polarized categories of East and West. The categories of East associated with Islam *tout court* and West associated with Christianity and/or secularism *tout court* do not work anymore. They are wide and un-useful in front of the complexity of the reality. European Christians, European Muslims, European Jews, Europeans belonging to other religions and European atheists, Europeans who do not recognize themselves in any particular religion, are part of a society made up by different identities and communities. Those identities are not monolithical, but they are fluid. Those communities cannot think to be able to live side by side without correlations. They are deeply linked. Cultures do not live separately and autonomously from one another. So it is not possible to think that issues as Islam and women or Islamic feminism are only for Muslim people, Muslim scholars.

Moreover, for what I understand can be Islamic feminism, or at least, that part of the movement that does not essentialize Islam, could guarantee everyone new legitimacy for speaking about women and Islam. Challenging fixed authorities and looking for a reform of the Islamic thought, Islamic feminists are legitimizing the right of everyone to speak about women and Islam. With their work against Islamist orthodoxies and Western prejudices on Islam as well, they are encouraging debate between Muslim and non-Muslims. They could also help the dialogue among different kinds of feminisms. As Val Moghadam notes, the Iranian scholar Afsaneh Najmabadi, already at the beginning of the 1990s, “celebrated the Islamic feminism (as articulated in the Iranian magazine *Zanan*) because she believed that it has opened up in Iran a new space for dialogue between Islamic women activists and reformers and secular feminists, thereby breaking down the old hostile divide between secular and religious thought.”

Challenging authority and, consequentially, opening new spaces is, I believe, the most revolutionary contribution of the Islamic feminism to women’s empowerment and to the dialogue between different positionalities and identities.

To conclude, we should be careful that Islamic feminism does not become something on which only Muslim men and women can

---

18 Moghadam 2005.
debate, excluding those who are not Muslim. Otherwise the idea that cultures are monolithic and separate entities, and so are doomed to clash, is strengthened. Against this risk, I find very useful what Raja Rhouni writes in her PhD dissertation. Deconstructing the work of the Moroccan Islamic feminist, Fatima Mernissi, debating with the position of Mohammad Arkoun and Abdullahi A. An-Naim, she suggests a post-foundationalist Islamic feminism and claims: “An Islamic feminist position is both exterior to the orthodoxy and interior to the subject at hand in the sense of a new type of commitment. As hinted before, adopting an interior Islamic feminist position does not mean a commitment to defend one’s faith position, or Islam, as [Miriam] Cooke argues, but a commitment to the subversion of dogmatic closure and androcentrism in the aim of re-activating the dynamism and plurality of Islamic thought through critical revisions. In this sense, post-foundationalist Islamic feminism is not a field of research restricted to Muslim women or men, but is open to all researchers who have this kind of commitment since Islamic feminism is above all a position rather than an identity as Cooke herself argues. The adjective “Islamic” is maintained here not to describe an identity or a faith position, but is retained (under erasure) to describe a scholarship committed towards the deconstruction/construction of Islamic thought or its re-activation through a secular critique.”

As I said at the outset, I do not consider myself an Islamic feminist, but I believe that I, as many other non-Muslims, can speak with legitimacy on women and Islam, and on Islamic feminism. I do not speak on behalf of anyone. I look at, I research, I study, I take part, I talk about what I see, what I hear, what I share. I just add my voice to the voices of other women and other men. Doing that, probably, I become part of the mechanism for propulsion of a discourse of Islamic feminism, even if I am not an Islamic feminist. In our own ways, Muslim and non-Muslim researchers together can and are contributing to the development and spread of the ideas and practices of Islamic feminism.

19 Rhouni 2005.
REFERENCES


Rhouni, Raja (2005) Secular and Islamic feminist critiques in the work of Fatima Mernissi. Towards a post-foundational Islamic feminism. Rabat: University Mohammad V.


Rethinking “Islamic Feminist Hermeneutics:”
The Case of Fatima Mernissi

Raja Rhouni

This paper is largely based on my doctoral thesis, which dealt with the work of Moroccan author and sociologist Fatima Mernissi. An important part of the dissertation dealt with Mernissi’s approaches and positions to gender and Islam. I used Mernissi in comparison with a few other scholars to engage Islamic feminism as hermeneutics and to discuss what I saw as its promises and perils, though it is difficult to speak about a uniform “Islamic feminist hermeneutics,”¹ as such. My main observation in this thesis was that there is a general tendency towards essentialism, truth-claims or what I have called “foundationalism” in both the practice and theorization of Islamic feminism. Using an approach informed by the insights of scholars of Islamic thought like Mohammed Arkoun and others I called for what I call a “post-foundationalist islamic gender critique” (sic). I

¹ I am using the term “Islamic feminist hermeneutics” following scholar of Islamic thought Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, who has described the work of scholars we might describe as “Islamic feminist” as “feminist hermeneutics of the Qur’an,” as well as following one of these scholars’ own appropriation of the term “hermeneutics,” namely Asma Barlas (see Abu Zeid 2006). Indeed in her “Qur’anic Hermeneutics and Women’s Liberation,” Barlas explains and claims her use of the term “hermeneutics” to describe her methodology, despite the fact that the word has often represented a Western concept, alien to Islam, or unislamic. Against this, Barlas explains that her use of hermeneutics, in the sense of an interpretive methodology, is derived from the Qur’an. In fact, she uses the term “Qur’anic hermeneutics,” i.e., derived from principles that the scripture itself provides (such as: reading it as a whole, prioritizing its clear verses over its allegorical ones, keeping the nature of God in mind when discriminating between best and worst readings, etc.) (see Barlas 2005). This justifies, I hope, my use of the term “Islamic feminist hermeneutics.”
will be deliberately writing the adjective “Islamic” with a small letter, to make a differentiation from an often essentialist conception of the adjective in most theorizations of the term “Islamic feminism.” These theorizations, in spite of their merit in stressing the importance of Islamic feminism, usually set the adjective as a hermetic and essentialist qualifier, referring to a rather ambiguous “Islamic paradigm,” from which gender critics speak. The transcription of Islamic gender critique with a small I, is hence meant to avoid constructing this field of research in hermetic terms and foreground instead the aspect of methodological cross-pollination. It also refers to the positioning of double critique which this scholarship in a way represents, as a simultaneous critique of both an Orientalist essentialist construction of “Islam,” written with a capital to underscore its alleged fixity and eternal dogmatism, and a fundamentalist gender discriminating construction of “Islam,” also written with a capital which stresses its orthodoxy. This idea of double critique, captured with this new transcription, essentially follows Mohammed Arkoun’s transcription of islam with a small I by which he criticises the essentializations of islam in both traditional western scholarship of islam and orthodox Muslim writings. Indeed Arkoun problematizes both the essentialist construction of “Islam,” written with a capital letter, by what he refers to as “Orientalist Islamology” and political science, on the one hand, and the canonical construction of “Islam” by orthodox Muslim theologians and jurists, who refuse to consider its plurality and open-endedness. On the first construction, for instance, Arkoun writes:

Il est banal de répéter que l’ensemble des islamisants – islamologues d’hier et politologues d’aujourd’hui – ont imposé l’usage du terme Islam avec majuscule et des qualificatifs islamique et musulman pour désigner une immense aire où foisonnent les groupes ethnoculturels, les langues, les systèmes de croyances, les structures sociologiques et anthropologiques des imaginaires et des mémoires collectives, les expériences et les régimes politiques les plus divers et les plus irréductibles. Même lorsqu’on accepte un découpage géographique précis en parlant, par exemple, de l’Égypte, de l’Iran, du Maroc..., on cède toujours à cette globalisation facile qui gonfle indéfiniment un monstre
Arkoun argues that the two ideological constructions do not take into consideration the socio-cultural construction of belief and its metamorphosis throughout history. He then prefers writing islam with a small letter to refer to a “religious formation among others and its diverse manifestations in history.” Arkoun also states that counter the prevalent trend in Islamic Studies and political science, he prefers to speak about “societies moulded by the Islamic fact” rather than “Muslim” or “Islamic” societies. Whenever I write Islam with a capital, I refer to ideological constructions of the term rather than islam as a religious formation in Arkoun’s sense. However, although my paper proposes to discuss “Islamic feminist hermeneutics” in general, I will focus here on the single work of Mernissi, which I consider to be the most original contributions to the study of gender and Islamic thought. In order to illustrate my point here, I will lay particular emphasis on her influential book *Le Harem politique: le Prophète et les femmes*, first published in 1987, and mostly known as *The Veil and the Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*.

The book has been considered as one of the first works which displayed a new way of doing feminism, one which does not stigmatize Islam. In this book, Mernissi breaks with her earlier secularist position and also with a whole tradition of secular feminist works dealing with Islam and gender produced by scholars from non-Muslim as well as Muslim background. In this book, Mernissi appears to be engaging with the Islamic tradition, that is, both the foundational text of Islam and the canonical scholarly texts of Islamic thought in a way which does not denounce its practices but creates interest-

---

3 Arkoun 2006, 82.
4 Arkoun 2000.
ing conversations with this tradition. The originality of *Le Harem Politique* is that it engages with one of the most important collectors of the Hadith and re-reads some verses of the Qur’an dealing with women by taking their historical and sociological contexts of production into account. Mernissi’s approach departs from the simplistic methodology of selectively invoking the passages that support gender equality and providing for other interpretations (or *tafasir*) which are more women-friendly. Nevertheless, and despite its very interesting approach, the book also presents some limitations which are, to my mind, tendencies towards the retrieval of truth, the search for authenticity and the compliance with foundationalism.

Assessing Mernissi’s approach in this book, I observed indeed both a subversive approach and a more, so to speak, “mainstream” methodology. Mernissi foregrounds what seems to me to be a refreshing contextual reading of some verses considered problematic regarding gender equality. She starts by subtly introducing the idea that the Qur’an came in the form of oral statements that were open to the immediate reactions of the first actors and the particular concerns of the Arabian society of the time. She stresses this interactive character of the Qur’an by emphasising how it actually came at times to respond to the questions of the first female converts, even the most feminist ones, in the modern jargon. Mernissi also presents the Prophet in his full humanity, as a lover and as a leader, who could be vulnerable to his social environment and the pressures of his companions and entourage, a price he had to pay for his will to be the closest possible to his community. She then moves to explore the broad context/atmosphere in which verses dealing with an issue like the *hijab* (veil) for instance, came into being, in the aim of suggesting the historical contingency of what is often perceived as eternal divine prescriptions.

By considering the political, social and psychological context of production of those verses, Mernissi’s hermeneutics moves beyond the methodology of classical exegesis, or *Tafsir*, called *asbab al-nuzul*, “occasions of the revelation,” which is a tool limited to the consideration of the immediate events which aroused the revelation of a particular verse. Her work can also be seen as building on this tradition since *asbab al-nuzul* is after all a historical tool of analysis,
but which does not extend its study to the broader historical, social and psychological environment. This exchange which Mernissi as a gender critic has initiated with the tradition is indeed interesting to underscore here.

Another interesting instance of this productive exchange is when she engages in a critique of the work of one of the most important collector of Hadith in Sunni Islam, al-Bukhari. Mernissi follows the same methodology of verification that al-Bukhari and others have elaborated in order to prove the untruthfulness of some hadiths voicing a misogynous ideology. In her inquiry, however, Mernissi asks new questions such as: When did the transmitter remember this particular statement and, most importantly, in which political circumstances did this act of remembrance occurred? Here again Mernissi builds on a traditional methodology, the *isnad* technique, which basically is concerned with authenticating statements attributed to the Prophet by verifying the reliability of their transmitters. Indeed, investigating some hadiths voicing a misogynous ideology, which are retained in a canonical text like al-Bukhari’s *a-Sahih* (The Authentic), Mernissi successfully casts doubt on their genuineness by questioning the credibility of the persons who reported them. The results of her enquiry might be seen as questioning the truth-claims of *a-Sahih* and highlighting the flaws of al-Bukhari’s *isnad* methodology. By problematizing the truth-claims of one of the most important sources of hadiths in Sunni islam and one of the most significant references of the *fiqh*, Mernissi’s investigation can also be considered as a problematization of *ta’ssil*, the methodology on which Usul al-*fiqh* is based, which consists of founding a certain law by relating it to a clear text either in the Qur’an or the Sunna.

Nevertheless, this critique of authenticity and *ta’ssil* is soon weakened by her own conclusion which urges her readers, or “every good Maliki Muslim,”5 to use her own expression, to discard the hadiths she investigated as unsound and their transmitters as unreliable. Here Mernissi makes of the untruthfulness of those particular hadiths an end in itself, rather than a means to stress the problematic

---

5 “Ce hadith doit être réfuté par tout bon musulman malékite qui se respecte”. Mernissi 1987, 81.
nature of the methodology of authentification as practised by al-
Bukhari, to suggest the untenable aspect of literalist and legalist read-
ings of those statements, and to put forward the importance of con-
textualizing them, for instance. Therefore, making the unauthenticity of that hadith and the unreliability of that transmitter an end in itself rather than a means to problematize the idea of authenticity and em-
phasing that of contingency and historicity, Mernissi settles within the foundationalist logic, and thus unwittingly reinforces the methodology of ta’ssil, especially the logic of considering the Prophet’s state-
ments and Qur’anic texts as statements of law binding all Muslims in all times, regardless of their historical contexts. In sum, she does not go beyond the methodology of verifying the reliability of transmitters and the authentification of hadiths in the aim of adding them as sources of law besides what are believed to be Qur’anic prescriptions. Here the conversation with the tradition does not lead anywhere since Mernissi ends up agreeing on the principle of authenticity or authen-
tification rather than leading the discussion towards the necessity of new reading methodologies, such as the contextual approach.

Against Mernissi’s approach one can logically ask: What if the revision of isnad did not provide for the desired objective, which is here the unreliability of the transmitter? In other words: What if the hadiths are found to be authentic? One can also ask whether Mernissi’s methodology, which may have succeeded with the par-
ticular hadiths she investigated, is likely to succeed with all hadiths voicing a patriarchal worldview. I am here especially thinking of the argument made by Abu Zeid and others, regarding the Qur’anic discourse, however, but which is also applicable to the Hadith. It basically says the following: because the Qur’anic discourse first ad-
dressed a particular people, for whom gender differentiation was an important part of their culture and social system, it was only normal that it would reflect this differentiation in its dialogical conversa-
tions, or polemics with them since its ultimate objective was above all to create a certain communication with them.6 To say this, Abu

---

6 This does not mean that it espoused this differentiation. Abu Zeid adds that the error is to consider dialectic expressions as legislation which Islam invented. Abu Zeid 1999, 43.
Zeid adds, does not mean that the Qur’an espoused this differentiation. It is also mistaken according to him to consider dialogical or polemical expressions as legislation per say that Islam brought about or invented. He also adds that it is significant to note that the so-called legislative verses do not exceed one sixth of the whole Qur’an.7

To my mind, one way of transcending the limitations of the search for authenticity is to ask new questions which Mernissi’s methodology actually comes at time to foreground like: What are the cultural, social, and ideological elements which inform religious texts? What do they tell us about the society of the time? What is the original tone in which a statement attributed to the prophet was uttered? But most importantly, were these texts or statements meant to be prescriptive, or rather descriptive, as Abu Zeid would ask?

In an article entitled Qadiyyat al-mar’a bayna sindani al-hadatha wa mitraqati al-taqalid,8 Abu Zeid argues that, regarding the issue of “women in Islam,” Islamic thought is unable to transcend what he refers to as “the crisis of interpretation and counter-interpretation.”9 By this he means the way both opponents and proponents of gender equality often use the same strategy, which is that of shedding light on particular Qur’anic texts which serve their interests and positions by identifying them as the asl, the most original or truthful, and resorting to a particular interpretation of the texts that contradict their interests and serve the interests of their opponents in a way which strives to eliminate the undesired meaning.10 The suggestion Abu Zeid makes here is that this type of eclectic reading is caused by the inability of challenging a prevailing paradigm of reading religious texts, especially the Qur’an, which does not consider its historical context, its communicative or dialogical aspect and its descriptive dimension.11

7 Abu Zeid 1999, 43.
8 Abu Zeid 1999.
9 Abu Zeid 1999, 60.
10 Abu Zeid 1999, 37.
11 To consider these dimensions of the Qur’anic discourse, he insists, does not mean a denial of its divine provenance. Abu Zeid 1999, 37.
Abu Zeid’s criticism of the tendency of presenting one’s reading as the *asl*, the foundation, falls within the argument I am making against the tendency towards foundationalism in “islamic feminist hermeneutics.” This tendency not only results in the manipulation of the meaning and ideologization of the religious text, as Abu Zeid argues, but, most importantly, for me here, does not challenge the way these texts are approached and understood. This is especially significant for a gender critique that aims to challenge the idea that Qur’anic texts are exclusively prescriptive or permanent statements of law, which have no connection to their context of emergence. In fact, Abu Zeid’s idea in this article is to put forward the necessity of the contextual approach.

In addition to Abu Zeid’s critique of what can be called the *asl* reading methodology, or the foundationalist approach, Mohammed Arkoun’s problematization of *ta’ssil* or foundationalism in Islamic thought is also instrumental for me to argue against the tendency in feminist hermeneutics towards what I have been calling foundationalism. Arkoun’s problematization of the concept of *asl* and *ta’ssil* is deployed in a book published in Arabic with the provocative title *al-Fikr al-usuli wa istihalat a-tassil: nahwa tarikin akhar li al-fikr al-islami*, which could be translated into Foundational Thought, or Foundationalism, and the Impossibility of Providing for Foundations/Foundationalism. To briefly summarize his argument, Arkoun deplores the way *ta’ssil*, the search for *asl* (origin or foundation) of a law by relating it to God, seized to be a genuine practice of

---

12 See also his “Rifaat Hassan and Others: Feminist hermeneutics,” in which he criticises the approaches used by “Islamic feminists,” based on Margot Badran’s account. For him, the approaches used are not new. They resemble those used by the Nahda thinkers in claiming women’s rights. They also do not go beyond a certain ideologization of the Qur’an. He writes: ”Like the reformist approach to the Quran, feminist hermeneutics faces the problem that as long as the Quran is dealt with only as a text – implying a concept of author (i.e. God as divine author) – one is forced to find a focal point of gravity to which all variations should be linked. This automatically implies that the Quran is at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter. For a communist, the Quran would thus reveal communism, for a fundamentalist it would be a highly fundamentalist text, for a feminist it would be a feminist text and so on.” Abu Zeid 2006, 91.

13 See more particularly his introduction. Arkoun 1999.
ijtihad, independent reasoning, since what he identifies as “the Classical Age of Islam,” situated between the 7th and the 13th century. For Arkoun, the Classical age is an intellectual era in which prevailed a spirit of munazara (disputation, or disputatio), involving different scholars with different tendencies and using all tools of analysis available to them.¹⁴ It saw the fair dispute between advocates of literal readings of the sources, those like Ahl al-Hadith who preferred adding the Sunna of the Prophet as a second source of ta’ssil, and proponents of reason and philosophy like the Mu’tazila.¹⁵ The end of ta’ssil as a scholarly quest and the beginning of taqlid (imitation), which is referred to in Sunni Islamic thought as ighlaq bab al ijtihad (the closure of the gate of independent reasoning), is what Arkoun identifies as the beginning of the dogmatic enclosure (la clôture dogmatique). He mentions how the acceptance of a-Shafi’s classification of Usul al-fiqh in his a-Rissala meant putting constraints into ta’ssil and the marginalization of philosophy and the human sciences today. He points out in this respect that we cannot be content with the imitation of early scholars’ ta’ssil, since every statement uttered by a scholar in the aim of ta’ssil is informed by the social, historical, linguistic and political framework within which the scholar operates. This is what he refers to as the levels of the thinkable, the unthinkable and the unthought.¹⁶ He thus argues that by considering these

¹⁴ He often argues that contemporary Muslims should at least imitate the example of these early scholars by using all available analytical tools available in the modern era, especially those provided by the human and social sciences.

¹⁵ Arkoun insists that the triumph of the first fraction is more political than intellectual. In fact, during the caliphate of al-Ma’mun (783-833/167-218), the Mu’tazila’s thought and doctrines were mainstream and dominant. However, with his successor caliph al-Mutawakkil, the Mu’tazila became persecuted.

¹⁶ Arkoun defines the thinkable by what is possible to think for the speaker. This level is related to the language the speaker uses, and the specific means possessed by the language chosen. It is also related to the thought, images, and doctrines of the group to which the speaker belongs, or which the he addresses, and the specific historical period to which belongs this group. It is also related to the political power in the society and nation to which the speaker is affiliated (Arkoun 1999, 9–10). On the other hand, the unthinkable refers to what was impossible to think about because of the limitation of reason or its closure at a certain stage of knowledge. He gives the example of how the faqih and the philosopher during the Middle Ages and until the eve of modernity were unable to think of the concept of citizenship
three levels in revisiting this scholarship, the focus would be on what has been silenced and unthought rather than ta’ssil itself.\footnote{Arkoun 1999, 11.} Arkoun’s project Applied Islamology (islamologie appliquée) aims to subvert this dogmatic closure through the incorporation of the human sciences’ methodologies.\footnote{Arkoun defines his project as a new area of research in the domain of anthropology of religions, which aims at transcending the limitations of “Classical Islamology.” For Arkoun, European Islamology, in spite of its important scholarship on islam and Islamic thought, has remained descriptive and descriptivist, that is, only concerned with the depiction of Islamic legal schools and the differences in their doctrines for a western audience. Though he insists on the significance of this scholarship, he is critical of its ethnocentrism, which he sees in its refusal to engage into a critique of Islamic thought through the use of the approaches and tools of analysis of the human sciences. He writes : “si l’islamologie classique n’a jamais entraîné une redistribution quelconque du savoir occidental, c’est que la plupart de ses praticiens sont restés solidaires de la vision historiciste et ethnocentriste” (in Zine 2001). Arkoun refuses to consider islam as a “separate” religion, which should be cautiously approached because it is intolerant of critique and inimical to modern approaches in essence. For him, it is only through the openness to new approaches that Islamic thought could regain its dynamics and fecund debates and polemics. Applied Islamology, which submits islam to history, anthropology, linguistics, etc, is an instrument that allows islam to be liberated from what he identifies as the processes of mythologisation (by orthodoxies), Statisations (from the Ummayads to the post-colonial states) and ideologisations (by Islamist movements).}
Now, it is true that to say that there has been a consensus on *ighlaq bab al-ijtihad* is itself problematic. Scholar of Islamic studies, Wael al Hallaq, for instance, has demonstrated that there has never been an *ijma’ on ighlaq bab al ijtihad*. Muhammed Qasim Zaman, another Islamic studies scholar, adds that even *taqlid* should not be viewed as blind imitation since it has historically been a framework of *ijtihad* and actually represented a platform for change. However, what I retain from Arkoun’s argument is his problematization of *ta’ssil* as a methodology and the need for integrating the human and social sciences’ approaches in the study of Islam. This argument and project provides for an interesting framework for an Islamic gender critique which uses new analytical tools like gender and patriarchy, as well as new approaches like the contextual approach.

To conclude, Mernissi’s failure to claim the legitimacy and even primacy of the contextual approach she actually came to foreground and her inability to move at times beyond the *fiqh*’s methodology or create a more productive conversation with it, do not really challenge this foundationalist thinking, but rather unwittingly reinforces it, as I pointed out before. It is my argument, then, that so-called “Islamic feminism” should move beyond foundationalism, in the meaning of the search for truth and authenticity and in the sense of moving beyond the search for the *asl*, and the methodology of *ta’ssil*. This is what I mean by the term “post-foundationalist Islamic gender critique.” The “Post” does not mean “anti,” though, first because what is meant is not an undermining of all foundations, especially God as the ultimate *Asl*, to which the Qur’an itself refers. Second, because this gender critique engages into an interesting exchange with the tradition rather than simply overlooks it or undermines it, third, because the contextual readings of the Qur’an, which some gender

---

21 However, despite the limitations of Mernissi’s position, her book *Le Harem politique* remains an outstanding revision of foundational texts of Islam from a gender perspective and deserves in fact the recognition that it has gained. Rather than an attempt to debase her work, my critique should be understood as an attempt to push Mernissi’s project a step further and hopefully incite future research towards what I see as more promising horizons.
critics adopt, can be seen as expanding rather than completely departing from or opposed to the methodologies of exegesis. Asserting and claiming the legitimacy of a post-foundationalist position, which claims the legitimacy and even primacy of the human sciences tools and approaches, primary among these is the contextual approach, is to my mind necessary not only to rethink gender within Islamic thought, but also to participate in the project of replacing a prevailing mythological understanding of Islam with a historical sense of religion, and therefore to hopefully help complicate political and ideological instrumentalizations of religious texts.

REFERENCES


Badran, Margot (2005) Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflection on the Middle East and Beyond. Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies (JMEWS), 1:1, 6–28.


AUTHORS

Amir-Moazami, Schirin

Schirin Amir-Moazami holds a Ph.D. from the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Currently, she is involved in a larger research project on Muslims in Europe coordinated by the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, and she teaches both at the European University of Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder and at the Free University in Berlin, Germany.

Badran, Margot

Margot Badran is historian of the Middle East and Islamic societies, specialist in gender studies. She is Senior Fellow at the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University and Associate Professor at Northwestern University, the USA. Her recent books include Feminism beyond East and West. New gender talk and practise in global Islam (2007) and Feminism in Islam: secular and Islamic convergences (2008).

Barlas, Asma

Asma Barlas is Professor of Politics and the director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College, New York, the USA. Her research proposes a liberatory Qur’anic hermeneutics that allows Muslims to argue on behalf of sexual equality and against patriarchy from within an Islamic framework. Her books include Islam, Muslims, and the U.S.: Essays in Religion and Politics (2004) and “Believing Women” In Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an (2002).
Eddouada, Souad

Souad Eddouada holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from the University of Mohammed V in Rabat, Morocco. She is currently Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, Morocco. In 2007, she has pursued post-doctoral research at Lund University, Sweden. In 2008–2009, she is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, and at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, the USA.

Jouili, Jeanette S.

Jeanette S. Jouili holds a Ph.D. in Sociology/Anthropology. She received a MA degree at the Free University Berlin in the fields of Islamic Studies, Political Science and History and obtained her Ph.D. jointly from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France and the European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder. She currently holds a post-doctoral fellowship at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World in Leiden, The Netherlands.

Pepicelli, Renata

Renata Pepicelli holds a Ph.D in Geopolitics and culture of the Mediterranean Area at Sum, Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane, University of Naples, Federico II, Italy. Her research focuses on Mediterranean relations, Gender Studies and Islamic feminism. Her main publication is 2010 un nuovo ordine Mediterraneo? (2004).

Rhouni, Raja

Raja Rhouni received her Ph.D. in 2005 from the Cultural and Development Studies program at the Mohammad V University in Rabat, Morocco. For the year 2006–2007 she was post-doc fellow
Sakaranaho, Tuula

Tuula Sakaranaho is acting Professor of Comparative Religion at the Helsinki University, Finland. Her research interests include religious freedom and multiculturalism in a comparative setting. Her publications include *The Complex Other. A Rhetorical Approach to Women, Islam and Ideologies in Turkey* (1998) and *Religious Freedom, Multiculturalism, Islam. Cross-reading Finland and Ireland* (2006).
The success of transnational religious and feminist movements throughout the globe is simultaneously endorsing the tension between essentialised notions of Islam and the “west” and directing the move towards reinterpreting modernity and redefining the religious sphere. Feminist scholars from within and outside Islamic faith are placing women’s rights issues at the heart of the ongoing debate on gendered Islam and multiple modernities.

This collection of articles, emanating from a seminar organised by TAPRI in August 2007, shows a multiplicity of contexts and social locations within women’s movement inside an Islamic framework. The struggles and negotiations are situated in diverse settings and geographical scales: in the debate concerning the conception of ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Islamic feminists’; in national contexts of Morocco and Turkey; in the narration of committed Muslim women living in France and in Germany; in a university setting in Italy; and in critical engagement with scholarly texts on religion. The diversity of the sites has been chosen so as to illustrate some of the variety of ways in which patriarchy, along with other axis of domination, is being challenged in an Islamic framework. At the same time, the articles portray different ways of understanding what constitutes ‘Islamic feminism’ in the wider context of debates concerning gender and religiosity.