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*Feminist Readings
of the Qur'an: Social,
Political, and
Religious Implications*

Islamic feminism is an intellectually rigorous and socially transformative global movement that, through a variety of projects and initiatives, is advancing gender equality and empowering Muslim women in a range of contexts.

*QUESTIONS
OF TERMINOLOGY*

As we confront the unfamiliarity and surprise provoked by the association of the terms “feminism” and “Islam,” it is necessary to begin with the clarification that ideological assumptions can lie hidden behind one definition or another. From the start, we can affirm that words are used within a historical context, and terms are continuously evolving. Hence, any definition is subject to constant revision.

On the one hand, there are three main theories of the difference between the sexes: universalism (all human beings are equals), differentiation (there are two sexes, and equality does not presuppose following the model of masculinity), and postmodern/queer theory (transcending the duality of sex and gender). This chapter will not advocate a particular theory, nor is there enough space to elaborate and thema-

tize each one of them, but it is obvious that these theories have certain political implications: Are we dealing with incorporating women into the same social structures, or reformulating these structures in regards to the two (or more) sexes?¹

On the other hand, the term “Islam” is not unambiguous either. Are we alluding to its social, political, or spiritual dimensions? Where? We often pass over these questions, tending to identify “Islam” ahistorically and monolithically. Hence there cannot be a definite and final answer on “the place of women in Islam.” At the same time, one can try to analyze the role of women in foundational texts, their interpretations, and the implications that these readings have for actual practice.

As the Iranian intellectual Abdelkarim Soroush affirms:

Believers generally conceive of religion as something holy or sacred, something constant. You cannot talk about the change or evolution of religious knowledge. They stick to the idea of fixity. But as I have demonstrated in my work, we have to make the distinction between religion on one side and religious interpretation on the other. By religion here I mean not faith which is the subjective part of religion but the objective side which is the revealed text. This is constant, whereas our interpretations of that text are subject to evolution. The idea is not that the religious text can be changed but rather that over time interpretations will change ...

Those who hold to the idea of fixity in religion are not fully aware of the history of Islam, or other religions for that matter. Islam is a series of interpretations of Islam. Christianity is a series of interpretations of Christianity. And since these interpretations are historical, the element of historicity is there. Because of this you have to have a good knowledge of the history of Islam. Going directly to the Quran and hadith will not give you much. You have to go to history and from there back to the Quran and hadith in order to put historical context to interpretation.²

In this way, when questions are posed such as, “Is Islam compatible with feminism?” or “Is Islam compatible with democracy or human

1 Here we are following the approach of the *AAVV Dictionnaire critique du féminisme* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 26–35, concerning the three theories of difference between the sexes.

2 “A Conversation with Abdelkarim Soroush,” *Q-News International* (British Muslim weekly), no. 220–221, 14–27 June 1996, http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19960614-A_conversation_with_Abdolkarim_Soroush.html (accessed May 17, 2011).

rights?" one senses automatically that both terms have a single fixed meaning, and that in the latter instance, that that which has to demonstrate its compatibility with another paradigm presupposed to be contrary to it is "Islam" (and by extension, Muslims).

There is still much debate on the accuracy of using such terms as "Islamic feminism." Some Muslim feminists are reluctant to present themselves as "Islamic feminists" because of the negative connotations that the term bears in countries where the majority of the population is Muslim, since feminism is associated with colonialism and strident atheism.³ Others, however, defend their adherence to the broader category of feminism, but in order to work within a religious framework, they must qualify their efforts with the adjective "Islamic."⁴ Beyond these differences in labeling (which are, in fact, strategic), such Muslim women scholars are unified by their conviction that the Qur'an does not defend patriarchy, as well as that discriminatory laws against women must be changed (as laws created by men, not being of divine inspiration). As Ziba Mir Husseini has put it, "I shall argue that the composite term Islamic feminism has become so loaded with disputed meanings and implications, so enmeshed in local and global political struggles, that it is no longer useful in any kind of descriptive or analytical sense."⁵

Therefore, instead of providing fixed definitions that make it impossible to grasp the dynamism of the social and ideological changes that are being produced within the movement or movements, perhaps it is more useful to present the theological debates as well as their coa-

3 See for example, the position of Nadia Yassine, for whom "Islamic feminism" is "an oxymoron par excellence": <http://www.nadiayassine.net/fir/#article,13,133,146> (accessed May 11, 2011). However, in the opinion of Raja Rhouni: "Yassine's position appears dogmatic and manipulative, since she opposes the term 'feminism' and prefers 'revendication feminine au sein de l'Islam' (feminine advocacy inside Islam and Islamism) which amounts to the same thing, but is only a play on words. The last lines of her rather long article make more sense and express a more comprehensible position. She suggests that she would avoid the term 'feminism' to avoid provoking 'resistances inutiles' (useless resistance). She would not refuse to use 'feminism' in the sense of a struggle for women's rights, which 'il conviendrait parfaitement à notre vision des choses' (perfectly suits our vision of things), but would demarcate herself from a term that refers to 'des incendies postcoloniaux pas encore éteints, revivifiés par un context international qui, s'il favorise d'une part l'ouverture, crée aussi du repli identitaire' (postcolonial fires not yet extinguished and revived by an international context which, though favors openness, on the one hand, is creating identity retreats)." *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 27.

4 See our debate with Wassyia Tamzali in *Desvelant secrets. Les dones de l'Islam* (Valencia: Tres i quatre, 2010), 139–148.

5 From the paper read by Ziba Mir Husseini at the IV Congreso Internacional de Feminismo Islámico in Madrid in 2010, <http://www.awid.org/Library/Islamic-Legal-Tradition-and-Feminism-Opening-a-New-Dialogue> (accessed May 17, 2011).

lescence and interaction with various social movements. Hence, I prefer to use the term “Islamic feminisms,” in the plural, although I am partially in agreement with Margot Badran over the risk this carries of dispersing and undermining the movement’s objectives.⁶

Another terminological problem encountered in this project is the reference to the *sharī’a*. Etymologically this means “path that leads to water.” According to the Qur’an, each religion has its own *sharī’a*, its own path which leads to a common origin. However, Muslim authors as well as non-Muslims tend to confuse the *sharī’a* (which implies or deals with a divine law, sacred and immutable) with *fiqh* (jurisprudence) that consists of human laws, and is thus modifiable within a given context.⁷

This question is crucial because it appeals to religious legitimacy to defend the “sacrality” of current family laws in Muslim majority countries, i.e. in the name of supposed *sharī’a*. These are laws that are extremely discriminatory to women, for which the man is the head of the family whose authority and privileges are not open to appeal (with the exception of the *Mudawwana*, adopted in Morocco in 2004).⁸ Although all Muslim feminists, Islamic and non-Islamic, have concentrated their efforts on demanding the modification of these laws, as we will see below, their strategies have been diverse.

6 Margot Badran: “The pluralizing of Islamic feminism can be read either as announcing or suggesting the need to consider the notion of multiple Islamic feminisms. I continue to prefer to retain the singular to keep the focus on Islamic feminism’s core message. [...] Now that there is an accelerated move in the trajectory of Islamic feminism from theory building to social movement building clearly there will be, and are, different local movements, responding to the diversity of local imperatives, but the driving core principles and core ideas remain the same. [...] I think we have to be wary of the possibility of fragmentation and circulation of multiple meanings that can cunningly undercut or dilute the basic tenets of Islamic feminism which pluralizing the term might unwittingly promote”: “An Historical Overview of Conferences on Islamic Feminism: Circulations and New Challenges,” in *Féminismes islamiques 13, Revue des Mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (PUP, 2010), 34.

7 These are the two positions defended by, among others, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Riffat Hassan respectively. See “Equal before Allah? Woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* XVII (2/ January–May 1987), <http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/import/english/pubs/trtf/dossiers/dossier5-6/D5-6-01-equal-allah.rtf> (accessed February 20, 2011).

8 Souad Eddouada and Renata Pepicelli assert that although the reform of 2004–2006 opened up very positive prospects for women, it likewise represents an appropriation of power from voices of feminist and Muslim grievance, in the form of a “state feminism,” the objectives of which are not necessarily those of feminists nor Muslims. Eddouada furthermore denounces the lack of practical application because of resistance to these new directives: see “Maroc: vers un ‘féminisme islamique d’Etat,” *Critique Internationale* 46 (January–March 2010): 87–100, and “Empowerment between the Global and the Local, the case of Moroccan Feminists,” a conference led by Souad Eddouada at the *II Congreso Internacional de feminismo islámico* (2008).

*FOUNDING MYTHS,
PATRIARCHAL READINGS*

*The use of historical
myths⁹ in classical texts*

In the Qur'an, there appears to be an opposition between two types of myths, "a written account (*uṣṭūra*) which breaks with the past of the tribe and its foreseeable future," and another, "more beautiful and true account (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*)."¹⁰ The latter does not have any negative connotation; to the contrary, it serves to record and reformulate the "true religion"¹¹ from the Qur'anic perspective. For example, Chapter Joseph says that, "In the measure that We reveal this Qur'an unto thee, [O Prophet,] We explain it to thee in the best way possible [lit. "with the best explanation" (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*)]" (Q 12:3).¹²

The Qur'an deals with the stories of the prophets in a different way than the Bible, since the characters in the latter were considered primarily in their historical dimension. On its part, the Qur'an does not give attention to the historical aspect (i.e. precise names, genealogies, etc.) but rather seeks to transmit an ethic and teachings actualized by constant reading/recitation on the part of the believers.

Now, in order to discern how the founding myths of Islam have served to validate the patriarchal social order, it is not as important to know precisely what the classical texts say as it is to recognize how historical (collective) memory has been constructed from the different interpretations and opinions based on them. It should be noted that throughout Islamic history there have been few female exegetes. It was not until the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that the first systematic writings by women were produced.¹³ This lack of written record does not imply a complete absence of Qur'anic interpretation on

9 In this contribution we follow the reasoning of Mohamed Arkoun for whom "projections to the foundational period which norms are determined for what is truth and falsehood, licit and illicit, good and bad, just and unjust, legitimate and illegitimate are the essence of mythohistoric views and practices. None of this comes from Islam, the same constructions for the same purposes can be shown in the founding narratives of all collective memories"; see "La construcción de los mitos fundadores: el ejemplo del pensamiento islámico," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 6 (2006): 53–56, <http://www.imesd.org/publicacions/quaderns/6/Arkoun.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2011).

10 Ibid.

11 This should not be understood as excluding previous revelations, but rather integrating them.

12 All translated verses of the Qur'an in this chapter are taken from Muhammad Asad.

13 Among others, the Egyptian Bint al-Shāṭi and the American Amina Wadud.

the part of women. In fact, in the earliest period of Islam, the *ummahāt al-mu'minīn* ("mothers of the believers," a title of the Prophet's wives) not only contributed in decisive ways to the exegesis of numerous passages of the Qur'an,¹⁴ but also were furthermore, great *muḥaddithāt* (transmitters of hadith) and teachers of men as well as women. Here we cannot touch upon all the possible reasons for the silence of the past although this is a theme that ought to be investigated in future works.

The creation myth

The myth of human creation in the Qur'an is different from its biblical counterpart.¹⁵ Man and woman are both described as companions (*azwāj*) of each other. Both were created from a single source (*nafs wāḥida*), on the merit of which they are ontologically related.

O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you! (Q 4:1).

And that it is He who creates the two kinds—the male and the female—out of a [mere] drop of sperm as it is poured forth" (Q 53:45–46).

Does Man, then, think that he is to be left to himself to go about at will? Was he not once a [mere] drop of sperm that had been spilt, and thereafter became a germ-cell—whereupon He created and formed [it] in accordance with what [it] was meant to be, and fashioned out of it the two sexes, the male and the female? (Q 75:36–39).¹⁶

However, readings of the myth of creation throughout the history of the Islamic tradition have largely been patriarchal. The name *Ḥawā'*

14 Many books of *tafsīr* (exegesis) contain passages of exegesis by 'Ā'isha. These include the works of Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr and al-Suyūṭī, among others. The exegesis of Umm Salama was also very important.

15 Differences should be pointed out between the narratives of Genesis 1:26–31, Genesis 2:18–25, and 3:1–16, 20). For a feminist analysis of the biblical narrative on Eve, see the article by Marlene E. Mondriaan, "Mythological Eve: Progenitor of Mankind and Prototype of Women," *Old Testament Essays* 20 no. 1 (2007): 170–184, http://www.up.ac.za/dspace/bitstream/2263/4060/1/Mondriaan_Mythological%282007%29.pdf (accessed February 20, 2011).

(Eve) does not appear in the Qur'an, neither does the account that Adam's wife was created from his rib. We have to turn to the hadith to find an explicit mention of this, or the *tafāsīr* (books of exegesis) that echo pre-Islamic traditions (Jewish and Christian)¹⁷ but contradict the Qur'an. For example, the *tafāsīr* of Ṭabarī takes up the biblical tradition, obscuring the Qur'anic version. He also uses *qiṣaṣ* (stories) as a technique to call the attention of the readership. According to Ṭabarī, Eve insisted that Adam eat from the forbidden tree but he resists. She blackmails him until he finally achieves her goal by getting him to drink. In the Qur'an the two are expelled from Paradise as a punishment. In another instance, Ṭabarī adopts the biblical version according to which Eve is the primary culprit. Iblīs had been expelled before the episode of the forbidden fruit when he refused to prostrate before Adam. How did he return to Paradise then? According to Ṭabarī, Iblīs went up to Paradise in the form of a snake with four legs like a camel (this detail was necessary to maintain the coherence of the biblical narration). His punishment consisted in his losing his four legs and thus having to crawl on his belly.

As Riffat Hassan has indicated, on the bases of these interpretations passed on through the hadith, two teleological premises are established:

First, the primary creation by God was man and not woman, since the manner in which it is believed that woman was created was from one of Adam's ribs; thus she is derivative and secondary;

Secondly, that woman, and not man, is guilty for the expulsion of human beings from Paradise.

In her article entitled "Equal before Allah? Woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition,"¹⁸ Riffat Hassan comments on the central importance of the issue of woman's creation because it is more important than any other element on the level of theological anthropology. If man and woman were created equally by God, who is considered the ultimate arbiter of justice, then how could they become unequal at a later time? Hence, females' clear inequality in the world of patriarchy is an affront to the divine plan. On the other hand, if man and

16 Translations from Muhammad Asad.

17 It would be almost a century for the first exegesis of the Qur'an to emerge after that of Ibn 'Abbās (the Prophet's cousin): the *Tafāsīr* of Ṭabarī (of Baghdad) that contains clear biblical influences.

18 Riffat Hassan, "Equal before Allah? Woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* XVII (January–May 1987), (February 10, 2011).

woman were created unequal by God, then they could not become equal in a subsequent time. In this case any intention to make them equal would go against the Divine Will.

MASCULINE PROPHETHOOD

For the majority of exegetes, only men can act as prophets on the basis of the following verse:

And [even] before thy time, We never sent [as Our apostles] any but [mortal] men, whom We inspired, [and whom We always chose] from among the people of the [very] communities [to whom the message was to be brought] (Q 12:109).

According to the majority view, the word “men” solely refers here to the masculine gender. As we can see, this interpretation was in perfect accordance with the patriarchal conceptions of medieval Islam.

Nevertheless, the theme was much debated. A number of exegetes of great significance defended female prophethood,¹⁹ among which were Ibn Ḥazm, Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Ash‘arī, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Qurṭubī. They supported this with an inclusive understanding of the term “*rijāl*” (men) as the human race. Al-Ash‘arī affirmed that there had been up to six female prophets: Ḥawā’ (Eve), Sara (the mother of Isaac and Abraham’s wife), Umm Mūsā (Moses’ mother), Hagar (the mother of Ishmael and Abraham’s wife), Āsiya (Pharaoh’s wife), and Maryam (Mary, the mother of Jesus).²⁰

These dissident voices have been obscured and marginalized, and apparent consensus has formed in turn on the impossibility of women attaining prophethood. From this the following conclusion may be drawn: women have an inferior status to men, and thus cannot serve an ideal model for all human beings.

19 Although they were in favor of female prophethood, they established a distinction between *nubuwwa* (prophethood) and *risāla* (messengership); the latter was considered exclusive to men.

20 Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an: Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Feminist Hermeneutics: New Readings

As we have seen, Muslims have inherited patriarchal readings that are a testimony to the mentality of the epoch in which they were produced. But subjectivity is not only a question of the past; human society is destined to interpret, debate and look for consensus across different subjectivities. This is why certain sectors must advocate for an *umma* that is understood as an interpretive community.

Feminist hermeneutics is a hermeneutic of suspicion demonstrating that those interpretations which pretend to be neutral (mere transposition of the Qur'anic message) are actually conditioned by the previous ideology of its interpreters. Every interpreter enters the interpretive process with their own subjectivity and baggage, i.e. with previous understandings on the questions treated by the text, conceptions and prejudices.

A majority of the discriminatory dispositions are based on the hadith. In Islamic feminist debates, there are two stances: one opts to reject all those hadith which contradict the Qur'an (Fatima Mernissi), and another accepts that some hadith may be authentic, but insists that these must be placed within a historical context, reflecting of a patriarchal mentality (Sa'diyya Shaikh, Leila Ahmed). In this way, an essentialistic vision of religion may be deconstructed.

In Turkey, an important revisionist project to filter the hadith is about to be completed. This reformist trend insists that a decision on these texts can only be taken after understanding the cultural past and not on the basis of the later commentaries. In this camp can be named, among others, the works of Hidayet Tuksal.²¹ Although not all Muslims support these reformist measures, there is certainly an ongoing internal debate over these issues.²²

21 Hidayet Tuksal, *Kadin Karşiti Söylemin İslam Gelenegindeki İzdüsumleri (Traces of misogynist discourse in the Islamic tradition)*, 1st ed. (Istanbul: Kitâbiyât, 2001).

22 See "Turquía emprende la reforma del islam del siglo XXI," an article by Juan Carlos Sanz, published March 8, 2008 in *El País*, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Turquia/emprende/reforma/islam/siglo/XXI/elpepuint/20080308elpepiint_8/Tes?TB_iframe=true&height=500&width=940 (accessed January 18, 2011).

*Fatima Mernissi:
Critical Analysis of the Hadith*

The work accomplished by Fatima Mernissi in *Women and Islam* was very important because it invalidated certain hadith based on the classical sources themselves since these did not respect the established conditions for hadith to be accepted.²³ The book thus is constructed on the initial question: “May a woman lead the Muslims?” which is answered by the famous hadith, “The nation led by a woman will not prosper.” From here, Mernissi carries out a profound study of the classical texts of Islam as a tool to analyze (and ultimately, invalidate) this and other discriminatory hadith against women.

However, discarding certain hadith via the traditional methods inevitably ends up reinscribing this discourse of authenticity by following its own logic. The goal ought to center on showing the problematic nature of the authentication methodology developed by the compilers of hadith rather than simply showing that one hadith or another was fabricated. The goal then, is not to demonstrate the inauthenticity of such hadith, but rather to assure that they not be taken as the basis for legislation since they are texts that reflect the mentality of a certain age on which basis they should not be taken as normative.

Other Muslim feminists have preferred to concentrate on studying the Qur’an. Among them are Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas.

*Amina Wadud:
The Centrality of the Qur’an and
the Principle of Tawhīd*

In her now classic *Qur’an and Woman: Re-Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, Amina Wadud criticizes the exegetical methods, verse by verse, which impede the universality of the text.²⁴ She adopts here the critiques of the Pakistani American scholar, Fazlur Rahman. On the basis of the Qur’anic emphasis of Rahman, Wadud expressed

23 Probity of the narrator, continuity in the narrative chain of transmission. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam. An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004).

24 Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Re-Reading the Sacred Text From a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

the necessity to distinguish in the Qur'an between universal principles, and those which have to do with the particular circumstances in which they were revealed. In this way, taking into account the intentions of revelation and the principles of the Qur'anic message with regard to a given issue, Wadud returns to the present to unpack the text's actual significance.

From her point of view, a holistic exegesis of the Qur'an must be carried out which treats its ideas, syntactic structures and principles, all the while taking into account social realities and concerns, morals, economics, and contemporary politics—above all else the relations between men and women. Wadud argues that the Qur'an establishes ontological equality of the sexes and appeals to recovering the (ethical and cosmological) principles which ought to frame Qur'anic exegesis: *tawhīd* (divine unity), *'adl* (justice), and *taqwā* (consciousness of God). These principles constitute the foundation of Islamic feminism. The Qur'an reminds human beings that they come from *nafs wāhida* (a single being), that the only thing which differentiates among humans is their level of *taqwa*, and that God is *al-'Adl* (The Just).

Wadud ultimately invites all Muslims to reform their societies so as to achieve the inherent equality in the *tawhīdic* Islamic paradigm, reflecting in human relations that unity which transcends any duality.

Asma Barlas: The Qur'an as an Anti-Patriarchal Text

The book most referenced for deconstructing Islamic patriarchy is *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, by Asma Barlas.²⁵ She defends the following thesis:

The hermeneutical aspect of my argument seeks to recover the Qur'an's egalitarian and antipatriarchal epistemology in a series of steps. The first is to challenge interpretive reductionism—i.e., the idea that the Qur'an has only one set of patriarchal meanings—by emphasizing the principle of textual polysemy. The second is to argue against interpretive relativism—i.e., the opposite idea that all readings are equally correct and that, therefore a patriarchal read

25 Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

ing of the text is as appropriate as an antipatriarchal reading on the grounds that some readings are in fact neither contextually legitimate nor theologically sound.²⁶

We may summarize the main conclusions that Asma Barlas derives from her study of the Qur'an and the names of Allah:

- › The Qur'an does not justify patriarchy.
- › In the Qur'an, God is not masculine.
- › God is not a father.
- › The Qur'an establishes ontological equality between men and women.
- › The Qur'an addresses men and women without differentiation.
- › The Qur'an does not establish paternal authority.

ADVANCES IN HERMENEUTICS

The various critiques that these feminist readings of the Qur'an have received, as well as the maturation process that scholars have undergone, have resulted in important advances in hermeneutics.²⁷ According to Margot Badran, there will be a qualitative leap forward on the basis of Amina Wadud's second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, published in 2005, since as Wadud herself says, she intended to go beyond previous apologetic positions.²⁸ She says that the important thing is not to consider the Qur'an as a fixed text, but rather as "a word or text in process [...]. One important aspect of this challenge confronts the possibility of refuting the text, to talk back, to even say 'no'."²⁹ Wadud asserts, for example, that certain practices which prevailed at the time of the revelation and which were not prohibited explicitly by the Qur'an are intolerable today (such as slavery or conjugal violence).

26 Asma Barlas, "Text, Tradition, and Reason: Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Sexual Politics," http://www.asmabarlas.com/PAPERS/20041011_cardozo.pdf (accessed February 20, 2011).

27 The development of Fatima Mernissi's work partly has to do with the contributions of ulema such as Ahmed Khamilichi and Moulay Rachid (she moved from a secular feminist position to an Islamic one). Amina Wadud on her part has acknowledged in her recent works the contributions of thinkers such as Abdullah An-Na'im, Khaled Abou el Fadl and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.

28 Margot Badran, "Où en est le féminisme islamique?" in *Le féminisme islamique aujourd'hui. Critique internationale* 46 (Paris: Sciences Po Les Presses, 2010), 25–44.

29 Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 191.

SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

1. Transnational Movements

Equality in all aspects

As we said at the beginning, it is difficult to assess certain movements that are still in a process of development. Their priorities differ given the contexts in which they are developed. Nevertheless, we can say that there is an important nucleus of women within this diversity, who demand complete equality in all aspects: political, economic, social and religious. The last of these has not been treated by secular feminists who mostly intended to minimize the role of religions in the public sphere and identified them as a source of discrimination.

The access of Muslim women to education and new forms of social organization brings with it the question of women's religious leadership. Allowing females to lead mixed-gender congregations will be one of the most controversial points but at the same time, one of the most productive within the different feminist Islamic movements. The main catalyst was the announcement by the press of the celebration of a mixed prayer service led by African American Amina Wadud in 2005. Reactions were diverse, and the question was settled by various fatwas (legal pronouncements) condemning the act, in a way that was more or less exhaustive.³⁰

Some Muslim activists critiqued the initiative, saying that it could be counter-productive; certain objectives that had been attained by it could have been achieved in a way that was less incendiary; some said simply that the issue had not been a priority.³¹ However, the question posed by Amina Wadud³² has permitted the debate on the feminine *imamate* to be expanded more amply, and to address inequalities that have been codified by the tradition. As she says herself, she was not intending to change Muslim mosques; rather she wanted to motivate

30 See "A Collection of Fatwas and Legal Opinion on the Issue of Women Leading Islam," *Living Islam*, April 2005, http://mac.abc.se/~-onest/d/fwlp_e.pdf (accessed February 2, 2011). Note that none of the contributing scholars are women.

31 These are the positions of Asma Lamrabet, Yaratullah Monturiol and Houria Bouteldja, among others.

32 The mixed prayer led by Amina Wadud in New York in 2005 was not the first, nor the only time (there are records that this has been celebrated and continued to be celebrated in South Africa, Canada, Bahrain, Mexico, Spain, Italy, Germany and the UK).

Muslims to believe that “we are all one and equal” in all spheres of life, whether in public, private or ritual. It is clear that the proliferation of women leading prayer in different parts of the world (whether in mixed congregations or solely among women) has to do with such calls for reform. At the same time, the attention which this event has created produced another positive effect: it has obligated some of the more conservative Muslim organizations to publicly recognize the unfair and precarious situation which women have experienced (and experience) in mosques, and to demand changes.³³

However, this transnational movement has not focused solely on spiritual leadership, but has likewise advanced various campaigns internationally which show the efficacy of such lobbies. One such example is the “Stop Stoning and Killing Women!” campaign, the objective of which is to eliminate such practices and denounce the way religion has been manipulated to incorporate cultural components that are not truly Islamic through the elaboration of unjust and aberrant *ḥudūd* (corporal punishments).

Another interesting initiative is the creation of the first International Council of Muslim Women (*Shura Council*)³⁴ in New York in 2007. This council intends to promote women’s leadership and train *muftiyāt* (experts in jurisprudence). In 2009 the second international meeting of the *Shura Council* took place in Kuala Lumpur where it presented its first campaign, called “Jihad Against Violence: Muslim Women’s Struggle for Peace.”³⁵ Its mission statement reads:

All over the world, violence destroys Muslim women’s capacity to develop themselves in their families, communities, and nations. Violent extremism and domestic violence in particular continue to devastate the lives of individuals, families, and societies. This represents clear injustice for those who suffer such indignities, as well as a violation of the teachings of Islam, in the name of which this violence is falsely justified.

33 Scholars such as Zayd Shakir and Dr. M. Louay Safi have been critiquing the situation and working to change the conditions of mosques in the United States for years. See, for example, the following essays by Zaid, “Flight from the Masjid,” <http://www.newislamicdirections.com/articles/Flight%20From%20the%20Masjid.pdf> and Safi, “Women and the Masjid between Two Extremes,” <http://aninsight.org/2005/03/woman-and-masjid-between-two-extremes.html> and “Towards Women Friendly Mosques,” <http://aninsight.org/2005/06/towards-women-friendly-mosques.html> (accessed January 18, 2011). Likewise, the NGO, Faith Matters, has put together a report presenting a list of mosques that are “friendly” to women in the United Kingdom.

34 Of which the author is an active member. See “Creación del primer consejo internacional de mujeres musulmanas,” <http://www.webislam.com/?id=6324> (accessed January 18, 2011).

This first campaign is based on an affirmation of women's authority as well as that of Muslim scholars, thus contributing to religious awareness while developing holistic strategies to create positive social change.

We may also include the four international Congresses on Islamic Feminism³⁶ hosted in Spain since 2005 which are visible manifestations of the movement. The different congresses have focused on analyzing the current situation of this movement and its future prospects. Once the debate has started and the main arguments have been made, the goal is to let them be known and to attain the biggest possible number of supporters. In order to do this it is necessary to find the main sources of resistance and different Islamic-Feminist projects among Muslims and non-Muslims, and in turn think of ways to confront challenges. What real chances do Muslim feminists have in changing Muslim women's current situation in the contexts where they face discrimination? How can pretensions of authority (authoritarianism) be confronted in conservative religious structures? How can an impression be made in the framework of ideas, customs and traditions through which patriarchy has been sustained? These are some of the questions that have been addressed through these congresses.

2. Local Movements

On the local level, we can mention the growing rise of different movements which are led by women: the *dā'iyāt* of Egypt, the *muballighāt* of Indonesia, the *murshidāt* of Morocco, the *Qubaysiyyāt* of Syria, the *otin shalar* of Uzbekistan, the *nu ahong* of China, and others. These are female religious leaders, teachers, preachers and female imams³⁷ for women, who, while not openly questioning traditional roles, present a form of passive resistance to male omnipresence in the public sphere; they also inconvenience the state because they are beyond its control (except, as we will see, in the case of Morocco) and demonstrate the almost complete absence of social policies on the part of the state.

35 http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/images/uploads/Jihad_against_Violence_Digest%28color%29.pdf (accessed January 18, 2011).

*A Piety Movement in Egypt:
the dā'iyāt*

This movement within the mosques appeared about thirty years ago. Activities were organized near neighborhood mosques for providing religious instruction and social services, as well as for distributing medication to the poor. This movement is so popular that almost every neighborhood in Cairo offers religious classes for women. In order to understand this agreement, one must bear in mind the critique which participants are making against the predominant form of religion in Egypt (labeled with the terms “secularization” or “westernization”):

Islam is reduced to a system of abstract beliefs [which are still observed, but] which have no immediate impact on the concrete organization of daily life ... the *dā'iyāt* [female religious teachers] and the women who attend their classes want to change this situation—concerning themselves with bodily attitudes, virtues, customs, and desires open to engraining Islamic principles in the practices of daily life.³⁶

To Saba Mahmood, “the capacity to act is found not just in acts of resistance to the norms but also in the multiple ways by which we live out norms.”³⁹ Although the author shows how norms and traditions can aid self-actualization, she does not deny that the “capacity to act” for these women is limited by the same norms.

*A Sufi Movement in Syria:
the Qubaysiyyāt*

The Sufi association called the *Qubaysiyya* is an important movement in Syria, with over 100,000 female participants. They are distinguished by their religious rigor and for creating specifically feminine spaces. The movement was founded by Munira al-Qubaysi whose activity began to be known in the 1980s.

These women’s circles form an alternative life of compromise: feminine and limited to the religious and educational sphere. They offer an Islamic alternative that fills the vacuum in Syrian society between

36 See <http://www.feminismeislamic.org>.

37 If we may use this neologism.

38 Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 74–75.

39 *Ibid.*, 32.

different trends (from political Islam to laicism), proposing a concrete model to which young women can adhere. Its discourse is spiritual yet subject to the society in which it exists.⁴⁰

*The Preachers of Morocco:
the murshidāt*

In 2005, the *murshidāt* (female preachers) were first promoted by the Moroccan state. Beyond the novel recognition of a religious role as educators for women in the public sphere, the emergence of the *murshidāt* responds primarily to a double-sided sociopolitical context: on one side the need to promote an official “Moroccan Islam” to counteract fundamentalist trends, and on the other, to continue to promote women’s rights in accordance with the family law (Mudawana) reform of 2004.

The *murshidāt* represent the feminization of clerical staff and to a large degree, a growing space for women to maneuver in the political and religious sphere.

Through these three examples (the *dā’iyāt*, the *qubaysiyāt*, the *murshidāt*), we can see that—contrary to what one might expect—Muslim women are not being submissive or passive, but are deployed in vigorous activism both social as well as spiritual, albeit in a different form than what Westerners might hope for.

*ACTIVITY IN MUSLIM WOMEN’S NETWORKS:
BEYOND BORDERS*

Activists today who defend gender equality in Islam recognize the need to unite efforts beyond differences in religion and nationality. Transnational cooperation is very active in particular for family law, which is practically the last bastion of patriarchy still intact. For example, the transnational *Musawah* movement offers a packet of sources⁴¹ on Muslim women’s rights in the family setting; the *Karamah* organization⁴² offers legal counseling for family issues; and the Canadian Council of Muslim Women has edited some informative guides on

40 Aurelia Ardito, “Les cercles féminins de la Qubaysiyya à Damas,” in *Les engagements féminins au Moyen-Orient (XXe–XXIe siècles). Le mouvement social*, 77–88 (Paris: La Découverte, April–June 2010).

41 http://www.musawah.org/resource_kit.asp.

family law in Ontario.⁴³ The *II Congreso Internacional de Feminismo Islámico*, hosted in Barcelona in 2006, focused on reforming family law.⁴⁴ Over the last thirty years, different networks have been created, locally and transnationally,⁴⁵ whose impact is still being evaluated.

In the European context, there are still no studies of such Muslim networks, so we cannot draw definite conclusions although there have been some reservations about the extent of activity for some of them (GIERFI and ZIF).⁴⁶ These reservations are only focused on the influences that these networks can have within the Muslim collective, affirming merely that they are minorities; they do not discuss to what extent they can change stereotypical images of Muslim women nor how they oblige people, even indirectly, to rethink feminism and open it up to new sensitivities—in short, to make it more inclusive.⁴⁷

Resistance to Islamic Feminisms

Ziba Mir Husseini, an Iranian historian and Muslim feminist, sums up the opposition which “the feminist project in Islam” faces:

I saw three broad categories of opponents of what I defined as “the feminist project in Islam”: Muslim traditionalists, Islamic fundamentalists, and secular fundamentalists. Muslim traditionalists are those who resist any changes in what they hold to be eternally valid ways, sanctioned by an unchanging Shari‘a. Islamic fundamentalists—or Islamists—are those who advocate political Islam, seeking to change current practices by a return to what they claim to be a “purer” version of the Shari‘a, which they hope to implement through the machinery of the modern nation-state. Secular fundamentalists deny that any religion-based law or social practice can be just or equal, or relevant to modern times; in my encounters with them in meetings and seminars, I found them as dogmatic and ideological as religious fundamentalists.⁴⁸

42 <http://www.karamah.org/>.

43 <http://www.onefamilylaw.ca/fr/muslimwomen/>.

44 <http://feminismeislamic.org/es/2congres/actescongres2/>.

45 See the appendix.

46 The international network GIERFI (International Group of Study and Reflection about Women within Islam) came to life in 2007. It assembles intellectuals and activists principally in the francophone world (France/Canada/Belgium) but also in the Muslim world (Maghreb and Middle East). ZIF is *Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung*: <http://www.zif-koeln.de>.

Thus, many Muslims restrict themselves to asserting that feminism has nothing to do with Islam and that the only thing it aims at is destroying the traditional family unit, the undoubted basis of every ideal Muslim society “from within.” But to present Islamic feminism (or Islamic feminisms) as a simple imitation of more old-fashioned secular feminism overlooks the differences that exist between the two, invalidates its indigenous origins and negates the great differences in interests that exist within secular feminism itself. For example, we might mention the multi-faceted critique (neither ethnocentric nor nativist) against colonization made by Fatima Mernissi, against discourses of women’s liberation within nationalist movements, against the postcolonial state for its opportunistic use of Islam as a unifying discourse, its adoption of capitalism, and its androcentric ideals of development.⁴⁹ In fact one of the things that incited Mernissi to reproach Moroccan nationalists was that they would call for more political rights but they did not attempt to reform family law, because according to them, Islam was genuinely patriarchal. In sum, secularists as well as traditionalists have had (and have) an essentialist view of Islam.

Muslim feminists face multiple challenges: breaking the interpretive monopoly, disassociating the notion of feminism from the Western imperialist project, expanding the concept of feminism to be more inclusive, fighting against ignorance and prejudice, and elaborating a consistent program for emancipation which translates into tangible improvements.

CONCLUSION

Far from the questions posed above having been resolved, the debates on these topics are ongoing. These debates (together with all of their contradictions) should not be understood as a lack of consensus or a

47 Lydie Fournier, “Le ‘féminisme musulman’ en Europe de l’Ouest: le cas du réseau féminin de Présence musulmane,” *Ammis, Revue de Civilisation Contemporaine de l’Université de Bretagne Occidentale* 8 (2008), <http://ammis.revues.org/593> (accessed February 20, 2011), and Jeanette Jouili and Nikola Tietze Jouili, “L’émergence de discours intellectuels islamiques en Allemagne: entre stratégie politique et herméneutique féministe,” in *Intellectuels de l’Islam contemporain. Nouvelles générations, nouveaux débats*, 77–92 (REMMM, 123, 2008).

48 Ziba Mir Husseini, “Islamic Legal Tradition and Feminism: Opening a New Dialogue,” paper presented at the *Fourth International Conference on Islamic Feminism*, Madrid, 2010, <http://www.awid.org/Library/Islamic-Legal-Tradition-and-Feminism-Opening-a-New-Dialogue> (accessed January 19, 2011).

49 Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

difficulty in establishing a common agenda, but rather as a type of dynamic and emergent social force, both in its theoretical dimension as well as in its construction of social movements that aim at responding to diverse imperatives at the local level. Most issues are common to global feminism (Should feminists participate in offices of state? Can we add a dimension of gender to different models of exercising power rather than proposing new models of gender?). Other issues are distinctly Islamic (What role does Islam play? How can family law be changed? Who has authority to interpret religious texts?). Others make us reflect on the relation of Islamic feminisms to global feminism as a whole (Is feminism against religion? Is it at the service of imperialistic projects? How can we advocate an inclusive perspective?).

As we have seen, women's participation in offices of state does not always mean a change of the system from within. It remains to be seen if such women officials have any room for maneuvering and negotiation. The state co-opts movements and women in order to block their calls for reform and to "buy" their silence so as to evade criticisms on politics in general, and gender issues in particular.⁵⁰

Indeed, although the relationship of Islamic feminisms to hierarchical power will serve in assessing the reality of its break with said power and the ideology that supports it, we cannot underestimate the role which Muslim women have played (and are playing) in the articulation and application of new concepts and paradigms in national and international politics. At the same time these developments belie any fixed vision derived on the basis of Western social theory, which on its part does not seem to be disposed to go beyond the "Westphalian order."⁵¹

However, Islamic feminists should not remain mired in ideological debate. We have tried to show that Islamic feminisms are much more than a corpus of texts and ideological principles. Their project is much broader and ambitious, aiming to address social dynamics that exceed the strict limits of intellectual production and rather require concrete action and initiatives in order to effect actual changes that will ameliorate Muslim women's status in a range of spheres and contexts.

50 See "Ni Putas Ni Sumisas y la instrumentalización política de la batalla contra el velo" by Ndeye Adújar, <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=47147> accessed January 17, 2011.

51 That is, viewing the modern nation state as a unitary actor according to a Western originated, international system of states, multinational corporations and organizations, as having begun at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

APPENDIX⁵²

Transnational Islamic Feminist Networks

Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

<http://www.wluml.org>

Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI)

<http://sigi.org/>

Musawah (Igualdad)

<http://www.musawah.org>

Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE)

<http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org>

Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC)

<http://www.wemc.com.hk>

European Muslim Women of Influence (Cedar-EMWI)

<http://www.cedar-emwi.com>

Groupe International d'Etude et de Réflexion sur la Femme en Islam (GIERFI)

<http://www.gierfi.com>

European Forum Of Muslim Women (EFOMW)

<http://www.efomw.eu>

National Organizations

Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung (ZIF)

<http://www.zifkoeln.de>

Shirkat Gah Centro de Recursos de Mujeres

<http://www.shirkatgah.org>

Muslim Women Network UK

<http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/>

Muslim Women's National Network Australia

<http://www.mwnna.org.au/>

Canadian Council of Muslim Women

<http://www.ccmw.com/>

52 What follows is a brief list of the main women's networks discussed, which, without being exhaustive, clearly represents both their geographic and strategic diversity.

Unión de Mujeres Musulmanas de España
<http://www.umme.es/>

Collaboration in International Networks

Women Without Borders

<http://www.women-without-borders.org>

Sisters In Islam (SIS) and collaboration with the Association For Women's Rights in Development (AWID)

<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my>

<http://www.awid.org>