

Times of Tumult: Discussing Islam and Feminism

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, OCT 20 2016

The news that we get from the Middle East is usually sensational in nature, often violent, and seldom laudatory or centered on sympathetic cultural analyses. So, for example, while a defendant in Jordan was shot dead by a vigilante as he awaited trial on charges of inciting sectarian strife by posting images on Facebook of God smoking in bed with two women ("Jordan Writer in Anti-Islam Case Shot Dead in Court"), I was teaching Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject* in the U.S. South to a classroom of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian students of all persuasions, and many ethnic and national origins.

I found myself suggesting to my students that religion, far from being what separates us, may actually be one of the things that we share in common.

I was drawn to discussing some of the similarities and differences among the experiences of the women's mosque movement in Cairo and those of my students, who have relatives or may have themselves participated in religious education and religious revival classes in the U.S. South. My students immediately nodded their assent that the women in the mosque movement – a women's Islamic revival movement in Cairo – were creating similar sorts of classes for women, scriptural study groups emphasizing personal encounter with scripture and with God, ethics and personal responsibility, faith and modesty, and the like. They were surprised that the male mosque leaders supported these women's groups within the framework of the mosque setting. And, as my students recounted on a number of occasions, these *conservative* women were carving out an active space for themselves within their own mosques in Cairo in a way that paralleled developments in my students' own churches, synagogues, or mosques, either now or at some time in the not so distant past.

My students were impressed at Mahmood's insistence that *conservative* women could, and perhaps should, be called "feminist" when they are carving out an active space for themselves both within and against certain traditional constraints. My students were surprised – and some remained skeptical – of the notion that one might be engaged in "feminist agency" when that agency is directed toward conservative and traditional ends rather than their more common association in the West, as Mahmood tells us, with inherently *liberal-progressive* ends. I took in with as much aplomb as I could that "liberal," for many of my students, was largely defined as licentious, representing a sort of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll culture. So, as a fairly conservative set of students, they identified more, to some extent, with the ethical goals of the women in the mosque movement in Cairo than they did with Western feminism. Indeed, the differences *among* us may take as much ironing out as the us-and-the-Middle-East dimensions.

One of the things that Mahmood does that was very useful for my students was a delving into philosophy. Mahmood explains that, for the women in the mosque movement, ritual acts were seen as having a causal impact on internal moral states. Moreover, they were seen as creating, producing, or inscribing, and then reproducing and reinscribing positive internal moral states. The goals of the women were thus, Mahmood tells us, *Teleological*, seen in a positive sense. They sought to engage in ritual acts, and embodied rituals such as physical prayer or wearing certain clothing, in order to create, produce, and then reproduce positive internal moral states.

Mahmood elaborates on the Aristotelian notion of causation in this equation to suggest that there is a place within Western tradition for the notion of certain acts as having a causal impact on one's internal state. That is, ritual and embodied acts such as physical prayer (e.g., Muslim *Salat*, Yoga, etc.), wearing a scarf or certain types of clothing,

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wearing a hat or covering one's hair can have an impact on one's internal state-of-being in a religious sense. She contrasts this Aristotelian notion of causation with a Kantian notion in which the moral state must come first: an act is only moral if it is thought out critically through reason. It cannot be understood as moral if it comes through habitualized acts, such as ritual. Most people who grew up in the West will recognize this almost foundational post-Reformation skepticism of ritual.

In that single move, Mahmood lays clearly for the reader perhaps the most fundamental *difference* between the Islam of the women's mosque movement and many of the assumptions that remain predominant in a still post-Reformation Western context: does ritual contribute to positive internal moral states, or is it just empty performance? With Mahmood's analysis in hand, my usual effort to focus on *similarity* gave way to a more profound effort to address *difference* at a substantive, philosophical level. These were philosophical differences that we have with other societies, religions, and even civilizations as well – Eastern religions came to mind most quickly, including my favorite, the Buddhism of Himalayan states such as Tibet. There are profound differences between our normative philosophical orientations and Eastern religions, and some of them share more in common with Islam in their non-material goals and use of ritual. And yet, if anything, we seek to emulate many of them rather than finding them threatening.

As I put together a course on the politics of the Middle East through feature film, it occurred to me that Europeans (and, by extension, we North Americans) have warred with the Middle East for longer than the wars with the Ottomans, and, before that, the Crusades. The first battle that came to mind between a civilization considering itself "European" and thereby different from the dominant Eastern and African Mediterranean of the time could be said to be that of *Troy*. Are we still, at some level, fighting over wives and husbands, skin, hair, and eye color as determinant of who should be allowed to choose to marry whom? *Troy* and our many contemporary versions of *Romeo and Juliet* seem to merge into one at that question. Are we still functioning at the level of the Capulets and the Montagues – understood in some local lore in the Middle East to represent Arab and Christian families in a then multi-cultural Italy? The more I delved into the films – over a long weekend of blissful fiction away from the jarring and brutal daily news – the more I thought, perhaps, yes.

About the author:

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