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## Islamism, Re-Islamization and the Fashioning of Muslim Selves: Refiguring the Public Sphere

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# Islamism, Re-Islamization and the Fashioning of Muslim Selves: Refiguring the Public Sphere\*

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## Abstract

This article explores the political implications of Muslim public self-presentation and forms of self-fashioning associated with the ongoing processes of re-Islamisation in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies. It sketches how projects of the Muslim public self contribute to a refiguring of the public sphere. The argument put forward is that public practices of self-reform grounded in religion and presented in pietistic terms are political by virtue of being tied to projects of societal reform and because they have a bearing on the public sphere and public space. Proceeding from the premise that the public sphere is not neutral and that the subjectivities inhabiting it are shaped by power relations, the article examines the ways in which projects of Muslim public selves are imbricated in the material conditions of the settings in which they develop and as such are underpinned by dynamics of power and contestation.

**KEYWORDS:** Islam, public sphere

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Over the past three decades, the rise of Islamist movements has turned on the political and social visions these movements have advocated. In scholarly analyses and media writings, explanations for this rise have tended to focus on the ideologies of Islamist groups, on the socio-economic backgrounds of Islamist actors, and on the political contexts for their emergence. More recently, research has turned to the wider processes of re-Islamization entailing social practices and disciplines that constitute individuals as Muslim selves active in the public sphere. These selves do not necessarily endorse the Islamist project of the Islamic state, nor do they perforce advocate militant or violent action to actualize a program of reforming the self and the social body of which they are members. However, the engagement of individual and collective projects of self-transformation in matters of ethics and morality has a bearing on the public sphere and on public space. As such, these projects engage others who may have varying, competing and conflicting projects. In the context of secular and western societies, they disrupt and destabilize modes of thinking and ways of being long thought to be the subject of consensus and closure. In Muslim-majority countries, the construction of Muslim public selves interrogates the project of modernity modelled after the western experience, while proposing alternative visions of the public sphere.

In this essay I begin by reflecting on the varying constructions of Muslim subjects in the public sphere and, in particular, on how different projects of self are guided by varying understandings of religion and personal faith. My purpose is to draw out some of the political implications of individual projects of self grounded in religion, underscoring that we cannot isolate moral selves from political selves. In exploring the political implications of Muslim projects of self, I will engage with current debates on the nature of the public sphere and, in particular, the claim made about its neutrality. In this respect, I want to address the implications of adopting a critical questioning on the neutrality of the public sphere in terms of the subjectivities inhabiting it, and in terms of the signs and symbols that populate it. In questioning this presumed neutrality, I highlight the historical situatedness of the visibility or invisibility of Islamic markers in the public sphere. Following from that, I sketch elements of the refiguring of the public sphere and the reshaping of Islamic traditions under conditions of globalization. Finally, I turn to an examination of the local dynamics of power and contestation underpinning projects of self-presentation in the public sphere. My overriding argument is that projects of the Muslim self, like all such projects, take shape in context and in relation to material conditions, and are, further, enmeshed in power relations. They are never apolitical even when framed or explained in strictly moral or pietistic terms. Thus, projects of Muslim self-production should not be seen as divorced from the settings and contexts in which they take place, but as imbricated in and emergent from those settings.

### **Islamism, Re-Islamization and the Construction of Muslim Selves**

The various projects of self that are pursued by contemporary Muslims are tied up with Islamist politics and the ongoing processes of re-Islamization. Before proceeding further, I will briefly define what I mean by Islamist politics and re-Islamization. I use Islamist politics to refer to activities of organizations and movements that mobilise and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions. I use re-Islamization to designate the processes whereby various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions (Ismail 2003, 2). I have argued elsewhere that Islamist politics and re-Islamization are not mutually exclusive (Ismail 2003). Rather, they have points of both convergence and divergence. I also think that the forms of activism that both entail fall under the wider rubric of Islamism.

At the ideological level, there is a wide range of articulations constituting the discursive field of Islamism. These articulations are neither coherent nor homogeneous. For example, they do not all necessarily buttress the idea of an Islamic state. Further, this field does not have fixed boundaries but rather overlaps with popular articulations of religion, more generally, and with differing productions of Muslim identities. Popular preachers, sheikhs associated with official Islam, religious figures of moderate Islam, lay religious intellectuals, Islamist activists, and ordinary Muslims all engage in the production of Muslim and Islamist identities. They are all party to the processes of re-Islamization. We do not have a straightforward equation for organising the manner in which this discursive field shapes Islamist movements. While it is safe to argue that re-Islamization does not equate with Islamist politics, it is simplistic to see in re-Islamization a negation of Islamism. There are stakes in the competing interpretative frames. Simply put, diverse actors, from secularists to militant Islamists, aim to claim ownership of “true Islam”. At this stage, we do not have a comprehensive view of the various discourses and their interaction (Ismail 2004a, 398-99).

For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus on the individual level of engagement in the production of Muslim and Islamist identities, paying particular attention to projects of self and the kind of politics that they represent. Some projects of self make clearly-stated political claims, while others renounce and reject an explicit political stance. While I accept this distinction, inasmuch as the agents themselves make it, I argue that there may be different kinds of politics at play and therefore projects of self are almost always, in some sense, political. As will be elaborated below, in most cases, projects of self-reform are tied up with projects of societal reform and transformation. For example, proceeding from the individual level, they may aim to alter gender relations, family norms

and modes of conduct in public. The drive for re-Islamization in these areas does not necessarily operate in the narrow political sphere nor does it address questions of government and state. In light of this, we should be attuned to the different politics expressed in individual and collective projects of self and society.

To illustrate, let us look at the examples of two Muslim women activists and their constructions of Islam and of their Muslim identity. I begin by considering the views of a well-known activist, writer and professor of Political Science at Cairo University, Heba Raouf. Raouf's political vision is captured in her approach to the *shari'a* as a political ideology and her view that religion has an emancipatory role to play in society (see Qureshi and Raouf 2004). This premise appears to guide Raouf's approach to social, cultural and religious practices of self-presentation in the public space. In her discourse, Raouf is critical of what she calls *al-muhajjaba al-mutaharira* (the liberal, veiled woman). Under this rubric, Raouf has in mind a *muhajjaba* (veiled woman) who wears a pure silk veil and speaks to her children in English (Haenni & Fuger 1996, 121). The critique of certain forms of Muslim public self-presentation made by Raouf cannot be said to issue from any religious strictures in Islamic traditions.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is an improvisation necessary for the evaluation of proper adherence to a political project that, in the terms enunciated, has nationalist and cultural overtones, expressing the desire to draw distinctions from "the Other" through styles of dress, language and overall cultural self-construction and positioning.<sup>2</sup>

I pose, in contrast to Raouf, Mrs. H., an activist who volunteers for an Islamic charitable association in Cairo, namely al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya. Mrs. H. holds a doctorate in the natural sciences and is engaged in fundraising for poverty relief, sponsorship of orphans, religious preaching and Quranic teaching. In discussing her activism, Mrs. H. rejected any reading of her engagement in political terms (interview with author, Cairo, April 2004). She explained that her activities in the charitable organization expressed a personal desire to please God: *li-wajh allah* (literally, "for God's face"). She denied that she was guided by a sense of social responsibility or that she was motivated by a desire to assume an "alternative moral citizenship" (as one analyst has suggested).<sup>3</sup> To prove the

<sup>1</sup> However, it should be noted that it is possible to mine the traditions to find religious justification for the kind of position taken by Raouf. Indeed, Saudi scholars issued fatwa-s disallowing Muslim women from wearing jeans on the basis that they make them look like infidels (the reference, here, being to westerners). See Al-Rasheed 2007, 132. This is not the ground on which Raouf stands.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Other' from whom it is necessary to draw distinctions is invariably the west. While certain Islamist discourses construct the relations with this other in predominately cultural terms, a clear link between cultural, economic and political antagonisms is articulated in the contestatory discourses of some Islamist preachers and ideologues. An excellent example is the sermons of Safar al-Hawli and Salman al-Awda discussed in Mamoun Fandy (1999).

<sup>3</sup> The idea that engagement in the charity work of organizations like al-Jama'iyya al-Shar'iyya expresses an alternative form of citizenship is put forward by Sarah BenNefissa (2004). The

strictly religious nature of her engagement, Mrs. H. invoked her apprenticeship in the ritual of washing the body of a deceased person. She explained that she learnt the ritual because it was recommended by the Prophet and because its rewards in the afterlife were high. In her view, she was undertaking practices that would make her a better believer. Is Mrs. H.'s piety private? I venture to answer in the negative. No, her piety is publicly practised and asserted. Though she denies having any political project, her ethic of self or project of Muslim self is socially imbricated. What are the political implications of this?

Mrs. H.'s rendering of her engagement in terms of a particular ethic of religious self-formation finds parallels in the terms used by Cairene women in mosque piety circles studied by Saba Mahmood (2003). Mosque circles are concerned with teaching scriptures, social practices and forms of conduct that are "considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self" (Mahmood 2003, 840). Examining the statements of these women allows me to draw out some of the political implications of ethical self-formation I am concerned with. As noted by Mahmood (2003, 842), in the construction and presentation of the ethical, virtuous self, the subject makes a distinction between practices that are conducive to the realization of the pious self and practices that are not. One of Mahmood's informants goes further, identifying practices that are Islamic in form and style, but not in substance. There are a number of observations to be made here. First, the distinctions drawn by the subject with respect to Islamic practices are internal to the discourse. They articulate claims to knowledge and truth and, therefore, are not neutral. The evaluations and judgements made in these distinctions implicate others as bad practitioners or non-practitioners. Such judgements can carry weight beyond the statements made. We may ask what impact such evaluative statements have on the individuals whose conformity to certain understandings or interpretations of religious rules and practices are put into question. The pronouncements issued in this regard go beyond simple disagreements in a context where authoritative judgments of non-conformity may translate into exclusion from the community or, in extreme cases, may be used to justify violence.

Second, the discourse expresses a link between a project of self and a project of society that we find in many of the piety movements. In her work on Moroccan women's pietist groups, Christiansen (2003) crystallises the link between individual self-reform through pious practices and activism aimed at transforming society as evidenced by practices targeting others, such as teaching and counselling. From this perspective, we are dealing with political projects. The political, here, has many dimensions. My main argument is that we cannot isolate the moral selves from the political selves. The project of re-Islamization should

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articulation of the idea of social responsibility as integral to practices of public piety is also expressed by Shi'i women active in religious charitable organizations in Lebanon (Deeb 2006).

not be constructed as apolitical because of its social and cultural orientation (as argued by Olivier Roy (1999) for instance). As noted above, transforming gender relations and family norms are ultimately political manoeuvres. Further, re-Islamization and Islamist politics converge and diverge and there is no benefit to be gained from seeing them as contradictory forces. A practical example of the convergence emerges when we consider the links between pietist groups and militant organizations. At a basic level, there is a shared discursive ground— both draw on a common stock of religious texts and articulate similar positions on issues of gender relations and family norms. In addition, there is the question of the passage from membership in a pietist group to membership in a militant one (see Ismail 2004a & 2006).

There is a broad range of normative and political issues that arise in relation to religious practices shaping the self and its public presentation. To a large extent, the debate has focused on the question of the freedom and autonomy of the subjects engaged in Islamic practices. In her work with mosque-circle women, Mahmood poses the following question: Are these women cultivating a certain Muslim self through practices that are socially prescribed, free and autonomous or not (Mahmood 2003)?<sup>4</sup> In asking this question, Mahmood aims to challenge liberal and feminist conceptions of agency and freedom, arguing that socially derived models of self do not negate the subject's historical agency. The political implications that I am concerned with are somewhat different. They turn on the kind of citizen positions these Muslim selves occupy in relation to others and how others position themselves vis-à-vis these selves. The subject cultivated through practices - whether religious or profane - is an active subject, a member of a community or communities. Her project of self has a bearing on her co-citizens, in the sense that the attitudes and dispositions that she cultivates orient her interaction with others and are likely to be manifested in practices of sociability, in evaluative assessments of others' conduct and in the approach adopted to difference in belief and practice. It follows that the ethical formation of the individual as a public self has a bearing on the public sphere and public space. What we need to consider at this point then is how the public sphere, as conventionally conceived and structured, problematises subjects whose public self-presentation is grounded in religious discourses and practices.

In conceiving the public sphere as an intermediate space in which citizens are formed and acquire capacities and skills that enable them as actors in the

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<sup>4</sup> Mahmood's questions emerge in the context of her engagement with liberal feminist writers who posit freedom as contingent on the subject's capacity to articulate moral and ethical preferences independent of societal rules. The issue we need to consider here is not where the values and ethical principles spring from (whether from self or society). Rather, if we suspend this dichotomy and accept Foucault's argument that in constructing the self, the subject draws on models available in the social world, the question that arises concerns the models upon which the self is patterned.

political sphere, and in which apprenticeship in the practices of civility become foundational for political society, modern political thought put forward the idea that religion should be left out of the public sphere in order to establish and maintain a democratic polity. One of the key arguments put forward against bringing religiously derived values into the public sphere rests on the idea that the public sphere is a neutral space and that individuals/subjects come to it unmarked, that is, unburdened by their social positioning, having somehow shed the accoutrements of their social being—the most important of which are gender, class and religion. In this respect, it would seem that the Muslim and Islamist projects of self are the ones that get closer scrutiny by a supposed neutral public subject, who, because of this presumed neutrality, feels comfortable or at ease in not just critiquing them, but in disqualifying them.<sup>5</sup> This may be done in the name of defending women's rights, individualism, democracy, 'our values', 'the things we stand for' and so on. Underlying all of this is a claim to universalism and superiority in normative terms, a claim to having a better vision of society and the position of the individual in it. In order to put these premises into question, it is important that we assess critically the claimed neutrality of the public sphere. In the next section, I present a critical discussion on the notion of neutrality in the public sphere focusing on how the secular public sphere operates by marginalizing forms of Islamic self-presentation in public. This detour is necessary in order to proceed, in the subsequent section, to an account of the transformations in the public sphere arising in conjunction with particular forms of Muslim public self-presentation. The last section suggests the terms of a reformulation of the *problematique* of contemporary Muslim public self-presentation and interventions, one that takes into account the relations of power in which they are imbricated and the kind of politics they represent.

### **Muslim Selves, Modernity and the Public Sphere**

Drawing on Nilüfer Göle (2002), I want to underline the idea that public self-presentation takes place in context, in particular places with histories. Göle suggests that by scrutinizing how Islamic practices are "... problematized in the public sphere, we become aware of the unspoken, implicit borders and the

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<sup>5</sup> This scrutiny has taken many forms. The media, public bodies and state-sponsored commissions in a number of West European countries have examined closely certain expressions of Muslim subjectivity to determine their compatibility with western liberal norms and models of the subject (an insightful look at this type of exercise is found in Asad 2006). The gaze in this evaluative exercise is cast beyond western borders to Muslim-majority countries. Additionally, an internal self-scrutiny is conducted by reform and secular intellectuals and activists with the aim of evaluating Muslim practices and performances in light of the ideals of modernity. Interestingly, the same preoccupation guides the social and public work of some contemporary Islamist activists as well (Deeb 2006).



stigmatizing, exclusionary power structure of the secular public sphere” (2002, 178). In other words, we need to pay attention to the techniques of power that serve to validate and authorise certain practices and ideas and not others. At issue are the rules of inclusion and exclusion from the public sphere. From this perspective, the “public sphere” represents not only the space or domain of debate and deliberation (the classical Habermasian understanding) but also a field of the construction of public subjects through techniques of marking, differentiation and identification. It is precisely because of the effects of power practices on the formation of subjects that the idea of the neutrality of the public sphere has been put into question. Critiques of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere argue that the construction of modern, rational subjectivities rests on the gendered distinctions of the public and private (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1992). Based on these distinctions, the rational subject of the public sphere was presumed to be male, white and middle class (Warner 1992). This was the taken-for-granted, the self-evident that needed no justification. The contention has been that in this sphere, impartial reason stands above and against differentiated moral subjects. However, this normativity is accomplished precisely by exclusion, stigmatization and repulsion of subjectivities falling outside its confines (the female, poor, non-white, religious subjectivities).

Elaborating on this critique Alev Çinar (2005, 40) points out that the public sphere is constructed not only through debate and deliberation, but also through visual displays and performances of subjectivities. In this respect, the production of identity and difference is an ongoing process that entails power and resistance and, as such, it is not fixed and does not achieve closure. The manner in which signs and symbols of identity are produced and circulated expresses power and contestation. Naming, marking and identifying are means through which subject positions of privilege and under-privilege are demarcated. For example, an item of clothing, a style of speech or a territorial association could enter into the identification of a subject in particular terms— as Islamist or secular, as progressive, conservative or liberal, as belonging to a particular class and so on (see Çinar 2005, 41-2). An examination of the processes of identity formation in the public sphere helps inform us of the inclusionary and exclusionary practices at work. It is important to pay attention to the fact that the dynamics of identity and difference in the secular public sphere play out in terms of ‘neutral’ unmarked subjectivities and identities: the taken-for-granted public subject and those who stand out because they bear signs of difference from the neutral, public subject.

Questioning this presumed neutrality has a bearing not only on our understanding of western public spheres, but also on how we view the development of the public sphere in non-western settings. We need to keep in mind that this development was informed by the projection of the west as a model and by the production of western modernity as a master narrative whose linearity

and teleology was presumed to capture the spirit of progress. To the extent that projects of modernity bore the emulative stamp, the western model of the public sphere - with its presumed neutrality - tickled the imagination of the intellectual and cultural elites spearheading modernization in those countries where catching up was the driving objective of transformative projects.

If we consider the development of the secular public sphere in Turkey, Iran and Egypt, we find that the banishment of certain signs and markers - like the veil - was enacted as a form of a secularising and modernising rite of passage. As Göle (2002, 184) argues, women became a 'sign/site' in the construction and projection of the public sphere. In the same vein, forced unveiling in Iran in the early part of the twentieth century, as pointed out by Minoo Moallem (2005, 69), constituted 'a corporeal inscription of modern citizenship'. Following a similar logic, the taking-off of the veil by Huda Sha'rawi (Egypt's pioneer leader of the women's movement in the early-twentieth century) upon her return from Europe, was one of those performative acts marking the passage or entry of Egypt into the space and time of modernity. Later in the twentieth century, forced veiling in Iran would come to punctuate another moment of state intervention in the perpetuation of particular forms of femininity (Moallem 2005, 70). In contrast, in Turkey and Egypt, the propagation of veiling and the various modalities of its adoption have served to remap old and new subjectivities in the public sphere.

Imbued with the meanings invested through secular practices, the veil appeared as the sign of backwardness, a regression in the civilizing process with its associated styles of dress. The social imaginary that articulates these views and projects them into the public gaze, then, necessitates banishment and exclusion.<sup>6</sup> Through a particular historical construction, the unveiled woman was an affirmation of the modern self. The invisibility – or absence - of signs of Islamicity was evidence of a modernizing society, indeed, of a civilizing one. To this day, many secular Egyptians point to videotapes of Um Kulthum concerts in the 1960s as the proof that Egypt was progressing: "Not a single veiled woman in the audience," they observe. "Rather, all were elegantly dressed in fashionable evening wear following the latest western trends."

The public performance of modernity was on display not only nationally but also internationally since the staging of the 'civilized self' targeted the West as the model and ultimate reference. In a poignant reflection on her journey to America in the 1960s (in the film *Four Women of Egypt* by filmmaker Tahani Rached), Safinaz Kazem, a contemporary Islamic writer and literary critic, and a former Marxist, notes how she engaged in outbidding her western interlocutors regarding the modernity of Egypt in matters of personal ethics and morality. To

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<sup>6</sup> Such was the case with the Turkish Parliamentarian who, in 1999, was run out of Parliament before she could give her oath of allegiance because she wore a veil on the day of her swearing-in ceremony (Göle 2002).

win Egypt the credentials of a modern nation, she asserted to her interlocutors that Egyptian women wore short skirts and, on matters of gender-mixing, were as liberals as their American counterparts, if not more. This public self was thought of as the ticket to modernity. We do not need to go over what has unfolded between the drive to emulate and the drive to authenticate in Safinaz Kazem's personal journey or in the wider public transformation of Muslim women and men in which the adoption of certain practices and not others and the rendering of personal and collective ethics became grounded in Islamic idioms. My interest here is to think out the issues with which we are confronted in and by Islamic self-presentation in public.

If we accept that public self-presentation is not neutral, that in the production of public selves, subjects draw on existing models and ideas and engage in self-disciplines that are historically and socially grounded, then we should examine what it is about the contemporary Muslim projects of self that is seen as problematic. To put the question in vernacular terms, what difference does it make whether one's public self-presentation is informed by images and ideas proffered on American daytime television shows such as *Oprah* or garnered listening to popular preachers like Amr Khaled? We need to be cognizant of the multiplicity of sources of the self, and that it is difficult to find - except for the most insular beings - selves that are formed in relation to one source only. In many instances, the sources and models for self-construction may appear as contradictory.<sup>7</sup> The question to be posed, then, is on what basis can religiously constituted markers of identity and forms of religious self-presentation be excluded or marginalized in the public sphere? Classical secular liberal arguments invoke the risks of intolerance towards difference that religion in public would bring about. They also view secular reason as neutral, hence normatively superior to religious reason, making it accessible to citizens of different doctrinal persuasions. Revisionist liberals concede the right of individuals to bring religious reasons to the public sphere, but add provisos for regulating their ability to do so.<sup>8</sup> Without wishing to deny the merits of this debate, I am more interested in shifting the analysis to consider the relations of power in which religiously grounded practices of self are imbricated. But before doing so, I will outline aspects of the refiguring of the public sphere resulting from Muslim public interventions and self-presentation.

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<sup>7</sup> Egyptian observers have noted the duality of preacher Amr Khaled and singer Amr Diyaab as models for young Egyptians and Arabs. Rather than being contradictory, the preacher and the singer inhabit one another not as a schizoid self but as a weave of synchronic multiplicity.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas' (2005) recent reformulation of the place of religion in the public sphere aligns with revisionist liberal thinking, providing new terms for inclusion of religious reasons in public debate and outlining conditions for engagement among citizens both secular and religious.

### **Refiguring the Public Sphere: An Islamic Public Re-Emergent?**

Muslim public self-presentation signals a change in the ideas structuring public discourse and in the practices and disciplines through which public subjectivities are formed and assumed. Specifically, these interventions shift the terms of public debate away from nationalist politics and secular conceptions of the project of modernization, proposing a redefinition of the community, its governing norms and its civilizational project (Salvatore 1998, 109). In considering this more recent re-entry of religion into the public sphere, it is necessary to take into account a number of socio-historical developments and their implications for reshaping Islamic traditions. Modernity and globalization define the historical context and processes that inform the production of Muslim selves. In this respect, some scholars assert that religious and cultural meanings are being reshaped by the forces of globalization, forces that promote hybridity and increased permeability of cultures and traditions (Hefner 1998). In examining the contemporary Muslim production of self, Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (1996) identified the process of objectification as a driving force reshaping Islamic traditions by altering the conditions of gaining religious knowledge and claiming authority. They argue that Muslims' self-quest for a sense of what it means to be Muslim has come about as a result of modernizing developments, in particular education and the spread of literacy. A related development was the weakening of the power of traditional religious authority and the rise of new bases and forms of religious authority.

These developments should be situated in relation to the transformations inaugurated by the earlier projects of modernization and the associated processes of state-building. The diversification and multiplication of religious authorities witnessed today has emerged against the background of state-sponsored centralization and incorporation of religious institutions as part and parcel of the processes of modernization. With the assertion of state control over key religious institutions came a drive for harmonization of religious discourses and practices with the project of modernity (see Gasper 2001; Salvatore 2001). Further, in subscribing to this project, segments of the religious establishment served not only to confer religious legitimacy on state policies, but to reorient practices and modes of reasoning to cohere with the desired new social order (Gasper 2001; Starrett 1998). The Islamic reformist movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries aimed at a remake of society through moral and social reform that was consonant with the ideas of progress and development at the time. Michael Gasper (2001, 85) argues that at the heart of this enterprise was the construction of subjects who conducted themselves in conformity with the prevailing civilizational vision. This has meant that Islamic reformers, not unlike their secular compatriots, have had to accede to modes of reasoning and

rationalities and techniques of power embedded in the western narrative of modernity (Salvatore 2001, 11; Gasper 2001). It followed that their interventions in the public sphere were part of a reordering in regimes of truth and power that privileged scientific discourse and principles over traditional religious knowledge and its style of argumentation and discussion (Gasper 2001, 88).

An important dimension of the state-sponsored modernization has been a redrawing of the boundaries of the public and private. At times, this has entailed bringing into the public, and under the remit of state agencies, matters previously privately regulated. This means that the public-private distinction is a function of the boundaries drawn up by state and non-state actors in and through their interaction and in relation to particular socio-historical contexts.

The shift in the boundaries of the public and private has brought about contestations over authority and the power to regulate the public sphere. In this respect, contemporary Muslim religious authorities and Islamists claim that whenever the private becomes public, it becomes subject to religiously-inspired regulation (see Kadivar 2003). Central to these kinds of contestations and contentions over the public and private is a certain ambiguity regarding what falls into realms requiring public reason and intersubjective agreement and what may be better left up to individuals and groups as matters of taste or aesthetics. The difficulty here is that while not all matters in public require public reasons, the attempt or desire of some citizens to bring about collective regulation on certain matters necessitates that reasons be given, that deliberation ensues and that a consensus on the form of regulation be reached.

As such, the construction of Muslim public selves is dialogic, that is, it is undertaken in dialogue among Muslims and with non-Muslims. The dialogue pertains to what it means to be Muslim and what conditions make it possible to lead a life consonant with that identity. At the same time, with a degree of individualization, we have a proliferation of the ways and signs of imagining the Muslim self in public—proliferating, in a sense, the selves in dialogue. Today, we find a wide range of representations of Muslim subjectivities in cultural products such as film, novels, fashion and music. While personal quests for what it means to be Muslim entail a degree of individualization, their driving motivation is a search for coherence and stable meanings and norms that are core to a ‘true’ Islam, capturing its unchanged essence. In surveying the signs of these multiple quests, the observer is thus confronted by the operation of two seemingly contradictory impulses. On one hand, we find personal quests and accompanying individualization that find expression in a pluralization of the languages and registers of being Muslim (a *heteroglossia* of sorts, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) term). On the other, the desire to identify a fixed Islam fuels homogenization efforts (*monologisation* in Bakhtin’s terms). The objective of such efforts, as noted by Jonathan Berkey (2007, 50), is to replace the

polyvocality of Islamic traditions with a univocal understanding of Islam. We see this at work in the deployment of the grid of *halal* (licit) and *haram* (illicit) to rule on and classify an ever-increasing range of practices, ideas and representations in public. From *hisba* episodes to fatwa banks on-line, the objective is to regulate and discipline Muslim conduct in public in a uniform manner consistent with the idea of a unified and unitary Islam.

Thus, Islam as a discursive tradition is subject to homogenizing forces driving for the unity of meaning and to pluralizing forces seeking plurality of languages and asserting difference. As noted, we see these forces at work in the multiplication of religious authorities and in the concomitant efforts to homogenize sources of authority and reference.<sup>9</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to map out the stratification of the languages of Islam and the various registers through which they develop and the sites of their articulation. However, it is important that I highlight certain features of the dynamics of pluralization and homogenization and provide some preliminary reflections on their implications for Muslim polities and societies.

The public dialogues about Islamic practices are plural and layered. The dialogues also develop in relation to events taking place in specific localities, but through globalized means of communication they acquire a global import. At the same time, there is an interplay of the dynamics of globalization and localization in the dialogues taking place among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Not only do local events and experiences refer to trans-locally elaborated discourses as shown by Bowen (2004), but in many instances they trigger trans-local debates and interventions that are intended to generate a univocal understanding of tradition. Events and developments in one locality become pretexts for a trans-local inquiry into the Islamic norms and rules on a given act, conduct or statement.<sup>10</sup> For example, on the al-Jazeera satellite channel, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi responds to questions not only raised by devout Muslims seeking further personal enlightenment in matters of ritual practice or doctrine, but also thrown up by challenges to Islamic “orthodoxy” taking place in the far-flung corners of the imaginary *umma*. As such, he was called upon to formulate a position on the permissibility of women leading the Friday prayer, an issue thrown into the open when Professor Amina Wadud did just that and in response some Muslims issued a condemnation. In the same vein, Dr. Muhammad Habash - a self-declared member of the enlightened trend in Islamic thought - was faced with worshipers posing the same question during his Friday commentary that follows the prayer at al-Zahra’ mosque in Damascus.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the dynamics of homogenization and fragmentation in contemporary Islamic discourses and practices from a comparative perspective see Hefner 1998.

<sup>10</sup> An excellent illustration of this trans-local search for authoritative Islamic rulings is provided in Caeiro’s (2004) study of fatwas on bank interest and home mortgages in western settings.

Qaradawi, Habash and the myriad of religious scholars-cum-preachers proffer their responses and fatwa-s in a global context structured by the ideas of a confrontation between the 'West' and 'Islam'. In other words, a global geopolitics (conceived in terms of confrontation) represents an additional frame for interpretation and self-positioning.

The reshaping of Islamic traditions in response to the processes of objectification and individualization and as a result of both the drive for homogenization and the pressures of fragmentation has centred on the ethical resources that Muslims call upon in their daily lives. The discourses propagated through various media from cassette sermons, instruction manuals and pamphlets, to satellite television shows and internet sites are geared to inform Muslims about the correct manner of performing rituals (in Islamic jurisprudence, the field of *'ibadat*). Additionally, they seek to instruct Muslims on how to conduct themselves in a manner consonant with Islam in their daily lives (in Islamic jurisprudence, the field of *mu'amalat*, literally transactions). In other words, they aim to orient individual conduct and social interaction in terms that invoke Islamic rules and norms. This objective has required an extension of the domains of fatwa-seeking and fatwa-giving and the sites of their articulation. The same objective has also been sought through an expanded sphere of religious instruction on chat shows, lessons at homes and in mosques, and data-banks and on-line sites. The pedagogies of Islamic virtue and the Muslim's engagement in learning and practicing them go beyond the individual level as they seek to govern modes of social interaction and to regulate much of what goes on in the public domain.

In this refiguring of the public sphere and out of the reshaped traditions, particular patterns emerge for shaping Muslims as public subjects who, to use Armando Salvatore's (2001, 40) formulation, are "carriers of the dialogic and disciplining instruments of public reason". In this respect, Charles Hirschkind (2001) points out that an Islamic 'counter-public' is formed through deliberative and disciplinary practices developed around listening to cassette-sermons. As sermon listening trains both reason and affect, Muslim listeners acquire skills and competencies that are necessary to enter into debate with one another on the interpretation of Islamic sources and on correct practices. For example, they learn styles of Islamic argumentation, a skill that allows them to draw on traditional sources in addressing contemporary concerns and issues. Yet, this counter-public which, according to Hirschkind, emerges at a distance from the state articulates a project of societal reform that seeks to ensure conformity of individual conduct with divinely guided morality (Hirschkind 2001, 27). In this sense, Islamic pedagogies reorient the terms in which the Muslim self is formed.

In this reorientation, practices are geared towards the disciplining of Muslims as subjects who regulate their conduct in accordance with Islamic rules. This can be noted in the reactivation and accompanying expansion of fatwa in the management of ethical questions and in the grounding of public morality in reference to religious norms.<sup>11</sup> One of the main features of re-Islamization has been the increased dependence on fatwa to address the ethics and propriety of quotidian transactions and relations in their details.<sup>12</sup> This has required the resort to religious authorities, but has also encouraged the informalization of fatwa-seeking and fatwa-giving. This development underscores the paradox of practices aimed at capturing divine intention as the principle of guidance in spheres of life where it is also regarded that common sense should not contradict with these same intentions. Much of the efforts of re-Islamization have been focused on grounding public morality in Islamic norms, with particular attention being paid to the sphere of gender interaction, women's presence in public and the regulation of sexuality. The injunction of *al-amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (to command good and forbid evil) is invoked in this assumption of governance responsibilities on the part of Muslims acting individually or collectively to safeguard or restore the moral order in public.

The signs of a re-emergent Islamic public sketched above have been subject to assessment in terms of whether this public ushers in a new era of

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<sup>11</sup> Another development that merits closer examination is the reassertion of an eschatological orientation in the articulation of the ethics of action in this world. Contemporary re-enactments of social practices grounded in the tradition can also be seen to represent an economy of individual and collective salvation that is developed around the reorientation of the ethics of action towards the hereafter. Reward and retribution calculations are made to choose and justify action, as in the statement made by Mrs. H to justify her apprenticeship in the ritual of washing the body of a deceased person. This economy is yet to be studied in a systematic fashion. Sermons by preachers articulate a critique of the estrangement of Muslims from practising their religion and from seeking closer relations with the divine by deploying *wa'z* (moral exhortation) on what awaits transgressors in the hereafter. A softer approach to the hereafter in the promotion of public piety is pursued by 'liberal' preachers like Amr Khaled. On the promotion of this eschatological approach to the ethics of worldly practices by preachers see Hirschkind 2007.

<sup>12</sup> According to Masud, Messick and Powers (1996, 29), although there appears to be a widening in the social scope of modern fatwa, the share of *mu'amalat* (transactions) in collections of fatwa-s in the modern period declined because civil law regimes in many Muslim countries draw little on the shari'a. However, I suggest that there are reasons to think that this may be changing. There may be an increase in the recourse to fatwa dealing with transactions as individuals redirect their activities to the informal sphere which is not regulated by the state and as such would have little use for civil law to regulate their interaction. This is certainly the case in the informal economy where much credit circulation and exchange is conducted without the benefit of formal financial regulations (see Ismail 2006). Thus, actors in this sphere replace the legal regime with conventions guided by Islamic ethics. A good example is the use of instalment payment in of selling and buying transactions. The propriety of raising the price with this type of transaction is judged within Islamic norms proffered in fatwa obtained formally and informally.



pluralism and toleration or foretells rising extremism and intolerance. Assessment is also carried out in terms of whether deliberation and persuasion or coercion and a measure of force are being used. Undoubtedly, these factors should be worked into any examination of the ongoing refiguring of the public sphere. I would suggest that this type of assessment cannot be carried out in the abstract and arrived at based on a priori assumptions about religious norms and practices. Rather, it is necessary that the practices forming the Muslim public self be examined in their socio-political context and in terms of their entanglement with relations of power and domination. In what follows, I look at the entanglement of male and female public piety in gendered relations of power that are shaped by the dynamics of contemporary socio-economic transformations and patterns of interaction with the state.

### **Projects of Self and Power Relations**

Surveying the signs of the refiguring of religion under conditions of globalization, some scholars have argued that the transnationalization of spaces of religion has resulted in disembedding of religious meanings and norms from their national settings (Casanova 2001; Roy 2004); an untying of the link between the nation-state and frames that inform individual identity, including those grounded in religion. I think that this formulation understates the extent to which the reworking of religious traditions is inscribed in social relations of power at the local level. In this section, I turn to what I see as dimensions of re-embedding of religious expressions in local settings and their imbrication in relations of power and domination, including relations with the state.

Studies of specific forms of feminine religious public piety, such as the adoption of the veil, note that such practices discipline the self while also opening up spaces for resistance. It is also pointed out that wearing the veil is associated with modification in general conduct (thought of as reform). In principle, the adoption of the veil associates with modesty, regulated gender mixing and so on. Viewpoints critical of the wearing of the veil identify it as a practice that subjugates women because it defines them in limiting normative terms— as a sexualized presence, as sources of *fitna* (in this context used to mean seduction) to be controlled (we may say not different from the images of women found in fashion magazines though the ideals are different). However, the adoption of the veil as an expression of piety and adherence to particular moral norms is tied with other practices relating to religious observance (*iltilzam*) and with the acquisition of certain skills and capacities. In this sense, as noted by Mahmood (2005), these practices are enabling for women: going to the mosque and adhering to community norms permit the formation of a public self. Women who become learned in the sciences of interpretation and *hadith*-s acquire the tools to argue

different readings and to make claims for differently situated subjectivities. In doing so, they break the male monopoly over religious authority. However, for some women activists, empowerment is not the goal, but a means of achieving closeness to God and of becoming better persons (Hafez 2003; Deeb 2006).

In taking account of women's varied motivations in adopting the veil and becoming observant, we should inquire into how these practices are inserted into particular settings and how they acquire meaning and have effect in relation to other practices. Subject-forming processes are power laden. We are only able to see the power relations that underpin subject formation and subjectivities, if we situate them in their socio-historical context and take account of the complex interplay of what is at stake for individuals in subject formation. In this regard, we should recall Foucault's (2003) proposition that practices of power may overlap, reinforce or annul one another. Therefore, what obtains at any given moment is a constellation or configuration of practices in interaction with one another. I want to zoom in on one of these constellations of practices to underscore the power relations that are at play in young men and women's display of public piety in one setting, namely the low-income neighbourhoods of Cairo.

In my work with youth in a popular quarter of Cairo, I found competing and conflicting programmes of self-fashioning that invoked patriarchal relations, class positions and relations to the state. Pious young men participated in religious fraternities of sorts (Ismail 2006). They joined groups like Al-Tabligh wa al-Da'wa and Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiya or study circles and Islamic musical bands. Through this engagement, they cultivated an ethic of Muslim self. They learnt about matters of religion and informed themselves of religious rulings, recommended conduct and so on. They sought self-discipline through extended prayers (*tahajjud*), reading religious pamphlets, listening to sermons on audio-cassettes and some of them ventured into the classics of the tradition. Further, they projected this Muslim self into their daily activities and chores. An important modification in practice and conduct was that of abstaining from 'chatting idly to women' and from shaking hands with them. This introduces a change in the existing norms of civility in the everyday life of alleyways in popular neighbourhoods of Cairo where gender mixing within the norms of propriety was accepted. The devout youth's practices of self-discipline include lowering the gaze (*ghad al-basar*) as recommended in the Qur'an. Further, they take on the role of preachers to their mothers, sisters and female neighbours counselling the veil and admonishing immodest dress.

It would be too limiting to read these young men's practices in the sphere of gender relations, public morality and the management of sexuality only as part of a programme of piety that works on the inner self. To integrate the idea of social reform will broaden our view. Yet, we must also bring into view other dynamics. I interpret the practices as implicated in male efforts at recovering

positions of authority lost as a result of changing socio-economic and cultural conditions. For instance, the increased participation of women as workers in the public space undermines constructs of the masculine self as provider. Women's own self-fashioning through education and work entails greater self-assertion. To further complicate the picture, young men occupy antagonistic positions in relation to state agents (Ismail 2006). In this conflictual and potentially confrontational situation, women have stepped in as mediators with state authority, a development which disrupts conventional constructions of masculinity. Male piety and civility is imbricated in this socio-political setting and cannot be understood outside it.

My point is that religiosity and piety are informed by one's social and political positioning. While they do not equate with militancy, or inevitably lead to activism, they are, nonetheless, political. However, we are dealing with a different kind of politics. In some sense, the pious male youth deploy disciplinary practices that reproduce the terms of dominant masculinity, monitoring and surveillance of women, construction of women as potential transgressors against the moral code, and so on. Women challenge these constructions by taking on employment outside the home, becoming visible in public space and articulating a different view of their roles in family and society. They may do so while also asserting their morality through forms of religious observance (*ilitzam*), including the adoption of the veil.

The selves that are formed and shaped through personal and collective programmes of piety are deeply embedded in social relations. Class, gender, age and lifestyle are factors that influence the processes of formation of Muslim selves (Ismail 2004b). Projects of self bear the weight of history. Muslims as self-fashioning agents do not stand outside history. They are not moved by something abstract called Islam, often projected as a puppeteer working behind the scenes moving Muslims to act in one way or another. Yes, Muslims reflect on their faith and on their lives in light of their understanding of their faith. They seek to use principles derived from Islamic traditions to guide them. However, they are touched by competing frames of reference and registers. Their ethical formation is shaped by their historical location. The agency they aim to recover is historically bounded.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Contemporary Muslims' engagement in projects of self and in the production of Muslim identities must be understood in relation to the social and political factors shaping the positions they occupy in various settings. Muslims, as social actors, occupy different positions in their social settings and in relation to local and global processes of change. Their projects of self and the subjectivities they

project in the public sphere are informed by their historical location at any given place and time. It follows that they do not engage, in a uniform manner, in the construction of Muslim selves. Nor do they produce a monolithic Muslim identity. By situating Muslims' engagement in projects of self in relation to local material conditions and in relation to global processes, we can discern the power relations that underpin subject formation and public self-presentation. We also need to pay attention to the ongoing public dialogues that the visual displays and performances of Muslim and Islamist subjectivities bring to the public sphere. Around and within these displays and performances lie constellations of power practices in interaction.

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