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ISLAMIC AND SECULAR FEMINISMS:
TWO DISCOURSES MOBILIZED FOR GENDER JUSTICE

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*Islamic and Secular Feminisms:
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Abstract

The role of women in Islam is invested with diverse meanings and discourses. The state, religious authorities, traditional Islamists and reformist intellectuals all claim the right to define the role of women in the Islamic society. This contestation over the meanings attached to women makes the issue of gender a key dimension of contemporary Muslim politics. This paper surveys the growing academic literature on women in Islam and presents two oppositional interpretative and analytical categories: secular modernist and Islamic reformist that both address the traditional, patriarchal Islamic discourse. The dichotomy between the two scholarly discourses emanates from differences in their frames of reference, methodology and outcome. It also presents arguments for synergy between secularism and Islam. My main argument in this paper is that searching for the appropriate framework is vital in understanding women activism in non-Western societies. The appropriate framing of the “Muslim women” question is needed not only for itself, but also because it carries important policy implications. Instead of subsuming the “Muslim women” question directly under the feminist theory, like most scholars do, I argue that we may use the well-developed theory to pose telling questions about the phenomenon, but without supposing that the answers will be the same and without insisting on strict correspondence.

Keywords

Islamic feminism, Secular feminism, Islamic Secularism

Introduction*

“If “women are the sisters of men” as one hadith suggests, then the Islamist occupation with the question of difference and the (secular) feminist claim that Muslim women have gender-specific concern miss the point”¹.

In my research on Muslim women intellectuals, I argue that a combination of new ideas promoted by new breed of Muslim intellectuals and transnational Muslim networks can contribute to social and political changes in Muslim societies. On this basis, I borrow the concept of “frames” from the social movement theory in order to explore the role of ideas and social networks. Frames consider the role of ideational factors, including social interactions, meaning and culture. Frames represent “interpretive schemata that offers a language and cognitive tools” for making sense of experiences and events². Framing describes the “process of meaning construction” through interpretive lenses. These schemata are important in the production and dissemination of *interpretations* and are designed to mobilize participants and support. In the framing process, the signifying agents are “engaged in the social construction of meaning”³. They “articulate and disseminate frameworks of understanding that *resonate with potential participants and broader publics to elicit collective action*”⁴. In addition to the strategies, processes and structural dimensions, social movement theory is interested in the way meaning is produced, articulated and disseminated by actors through interactive processes and how potential participants are actually convinced to participate⁵.

I rely on this definition of framing in order to explore lenses through which the “Muslim women” question has been identified, defined, and thus, framed in the scholarly debate. This is not only an analytical point, but also reflects a political imperative born out of the realization that the definition of the “Muslim women” question is very crucial in determining the appropriate course of action. The literature on women in Islam incorporates many controversies and disagreements. From surveying the growing academic literature on women in Islam, one can discern two oppositional interpretive categories: Secular modernist and Islamic reformist that both address and challenge the traditional, patriarchal Islamic discourse and disposition regarding Muslim women.

For the issues of democracy and tolerance, the “women question” has been a key issue in developing the Western critique of Islam. In seeking to understand the role of religion in the Muslim world many scholars and commentators have turned to Samuel Huntington’s controversial thesis of a “clash of civilizations”. The clash of civilizations thesis advances three central claims: (1) culture matters and that contemporary values in different societies are path-dependent; (2) societal values in contemporary societies are rooted in religious cultures and (3) the most important cultural division between the Western and Islamic world relates to differences over democratic values⁶.

Increasingly after 9/11 and through the “clash of civilizations” lens, Muslims have been positioned on the global stage as anti-democratic and anti-liberal. Islam and the Muslims have become “the foils for modernity, freedom and the civilized world”⁷. From this understanding of the interplay between

* An earlier version of this paper was presented in Workshop 2: ‘The Many Faces of Islamic Feminism’ at the 12. Mediterranean Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme, April 6-9, 2011, organised by the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute.

¹ Zaynab Al Ghazali cited in Hatem 2002:45

² Wiktorowicz 2004:15

³ Wiktorowicz 2004:15

⁴ Wiktorowicz 2004:15 *emphasis mine*

⁵ Wiktorowicz 2004:15

⁶ Norris and Inglehart 2004:135

⁷ Zine 2006:2

politics and religion in Muslim context, a number of scholars developed their analytical framework and interpretative categories regarding Islam and gender.

Testing the clash of civilizations theory, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart assert that the key difference between the Western and Islamic worlds revolves around the issues of gender equality and sexual liberalization, rather than the democratic values that are central to Huntington's theory⁸.

In their study, attitudes were compared towards three dimensions of political and social values: (1) support for democratic ideals and performance, (2) attitude towards political leadership and (3) approval of gender equality and sexual liberalization⁹. The comparative study found the following: when political attitudes are compared, "far from a 'clash of values', there is minimal difference between the Muslim world and the West"¹⁰. However, support for religious authorities is stronger in Muslim societies than in the West. Muslim publics did display greater support for a strong societal role by religious authorities than do Western publics¹¹. Significantly, there is a substantial cultural cleavage in social values towards gender equality and sexual liberalization between the Western and Muslim societies. The gap has steadily widened as the younger generation in the West has gradually become more liberal, while the younger generation in Muslim societies remains deeply traditional¹². Norris and Inglehart argue that "the trends suggest that Islamic societies have not experienced a backlash against liberal Western sexual mores among the younger generations, but rather that young Muslims remain unchanged despite the transformation of lifestyles and beliefs experienced among their peers living in postindustrial societies"¹³. According to Norris and Inglehart "the most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam does not concern democracy—it involves issues of gender equality and sexual liberation"¹⁴.

From such an understanding, their proposed solution for gender equality and sexual liberalization in the Muslim world is based on the version of human development and modernization theory developed by Ronald Inglehart, which proposes that human development generates change in cultural attitudes in virtually any society. Modernization brings systematic, predictable changes in gender roles. This modernization operates in two key phases¹⁵ :

First: Industrialization brings women into the paid work force and dramatically reduces fertility rates. Women attain literacy and educational opportunities. Women are enfranchised and begin to participate in representative government, but still have far less power than men.

Second: The postindustrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality as women move into higher status economic roles in management and the professions, and gain political influence within elected and appointed bodies. Only the more advanced industrial societies are currently moving on this trajectory.

These two phases correspond to two major dimension of cross-cultural variation: a transition from traditional to secular, rational values and a transition from survival to self-expression values. The decline of the family is linked with the first and rise of gender equality is linked with the second¹⁶.

⁸ Norris and Inglehart 2004:5

⁹ Norris and Inglehart 2004:8

¹⁰ Norris and Inglehart 2004:12

¹¹ Norris and Inglehart 2004:10

¹² Norris and Inglehart 2004:13

¹³ Norris and Inglehart 2004:149

¹⁴ Norris and Inglehart 2004:155

¹⁵ Norris and Inglehart 2004:133

¹⁶ Norris and Inglehart 2004:133

Although I disagree with these reflections because I think that they do not take us far in explaining the complexity of the women question in Muslim context or how their gender and religious identities are intertwined, I find them useful as a point of departure because they highlight some of the tensions, controversies and disagreements incorporated in the literature on women in Islam that I will be discussing in this paper, namely the dichotomy between two scholarly discourses: secular modernist and Muslim reformist. This dichotomy emanates from differences in their frames of reference, methodology and outcome. The literature on women in Islam has become so polarized with oppositional binaries: theology versus social issues, Islam versus democracy and Qur'an versus universal standards. The polarization of the discourse is further reinforced by the so-called confrontation with the West coupled with the growing demand for cultural self-determination in terms of an Islamic collective identity¹⁷.

For several decades women activism and liberation in Muslim societies have been perceived as a largely secular phenomenon that relied mainly on secular, universal discourses for gender equality. Islamic revivalism has altered the character of women activism and liberation in two ways. On the one hand, by mobilizing against the notion of women's rights as a Western, imperialist construct, which denied feminists the vital support of the masses in Muslim communities. On the other hand, it opened up the space to a number of scholars and activists who have elected to engage in and elaborate an Islamic discourse on gender justice.

In her book *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*, Azza Karam demonstrated thoroughly the corollaries and contradistinction between secular feminism and Islamist feminism, a distinction previously unclarified in Western and some Muslim literature. She also defines "Muslim Feminism" as women activists using Islamic sources like the Qur'an and the *sunnah* "to show that the discourse of equality between men and women is valid, within Islam", since "feminism that does not justify itself within Islam is bound to be rejected by the rest of society, and is therefore self-defeating"¹⁸.

In her article *Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?*, Margot Badran brings a clarification to the distinction between secular and Islamic feminisms as two "discursive categories mobilized" for gender equality in terms of their strategies and ideologies. As she puts it: "the distinction between (secular) feminist discourse and Islamic feminism is that the latter is a feminism that is articulated within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm"¹⁹.

Margot Badran is known for her contribution to the history of secular, national and cultural feminism. In a chapter entitled *Toward Islamic Feminisms: A Look at the Middle East*, Badran astutely shows how the earliest feminist movement in Egypt formulated its discourse in cultural and Islamic terms and how subsequent feminist movements strove to remain secular and were allied with the secular nationalist movements. In the late twentieth century, the feminist discourse is once again being constructed within an Islamic paradigm by women claiming their rights to reinterpret this paradigm. This critical reformist movement is based on the awareness that the patriarchally interpreted religious laws are responsible for the oppressive Muslim practices against women²⁰. It is a movement that aims at challenging traditionalist interpretation and the patriarchal cultural patterns it reproduces²¹.

¹⁷ An-Na'im 1995:54, 56

¹⁸ Karam 1998:11

¹⁹ Badran 2002

²⁰ Badran 1999

²¹ Sharify-Funk 2003

Secular Feminism and Religion: Rejection and Dismissal

The major scholarly as well as policy debate regarding women in Muslim societies has been framed within the secular modernist paradigm. Feminists who view religion as a key factor in the subordination and oppression of women have rejected, dismissed and fought against religious traditions²². This dismissal is based on a perceived incompatibility between feminism and Islam, a religion that is based on gender hierarchy²³ and their view of the *sharia* as “not compatible with the principles of equality of human beings”²⁴. According to this approach, theology is useless in addressing real problems facing Muslim women. Valentine Moghadam argues in her essay, *Islamic Feminism and its Discontents*, that as long as Islamic feminists remain focused on theological arguments rather than the socioeconomic and political questions and as long as their reference is the Qur’an rather than the “universal standards”, their impact will be limited at best. It is difficult for Muslim women trying to reform Islam from within Islamic framework to win theological argument because attempts to do so can reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic system, help to reproduce it and undermine secular alternatives²⁵.

Similarly, in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haideh Moghissi is concerned that celebrating Islamic feminism highlights only one of many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing secular voices raised against “Islamification” policies²⁶. Moghissi asserts that feminism is a secular ideology and Islam rests on “fundamentalist foundations”²⁷. She also argues that by advocating feminist projects conducted within Islamic framework, Muslim women help legitimize the political-religious dictatorship. Moghissi writes that Islam is a religion that is based on “gender hierarchy” and therefore cannot be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men²⁸.

Prominent secular and Muslim feminists claim that Islam is a patriarchal and misogynistic religion. Fatima Mernissi in her book *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory* claims that Islam “professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience”²⁹. Because of this view of Islam, secular and Muslim feminists do not find it meaningful to engage the Qur’an in their struggle for women’s rights. But this did not keep some of them from using it to win an argument or from making false claims about it.

For instance, Nawal al-Saadawi, who is well-known for her aversion to all monotheistic religions wrote that “the Qur’an advocates stoning to death for adultery”, though, in fact the Qur’an does not prescribe stoning for any sin or crime, asserts Barlas³⁰ Nawal al-Saadawi hastily makes use of a couple of Qur’anic verses or a *hadith* sometimes just to win an argument³¹.

Secular and other Muslim feminists focus mainly on the socioeconomic and political barriers that work against modern changes in gender roles and women’s rights in Muslim societies³². Nayereh

²² Tohidi and Bayes 2001:47

²³ Moghissi 1999:126

²⁴ Moghissi 1999:141

²⁵ cited in Barlas 2002:102

²⁶ Moghissi 1999:137-138

²⁷ Moghissi 1999:143

²⁸ Moghissi 1999:126

²⁹ Mernissi 1996:13-14 cited in Barlas 2005b:13

³⁰ Barlas 2005b:13.

³¹ Abou-Bakr 2001

³² Tohidi 2003

Tohidi stresses that “[t]hrough a very important factor, religion is only one determinant of women’s status and rights and its impact is mediated and modified through state policy, the educational system and other socio-cultural institutions³³. She also asserts that any claims to cultural relativism render more harm than help women’s empowerment³⁴. Historically, she adds, Muslim women activists were often able to bypass cultures of religious interpretation through participation in powerful secular nationalist and socialist movements. Today, the resurgence of Islamic identities and cultures brought about by the revivalist countermovement has placed women’s activism in a new context.

In a lecture delivered at the American University in Cairo (April 10, 2001), Deniz Kandiyoti was asked about “Islamic feminism” and “she quickly dismissed it as an “Arab-centered debate”, too “theoretical and textual”, as opposed to “living Islam”. She also opined that it is better to leave such a debate on the Qur’an and Hadith to religious scholars³⁵. Kandiyoti is among the scholars who believe that political and socioeconomic conditions are more important in determining women’s status and role in society. In her book *Women, Islam, and the State*, Kandiyoti placed the state at the center of her analysis because it “highlights the reproduction of gender inequalities through various dimensions of state policy, through ‘gendered’ construction of citizenship and through the dynamics of incorporation of national and ethnic collectivities into modern states³⁶.

[T]he treatment of women and Islam has for a long time been dominated by ahistorical accounts of the main tenets of Muslim religion and their implications for women. A predominately exegetical approach is shared by fundamentalist apologists defending what they see as the divinely-ordained inequality of the sexes, Muslim feminists attempting a progressive reading of the Qur’an, the *Hadith* and of early Islamic history, and a few radicals who argue that Islam is intrinsically patriarchal and inimical to women’s rights.....This tendency has produced a rather paradoxical convergence between Western orientalists, whose ahistorical and ethnocentric depictions of Muslim societies have been the subject of an extensive critique, and Muslim feminists and scholars with a genuine interest in radical change. Whatever the strategic merits of engaging with conservative ideologues on their own terrain, this approach is ultimately unable to account for the important variations encountered in women’s conditions both within and across Muslim societies. More it is able to conceptualise [*sic*] the possible connections between Islam and other features of society such as political systems, kinship systems or the economy³⁷.

Islamic Feminism: Revision and Reconstruction

During the past two decades, reform-oriented Muslim women scholar-activists, also known as Islamic feminists, started “speaking for themselves”. Their voices seek to correct the narrow representation of their struggle and craft a better understanding of how to engage in a two-front battle (against Islamic traditionalism and Western imperialism) and the difficulties they endure. As Elizabeth Fernea discovered in her *Search for Islamic Feminism* that Muslim women activism is alive but may be in different forms than expected in the West and that she has to recast her own definition of feminism in order to incorporate the strategies these women are using to address their problems³⁸.

It seems important at this point to clarify my use of Islamic/Islamist feminism. I employ Islamic/Islamist interchangeably and broadly to mean anything pertaining to Islam. The term Islamic feminism is an uneasy one. It has been created by Western scholars in order to categorize or label Muslim women activism, which Omaira Abou-Bakr (2001) calls the “hegemonic naming of the

³³ Tohidi 2003:166-167

³⁴ Tohidi 2003:185

³⁵ quoted in Abou-Bakr 2001

³⁶ Kandiyoti 1991:1

³⁷ Kandiyoti 1991:1

³⁸ Fernea 1998:415, 422

‘other’”. Some Muslim women activists see the term feminism attached to Islam as “redundant and offensive”³⁹. Others, like Omaima Abou-Bakr, look at the term ‘Islamic’ attached to feminism as a “necessary qualification in our present time to clarify that the concerns over women’s conditions, rights, and roles is in the context of our cultures and their social, historical, and religious background. Hence, it qualifies our feminist agenda, drawing lines of demarcation among trends and orientations”⁴⁰. Another group of Muslim women⁴¹ engaged in activities and research on women’s rights rejects this labeling. So while some Muslim feminists openly use the term, others evade it opting for “Believing women”⁴² or “Muslim women scholar-activists”⁴³.

The term Muslim women scholar-activists is the term that I use throughout the paper to describe Muslim women engaged in the revision of Islamic traditions, the constitution of new modernity in the twenty-first century, the transformation of the Muslim public sphere and probably the transformation of feminism itself⁴⁴. All these activities are within an Islamic framework. The term “Muslim women scholar-activists” is used by Muslim women to avoid hegemonic labeling and to actually put the concept into practice, demonstrating the connection between theory and practice. Hence, this term addresses the criticism that pro-faith activism is basically an intellectual project that does not represent the political and socioeconomic realities of Muslim women⁴⁵. Muslim women scholar-activists are engaged in a movement of Islamic reform in Muslim societies both “within predominately Muslim states and societies, in old Muslim minority communities, and in new diasporas”⁴⁶.

With the rising influence of multiplicity of factors such as globalization and fragmentation, the Muslim world is witnessing waves of revivalism and reformation. A group of critical Muslim women intellectuals and activists are now challenging the predominant conservative interpretive practices in an attempt to reconstruct Islamic social norms and structures, whether religious, cultural or legal. To achieve this reconstruction, emphasis is placed on methodology while simultaneously acknowledging constraints or shortcoming within it vis-à-vis the realities of today. Islamic authenticity and legitimacy are maintained in such a way as to respond to the needs and aspirations of Muslim women in today’s world. This is fundamental to the issues confronting Islamic thought and reform today⁴⁷.

According to Amina Wadud, “the Qur’anic text must be continually interpreted in accordance to the interpreter’s present situation”⁴⁸. Asma Barlas’s contribution illustrates the liberatory potential of theology for women by giving a reading of the Qur’an that challenges its appropriation by religious patriarchies. According to Amina Wadud, the term ‘patriarchy’ means “a hegemonic presumption of dominance and superiority that leads to the eradication of women’s agency”. It is a situation when women are treated as object of *sharia*, not as a discussant⁴⁹.

Muslim women scholar-activists argue that liberation must be reformulated within Islam, especially the Qur’anic text. They stress that the liberation of women that began with the Prophet’s message in seventh-century Arabia should not end with his death⁵⁰. By engaging meaningfully with the Islamic

³⁹ Abou-Bakr 2001

⁴⁰ Abou-Bakr 2001

⁴¹ Wadud 2000, 2006; Barlas 2002; Ezzat 1995

⁴² Barlas 2002

⁴³ Webb 2000

⁴⁴ Badran 1999

⁴⁵ Moghissi 1999

⁴⁶ Badran 1999:165

⁴⁷ Wadud 2005:179

⁴⁸ Wadud 2000:11

⁴⁹ Wadud 2006

⁵⁰ Wadud 1999

tradition, Muslim women are trying to avert the failure to perpetuate the spiritually-based liberatory and democratic ideas initiated by Prophet Muhammad.

In her latest book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Amina Wadud describes her intellectual and activist *jihad* (struggle) against gender prejudices. She is simultaneously critical of conservative or traditional Islam as well as of progressive Muslims and feminism. She describes the ways in which the Divine authority, text, or law are transformed into instruments exploited by those in power in order to erase and marginalize women. She shows that patriarchy, which leads to the eradication of women's moral agency, is an offense against Islam and negates a true surrender to God. She asserts that the Islamic texts must be the foundation for continued debate, interpretation, re-interpretation and contestation. This process guarantees the continuity of these texts as sources and that these sources are not static but *salih* (sound) for all times and places⁵¹.

Likewise, Asma Barlas (2002) believes that liberatory theology can challenge and reform oppressive Muslim practices against women by critiquing Islam from within. She articulates a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an⁵². Barlas and Wadud argues that by reflecting upon Islamic theology and hermeneutics as a methodology, one can discern some ideas about a theory of female inclusiveness⁵³ or a theory of sexual liberation in Islam⁵⁴ which will then require political structures and programs to ensure that it is activated.

Faced with Islamic revival, more and more Muslim women are finding it necessary and beneficial to engage in the dialogue about their religious and gender identities. They articulate a gender-sensitive discourse within an Islamic framework or paradigm. They use *ijtihad* (independent investigation of the religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) as their basic methodology in order to establish a new gender-sensitive hermeneutics that "render a confirmation of gender equality in the Qur'an that was lost sight as male interpreters constructed a corpus of *tafsir* promoting a doctrine of male superiority, reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures"⁵⁵

Many Muslim women intellectuals from different generations, orientations, and locales, challenge the political and discursive influence of Islamic hegemonic discourse. Their actions and scholarship "bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail"⁵⁶. Their activism represents a "double commitment" that leads to the emergence of a new, complex self-positioning that confirms "belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women"⁵⁷. This self-positioning "informs the speech, actions and writings, or the way of life adopted by women who are committed to questioning Islamic epistemology *as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it*"⁵⁸. Muslim women intellectuals occupy the space between identities that appears to be "mutually exclusive", trying to demonstrate their "continuity". They are engaging in a provocative and oppositional act of political insubordination, because they refuse the boundaries others (traditionalists or secularists) try to impose on them⁵⁹. Islamic feminism is an "attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim

⁵¹ Wadud 2006

⁵² Barlas 2005a:106

⁵³ Wadud 2006

⁵⁴ Barlas 2002

⁵⁵ Badran 2002

⁵⁶ Cooke 2001:59

⁵⁷ Cooke 2001:59-60

⁵⁸ Cooke 2001:61

⁵⁹ Cooke 2001:60

women”⁶⁰. Muslim women claim their right to be strong women within their tradition, regardless the accusations of being deviants or westernized. What is meant by Islamic feminism in this context is a “rather contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning”⁶¹.

During the past two years, books, anthologies and edited volumes by Muslim women themselves have begun to appear. To mention only a few: Fereshteh Nouraie Simone’s *On Shifting Grounds* and Gisela Webb’s *Windows of Faith*. They contain a collection of articles on intelligent, reform-oriented Islamic and feminist scholarship written by Muslim women themselves. Their dynamic, civilized reflection and open dialogue are not only crucial for the empowerment of women, but also for the initiation of reflexive change in Muslim societies.

To sum up, despite a rapid expansion of research *on* Muslim women, until recently there was an absence of research *by* Muslim women themselves. Faced with a transnational Islamic revival movement, more and more Muslim women are finding it necessary and beneficial to engage in a dialogue about Islamic identity and culture. The goal of this research is to trace the emerging tendencies of intellectual scholarship and transnational activism in different localities throughout the Muslim world and assess their impact on the lives of Muslim women. In this section, I covered a small sample of the rich multiplicity of women’s voices as an indication of the vital potential for change that women, individually and collectively, possess.

Religion and Social Change: Women Negotiating Islam and Modernity

The intellectual exchange between secular feminists and faith-based scholar-activists symbolizes the public and policy debates on Muslim women. Traditional Muslims argue that gender equality is a Western ideal and thus alien to Islam and Western discourses identify Islam with “oriental despotism”⁶², asserting that gender justice is impossible in Islam. On the compatibility between Islam and feminism, there seems to be a convergence between Islamic and Western hegemonic discourses. Islamists consider women’s liberation to be a Western secular idea, which prevented them from making their own interpretations about women’s problems⁶³. Secular feminists are critical and dismissive of attempts for exegetical reform to “extract liberatory mode of feminist theorizing and praxis” from the Qur’an⁶⁴. By dismissing alternative, liberatory readings, “secular feminists uphold the most rigid and dogmatic narrations as being the authoritative voice. They, therefore, fall into the same trap as fundamentalists who derive only static and literal meanings from the Qur’an”⁶⁵.

As mentioned earlier, the dichotomy between Islamic and secular discourses emanates from the difference in their frame of reference, methodology and outcome. One derives its discourse from the Qur’an and other derives its discourse from universal standards. The problem with secular feminism lies in that its arguments conflate Islam with a patriarchal reading of it. Focusing only on secular feminism ignores significant and lively debates and activism within Islam committed to the feminist goals of combating patriarchy and transforming the ideological and material conditions that sustain the subordination of women. Such extreme dismissal inhibits political solidarity across feminist divides⁶⁶. Secular feminists need not to treat Muslim feminists as rivals or foes⁶⁷. Abdullahi An-Na’im argues

⁶⁰ Cooke 2001:61

⁶¹ Cooke 2001:59

⁶² Mernissi 1995:33

⁶³ Ezzat 1995

⁶⁴ Zine 2006:15

⁶⁵ Zine 2006:16

⁶⁶ Zine 2006:17

⁶⁷ Bayes and Tohid 2001:51

that it is imperative to reconcile the two types of discourse in the interest of promoting women's rights⁶⁸. He posits an urgent need for a positive engagement of religion in social change. Advocate of women's rights need to take religious discourse seriously and to educate themselves in its concepts and techniques. Once they have done that, they will gain the confidence and competence to challenge the traditional Islamists on their own grounds⁶⁹. Advocates of women's rights have no alternative but to engage in an Islamic discourse because Islamic groups have already succeeded in "Islamizing" the terms of reference of the public discourse in most Muslim societies⁷⁰. For effective strategizing, Muslim women not only need to challenge traditional doctrine about women's rights, but also to develop an alternative discourse and articulate an Islamic justification for it⁷¹.

Muslim women take Islam seriously. Contrary to Inglehart's version of modernization, modern scientific advances and secularism have not eroded religion or spiritual needs from the lives of Muslim men and women⁷². Muslim women have been critical of Western-oriented modernism, which has been uneven, distorted, and polarized. Muslim women associate this modernism with Western imperialism to the extent that they have joined the Islamist movements⁷³. Heba Raouf Ezzat (2001) argues that contrary to what secular feminists believe, Muslim women join Islamist movements not to return to subservient and secluded roles but "to find a legitimate and sanctioned milieu for social presence and political activism". It is a detour toward modernity, but one that is rooted in their Islamic faith⁷⁴. Therefore, a realistic assessment and understanding of the role of religion in women's lives and in shaping their status are necessary for effective strategizing for women's rights.

The civilizing and liberating gender policies of the West have proved counter-productive, creating more resistance than would have been otherwise the case⁷⁵. By making Muslim women and their rights central to imperial policies in the Middle East, Muslims, as a reaction, have turned traditional practices into symbols of Islamic identity and authenticity in defiance of cultural imperialism⁷⁶. A positive engagement of religion ensures that the debate about the status and role of women in Muslim societies are local, indigenous and a culturally-rooted critique of traditional practices. It also protects the right of Muslims to understand and adopt modernization and women's rights on their own term.

The faith-based approach to women's rights does not suggest that we "pin the entire project of sexual equality and women's rights on theology alone"⁷⁷. However, adopting the right discourse is integral to the political struggle for the protection and the promotion of women's rights, and not as a substitute for it⁷⁸. This approach transcends and destroys the old religious/secular, socioeconomic factors/religious prescriptions and public/private binaries that have been conceptually and practically misleading in the current discourse on women's rights in Islam.

⁶⁸ An-Na'im 1995

⁶⁹ An-Na'im 1995:56

⁷⁰ An-Na'im 1995:59

⁷¹ An-Na'im 1995:51

⁷² Tohidi and Bayes 2001:44

⁷³ Tohidi and Bayes 2001:41

⁷⁴ Tohidi and Bayes 2001:42

⁷⁵ Moghissi 1999:35

⁷⁶ Ahmed 1992 and Tohidi 2003

⁷⁷ Barlas 2005a:102

⁷⁸ An-Na'im 1995:60

From Islam versus Secularism to Islamic Secularism

Despite their divergences, a certain commonality remains between secular and faith-based woman activism; that is the interest in the promotion of women's rights. An-Na'im stresses the need to build bridges between secular and Islamic feminisms. Secularists need to critically reexamine their views of Islam and seriously reconsider the public role of religion as a force of empowerment and liberation. Secularism must be understood in a dynamic and deeply contextual sense for each society, rather than through Western analytical categories, such as the so-called strict separation of "church and state", to be transplanted from one setting to another⁷⁹. In this regard, it is important to discuss a creative endeavor to avoid the polarization between traditionalists and secularists. This endeavor rethinks the concept of secularism not merged with liberalism, not confused with the marginalization of religion and not imposed by neo-colonialism.

In an attempt to redefine secularism, Heba Raouf Ezzat and Ahmed Mohammed Abdalla (2004) suggest "Islamic secularism" as a "third option" between secularism and Islamism in which Islam "will express itself as a moral ethos [in some spaces], while in others it has a legal contribution, and in a third category, it can become a vehicle for social change by inspiring social movements for peace and social justice or the liberation of women"⁸⁰. What is required to advance Islamic secularism is a "collective civil *ijtihad*".

Islamic secularism ensures that Islam and Muslims are always concerned with issues of human rights, democracy and social justice and that Islam is not reduced to rituals and penal codes. Islamic secularism also empowers people in civil society by facilitating their engagement in grass-roots politics and grass-roots *ijtihad* (what Ezzat and Abdalla prefer to call the "politics of presence"). It also empowers local communities by retrieving a lot of functions from the state and redefining the public role of religion in empowerment and social change. Hence, this approach re-imagines politics and civil society in a way that encompasses the centrality of religion and move beyond the "power-centered statist paradigm".

An example of the positive cross-fertilization between secular and Islamic women activism is that Muslim scholar-activists examine issues that were raised by Western and secular feminists that called into question the validity of many Muslim practices concerning women. However, they ask these questions not as feminists but as Muslim women concerned with Islam as practiced based on its ideals. Asma Barlas's intellectual and "textual activism" is a case in point. She writes:

I dispute the master narrative of feminism that claims this insight as a peculiarly feminist discovery....In my own case, for instance, I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur'an. In fact, it wasn't until much later in my life that I even encountered feminist texts....But I do owe an intellectual debt to feminist theorizing about patriarchy and for having given me the conceptual tools to recognize it and talk about it⁸¹.

Islam and Civil Society

The previous section demonstrated the difference between secular and Islamic feminisms in terms of the frame of reference and conclusions. I want now to discuss the implication of that frame of reference on their strategies and outcome. Secular feminists dismiss the role of religion in women's liberation, focusing mainly on political and socioeconomic problems within the narrowly defined Western epistemological foundations of women's rights discourse (which claims to be universal). Conflict is the main concept of the feminist theory. Secular feminists fight male domination, struggle

⁷⁹ An-Na'im 2002, Ezzat and Abdalla 2004

⁸⁰ Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:46

⁸¹ Barlas 2005b:13

for the “empowerment” of women over men, view religion as an obstacle to women’s rights and concentrate on women’s superior nature as well as on women’s participation in state institutions as channels of “empowerment”⁸². Therefore, as Asifa Qureishi argues, “feminism to most Muslims means Western imperialism, which means attacking Islam and destroying Muslim women’s identity and replacing it with secular identity and agenda”⁸³. Feminism’s negative anti-religious and neo-colonial associations among the Muslim public explains the limited policy impact of the transnational activities of Western feminism despite their networking, coalition-building and financial capabilities.

Alternatively, the new Islamist framework provides better grounds than secularism and feminism for securing the rights of women in Muslim societies. Muslim women scholar-activists, like Heba Raouf Ezzat, focus more on the society and the public sphere instead of the state, which they view as a barrier rather than a catalyst for women’s activism. The state, in their point of view, is a static entity that does not provide much hope for participatory engagement⁸⁴.

According to the Islamist approach, the development of a discourse on Islam, civil society and women’s rights is crucial for social change through the empowerment of women to engage in public sphere dialogue. Muslim scholar-activists:

aim for a dynamic reconciliation into a system for a moral society that recognizes the benefits of modern civil society while yet sustaining Islamic traditions without succumbing to the consequence of patriarchal interpretations that marginalized women’s public and private roles⁸⁵.

On this basis, it is critical that any conceptualizations of global civil society facilitate a positive engagement of religious perspectives. In his article *Religion and Global Civil Society: Inherent Incompatibility or Synergy and Interdependence?*, Abdullahi An-Na’im (2002) proposes a synergic and interdependent model of a mutually supportive relationship between religion and civil society. He believes that a sharp dichotomy between the religious and the secular is not necessarily the best way of conceptualizing the relationship between religion and the state of politics⁸⁶. He discusses attempts to reframe three set of relations that are central to the discourse of civil society, namely, those between the religious and the secular, between individual and the social, and between the private and the public spheres. His main concern is how the concept of global civil society can engage and encompass the centrality of the religious and cultural identity for most people and communities throughout the world.

Reformist thinkers, such as Khaled Abou El-Fadl, argue that “it is in the interests of predominantly Muslim states not to suppress independent civil society groups because, in the end, progress comes from the dialectical as well as dialogical interaction amongst the Muslim state and Islamic civil society groups”⁸⁷. The forming a new Muslim public sphere would “enable both men and women to hold the hegemonic state and its substructure accountable for their actions”⁸⁸.

By entering the public arena, Muslim women scholars-activists reclaimed, revived and reshaped the concepts of civil society, politics and activism without inscribing the exclusions on which they have been based, such as the exclusion of the role of religion and different forms and spaces of activism. Muslim women activism is crucial in unpacking stereotypes of women in Muslim societies by focusing on how Muslim women perceive their status, rights and identities. Their approach reflects the diverse and varied realities of Muslim women and Muslim societies. Their activism promises a more

⁸² Ezzat quoted in El-Gawhary 1994:26

⁸³ quoted in Fernea 1998:378

⁸⁴ I developed this argument based on my understanding of Heba Raouf Ezzat’s various interviews and writings.

⁸⁵ Wadud 2005:171

⁸⁶ An-Na’im 2002:59

⁸⁷ Sharify-Funk 2003

⁸⁸ Sharify-Funk 2003

inclusive, pluralistic, civic, and voluntary civil society that rejects the false essentialism, defines an authentic identity, and maximizes women's participation and engagement.

This research provides an empirical portrait of a creative political and theoretical endeavor that promotes the consistency between religion and global civil society. Much has been written about the development of civil society and its impact on democratization and political culture in the Muslim world⁸⁹, but none of them examined the possible contribution of the interdependent model of the relationship between religion and civil society; whereby each is understood in a way that supports the other⁹⁰.

Transnational Networking and Activism

For effective strategizing, the importance of dialogue and coalition-building cannot be overemphasized. However, little has been written about how dialogue among Muslim women from different contexts shapes their activism. Much of the literature of women and Islam “offers predominantly structuralist account of social change that focuses only on analyzing traditional, economic, neocolonial, and revivalist barriers to women's advancement as well as on localized impact of global economic factors”⁹¹. While there is a number of studies about the efforts of various women's organizations and groups to achieve change in local contexts, there has been an absence of studies examining how these efforts are increasingly linked together via transnational networking and how they contribute to the emergence of a transnational Muslim public sphere⁹².

Muslim women scholar-activists take advantage of transnationalism to empower themselves. Meena Sharify-Funk (2005) explores how women from diverse contexts feel empowered to approach their local work with greater confidence and creativity, hence, becoming “cocreators” of an emergent, transnational public sphere that projects civil, pluralistic attitude towards Muslim identity politics⁹³.

As a final point, I want to discuss the role of male advocates of the rights of women. An-Na'im (1995) believes that male advocates have a contribution to make. Khaled Abou El Fadl, an advocate of Muslim women's rights, provides a great support for Muslim women intellectuals. He believes that it is about time that we trust women with our intellectual and public lives. He also speaks against those who accuse reformists, seeking to recognize women's rightful place in Muslim society as being westernized. He asserts that “[f]ar from being westernized, Muslim women intellectuals are fully anchored in Islamic jurisprudence and morality than traditionalist attitudes towards women”⁹⁴.

⁸⁹ Al-Sayyid 1995; Brynen, Korany and Noble 1995; Ibrahim 1993

⁹⁰ This model is suggested and developed by Abdullahi An-Na'im (2002).

⁹¹ Sharify-Funk 2005:230

⁹² Sharify-Funk 2005:230

⁹³ Sharif-Funk 2005:261

⁹⁴ Abou El Fadl 2005:273

Conclusion

By exposing the dichotomies and gaps in the literature on women in Islam, I hope I have uncovered the tensions and blind spots that limit our ability to understand gender in non-Western societies. My research is a suggestion to rethink the role of religion in contemporary feminist debate in order to formulate an informed political judgment regarding the status of women in Muslim societies. Arguably, an encounter with the voices of Muslim women as active agents of an authentic modernity rooted in their faith may lead to the transformation of feminism itself. My point is not to suggest that there is no injustice towards women in Muslim societies, but that the reductive character of the framing of Muslim women's issues needs to be questioned.

Situating themselves at the nexus of religion, gender and translocality, Muslim women scholar-activists simultaneously challenge hegemony and extremism. Muslim scholar-activists assert that the liberation for women must be reformulated within Islam, especially the Qur'anic text as the starting point. They provide new interpretation of the status of Muslim women and challenge the Western, secular, and liberal definition and assumptions of feminism and modernity. This positive, forward-looking, Islamic modernist project for women's liberation within the Islamic framework will be Margot Badran argues- the new radical feminism of the future in Muslim societies⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ Badran 1999:184

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