Inhabiting Orthodoxy: Discussing Islam and Feminism, Continued

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When I teach Politics of the Modern Middle East to students from Florida, the third largest state, by population, of the U.S. (2015 figures), I teach, typically, to a classroom fairly equally distributed between Muslim, Jewish, and Christian students. My students come, likewise, from a wide range of national contexts. In this sort of classroom context, thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them' does not seem to hold a great deal of practical value.

So, I often find myself emphasizing similarity. What are those axes upon which we can divine a similarity among us – for the sake of both world and classroom peace? I emphasize the extent to which the Middle East is religious. That puts it on a common par with the U.S. South, which returns high results regarding belief in God, as well as religious practice or participation in religious institutions (71% believe in God to an absolute certainty in 2014, and another 16% fairly certain; 41% attend religious services once per week, and another 33% once or twice a month to a few times per year, according to Pew Research Center). In fact, it puts the Middle East on par with a good deal of the U.S. population in general, which returns results regularly as having a high degree of belief in God (63% with an absolute certainty in 2014, and another 20% fairly certain according to Pew Research Center) as well as religious practice (69% when combining those who go to service once per week [36%], and those who attend once or twice a month to a few times per year [33%], also according to Pew Research Center). That is, people in the U.S. practice religion to a fair extent and come in very high on belief in God. Europe holds religion low among social values across the region (7%); and the population is split on the statement, "The place of religion in our society is too important" (48% completely disagree, 46% completely agree) (Eurobarometer 2006). Belief in God ranges vastly in Europe from 95% in Roman Catholic Malta to 16% in Lutheran Estonia; in Roman Catholic and various forms of Eastern Orthodox countries, belief in God is highest; however, in France, for example, non-belief (33%) is almost as high as belief in God (34%), while some believe in spirit or life-force (27%) (Eurobarometer 2005). Belief in spirit or life-force is significant for some Europeans (Estonia 54%, Czech Republic 50%, and Sweden 53%) (Eurobarometer 2005). Some countries combine the two in high degrees: Slovenia 37% God/46% spirit, Latvia 37% God/49% spirit, and United Kingdom 38% God/40% spirit) (Eurobarometer 2005).

Saba Mahmood shows us in great depth through her political ethnography of the women's mosque movement in Cairo, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject* , a collection of women engaged very much in feminist action within their own mosque setting with aims, nonetheless, directed more toward tradition than away from it.

Mahmood draws upon the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, to make orthodoxy – or, more accurately in both her and Bourdieu's usage, *Doxa* – a perhaps positive thing. That is, for Mahmood as she draws upon Bourdieu, certain social practices, which may be embodied practices (e.g., donning certain clothing, wearing one's hair a certain way, etc.), or other types of social practices (e.g., methods of entertaining, etc.) both embody and symbolize *Doxa*. That is, they form, most approximately, a sort of social orthodoxy on how to be, ontologically (e.g., how to inhabit one's life, or what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, perhaps best understood through the French word, *habiter*, 'to live' or 'to inhabit'; as well as the English notion of 'habit' or habituated practices).

The women of the mosque movement, by Mahmood's account, then, embody and reproduce a form of orthodoxy

within their mosques. But they also change that orthodoxy through their own practices, and through their insertion of themselves into the formal institutional life of the mosque. And, perhaps most perplexing for my students, they assert a women's space – a feminist space – for themselves through women's agency within the mosque setting. And they do so in service of conservative goals: modesty, positive internal moral states, faith.

We found the women's mosque movement to emulate something closer to Catholicism and perhaps Orthodox Judaism and Buddhism in its belief in the transubstantiating power of ritual; and to emulate something closer to Protestantism and some forms of Judaism in its emphasis on individual action, individual engagement with scripture, and individual and community efforts to achieve positive internal moral states. We found the women to be engaged in agency on behalf of themselves as women, which we, largely, agreed with Mahmood in defining as feminist. My students reported that they identified more with the moral and ethical goals of the women by the end of the book than when we first began to read it. And we left with the quandary: can the head scarf be an act of feminist agency, creating a space within (and, perhaps, creating a new) orthodoxy for one's self as a woman? Is orthodoxy a legitimate feminist goal when empowering one's self to inscribe / reinscribe / produce / reproduce that orthodoxy is one's life goal *qua* woman?

As we finished the book, I was left with my personal quandary: why do we care about a piece of cloth that some women and men in the Middle East have worn on their heads, on and off, literally, for thousands of years? We care about it when Muslim women in the Middle East do it, but not when Tuareg men do it, or when Muslim men do it, or when Christian women in the Middle East do it; and not when Orthodox Jewish women do it, or when they cut their hair and wear a wig and a hat to cover it. Why do we not care about the headdresses of Buddhist men and women; African, South Asian, or other headdresses; or those of the peoples of the Andean rainforests, decorated, as some of them are, with feathers approaching the Heavens? Why do we not care, similarly, about saris and sarongs, and other innocuous pieces of cloth? By talking to Muslim women in the Middle East who are engaged in inscribing themselves in their own religion, that is, who are engaged in feminist agency, Mahmood helps the similarities and differences among 'us' and 'them' to become clarified and, at once, more meaningful and more meaningless in the telling.

About the author:

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