BETWEEN THE POST-ETHNIC AND THE RELIGIOUS:
MUSLIM WOMEN AND AMERICAN POLICY-MAKING [1]

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Abstract

Muslim women are treated in a similar manner by the media and the globalization political process. Because of this fusion between sensational media reporting and policy-making, combined with compartmentalized scholarship (area studies, Islamic studies, women's studies) and activism (Muslim vs. Western), a Muslim woman is often not viewed as an autonomous entity that could and should be involved in policy-making. This pattern of ignoring Muslim women's political participation is repeated even in the United States. With the exception of a few, the majority of American Muslim women of varying backgrounds and educational levels are neither involved in the domestic nor in the international affairs of the US. Hence, the issue is: how is it possible for the estimated three million American Muslim women to become a political reality to further the US democratic policy, the US Muslim political and legal rights, or Muslim women's human rights all over the world.

Introduction

The theme for the 1997 annual national convention of the American Muslim Council (AMC) was "Muslim America: Becoming a Political Reality." [2] Established in 1990 as one of the first Muslim organizations to defend the political and legal rights of American Muslims, AMC was also among the first to include women on its advisory board, and recently (1997) on its board of directors. This inclusive practice was, and continues to be before and after AMC has opened its nomination and election process to the general membership. During the first five years of its operation, AMC was governed by self-selected board of directors who nominated advisory board members. Although its membership has grown to over 5, 000 members, according to an informal statement by a member of its board of directors, AMC only opened the nomination process of its advisory board to the general membership during the 1997 annual national convention. [3] Yet, the role and the involvement of women in high level decision making remained limited and was constantly re-conceived in line with the swing of the national and international gendered agenda. The AMC, though considered one of the most liberal Muslim organization and has made an important impact with regards to Muslims political rights with the help of credible professional female members, has yet to realize the full potential of women's political participation.

This lack of realization and the problem of women not becoming a political reality in the US lies not only in the various degrees of perceptions and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims in the US, neither in religious tolerance vs. bigotry, or in Multiculturalism vs. national unity. Rather, this problem is mainly of perceiving women, particularly Muslim women as morally dependent and, hence, politically irrelevant or

non-central to the discussion of their own state of affairs or that of the community and the nation. Worst yet, neither Muslim women themselves, nor policy-makers (Muslims or none) recognize this issue as a problem because these women perceive themselves and are being perceived as citizens by proxy. [4] According to these perceptions, a woman is only recognized as secondary in the economic unit or in the genealogical unit: as a daughter, a wife or a mother who plays a complementary role (Badawi 1998). Both views contradict the Islamic worldview wherein an individual is only recognized as an agent of change when she, or he, expresses her views and shares in the decision-making process as an autonomous entrusted being (The Qur'an, 2:30; The Author 1996).

Although voting turnout often is low for all citizens, and even during the last election it was lower among women (54% of women did not vote), [5] I am using "political" involvement in its widest sense beyond voting, beyond Muslims' advocacy of gender equity, and beyond feminist advocacy of gender equality or parity of men and women in public life. [6] When I discuss Muslim women's political involvement, I am aware of the variation in identification with Islam (The Author 1997) as much as the variation in the Muslims' experience of both domestic and national authority, secular or religious (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). Recognizing these variations would preclude me from portraying the Muslim woman as passive and abused, but it would not preclude me from asserting the reality that the majority of Muslim women are excluded from the decision-making process as partners in the interpretation of Islamic texts (The Author, in press). Be it the claimed foundations of every thing Muslim, Islamic teachings (the ideals), though stable and favor justice for women (The Author 1996), these teachings have been exclusively interpreted by males (the practice) aborting the gender revolution

in Islam, as Mazrui (1993) states. Therefore, women's participation in the interpretation process of Islamic primary sources and perhaps reformulating of present laws and perceptions that govern Muslims wherever they are is not only a "legitimate [political/legal] right" [7] but is a matter of fulfilling one's identification with Islam. The Islamic article of faith, there is no God but Allah, may not be fulfilled unless the individual who pronounces it consciously chooses the Islamic worldview and actually acts on it void of any intermediary.

The issue of women's lack of political involvement, therefore, might be projected as an internal Muslim community problem, but it is equally a reflection of the general US and other nations' policy-making process, in which the voices of women are not sought after. Taking the easy way out, elected officials and governing bodies more often than not, particularly in the case of Muslims, listen mainly to a one-sided view of the Muslim males as if these men are the only public representatives. [8] The solution, therefore, lies in the hands of policymakers as much as it is in the hands of scholars with multicultural background and interest. Similarly, it is in the hands of Muslim community's predominantly male decision-makers as much as it is in the hands of Muslim women themselves, particularly those who self-identify with Islam. In other words, because of compounded reasons that I will explain in details later, Muslim women have become a national domestic burden and often a source of public and international embarrassment.

For instance, a recent debate took place about *Niqab* (face veil) by both AMC-L and Muslim JD-L news group on the internet (April, 1997). The debate was instigated by an e-mail of the AMC executive manager to the AMC Advisory Board members

claiming a victory by protecting a Muslim woman's right to ware the Niqab despite a state ordinance against concealing one's identity. The debate was instigated by this author, and another Advisory Board member, both are scholars-activists in the US Islamic feminine movement. Each member protested not the defense of the woman's right to choose the face cover, but the claim of the AMC officer that this legal gain was a victory for Islam. Both members wrote, separately, to the effect that the face cover is not required by Islam, but is a customary practice, and that AMC better educate its officers about what constitutes Islamic or non-Islamic. One of member decided to post the two responses to the Muslim JD-list, a news Group for KARAMAH, the organization of Muslim women lawyers and legal councilors. As a result, another heated debate was generated, only to re-confirm one of my basic assumptions: Women are still seen as in need of being protected, and their morality--represented in the dress form--is still the affair of the community. Furthermore, as I requested that female members on the AMC Advisory Board be consulted on such issues before a decision of the sort is made, another storm was generated in the organization. Finally, the AMC By-laws--under review then-- were revised without further consultation with the Advisory Board, and a statement was added to the effect that the Board of Directors is not bound by the Advisory Board recommendations. The implications of these events--and that of other contradictory reports, including the report on the indifference of US Gas companies towards the Afghani Taliban's war against women's education and public participation (Feminist Majority Report 1997)-- are the same; Muslim women issues are only of concerns when they serve the particular group's or government's agenda.

Regardless of the motive and the variation in the degree of complacency with the views of few extremists--Muslims or non-Muslims--behind these events, the prevalent issue is still the same: women, particularly Muslim women are viewed as morally and politically dependent.

Though we pride ourselves in the US to be a democratic society and claim freedom of choice for each individual, in reality Muslim women have not been able to access their rights to understand, to consciously choose, and to actively act on their choice of Islam as a worldview and as a way of life. Even when the US constitution protects multicultural and multireligious affiliation, the issue is not only that of cultural and ethnic identity, nor of religious practice in the privacy of the homes or the mosques. It is an issue of women's active participation in the interpretation of the religious and cultural heritage. Ajrouch (1997; 6, 151, 169, 174) eloquently explains the development of American Arab ethnic identity in relation to religion, and how it moves the female ethnic identity formation into the religious realm, creating more limitations for the female, but opening more opportunities for the males when the latter are given the option to practice the religion, while females are not. My emphasis on women's self-identification with Islam is intended to offset this biased identity development process, as described by Ajrouch, and to move it from the ethnic and the religious into the ontological (view of reality) and the epistemological (view of knowledge) that affects the individual's worldview and, consequently, his or her ability to integrate into a society that is governed by a different worldview, such as the US Western worldview (The Author 1998).

For example, as the issue of violence against women is discussed in the legislative branch, the only Muslim woman activist that have been involved was not by a legislative design, but because this Muslim woman's active pursuant of the matter? [9] The significance of a feminine or feminist Muslim perspective is not only in representation. Rather, by making legislators aware of the Islamic vis-à-vis customary Muslim practices and by drawing relations between Islamic and the US secular or Judeo-Christian moral and legal foundations, we may be able to avoid not only cultural conflict but domestic conflicts. When a husband realizes that he cannot easily lean against the First Amendment with the excuse of freedom of religious practice when oppressing his wife, for instance, we would have aborted the chance for both abuse of the system and wife, which may subsequently abort what may seem to be a "cultural clash."

Since this problem, of women's lack of political involvement, is crossing the boundaries of the immigrant and the first generation of indigenous converts to Islam, I argue that without deeper understanding of the basics of Islam and without understanding Multiculturalism and pluralism as an integrative energetic engagement with diversity, beyond mere tolerance, neither policy makers, nor scholars, or Muslim women themselves will be able to turn this national liability into an effective three to four million active votes as well as politically effective agents of change. I must add here, that this issue cannot be considered only a US issue, but certainly it is a global one. That is, if we are preaching, and often claiming to export democratic ideals, particularly concerning issues of women's human rights, to developing/Muslim societies, then we need to start by practicing domestically what we preach globally.

How and why? I will explain by starting with a concrete example of what I am focusing on here and as a background for my present thesis, and by presenting some concrete observations. I will, then, move into a workable definition of "Islamic identity" and what it means for American Muslim women to become a political reality, drawing briefly on few basic principles, and concluding with some strategies as solutions.

Background

David Hollinger argues that "defenders of cultural diversity need to take a step beyond Multiculturalism, toward a perspective I call 'postethnic'" (1995, 2-3). He suggests that the "ethnoracial pentagon," which refers to the five-part demographic structure within which each American is now routinely classified, is of limited utility as a map of culture. He further argues that if we are to discuss cultural diversity we ought to discuss religious cultures of America. [10] Muslims of the 1990s America, who present themselves as a religious cultural group, have been striving for political recognition since the 1960s, just as the Catholics and the Jews have done earlier in the 17th, 18th and the 19th centuries during the era that I will coin as the "preethnic divide." This era is exemplified in the different projections of their struggle and the advantage that American Jews, for instance, enjoy in the ability to emphasis Judaism as a religion vis-à-vis as an ethnic minority. It is religious when addressing the struggle of Jewish women against Jewish religious institutions (Keller and Reuther 1995), and it is intellectual , ethnic and religious when addressing the secularizing element of the American academia (Hollinger 1996). Yet despite the fact that Jews are recognized as a political entity and their civil rights are

protected, Jewishness is not one of the categories in the US ethnic minority scheme. What does this mean for Muslims?

American Muslims of the 1990s, therefore, are facing the question: How is it possible to discuss the "Islamic" religious identity in a society that claims to be secular, and yet the basis of its values are the Judeo-Christian traditions? These values, being re-emphasized by the "back-to-religion" right wing movements, while the government is tightening the immigration laws, tightening the coda for those with Muslim/Arab backgrounds in the name of "Anti-Terrorism Law," (Saad 1997). Meanwhile American anti-discrimination laws, based on the "ethnoracial pentagon," do not apply directly to Muslims because Muslims are of ethnoracial mix. American Muslims are 42% African-American, 24.4% South Asians, 12.4% Arabs, 5.2% Africans, 6% Iranian and Turks, 2% South East Asians, 1.6% American whites, and 6.4% other (Nu'man 1992, 13). Afro-American Muslims are often dismissed categorically as a significant minority by media bashing and attack when they are all wrongly attached to the controversial figure of Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, whose constituency is less than 10% (Kepel 1997).

Women in the Muslim ethno-religious divide not only carry the brunt of the confusion between the ethnic and the religious that is used to legitimate the first, but they also are carrying the brunt on both ends of the debate; the Muslims and the 'nationals.' The national right wing backlash movements, in the name of 'family values,' is also being utilized by some extremist immigrant Muslim groups to protest the US biased foreign policy. The debate over human rights issues (cf. 7) is a good example. The irony is that the majority of US Muslim women are not aware of such debates, even though

9

they are experiencing the consequences by being further regulated, secluded, and isolated from political decision-making while being pampered when appointed as assistants to the *Imams* (the professional, imported preachers who claim community leadership without the Islamic consultative practice nor the civil election due-process). These women's job is mainly to overlook women's auxiliaries and social events in their respective communities.

Hollinger argues that Multiculturalists are, in essence, conservatives because they refuse to ask authorities to move away from thinking within the limited mixed races of the census. I argue, to the contrary, that it is the conservatives who have a larger stake in the *status quo* of the "one-culture, different representations", and who are enjoining the confusion between what Hollinger himself calls "Multiculturalism and anti-discrimination remedies." These conservatives would like to slow-down, or perhaps prevent cultural reform that eliminates pigeonholing of the "hyphenated" citizens, not withstanding the stigma surrounding the random revisions (and regressions) in affirmative action laws. One could see a parallel policy among European countries like Briton and Germany concerning their predominantly Muslim South Asian and Turkish minorities, respectively. Similarly, but with a convoluted rationale, the French oppose integration of their North African minority --1/5 of the population-- while also rejecting the parallel cultural lines of the US and Briton. [11]

Thus, for example, a Muslim from south Asia or South East Asia who would want to classify herself as Asian-American in order to gain the affirmative action favors do not fit within this classification because she is not of Asia Pacific ancestry. Similarly, a Muslim of a fair skinned Arab descent does not fit neither with the Caucasian nor with

the Asians because she is of "West Asian" ancestry. Regardless of their ethnic

identifications, Muslim immigrants tend to be high achievers but hardly recognized in the

political arena or in scientific and professional societies as Muslims (Stenberg 1995). To

the contrary, they are being projected only as religious fanatics who cannot be

constructive, rational citizens to the point that Mark Williams, a talk show host on WGY

in Albany, suggested that "we should look at legislation to outlaw Islam" (Husseini

1997). As we approach women's participation, such discriminatory views and practices

become compounded by not fully recognizing female contribution and autonomy both

within the Muslim community and the society at large (The Author 1998).

Hollinger's suggestion to have a sharper separation of multicultualism from anti-

discrimination remedies by talking about religious cultural diversity might be a one step

towards solving the problem of American Muslims who are growing in number but who

have no political clout. I disagree, however, with Hollinger's explanation, as he did in his

response to the question, "how can religious cultures be discussed in a society that

claims to be secular?" His answer was that we need to maintain the secular America

when discussing religious cultural diversity because religion is too large a cultural

phenomenon with too much at stake to be left in the hands of those who believe in it.

Such a luxury might be possible for Hollinger, having the flexibility of moving between

the "ethnic" and the "religious" identification or heritage, but can never be a utility nor

will it be understood in reference to Muslims. It is true that Muslims also have other

ethnic identities--Arabs, Kurds, Afro-Americans, etc.-- but such identities are not

recognized as part of the US. ethnic mosaic, except in the case of Afro-Americans, nor

Islam is fully recognized as a religious minority. [12]

Furthermore, Hollinger's answer leads us to a broader question: how could one possibly discuss a religious cultural group without allowing for its members to explain their worldview as a representation of their cultural diversity? The Swiss Cognitive Scientist, Jean Piaget tells us that the first requirement to a moral- or value-related identity is the ability to freely construct its meaning within one's framework. In addition, how could we claim the understanding of the various religious cultures without allowing for the particulars of each religious group outside our own to express themselves; the meanings of their experience and their reality, as Piaget suggests? (De Vreis 1997).

 I must emphasize here that although I recognize the significant intergenrational shift in ideas of religious and political authority (The Author, in preparation, 1988; Kepel, 1997) it is exactly the determination of the "religious authority" that is at the heart of my thesis. When Muslim women are denied Islamic higher learning (i.e., deeper knowledge of Islam's primary sources) and the subsequent involvement in the interpretation of the Islamic texts, using as an excuse the limited interpretation that women are not to be involved in the public arena, the question of "who is the authority" becomes central here. Given the limitation of this context, I could only point out that in Islam there is no clergy nor Papacy, nor is there a one single interpretation as the authority. [13] There is a set of guidelines for interpreting Islamic primary sources (the Quran as the book of Islam, and the Prophet Muhammad's tradition). That is, when a Muslim--male or female--masters these resources and uses them methodically, that interpretation becomes part of the Islamic legacy by means of mutual consultation and consensus.

It seems as if we have to wait for Hollinger to go through the same intellectual transformation that his scholarly equal Nathan Glazer has just revealed before we can answer the above questions concerning Muslims political recognition. A long-time foe for affirmative action, Glazer recently stated (1997) that he underestimated the significance of race in the multicultural America. [14] Such revelations seem to be happening faster than the multicultualists have dreamed of. This is evidenced in the recent shift in Samuel P Huntington's thesis from his earlier *Clash of Civilizations* into *The West: Unique, not Universal*. G. John Ikenberry rightly describes Huntington's shift as follows: "Just as we thought it was safe to relax, Samuel P Huntington has arrived with bad news: the old world of realpolitik and great power tensions may have faded, but it has been replaced by an even nastier and less predictable world of looming cultural and religious conflict." Ikenberry adds, unlike the passing era of power politics, Huntington claims, civilizational politics resists reason and resolution: "A prudent West must accept this new dangerous reality, rally together, and prepare for the worst." [15] Such statements are typical manifestations of what Scheurich and Young (1997, 6) call "civilizational racism" that "encompasses the deepest, most primary assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), the ways of knowing that reality (epistemology), and the disputational contours of right and wrong or morality and values (axiology)... that are fundamental to Euro-American modernism."

I would argue with Scheurich and Young that such a bias exists deeply, and I also add that it can easily be called also a "civilizational bigotry" with reference to religious groups other than the predominant ones at the onset of modernism.

On a broader context of tolerance and Multiculturalism, Noam Chomsky writes in Powers and Prospects (1996, 94) "There is a conventional picture of the new era we are entering and the premise it holds. It was formulated clearly by the National Security Adviser Anthony Lake when he announced the Clinton Doctrine in September 1993: 'Throughout the Cold Ware, <u>we contained a global threat to market democracies. Now we should seek to enlarge their reach'</u>" (emphasis added). With the expanded "successes of the [Clinton's] 'Administration's campaign of commercial diplomacy'," represented for example in the "US $35 billion contract for Exxon to cooperate with Indonesia's Pertamina oil company... [that] led to a rapid increase in Exxon's stock," (103) I feel the urgency to alert to the fact that Indonesian women and Muslim women, in general, might have to unwillingly embrace both for economic and cultural co-optation . Although I have made this statement earlier, in May, 1997 when I delivered my lecture, the current crisis in Indonesia with the pressure from the IMF and the Economic Seven confirms my prediction and Chomsky's (1996, 169) assessement. Another example is seen in Pakistan upheaval and further tightening of "moral edicts" for women after the economic sanctions were imposed because of its Nuclear activities, while nothing of the sort was imposed on Israel despite its explicit refutation to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and while the US congress itself refuses to ratify the CTBT .

In addition, my fear of such co-optations comes from the fact that such corporate contracts often lead to economic co-optations that will inevitably leads to social and cultural co-optation, specifically with regard to women's role. [16] Being the only country with the largest Muslim population in the world (over 160 million) that allows women to be part of the religious decision-making wherein women are members of the Indonesian

14

Ministry of religion, Indonesia's government may be pressured to adopt some superficial women's rights measures as part and parcel of today's development agencies packages that will trigger the conservatives' backlash. This phenomenon of cultural intervention, attached to economic intervention, and followed by a social upheaval and conservatives backlashes have historically been repeated in many Muslim countries since the early days of European economic and military colonization. [17] The present state of Indonesian unrest is hardly instigated by an internal matter. It is rather created by outside elements combining both religious missionary interest in the East Timor Island and capitalist economic interest of investors from industrialized nations. The fear of co-optation also extends to the US national scene at which Muslim women face a dual dilemma as stated earlier.

Definitions, Principles and Implications

Islamic identity and equal rights are not given, but gained by the individual's conscious efforts towards self-realization. Conscience is central to Islamic identity as love to Christian Identity and law to Jewish identity. Islamic identity comes from the Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic principles, and yet neither may become a reality without the other. Nor would the Qur'an be considered a primary source of individual and socio-political behavior without each person being autonomously learning and acting within its parameters. In chapter four of the Qur'an, titled "*Al-Nisa'* , The Women" it is stated in verses 124-125: "If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female- and have faith [sic] not the least injustice will be done to them. Who can be better in religion than the one who is at peace with Allah, is good and of fair and splendid manner to others and follows the way of Abraham the true in faith?"

The Evidence of Creation

Evidence of autonomous moral and political responsibility lies in the basic principles about the human female in the Qur'an that have been peculiarly absent from both Muslim and non-Muslim, scholarly and media material about Islam. The same Qura'nic chapter four, ˜*Al-Nisa'*, opens with the verse: "Oh, humankind (*al-Naas*), be conscious of (*ittaqu*) Allah (your guardian) who created you of a single [feminine] soul/person/being (*nafs wahida*)' and created of it her mate '*zawjaha*'."

This verse is apropos to understanding the Islamic stance on human creation, particularly of the feminine aspect of the single person. Muslim women who identify with Islam and have not been able to access this direct meaning and its implication to changing the paradigm of understanding religion, and Islam, cannot be part of the political reality. As this verse re-instates gender justice in the very nature of the human creation, it also reinstates the reality that women are an essential part of the interpretation process of Islam. That is, because human nature is distinguished by itself '*nafs*' (Rahman 1980, 17). Rahman states: In Islam, there is no separation between mental and physical being, and nafs implies the totality of the [feminine] person and her disposition, or the close relation between human heart and mind, which realizes the existence of God through her relation with herself, others and nature. I must add, as Islam is affirmed to be both a belief and a social structure that is not based on submission but on action (Garaudy 1983,179), being a Muslim requires active participation and not mere acceptance of teachings or submission as Islam often is explained in English texts.

16

By the same measure, how can we assume that the Muslim woman has regained her citizenship without her direct involvement in the interpretation of the law of the land in which Islam is applied ? History indicates that she was stripped of these rights many times under the disguise of the fossilized "Islamic law" or cultural barriers, or of state sovereignty (The Author 1996). The strategy, therefore, is that the woman herself generates a new identity within the framework of Islam and that we recognize this identity as the operating principle for active egalitarian democracy in America.

The Evidence of Trusteeship and Leadership:

The Quranic principle of trusteeship (2:30) is to eliminate proxy for individual moral and political conscientious accountability and leadership.   Muslim women's becoming partners in the religio-political decision-making is key to creating a political reality of the Muslim community and, hence, a sound multicultural democracy in America. Muslim woman's understanding of democracy, therefore, is as significant, because her self-realization can only affect a sustainable change in society when her self-identity unfolds the meaning of trusteeship and leadership in Islam. Muslim community, therefore, may not be able to unfold this meaning and to claim a consultative (*Shura*) decision-making process without women's becoming agents of this sustainable change.

The Issue

Muslim women of all classes and educational backgrounds are caught between the zealous Muslim men who prevent women's political participation, on one hand, (Keller 1998, 20) and the non-Muslim, particularly males with orientalist mentality who may see

Muslim women only as followers, on the other hand. [18] Other groups have become beneficiaries of this seeming vulnerability. These beneficiaries are represented in economic development agencies (e.g., IMF, World Bank, US AID) whose decision-makers are only interested in utilitarian educational programs that produces labor and economic profit concerning gender policies. These groups also tend to see women only as followers or in the context of cheap labor in US- and other Western countries-based transnationals. For example, Beneria (1998, 3) reports the impact of industrial relocation, especially on women who "particularly suffered disproportionate losses despite their effort at acquiring new skills through training. This is consistent with conclusions from other studies".

Zealous Muslim men are generally very obsessed with "circumscribing women's lives through dress codes, subordination to male authority, and segregated domesticity" (Radford Ruether 1995, 432). Yet, these same men do not hesitate to benefit their enterpunrship from their women's "home work" with the rationale that the women can be paid lower wages. [19] Men like these reject many agendas of scholarship-activism by Muslim women even those who interpret Islam from within because, in these men's opinion, these women are non-practicing Muslims since most of them do not practice "*Hijab*, Muslim women's head cover." By the same measure, non-Muslim male Oreintalists claim that Muslim women's scholarly work is not valid because it stems from the Islamic perspective. A Professor at an ivy league's near eastern studies department refused to cross-list this author's course on the education of Muslim women, accusing her of proselytizing. Even though the course was approved by and taught under the auspices of the same university's women's studies program, the named professor assumed his own

authority on Islamic scholarship in that university. Furthermore, when the religious

studies program at the same university proposed the inclusion of this author's course

within its course offering, the same professor, a member of the religious studies program

board, rejected the proposal because, according to him, "no course on Islam should be

taught at the university without the approval of the Near East Studies Department" 1991)

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Because these Muslim women happened to be consciously accepting the Islamic

worldview, they are being perceived as if their work is neither scholarly nor valid

"objective" interpretation of Islam, and that they cannot think rationally and

independently of their male "guardians." Such chauvinist Oreintalist views do not differ

much in their perspectives of religion and of Islam from the zealous Muslim males,

because both groups see Muslim women as morally dependent and, hence, irrational and

scholarly incapable. Further evidence is found in the ironic hypocrisy of such views,

evidenced when the same NES professor discusses the importance of improving Jewish

life on campus in relation to advancing Jewish scholarship at the Jewish studies program

of the same university (May, 1998). Similar hypocrisy was evident by the Turkish

government's opposition to women's choice of Islamic modest dress (wrongly called

Hijab), discriminating against those women who do practice it, with the excuse that

Turkey is a secular state. Meanwhile the same government orders mosques to open their

doors for women. [20]

The issue of Muslim women's code of dress has received endless controversial

and rhetorical treatments even by women's groups, [21] or male proponents [22] because of a

confusion between the name, "*Hijab*," (in Arabic, a curtain, or a divide that was intended

19

to protect the privacy of Muhammad's wives (Qur'an, 33: 53) and different social customs in practicing the modest Muslim woman's attire, "*jilbab*, over garment" (Qur'an, 33:59; The Author, 1996; 1989). This confusion produces similar perspectives and results to those resulting from the confusion between Holligner's "Multiculturalism and anti-discrimination." My analogy stems from my empirical research findings (not reported here) that suggest a confusion and a gap between males' and female's understanding of Islam. Men interpret Islam as a submission to Allah's (God's) will while claiming superiority and guardianship over women. Meanwhile women see Islam as submission to God's will as interpreted by males (The Author 1997, in press). This gap is quantitatively large, but more importantly, it is qualitatively enlarging with time-spent in America. There is a shift in the thinking and the practice of women's role among first generation immigrants and that of their offspring from the time I interviewed them in 1984-85 (The Author 1988). A more strict, zealous interpretations are prevalent in the opinion and the practice of these same individuals in 1997 (The Author, in preparation). It seems that these Muslims are being acculturated by the American conservatives' favor of "one culture, but different representations" that I alluded to earlier, instead of "engaging with the diversity" of the American society, as suggested by Diana Eck (1996). It seems that these Muslims, by being defensive of their identity instead of attempting to construct the meanings of their "different identity", [23] are emphasizing "tolerance" over "understanding" exemplified in their emphasis of free practice of women's head dress, seclusion and the ghettoized enclaves of minor practices over the "active seeking of understanding" (The Author 1998). They do not realize that tolerance "is simply too thin a foundation for a world of religious differences. It does nothing to

20

remove our ignorance of one another, and <u>leaves in place the stereotypes, the half-truth, the fear that underlie old patterns of division and violence."</u> (emphasis added) (Eck 1996, 44).

When, in 1997, I informally tracked each of the interviewed family of my 1984-85 study, I was disheartened by the outcome. The majority of the young females who are second-generation US citizens were very enthusiastic intellectually and politically active in their communities when I interviewed them in 1984-85 at the age of 14-21. Now, they seem to be molded to being followers of their male households in the name of "preservation of the Muslim family and identity." This outcome is also confirmed by Ajrouch (1997) where she reports the same tradition of male superiority, using religion as the excuse to "limit" females movement and independence. Similar findings confirm the same phenomenon being repeated among French Muslims (Kepel 1997).

Only about five of the thirty young females whom I interviewed in 1984-85 can be said to have autonomous political entity now. The transformation of these second-generation Muslim young females seems to be partially affected by the views of their husbands who are largely influenced by the double-edge new wave of globalization and "democratization" along with the reactive wave of the "politicized Islam" intended to resist the 'open market economy and democracy, with its acculturation process. [24] In addition to the fact that organizations are changing their stance on certain issues that concern Muslim women, [25] Muslim Women's education for political participation in the US of the 1990s was viewed by these women's families as peripheral, and at times dangerous or not permissible for fear of dismantling the Muslim family. [26] In the 1960s at the time when these first-generation immigrants (the generation of those men who are

now propagating more conservative treatment of women) were establishing themselves,
many of their females were active in the community either in a voluntary or paid jobs,
and they viewed the education of the younger generation as an asset irrespective of the
sex of the child. Though some of these same women are still active, their activities are
limited within the community as an add-on item under "women's committees" or
"women's programs." [27]

The growing resistance against acculturation is being translated into women's
being the preservers of the culture and, as a result, forging women to perceive themselves
and to be perceived as morally dependent on their male household who are the defenders
of Muslims' rights. Women's role in society is viewed only as mothers, daughters, or
wives who preserve the cultural identity at home, but never as a moral and a political
entity that can lead the same fight against anti-discrimination and against the melting-pot
assimilation process (The Author 1998). Even when women have their own Islamic
movement, the propagation of males' interpretation of the women's political involvement
is wide spread. [28]

This phenomenon is not only a manifestation of a tension and a dichotomy
between the ideals and the practice concerning women's--Muslim women among them--
and education in Western societies, including issues of religious and public education
(The Author 1998). Rather, this phenomenon , I argue, is the result of a long-ignored
relation between the perceptions of "superior and inferior" cultures, whether in the form
of colonizer and colonized or in the form of ethnic and religious minority and majority
groups, that is reflected in the patriarchal and patronizing behavior of individuals within
these groups. [29]

The collective findings of my empirical and historical research suggest that unless we--scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim, individuals and groups, and policy makers--change our understanding of Islam and its practice, on one hand, and democracy and Multiculturalism, on the other, neither secular nor traditional Muslim education would help women, or men for that matter, to attain a politically constructive identity. I should point out that although the arguments for, or against Islamic presence in the cultural debate are changing from generation to the next and between groups, the fundamental perception of Islam as only religious, dogmatic doctrine has not changed. For Muslim women to be part of the religio-political decision-making process in the principled democracy away from marketing gender or "politicized, gendered" Islam, they need to be part of the community decision-making process by joining the ranks in re-interpreting the Islamic primary sources, as well as the ranks of policy makers who interpret the democratic sources.

It is important to note here that American women who are involved in multicultural feminist scholarship and activism tend not to recognize Muslim women's contribution to the American culture. For instance, the 1994 edition of Unequal Sisters (Ruiz and DuBois 1994) acknowledged many changes in multicultural issues for feminists, including the religious trend, but failed to explore the Islamic/Muslim women's issues despite the fact that available literature includs several cases of significance. Furthermore, Muslim women's attempts to feminine Islamic scholarship from within the Islamic philosophical perspective have been hardly noticed by American feminists in area studies, such as the Middle East Studies, and women's studies, in general. Does that mean that Muslim women should lean more on identifying with

religious feminists? The answer to this question lies more in the hands of policy makers than that of scholars, even though scholars often begin the drive for change in perception and policy making, as obvious in Hollinger's *Science, Jews, and Secular culture*. Unfortunately, few Jewish female scholars, including the Jewish Orthodox women, have come to recognize Muslim women contribution as did Roded (1994).

Goal and Strategies

My intent was to de-polarize controversial perspectives by bringing back the dynamic interpretation process of Islam and democracy, analyzing real and imaginative perceptions concerning Muslim women's rights and responsibilities.

Since elected officials as policy-makers in the US do not take the extra step to understand their constituents, how could we count on them to see to it that these Muslim women's voices can be heard as agents of change in the 'new world order of the 21st century' if we do not involve these women in the interpretation process? Also, how could a community of scholars claiming to research and defend the rights of Muslim women achieve that goal while their main concern of intellectual exercise exceeds their effective scholarship in policy making and public affairs changes. And how could a community or a society claim to seek political reality while the predominant perception--by both Muslims and non-Muslims in that society--view Muslim woman as not able to go out to cast her vote without the permission of her husband, father, or even a son? In other words, she is still viewed as morally dependent and, hence, a political entity only by proxy!

The realities indicate that politicians in the US may export some superficial ideas about women's rights to the Muslim world as part of the 'free market' policy, but they never really discuss the foundations of what it means for Muslim women to be a political reality domestically or globally, because, in their words, they are more concerned with issues of economic and national security. As if women do not constitute 1/2 of these national and economic concerns! Or are women only part of the exchanged commodities? The excuse, or the backlash by the Muslim community's males who claim that such interference in women's affairs is a gross violation of the privacy of domestic issues or community affairs does not fly any more. That is, one can only survey the meager domestic issues in Muslim communities and societies have not been untouched by the colonizers, missionaries and economic and cultural hegemony, including family laws, to be able to affirm the fallacy of such claim. The claim that these laws are guarded by the *Shair'a* (translated wrongly as Islamic law) is a facade that easily crumbles when one examines the Swiss, French, British, Dutch and other elements in the different post-colonized Muslim societies' civil laws, particularly personal status codes. [30]

On the other hand, the Muslim world exports to the US the zealous so-called Muslim community leaders who decree, for example, that a woman is not allowed to pray in the mosque, or that she has to pray in a separate, second-class type adjacent building to the mosque, like the case of the Islamic Center in Washington, DC, or that she is not obliged to attend the Friday prayer, or that her voice in public place is sinful . How could these leaders, no matter who they may be, prevent something that *Allah* (God) and the prophet of Islam, Mohammed allowed? And how could democratic and human rights principles be integrated with such practices? Or is it the policy makers indirect excuse to

dismiss Islam and Muslims altogether as being "against human rights"! It is the responsibility of policy makers to realize that practices do not always speak for the principles, just as certain principles are not always practiced with the same standards of justice, liberty, democracy and equality.

One of the Qur'anic intentions in entrusting human beings as deputies is to bring a balance between the sexes as the goal of Islamic justice. The strategic implications of this intention lie in :

(1) Rethinking and acting within this balanced view of justice away from the many layers of following precedence and from secular rationalization or media sensationalism of Islam. Here, I propose an open dialogue in which self-designated Muslim women may participate in discussing issues of their choice without being penalized morally or politically.

(2) Facilitating for Muslim women the strategies to realize their identity in a clear, transforming meanings. Here, I propose that Muslim and non-Muslim women chart and develop a curriculum of Muslim Women's Studies as an integrated part of the curricula of other Women's Studies, and to establish a special institution with all related political and scholarly forums. Allowing for, or supporting Muslim schools is not enough.

(3) Interpreting humanist secularists' concerns and those of interfaith/interreligious concerns within the Qur'anic concerns for a just human society, where justice means balance and fair play, and a sustainable change of women's role. Here, I challenge both, the Muslims' claim that there is no separation of religious and political practice, and the non-Muslims' claim that secularism prevail in the democratic policy-making process. That is, a Muslim woman cannot practice Islam without being involved in the

interpretation of the religious text. Also, an American Muslim cannot live dignity and democracy when democracy is rationalized only within the Judo-Christian framework when interpreting the constitution. Recognizing Muslim holidays is not enough.

(4)   Changing the conception that patriarchal and economically-dominant modernized cultures are superior cultures, even if they claim democratic ideals. The Quranic concept of being conscientious of Allah is the check point: That no human is superior to another except in his/her ability to balance her free ethical choice with the guiding principles, legally and spiritually. Here, I suggest training workshops for both Muslim and non-Muslim men and women in intergender and intragender relations. Who ever is capable of imparting a just character can represent herself or others.

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    Action Watch, 11 (3&4): 7.

Notes

1. This paper is based on an invited talk given at the American Muslim Council (AMC) 1997 annual convention, under the panel: " American Muslims: Our Role in Domestic Issues." The author was nominated after the convention and elected to serve for three years as a member of the Advisory Board of AMC.

2. The AMC 1992 estimate of the Muslim population in the Untied States suggests a total of 5-6 million (Nu'man 1992), but recent unofficial estimates fluctuates between 7-8 millions. Though the AMC was the first Muslim organization in the US to include women in its advisory board when it was established in 1990, when matters of women's rights were pressed (e.g., issues of practicing special attire or the question of abortion (cf. 25)) female Advisory Board members' involvement was limited or ignored.

3. Personal communication with Suhair El Masry, May 1998.

4. See The Author's (1997). Also, the "reformed welfare policy" is a good indicator of such perceptions, see Gwendolyn Mink "Aren't Poor Single Mothers Women?: Feminists, Welfare Reform and Welfare Justice." A Lecture at Cornell University (November 18, 1998). In addition, see Bauer's (1998) comparison of university's views concerning the role of female faculty to the home life of dual-career heterosexual couple, and the ensuing "cultural cover-up."

5. See the First Lady, Hillary Rodhom Clinton's speech at Seneca Fall, July 16, 1998 during the "Celebrate 98 of the 150th Anniversary of the Women's Declaration of Sentiment." The Associated Press.

6. The "parity" notion is furthered by Francoise Gaspard, a French sociologist and France's expert representative to the United nation and the European Council on the

issues of immigration and the status of women, as discussed in a lecture entitled, "Parity Men/Women in Public Life: A New Feminist Movement" (Cornell University, October 20, 1998). The probelm with this notion is in its emphasis on public life as the main criterion for parity among men and women that was proved insufficient for Muslim women.

7. It is ironic that The Women's Watch (1998) has reported this quotation as a victory to international feminism. It states:" Sheikha Muza al-Musnad, wife of Qatar's Emir, says that women's participation in politics is not a subject for debate but a 'legitimate right'." Meanwhile Qatar was instituting the policy of having separate libraries for women on campus. This latter policy, was being criticized by another group, the New Voices for Women in the Middle East, as discriminatory measures against women. I wonder which standards are being used by the two reports! In addition, neither act of the Quatari authorities statisfies the need of women's participation in the interpretation of texts.

8. With the exception of few reports, most of the reports on Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media (e.g., The Washington Post, Newsweek) and in Muslim popular culture magazines (e.g., The Horizons, The Message, the Minaret) often quote males on different issues, despite the fact that females were actively participating in the same reported activity.

9. Personal communication with Sharifa Elkhateeb, vice-president of the North American Council of Muslim Women, (October, 1998). Also, see The Violence Against Women Act of 1998. http://www/now.org/issues/violence/vawa/vawa1998.html (10/28/98).

10. Cornell Chronicle, April 24, 1997:4. And in Hollinger 1996-97 Nordlander Lecture, "The Will to Descend: Culture, Color and Genealogy" at Cornell University , April 28, 1997.

11. See Voice of America: Islam in Europe, quoting Kepel, Gilles in Koleksi Diskusi Isnet (Februari 1995): GEN: Islam in Europe (VOA) http://www/isnet.org'archive-milis/feb95/0032..

12. It is only in 1996 that the Clinton Administration adopted the phrase "Judo-Christian-Islamic heritage." Even after such adaption, very few government representatives of media reporters do actually use the phrase or pay attention to its implications.

13. See DeLorenz (1998) on the importance of using the plural "Islamic ways of life" vs. the singular "way of life."

14. See Christopher Shea: Multiculturalism Gains an Unlikely Supporter." The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 11, 1997:A16, A18.

15. Under the general title " The West: Precious, not Unique: Civilizations make for a poor paradigm" G. John Ikenberry and others wrote in response to Huntington's "The West: Unique, Not Universal," article. Ikenberry entitled his response "Just like the Rest," Foreign Affairs, 76 (2) 1997: 162-163.

16. See Rebeca Overmyer-Vela'zquez's discussion of religious co-optation of the Nahua (Aztec) world view by the Spanish Franciscan Christians in the Central Valley of Mexico.

"Christian Morality Revealed in New Spain: The Inimical Nahua Women in Book Ten of the Florentine Codex." *Journal of Women History*   (10 (2) 1998: 9-37).

17. See for example, Leila Ahmad's analysis of the Egyptian women's liberation movement against the British occupation. *Women and Gender in Islam,* 1992).

18. Women who address Islamic issues from within the Islamic framework are considered religious proselytizers. R.B. letter of 1991, in response to The Author's proposal for a cross-listing her course on Muslim women's education with his department's course listing.

19. A comment by Dale Eickelman about Moroccan fundamentalist enterpunores, (August, 1997) when reviewed a draft of this article.

20. See AMC-L discussion about *Niqab,* and The Women's Watch report vs. the report by The New Voices for Women in the Middle East (cf. 7).

21. See, for example, The hypocracy of Women's Watch (1998) applauding the Turkish government's inclusion of women in prayer, while ignoring the Turkish government's discrimination against women who wear *hijab*.

22. This is further illustrated by the AMC's defending *Niqab* vs. ignoring more subtle exclusion of women from more pertinent issues and involvement in decsion-making process.

23. See Piaget's Social Theory for further discussion on how individuals compromise their autonomous development when they cannot construct reality by liberating themselves from the thought and will of others. The lack of this kind of liberation results in inability to co-operate. (DeVries 1997:6).

24. See Lena Sommestad and Sally McMurry (1998, 137) argument how a global process can have vastly different consequences for women, especially when they made their choices on the basis of "vastly different structure of wealth and opportunities..., and

that they evaluate their choices on the basis of relative wages as well as according to the values of personal development, status, and independence."

25. For example, the AMC had its first pamphlet, in 1990-91 stating that abortion is permissible until 120 days after conception. In a more recent pamphlet (1995) on moral issues, after the controversial 1994 Population World Conference, it was stated that abortion is prohibited, unless there is a threat for the mother's life.

26. See, for example, Khaliijah Mohammad Salleh. The Role of Men and Women in Society. *Islamic Horizons*, January/February, 1997:57). Also, a question, with a request on how to combat such dichotomized views, was raised to this author while addressing student and faculty group at Columbia University Medical School in October, 1998. The questioner reported that the President of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) proposed to parents during the ISNA 35th annual Conference that they should get their daughters maried at the age of 18 before they go away to college and become corrupted by knowledge of the outside life. The basic strategy that I see working towards such propogations is that Muslim girls and women read the Qur'an by themselves to realize and to respond to such baseless interpretations.

27. See summary of the program of "International Conference on Islamic Unity" *The Muslim Magazine* , 1 (4) (October 1998)**:** 40-51.

28. See US Muslimah Journal; and philosophy of Bangladesh Islami Chatri Sangshtha by Huq 1994, quoted by Eickelman and Piscatori (1996:120).

29. See, another example of a similar response by Muslims against colonizers' acculturation in The Author's "Educational Reform" and "Religious Education "in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (1995a; 1995b).

30. See for example, Ali Engineer 's comparison of Indian Muslims' and British law.

Also, se Al-Hibri's discussion of personal laws that are claimed to be based on the

Islamic Shair'a in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Kuwait.

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