

CREATING A CRITICAL FAITH-CENTERED SPACE FOR ANTIRACIST FEMINISM

Reflections of a Muslim Scholar-Activist

Jasmin Zine

My project is not to entertain readers with one more exotic tale or shock them with another astounding revelation about womanhood in a faraway place. All I wish to do is to communicate another mode of being female. But this is more easily said than done.

—Marnia Lazreg

Decolonizing Feminism

In this epigraph, Marnia Lazreg writes about the tribulations of writing as an Algerian woman about women in Algeria.¹ The idea of being able to communicate “another mode of being female” within feminist discourses is indeed a difficult task, because the legitimate articulations of the category of “female” have been discursively drawn and mapped in ways that privilege a particular construction of womanhood based on Western, liberal, secular notions.² As Jacquie Alexander and Chandra Mohanty note, “There is a convergence between the way gender emerged as a primary category of analysis and the social, demographic, and class composition of those who actually theorized gender in

¹ Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (London: Routledge, 1994), 6.

² See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80; Marnia Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 81–107; and Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” *Feminist Review* 17 (1984): 3–19.

the US academy.”³ Counternarratives are often posed by “third-world” women, or women from the South, that attempt to authorize different understandings of women’s identities as subjects engaged in their own processes of identity construction and negotiation within frameworks that differ from those privileged in a Western, secular context. Muslim women, for example, are variously contesting the way their identities have been scripted both within particular Islamic discourses and in Western secular conceptions of feminism.⁴

The construction of Muslim women through sensationalized accounts of their victimization is what Lazreg has termed a “search for the disreputable” on the part of feminist writers who turn their gaze upon invariably “oppressed” Muslim women.⁵ The unidimensional construction of Muslim women as being in need of liberation through the casting off of their veils and the adoption of Western, secular sensibilities is a paternal mode of imperialist feminism that denies these women the agency and political maturity to act as subjects of change on their own terms.

In the post-9/11 era, Muslim women navigate between both racialized and gendered politics that variously script the ways their bodies and identities are narrated, defined, and regulated. Located within this dialectical dynamic, the rhetoric of Muslim women’s liberation is all too often caught up in the vast undercurrents of ideological extremism, on the one hand, and racism and Islamophobia, on the other. Muslim women’s feminist praxis is shaped and defined within and against these discursive terrains.

As part of this dynamic, Muslim women are also resisting traditional interpretations of Islam that are male-centered and that cast women in subservient roles that are inconsistent with the ethos of the Qur’an and the historical role of Muslim women. Attempting to construct an alternative space where Muslim women can articulate a new understanding of their subjectivities through discourses they themselves have authorized is a contemporary challenge.⁶

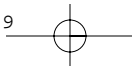
In this discussion I will map out the politics of possibilities for Muslim women to connect their struggles for identity and liberation within an antiracist feminist epistemology. I will also offer a new critical faith-centered framework

³ Jacquie Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Genealogies, Legacies, and Movements,” in *Feminism and “Race,”* ed. Kum-Kum Bhavnani (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 495.

⁴ See, for example, Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Gisella Webb, “May Muslim Women Speak for Themselves, Please?” in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisella Webb (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xi–xxi. Still, such counternarratives are all too often only token inclusions within liberal feminist studies; see Alexander and Mohanty, *ibid.*

⁵ Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, 10.

⁶ Jasmin Zine and Katherine Bullock, “Re-framing Women and Islam,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2002): i–iii.



that I pose as a new discursive space within which Muslim women spiritually dedicated to Islam can ground their theoretical and praxis-oriented projects.⁷ I want to explore the possibilities for how critically faith-centered theorizing and praxis can be accommodated within an antiracist feminist paradigm. Significant questions include whether women committed to antiracist feminism can be inclusive of women with religiously oriented subjectivities or whether they will continue to dismiss this possibility as having covert “fundamentalist” tendencies.⁸ Also in question is the extent to which the boundaries of an antiracist feminist epistemology can extend to include the voices of women who may articulate “another mode of being female” in ways that disrupt the Western, secular hold on liberatory modes of feminist identification and corresponding political engagement.

Rewriting the Script

As a Muslim woman, I find that my identity and subjectivity are shaped by dual and competing discourses. For example, patriarchal and fundamentalist discourses circumscribe the social engagement and public life of Muslim women according to narrow, gendered parameters in which women occupy limited public roles. The Taliban are an extreme example of this worldview, in which women were exiled from public space and their bodies were policed and regulated within nonpublic, domestic space. In addition, some Western feminist articulations of Muslim women’s identities have appropriated colonial discourses that construct Muslim women as backward and oppressed. Their redemption, according to this discourse, can come only through emulation of Western norms and conventions of womanhood.

Each of these competing discourses denies Muslim women the agency and political maturity to define their own sense of identity within the broad parameters of Islam. The role of Muslim women scholars has now become one of rewriting the scripts according to which our identities have been framed. This means regaining control over how our bodies are represented and regulated.

The Foucauldian notion that discourses construct, regulate, and structure subjectivities is important in developing a project to reconstruct and remap the

⁷ See also Jasmin Zine, “Staying on the Straight Path: A Critical Ethnography of Islamic Schooling in Ontario” (PhD diss., Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2004).

⁸ See, for example, Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed, 1999); Shahrzad Mojab, “Doing Fieldwork on Women in Theocratic Islamic States: A Critique of the Politics of Empiricism,” *Resources for Feminist Research* 28, nos. 1–2 (2000): 81–98; and Bronwyn Winter, “Fundamental Misunderstandings: Issues in Feminist Approaches to Islamism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13, no. 1 (2001): 9–41.

way Muslim women have been discursively represented and policed within both specific Islamic frames of reference and Western feminist conceptions. Developing a new discursive orientation from which Muslim women can locate their self-determined political and ideological projects is an important strategy in reclaiming authority over the representation of their lives and bodies. According to Mohanty, feminism can be understood as “being conscious of being a woman and doing something about the consequences of being a woman.”⁹ This simple definition allows for multiple readings of what “being a woman” means within a variety of experiences of being female in different social and cultural contexts, without positing a fixed or essentialized a priori understanding. The corresponding notion of “doing something about the consequences of being a woman” embodies an argument against cultural relativism by claiming for women the agency to act against the negative consequences that often accompany the act of “being a woman” in various cultural milieus that may be located geographically in the global North and South. This notion sees feminist consciousness as being rooted in critical self-examination and political praxis. This definition is a relatively neutral space in which to ground the basis for an antiracist feminist theory and praxis.

The development of alternative feminist discourses along the politics of the color line has resulted in coalitions among “women of color.” This represents a movement that attempts to define a political vision for women coming into the knowledge of their racialization from different ethnic and racialized vantage points. For example, the black feminist movement in the United Kingdom comprised both Caribbean and South Asian women who coalesced under the category “black” as a designation of a political identity and location that differentiated its struggles from the history of white feminism.¹⁰ Although “black” was largely viewed as a political category rather than a homogenized, racially determined designation, it has been criticized for detracting from a more varied basis for the analysis of racism as it relates to culture, ethnicity, and religion.¹¹ The black feminist discourses produced in the United States, in contrast, relate more specifically to the construction of an African American indigenous feminism.¹²

The insertion of Muslim women’s discourses into these prevailing political and discursive paradigms or within broader discourses of antiracism has char-

⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, introductory lecture at the Anti-racist Feminist Institute, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2001.

¹⁰ See, for example, Heidi Safia Mirza, *Young, Female, and Black* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹¹ Tariq Modood, “Difference, Cultural Racism, and Anti-Racism,” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), 154–72.

¹² See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); and bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End, 1981).

acteristically affirmed their marginalization on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion as part of the multiple and interlocking sites of oppression through which their realities are shaped and defined. However, many of these accounts have often fallen prey to deterministic modes of analysis that deny women any agency, especially within the structures of patriarchal modes of religion.¹³ Religion is characteristically cast only in fundamentalist terms, despite the fact that fundamentalism accounts for only a minority of the varied orientations toward faith that exist. The idea that women can use religion as a site of resistance and as an epistemological terrain upon which to construct alternative visions of womanhood has not been validated in prevailing antiracist feminist discourses.

Negotiating the Boundaries of Faith and Feminism

For many secular liberal feminists committed to social justice, as well as those taking up antiracist positions, feminism and religion are often viewed as fundamentally incompatible philosophical bedfellows. A study by Helen LaKelly Hunt, for example, examined two groups of American women in the contemporary feminist movement who identified their activism as being either distinctly secular or framed within a religious paradigm. Among her forty-nine participants there was agreement that some form of friction existed between faith-based and secular women working in the women's movement.¹⁴ During the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995, Hunt became aware of the absence of religious perspectives in the forum and began to question the uneasy communion between religion and feminism. She began a series of interviews with secular and faith-based feminists to explore the distance and antagonism between these two groups in search of common ground for building unity and collaborative feminist practice.

Hunt's attempt to bridge the ideological and political divide yielded information about the biases that each group held for the other. For example, on the one hand, women with secular orientations disagreed with faith-based women, whom they saw as having to continually frame their identity in accordance with patriarchal doctrine. Many were also critical of the hypocrisy of religious institutions that espouse tenets of justice and equality but are organized on the basis of racist, sexist, and classist hierarchies.¹⁵

¹³ See, for example, Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, rev. ed. (London: Saqi, 2003); and Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*.

¹⁴ Helen LaKelly Hunt, "1995 Beijing Conversation: Spirituality and Activism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no.2 (1999): 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

On the other hand, faith-based feminists charged that their secular counterparts, though they took on the important project of challenging patriarchal authoritarian structures, were not attentive enough to issues of race and class and marginalized the voices of racially minoritized women and the poor within their movement.¹⁶ They branded secular feminism as a mostly “white women’s movement,” arguing that secular feminists were not prioritizing issues of racism and classism in their social analyses and political agendas.¹⁷ There were disjunctures also on ideological and epistemological grounds, as faith-based women interrogated the divergences in the conceptual methodologies each group employed to “make sense” of the realities and complexities of women’s lives. Faith-based women contended that secular feminists were reliant on dualistic modes of thought and analysis emanating from a rational, Cartesian worldview, whereas their own spiritually centered intellectual frameworks were based on a more “transrational way of functioning” that involved engaging metarealities. This represented a different discursive methodology for addressing social and political concerns.

Despite the different ideological vantage points of these groups of women, Hunt noted that there was a willingness among each of them to engage in collaboration and coalition building and to embark on a process of moving toward greater “relationality” and “connectivity” as vital aspects of feminist alliances and organizing. Creating a space for critical engagement among both secular and faith-based women would also mitigate the clearly essentialized notions and biases that each group clearly held for the other. Each group regarded the other through an undifferentiated focus that reduced the other to an a priori set of standards based on the first group’s own biases and contentions rather than a true understanding of the different positions that women take up from within these broad discursive terrains. Creating dialogue and collaboration to work beyond differences, Hunt notes, proceeds from a foundation of mutual respect: “Mutual respect must involve a matrix of understandings, including the whole spectrum of race and class analysis, which will give the women’s movement a more complete power. This will also incorporate rich cultural, ethnic, age and sexual diversity patterns, as well as spiritual or religious diversity.”¹⁸

Among Muslim feminists of secular and faith-based persuasions, attitudes are less conciliatory. Although both groups comprise large numbers of racially minoritized women who face common struggles against patriarchy, racism, Islamophobia, imperialism, and global poverty situating them at the nexus of a variety of conditions and sites of domination and oppression, epistemological di-

¹⁶ I use the term *minoritized*, as opposed to *minority*, to denote the social, economic, political, and cultural factors that marginalize groups of people.

¹⁷ Hunt, “1995 Beijing Conversation,” 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

vergences maintain a rigid divide in their otherwise common political struggles.

Although Muslim feminists of both secular and religious persuasions have a vested interest in combating the multiple forms of oppression that are manifest in their lives and societies in the global North and South alike, women with secular orientations accuse faith-based Muslim women of colluding with patriarchal theocratic rule by not unequivocally disavowing what they view as the doctrinal underpinning of women's subordination in Islam. Many faith-based Muslim women, in turn, are suspicious of the motives and rationales of secular Muslim feminists as being purveyors of Western ideological discourses alien to indigenous feminist theorizing and praxis. Yet mobilizing against common oppressions requires a suspension of such mutual dissent to allow a greater understanding of the convergences rather than the divergences of their respective epistemological standpoints. This political divide has compromised concerted efforts to coordinate action among the secular and faith-based Muslim feminists in key forums such as United Nations conferences in Nairobi, Cairo, Vienna, and Beijing. Overall, the participation and inclusion of racially and religiously marginalized women in these forums have been subject to "invisibility" with respect to their structural and politically strategic absence in shaping the framework and scope of global feminist advocacy.¹⁹ The existing marginality of Muslim women's voices in transnational feminist organizing and policy-setting agendas is further fragmented and compromised by the lack of solidarity among secular and faith-based Muslim feminists.

Secular Muslim feminists all too often brand their faith-based sisters as victims of "false consciousness" who therefore presumably lack the political maturity to understand, articulate, and combat the nexus of oppressions they face. Egyptian secular feminist Nawal El Saadawi sees contemporary feminists in her country as falling prey to both Western consumerism and religious fundamentalism as they combine their *hijabs* (head scarves) with designer wear. She is critical of what she regards as their emphasis on fighting patriarchy to the exclusion of other connected forms of oppression, such as global capitalist imperialism. Interestingly, this is the same charge that Hunt noted that faith-based feminists in the North made against their secular counterparts. El Saadawi goes on to argue that these religiously oriented modern Egyptian feminists lack the political awareness to effect their emancipation from the multiple layers of oppression that subsume them.²⁰ However, by making such an essentialized critique, secular Muslim feminists like Saadawi reproduce the Orientalist rhetoric of Western "imperialist feminists" who cast Muslim women

¹⁹ Maliha Chishti, "The International Women's Movement and the Politics of Participation for Muslim Women," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2002): 80–99.

²⁰ Ahmed Nassef, "Egypt's Leading Feminist Unveils Her Thoughts" (interview with Nawal El Saadawi), *Women's eNews*, February 25, 2004, <http://www.womensenews.org/>.

in similarly pejorative terms and positioned themselves as the intellectual vanguards of these politically vulnerable women who needed to be guided and schooled in the ways of Eurocentered cultural feminism.²¹

Religiously oriented Muslim women have also been disavowed by other progressive, left-wing movements that otherwise espouse ideals of antiracism and social justice, such as many of the leftist parties in France that support the banning of the *hijab* in French schools. Groups such as the Labor Struggle Movement and other left-wing organizations that normally champion the rights of racially and economically minoritized groups have supported passing into law the ban of religious head scarves not out of allegiance to their secular politics but because they see the *hijab* as a “symbol of women’s weakness.” Other leftist groups distributed a communiqué saying they did not “support the Islamic veil in itself” but supported “the principle that French schools are for all,” and thus opted to support civil liberties, albeit in capitulation to religious fundamentalism.²²

Yet, in contrast to the essentialized representation of faith-based Muslim women by their secular counterparts and other detractors, not all women who situate their feminism within a faith-based perspective necessarily view issues such as the *hijab* as an inviolable religious tradition. On the contrary, Muslim women scholars who do not see Islam as fundamentally incompatible with feminism, such as Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, and Amina Wadud, also do not consider the *hijab* to be a religious requirement. They may support the civil liberties of Muslim women in Europe and Turkey who are denied the choice to adopt this particular style of dress in schools and other public institutions, but they view this stance not as a capitulation to patriarchy and fundamentalism but, rather, as an assertion of women’s agency over the representation of their bodies. They also note the multiple social and political meanings and purposes that the veil has embodied and served within different historical contexts, for example, when Iranian women took up the veil in 1978 as a form of political protest and revolutionary action.²³ The issue of the *hijab* ban in Europe must also be articulated from within an antiracist paradigm and connected to broader systems of xenophobia and Islamophobia and the undue connection of Muslim women’s bodies with global terrorism. The way in which the politics of such representation acts in service of neo-imperialist goals and global militarization, as well as xenophobia and policies of racial profiling and exclusion, needs to be constantly critiqued as a threat to civil liberties and democratic pluralism. Muslim women’s bodies continue to be disciplined and reg-

²¹ See Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference,” and Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes.”

²² See Hadi Yahmed, “French Leftist Groups Oppose Ban on Hijab in Schools,” October 9, 2003, Islam Online, <http://www.islamonline.net>.

²³ See, for example, Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002).

ulated both by oppressive laws mandating veiling under authoritarian theocratic regimes in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, and by laws denying their freedom to wear head scarves in Western democratic societies like France, Germany and Turkey. In either case, the fact that their bodies are made subservient to the decrees of patriarchal state authorities is an antifeminist move.

Yet detractors of faith-based feminism argue that legitimizing practices such as veiling is often done to concede to the politics of anti-Orientalism, antiracism, multiculturalism and postmodernism, compromising women's rights, freedom, and autonomy in the process. This is seen as an antiliberal move by some feminist scholars who have argued for placing limits on multiculturalism that values group rights over individual rights and allows for the persistence of cultural norms inconsistent with liberal values and gender equality. For example, in her famous essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" Susan Moller Okin charges that "despite all this evidence of cultural practices that control and subordinate women, none of the prominent defenders of multi-cultural group rights has adequately or even directly addressed the troubling connections between gender and culture or the conflicts that arise so commonly between feminism and multiculturalism."²⁴ In a rejoinder to Okin's position, Azizah al-Hibri, a Muslim feminist and Islamic legal scholar, takes issue with the paternal approach embedded within liberal feminism. She situates her response from a faith-based feminist perspective that leaves room for alternative constructions of Muslim womanhood that may differ from her own. For example, she acknowledges that for some Muslim women this may include the desire to wear the *hijab*, without being proscriptive or uncritically valorizing this choice for all Muslim women:

Clearly I could build a united front with secular feminists and try to foster popular sentiment against self-oppressive choices. But my Islamic training and knowledge of my community tell me that many of these Muslim sisters have thought seriously about the issue of covering their heads and have reached conclusions different from mine. Forcing them to abandon their religious choices is not only patronizing but fundamentally un-Islamic! Islam has established an etiquette of difference, by which I may explain my position to other Muslims without ever claiming exclusive access to the truth or becoming coercive.²⁵

Al-Hibri allows the space for her fellow Muslim sisters to make reasoned choices in ways that encourage them to take ownership over the meanings that

²⁴ Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* by Susan Moller Okin with respondents, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 20.

²⁵ Azizah Y. al-Hibri, "Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/Minority Women?" in Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* 46.

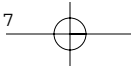
are inscribed upon their bodies and lives. By using their own *ijtihad*, or independent judgment and reasoning, to discern whether or not the *hijab* is a religious requirement that can be scripturally validated, al-Hibri and other like-minded Muslim feminist scholars believe Muslim women should have the agency to interrogate the debates on this practice and arrive at their own conclusions. By utilizing *ijtihad*, women can therefore begin their own critical examination of key authoritative religious texts, taking into account newer, antipatriarchal readings and feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an.²⁶

My own reasons for wearing the *hijab* have shifted through a similar process of engagement with these key texts and scholars. Though I continue to wear the *hijab* in many spaces (and also choose not to wear it in certain contexts), I do so as a form of identity and also as a political move that ruptures the stereotypes of Muslim women as voiceless and politically immature. I therefore use the *hijab* as a situationally specific symbol that allows me to navigate within particular spaces and terrains in ways that suit my particular personal and political imperatives. After considerable research on the historical context and discursive norms of modesty outlined in the Qur'an, I am no longer convinced that wearing a head cover is religiously mandated; therefore, I make reasoned choices as to when to wear the *hijab* and when not to. My use of the *hijab* is not based on coercion or "false consciousness"; rather, it is an informed and strategic move that does not fall neatly into the categorizations of veiled women that disapproving feminist scholars characteristically purvey.

Within the new dynamics of Islamic feminism, many Muslim women scholar-activists like al-Hibri and me locate our struggles for faith-based feminism within the discursive arena of exegetical reform based on antipatriarchal readings of religious texts. Increasingly, Muslim women scholars and activists are locating their feminism within the broad parameters of Islamic thought and are advocating new understandings of gender justice in Islam by moving away from narrow, patriarchal interpretations as the only authoritative or legitimate epistemic possibilities. We represent a genre of faith-based Muslim women committed to the feminist goals of combating patriarchy and transforming the oppressive ideological and material conditions that sustain the subordination of women, but who, unlike our secular counterparts, do not see this as inherently inconsistent with Islam.

Many Muslim and non-Muslim secular scholars are highly critical and ultimately dismissive of attempts to extract liberatory modes of feminist theoriz-

²⁶ See, for example, Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2001); and Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).



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ing and praxis from the pervasive and totalizing grasp of fundamentalism. For example, Bronwyn Winter, who situates herself as an atheist scholar, notes:

For me . . . the validity of the term “fundamentalism” holds because religion cannot merely be seen as a text or group of texts; it is also a cultural and political structure of social control. Even historical and geopolitical variations (including such progressive ones as liberation theology) do not divest religion of this “fundamental” aspect. Religious fundamentalism, then, is a return to this basis: the reaffirmation of religion as a—the—primary tool of social control.²⁷

Despite the fact that fundamentalist orientations are only a small part of the spectrum of religiosity, scholars like Winter allow their skepticism to effectively delegitimize the broader arena of faith-based feminist engagement. Although Winter does acknowledge that a more nuanced range of religious practices exists within the Islamic tradition and argues that theo-logocentric views that attribute all social ills to religion bear the imprint of an Orientalist discourse that she does not claim to purvey, she nonetheless maintains that religion overall is essentially “bad for women.”

Winter argues that religion limits women’s narratives and agency, but she stops short of denying women agency altogether within religious frameworks. For example, she states:

[I] would argue that most religions are institutionalized in some way and as such leave little choice for women who have had the misfortune to be born into a religious family, at least during their childhood and adolescence. Of course, this can be nuanced further: the daughter of a Hasidic Jewish, Wahabite, or Klan family is more likely to be denied personal freedom than the daughter of a less fundamentalist branch of these religions.²⁸

Although I would not argue with the fact that, on the one hand, in all faith traditions there are religious orientations that are clearly restrictive and oppressive to women and need to be challenged, on the other hand, reducing all religious orthodoxy to the same station as the Ku Klux Klan conflates fundamentalism with extremism and racial terrorism. Such simple equations also dangerously conflate the political manifestations of religions with personal spiritual orientations.

Within secular and atheist conceptions, women with religious sensibilities are regarded with suspicion in both local and transnational contexts and dismissed as “apologists.” Winter, for example, places all Islamic feminists into this camp, to varying degrees, and effectively silences any attempts to develop

²⁷ Winter, “Fundamental Misunderstandings,” 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

a feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an that many Muslim women see as forming the discursive basis of gender reform: "Scholars following the apologist framework claim that Islam made things better for women, but the fundamentalists misinterpret it—which corresponds roughly to the 'multiculturalist' discourse—or that the Quran is open to interpretation, and feminist interpretations can be made—which corresponds roughly to the 'pluralist' discourse."²⁹ Once again, multiculturalism and pluralism are treated with disdain as insidious notions that are placed in a seemingly irreconcilable tension with feminist goals. Antiracism, in effect, is also cast as operating in collusion with patriarchal hegemony according to white feminist scholars like Winter, who reduce the broad arena of antiracist epistemology and praxis to a disdainful form of "political correctness" that they feel limits their own ability and freedom to critique issues of gender inequality and subordination within racialized societies (without being branded racists or "imperialist feminists," that is).

Because of her dominant social and racial location, Winter has not been able to see or theorize the other side of that political coin, where racialized Muslim women, in attempting to rupture the authoritarian and patriarchal structures within their communities, are often reticent to expose their concerns within the pervasive context of racism and Islamophobia that already exists and gathers strength upon such unseemly revelations. By exposing issues of sexism within their communities, Muslim feminists are immediately subject to the racism and Islamophobia that negatively essentialize these experiences as *the* defining referents of the Muslim community. Therefore, for racialized Muslim women, these systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, religion, and gender are interlocking and interconnected, and within this context particular attention needs to be paid to the ways that racism and religious discrimination can effectively shore up sexism and gender inequality. The struggle of antiracist feminists and faith-based feminists, therefore, is one of working simultaneously to dismantle these interlocking systems that mutually sustain and reinforce the nexus of oppressions affecting Muslim women's lives. Implicating multiculturalism as the culprit for women's subordination denies the complexities of the multiple forms of oppression Muslim women face.

Yet it is not only dominant white feminists like Winter who object to connecting religion with feminist praxis; there are many secular scholars from Muslim backgrounds committed to social justice and antiracism who also do not see any possibilities for situating feminism within a religious framework. Haideh Moghissi, for example, argues that Islamic feminism is based on a prescribed set of religious ideas and teachings that are rooted in an irreconcilably sexist discourse. She asks the question, "How could a religion based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and

²⁹ Ibid., 13.

women's equality with men?"³⁰ Despite rightly problematizing the totalizing notion of the term *Islamic*, Moghissi reinscribes, as the only possible narrative, a singular conception of Islam as essentially misogynist and thereby irreconcilable with feminist goals and aims. This reduces the broad epistemological expressions of Islam to a singular negative framework, delegitimizing the discursive challenges made by Muslim women who advocate gender reform. For Moghissi, this rationale behind the discursive strategy is insufficient, as are all attempts to reconcile issues of gender equity from within an Islamic framework. She argues that sharia law, or religiously based jurisprudence, is based on the discrimination of women and minorities and that, as long as women support this as a legal framework for women's rights, they will never achieve those rights, because sharia is, in her view, not compatible with the principle of the equality of human beings.³¹

Despite the excellent work of scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Azizah al-Hibri, and Khaled Abou El Fadl, who have opened up the hermeneutic spaces of Qur'anic exegesis and corresponding elaborations of sharia to alternative readings and interpretations based on gender justice, some secular feminists remain dismissive and reject any form of epistemological reform. For example, Shahrzad Mojab not only rejects the view of "Qur'anists," who negate the secondary sources of prophetic hadith (or sayings) from the parameters of religious guidance, arguing that these historical narratives are inconsistent and contradictory and are therefore an unreliable component of Islamic epistemology, she also rejects any attempts to read the Qur'an through an antipatriarchal lens as being a futile exercise:

[I]t is doubtful whether the discarding of Islamic texts other than the holy Koran would lead to dramatic change in the status of women. It is even more doubtful that the interpretation of the Koran by women would have a substantial impact on gender relations in the Islamic societies. Studies of the Koran show that males and females do not enjoy equal status. No amount of feminist interpretation of the text can explain or justify this unequal relation.³²

Secular feminists too easily dismiss the possibilities of discursive reform and the pervasive way in which religious discourses operate to structure and create particular types of subjects. Islamic religious discourses also extend to the political, economic, legal, and civic structures of society and thereby implicate a broad confluence of sociological factors that can enhance or limit the possibilities for women in Muslim societies. By not engaging with the ideolog-

³⁰ Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, 126.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³² Shahrzad Mojab, "Islamic Feminism: Alternative or Contradiction?" *Fireweed* 47 (1995): 22–23.

ical dimensions of women's subordination that are sustained by patriarchal and puritanical readings of religious texts, secular feminists limit the channels of reform by failing to take into account the ways that these discourses affect the material conditions women face. Such theorizing actually reinforces a patriarchal, fundamentalist view and reading of the Qur'an by closing off any other possibilities for invoking more gender-positive readings. By dismissing alternative or "progressive" 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 and see the human interpretation of laws derived from religious texts as inviolable and fixed rather than as the product of historical, cultural, and gendered attempts to apprehend the meaning of divine intent.

Secular Muslim feminists also argue that religiously based feminism does not represent the only legitimate form of indigenous feminism in Muslim societies. They contest all moves that situate the debates over women's rights on an exclusively religious terrain that closes off possibilities for secular interventions. I would agree that a multifaceted approach is needed to address the complex and varied challenges that Muslim women face and that secular interventions can provide useful and legitimate strategies. However, I disagree with the characterizations of all religiously based interventions as automatically and unequivocally "fundamentalist" agendas. Such narrow views collapse the broad arena of Muslim women's religious orientations into a singular, static mold and are counteractive to the polyvocality that antiracist feminist discourses have sought to encourage.

Foundations for a Critical Faith-Centered Epistemology

In attempting to reconcile these various contestations and concerns and to create a discursive arena that is attentive to the role that religion and spirituality play in the lives of many Muslim women who consider themselves feminists, I will now attempt to map out a possible way forward. The notion of "Muslim women" I pose here is not intended to cast the variety of Muslim women's experiences and constructions of identity into a monolithic mold. I do, however, construct "being Muslim" as an essentially religious identification. Despite the secularity of many individuals who cast themselves as Muslim, I see Islamic identity as largely connected to spiritual practice of the faith in its multiple forms rather than as simply a "cultural" identity.³³ My attempt, therefore, is to

³³ In another work, "De-constructing Islamic Identity: Engaging Multiple Discourses," in *Disporic Ruptures: Transnationalism, Globalization, and Identity Discourses*, ed. Ali Asgharzadeh, Erica Lawson, Kayleen Oka, and Amar Wahab (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming), I make the distinction between the category of "Muslim" as a social designation that absorbs many, often secular meanings, and the category "Muslim" as a religious conception that is inextricably linked to practice

map out possibilities for an alternative faith-centered epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it. However, I clearly recognize that this is not a singular view, as Muslim women occupy a variety of ideological, sectarian, and discursive spaces within the broad parameters of the Islamic tradition. Given this epistemological plurality, I am aware of the limitations to the framework I propose. The epistemological space I am seeking to engage is a discursive orientation to which not all women who categorize themselves as Muslim women would necessarily subscribe. What I intend is the construction of a critical space in which faith-centered women may articulate notions of femininity and womanhood, a space that is attentive to the role spirituality and religious commitment play in Muslim women's conceptions of selfhood and feminist engagement.

Attempting to construct a new genealogy for Muslim women's feminism and praxis based on a faith-centered epistemological framework requires centering faith-based knowledge construction as a lens through which a particular reading of the world can be constructed and framed. This involves the political and discursive goal of creating a space where faith-centered voices can enter critical academic and political debates and dialogues as valid sites of knowledge and contestation. The emphasis on criticality within this perspective relates to the way women can identify, counter, and resist racism, classism, and sexism from a spiritually centered space that is at the same time attentive to the way that extremist or fundamentalist religious dogmas can become complicit in these constructions and the structural relations and circumstances that sustain them. This key aspect of the paradigm also addresses secularists' concerns about religiously oriented feminisms colluding with patriarchal fundamentalist agendas, by maintaining a critical eye toward the ways that religion is co-opted to serve in the perpetuation of oppressive regimes and practices.

This framework articulates spirituality in connection with social-justice imperatives and focuses on the ways in which spiritual knowledge can act in service of emancipatory goals. Although I reference examples to this framework within an Islamic paradigm, these principles can be applied to other spiritually based epistemologies. For example, this framework can be connected to existing paradigms for feminist liberation theologies from various multicultural and multifaith perspectives. Lieve Troch, for example, notes that a feminist methodology for liberation and change involves looking "critically at the political, economic, social and religious situations and the functioning of 'sacred

of the faith. The salience of the religious conception is evident in the definition of the word *Muslim*, which means "submission to God." Moreover, I argue that Islamic identity is qualitatively different from ethnic identity, for example, because it is not simply passed on through heredity but must be claimed through conscious praxis of the faith.

texts' within them" as a basis for crafting a spiritually based and transformative feminist praxis.³⁴

My starting point for such a project involves utilizing a philosophy of holism. For example, the embeddedness of a spiritual dimension in everyday acts is central in maintaining the unity of the spiritual, material, and intellectual states of being as holistic and mutually constituting elements of Islamic ontology. From an epistemological standpoint, this forms the basis of understanding of how faith-centered Muslims make sense of the world and their place within it. A critical faith-centered analysis provides for this level of metaphysical engagement in order to best understand how faith and spirituality continue to inform daily social life and personal development. The centrality of religious practice is imperative in understanding the realities of faith-centered Muslims. Therefore, in this way, the critical faith-centered perspective attends to the salience of faith and spirituality in framing the worldviews, beliefs, and practices of faith-centered people and accepts this as a valid way of negotiating an understanding of notions of community, selfhood, gender, identity, and feminist engagement and praxis.

Engaging a critical faith-centered framework for political and academic modes of engagement that can be applied to feminist goals involves an acknowledgment that religious and spiritual worldviews and/or contestations of these worldviews continue to shape human social, cultural, and political development. The organization of social space in the Islamic tradition is a relevant example of how Islamically gendered worldviews shape social as well as physical and spatial contexts. Traditionally, a practice of sexual segregation during prayers is maintained so as not to allow either party to be distracted by the physical presence of the opposite sex. This segregation has been extended to many spheres of activity in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, including the workplace, the driver's seat, public transportation, and banks, resulting in a system of "gendered apartheid." This extreme practice has little validity in Islamic doctrine or history; the women of Medina in the time of the prophet Muhammad were active in business, medicine, and military roles.³⁵

As Muslim women contest these worldviews by producing counternarratives based on feminist readings of religious doctrine, they create a gendered Islamic epistemology that challenges the male-dominated status quo. These contestations occur not only in order to challenge the gendered segregation of public space but also, as Miriam Cooke reminds us, because Arab Muslim women "have been left out of history, out of the War Story, out of the narratives of emigration and exile, out of the physical and hermeneutical spaces of

³⁴ Lieve Troch, "A Feminist Dream: Toward a Multicultural, Multireligious Feminist Liberation Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 2 (2002): 117.

³⁵ See Memissi, *Veil and the Male Elite*.

religion.”³⁶ As a response, Muslim women intellectuals and writers are challenging the erasures of their experiences in the public and discursive spaces of nation, community, and faith.³⁷ It is through these contestations of existing static worldviews that social development and change move forward as dialectical shifts initiated through the integration of material, ideological, and spiritual catalysts.

Islamic frameworks are also rarely used as analytical tools for the study of Muslim societies. As noted earlier, they are traditionally regarded as elements of “false consciousness” or dogmas to be elided by “rational” scholarly thought. The critical faith-centered framework is an attempt to situate spiritually centered epistemologies as valid locations for the production of academic knowledge. Accepting critical faith-centered voices as valid constituents of academic thought is not meant to imply an uncritical moral relativism but merely asserts that these voices be allowed to occupy spaces within the arena of legitimate academic engagement. The validity of faith-centered knowledges, like all other forms of knowledge, is therefore open to contestation. However, these knowledges should not be invalidated simply by virtue of not being secular in orientation. For example, the Islamic perspectives on economics that provide limits to capitalism create alternatives to interest-based economies and provide for the economic redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. This can be a corrective to other systems of economic thought that lack the same regard for economic justice. Therefore, faith-based knowledges can provide directives to address societal challenges and can present new possibilities for social, economic, and political engagement.

Faith-based knowledges and traditions can enter academic dialogues and inquiries not as static dogmas but as contextualized and historicized paradigms of thought that are referenced in metaphysical realities. They are not intended to operate as new grand narratives but, instead, can function in a dialogical manner with other discourses and paradigms that may have more secular foundations. This does not mean that these knowledges will, in all instances, be oppositional but, rather, that they will refine and be refined by a variety of empirical and ideological engagements. In addition, there can be intellectual alliances between secular and nonsecular academic and philosophical perspectives, such as through pursuit of common liberatory goals and struggles for social justice.

Toward this end, a critical faith-centered framework develops an understanding of how religious and spiritual identifications represent sites of oppression and are connected to broader sites and systems of discrimination based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and colonialism, while ac-

³⁶ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, vii.

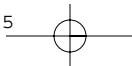
³⁷ See, for example, Webb, “May Muslim Women Speak?”

knowledging that religion has at times been historically misused and become complicit in the perpetuation of these oppressions. The epistemological foundation of this framework is the understanding that various forms of social marginality based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability make up a system of interlocking oppressions that are mutually reinforcing. Attempting to unravel and dismantle these systems involves addressing the multiple sites of oppression and challenging the hierarchies of racialized and class-based dominance that ideologically and structurally sustain social difference and inequality. As in critical integrative antiracism,³⁸ this framework also allows for the analysis of systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability as they intersect within the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Yet a faith-centered framework would tend to move religious issues from the margins to the center of discursive focus. Although the issues of religious difference and discrimination are central, the analytical approach must remain attentive to how religious difference intersects with other forms of social difference and, in some cases, can contribute to the oppression of others.

Islamophobia is a salient example of discrimination and oppression based on religion. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, have brought this historic form of oppression into fresh relief. Since the attacks, renewed Orientalist constructions of difference have permeated the representation of Muslims in media and popular culture. Yet Islamophobia has a history that well predates the current context. Religious discrimination against Muslims is highly institutionalized, pervasive, and ideologically tied to the global political context. Nevertheless, there are situations in which religion can be misused and can become complicit in the construction of oppression against others. Here I am thinking specifically of the misuse of religion through third-world missionaries and their collusion with the colonial mandate; white-supremacist racist churches, such as the Church of the Creator; the racial politics of the Nation of Islam; the suppression of women's rights by theocratic states; and the persecution of gays and lesbians. The extremist religious politics of groups such as al Qaeda and the Taliban are also examples of misapprehending and abusing religion in service of particular political goals. Being attentive to the ways in which religion can operate as both a site and a source of oppression is the key to maintaining an emphasis on criticality within this perspective.

What would be avoided in a critical faith-centered framework is the tendency to use religion as the only means to deconstruct women's oppression in religiously based societies. All too often the "religious paradigm" has been used as a means to reduce the complexity of women's lives in theocratic societies to

³⁸ See George J. S. Dei, *Anti-racism Education: Theory and Practice* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 1996).



a singular religious “cause” for inequality or underdevelopment.³⁹ The issue here is one of focusing on religious and spiritually centered worldviews as a basis for social understanding and critical analysis, yet not using these worldviews as a way to deny the role of religion in situations and sites of oppression.

Moreover, a critical faith-centered position acknowledges that although religion and spirituality can be sites or sources of oppression, they also offer powerful spaces of resistance to injustice and provide avenues for critical contestation and political engagement. For example, the politicization and assertion of Islamic identity was a salient aspect of anticolonial movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Veiling was also used as a symbol of political protest and revolutionary struggle in Algeria in the 1950s and in Iran in the 1970s, and the *hijab* was donned by women who did not previously wear the Islamic head scarf, as an act of subversion against colonial powers that sought to eliminate all vestiges of indigenous Muslim societies.⁴⁰

Spiritual resistance operates in other ways as a catalyst for liberatory modes of praxis. Following Foucault’s notion of power as emanating from the microlevels of society and not simply operating as a top-down process,⁴¹ in a critical faith-centered framework, religion and spirituality are seen through their possibilities for vitalizing local grassroots movements as powerful spaces of resistance to injustice and oppression. Similarly, George Dei argues that spirituality is an active force that directs away from an intrinsic to an extrinsic or outward manifestation through social transformation, revolution, and a collective struggle geared to emancipatory aims:

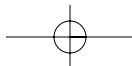
There are different spiritualities and the focus on reclaiming the spiritual is for an action-oriented, revolutionary spirituality. This approach moves beyond the liberal focus on compassion, humility and caring, to discussing how we evoke spirituality and spiritual knowledge to transform society and to challenge oppressive systems and structures. This approach thus focuses on questions of power and domination and the role of spirituality in strengthening and empowering the self and the collective to resist marginality.⁴²

³⁹ See Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, 14.

⁴⁰ Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women*, 87–88. Religious fundamentalisms have also emerged as ideologies and ontologies of resistance to colonial and contemporary modes of imperial intervention and control. However, because of their complicity in the construction of sectarian and gendered oppression, they operate outside of my definition of a “critical” faith-centered perspective.

⁴¹ See for example, Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁴² George J. S. Dei, “The Resistance to Amputation: Spiritual Knowing, Transformative Learning, and Anti-Racism” (keynote address, Transformative Learning Conference, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, November 3, 2001).



Critical in Dei's conception is the centering of spiritual knowledge as the basis for building socially transformative movements that present possibilities for challenging oppressive structures and conditions. Muslim women, as previously noted, are reclaiming the hermeneutic spaces of religious discourse as a means for developing a basis for Islamic feminist engagement. Despite critics such as Moghissi who challenge the centering of feminist movements within an Islamic paradigm, arguing that the inherent patriarchy in Islam cannot be transcended, other faith-centered Muslim feminists see using strategies such as feminist exegesis of the Qur'an as a means of articulating feminist thought and engagement from within the broad discursive parameters of Islam, achieving greater gender equity, and countering oppression.⁴³ This approach seeks to use the politics of hermeneutics as a means to create alternative readings of religious texts that build a discursive and spiritual basis for more equitable gender-based structures, systems, and practices.

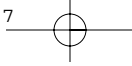
I propose that a critical faith-centered Islamic feminist epistemology can utilize Qur'anic precepts of peace, social and environmental justice, unity, and accountability as the guiding principles that govern theory and praxis. These faith-based principles, I would argue, in many ways correlate well to the goals of social justice that feminists of all persuasions see as central to their own theorizing and praxis. There are some significant differences, however, in the way in which notions such as accountability would be constructed from a faith-centered framework. In this conception, accountability extends beyond an existential understanding and relates to a responsibility to a Creator or higher power, which shapes the ethics of one's actions. This approach is more clearly related to indigenous epistemologies that have a stronger spiritual basis for understanding social and physical realities.⁴⁴ It also differs significantly from secular humanist constructions of accountability that are shaped by individual moral and political conceptions.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, gaining legitimacy for viewpoints that differ from the standard formulas used to theorize Muslim women's lives is, as Lazreg, puts it, "more easily said than done." What has been missing is a discursive space from which faith-centered women can articulate a point of view that relates to the

⁴³ See Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*; Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*; and Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam.

⁴⁴ See George J. S. Dei, "Re-thinking the Role of Indigenous Knowledges in the Academy," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 4, no. 2 (2000): 111–32; and Marlene Brent Castellano, "Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge," in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*, ed. George J. S. Dei, Budd L. Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ For example, liberal notions of the "good life" are believed to be best determined through an individual's own moral convictions and autonomy rather than a set of predetermined precepts. See Terrence McLaughlin, "The Ethics of Separate Schools," in *Ethics, Ethnicity, and Education*, ed. Mal Leicester and Monica Taylor (London: Kogan Page, 1992), 100–113.



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way they see the world and their place within it. Whether this kind of epistemological framework will be validated by antiracist feminists remains to be seen. What we can hope to engage, at the very least, is a politics of inclusion and possibilities.

