

ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND A NEW MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE: A CLOSE - UP ON SPAIN

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Abstract: This paper argues that Islamic feminism has the potential to play a significant role in the shaping of a new Mediterranean culture. The paper provides a historical background on 1) the emergence of feminisms in nation-states or state-based feminisms in the south Mediterranean early last century and their international interactions during the colonial period and 2) the emergence of Islamic feminism as a new global discourse of egalitarian Islam toward the end of the twentieth century. The paper looks at the diffusion of Islamic feminism in Spain through Muslim women professionals and leaders in convert communities, influenced by the work of Islamic feminists from the south Mediterranean, and their interaction with new Muslim citizens and immigrants, focusing on a case that Muslim women across the spectrum took out against an imam for claiming in a book he published in Spain that Islam endorsed wife-beating, accusing him of fomenting gender-based violence. Through the force of Islamic feminist arguments and Spanish law the author of the book was pronounced guilty of inciting gender-based violence.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, emergence of feminisms, egalitarian Islam discourse, new mediterranean culture, islamic feminist discourse, Muslim women

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As I reflect upon how Islamic feminism may contribute to the creation of a new Mediterranean culture I ponder its geographical and religious template, and glance at its history. The rich alluvial of the Mediterranean world spans three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Old Muslim majorities and old Christian minorities are found on the African

and Asian shores. Old, now long secularised Christian majorities and new Muslim minorities populate the European shore. Historically, one of the great Muslim civilisations flourished in Andalusia on the northern shore while Muslim communities and cultures were also found historically in parts of Italy and France. Jewish minority communities have existed historically on both shores and in more recent times a Jewish state was established on the south-eastern shore. Religion operates in the Mediterranean world in various ways as roots, as memory, as identity, and as practice, and in complicated dynamics with secularism/s.

Al-bahr al-abiyad al-mutawassit in Arabic, or “the middle white sea” and the Mediterranean “between the land” from Latin, the Mediterranean Sea, often connoting division between north and south or east and west, marking a frontier of deep difference and hostilities, has also nurtured exchange and commonalities. The Mediterranean has long witnessed a two-way traffic of people moving between and settling on opposite littorals. The Mediterranean world in modern times was the terrain of both colonisers from the northern shore, coming from France, Italy, and Spain and the colonised along the southern shores in countries populated by Arabs and Berbers. In the 19th century before the significant flows of people from the North to the South accompanying the empire, economic opportunity served as a magnet in some places, such as Egypt. The latter decades of the 20th century saw vast migrations of people from former colonies in the economically depressed south Mediterranean to countries on the north shore. Affinities deriving from elements of shared culture persist in the larger Mediterranean universe along with deep antagonisms related to still recent colonial history and deriving from more historically distant tensions between “Christendom and Islam.” The final decades of the 20th century saw the rise of political Islam or Islamism in the south Mediterranean and with it a surge of an amalgam of religious and cultural conservatism which many migrants brought with them to the north. In the northern Mediterranean world, (as in the broader West) Islamophobia surged.

In 2005, controversy and outrage ignited by the publication of cartoons in a Danish newspaper depicting the prophet Muhammad in ways deeply offensive to Muslims, and republished in papers across Europe and beyond, spread like a global wildfire in cyber space and real space. In the global imbroglio much of the West and ‘Islam’ re/essentialised ‘the other,’ resurrecting earlier stereotypes and antagonisms. The edges of the three continents that make up the Mediterranean world felt and responded to the massive ‘culture quake’ and surrounding politics. The publication of the offensive images, justified by freedom of speech in ‘the West,’ set off a counter deployment of angry words and physical

violence perpetrated by some Muslims in extreme outrage at the desecration of the sacred. From all quarters old dichotomies were re-asserted as arrogance, ignorance, and defensiveness were wantonly paraded. The storms unleashed and the barricades set up on both sides signaled deep fissures in the shared global terrain and profound animosities, and fears, in what Karen Armstrong called ‘the clash of the ‘sacreds’ which was that and much more.

The eruptions exposed what lay below the surface and how old cultural, social, and political frictions could be re-asserted and stirred to boiling point. In Europe and the West more generally, there was a broad outcry and defense of dearly-won freedoms, importantly, freedom of expression, but less evident was a sense of the limits of free speech and what constituted defamation and degradation. In parts of Asia and Africa the cartoon incident demonstrated how deep offense to religious and cultural sensibilities in proximity to flammable Islamist extremism and state war-mongering could spark instant violence. The incident brought into plain view to Europeans conundrums concerning immigrants and new citizens from Asia and Africa living among them, many of them Muslims. Such newcomers no longer simply filled jobs Europeans did not want but were now competing in the wider economic marketplace, and as permanent residents and citizens rather than transients, appeared to many to threaten the very fabric of familiar society

The challenge in European countries, as elsewhere in the West, becomes how to build new more richly textured pluralistic societies that respect the freedoms, liberties, and rights of all citizens of both sexes while also productively engaging difference in an era of intensive immigration. The challenge in countries of Africa and Asia is how can citizens, Muslims along with adherents of other religions, women and men alike, equally enjoy the practice of their constitutional rights? How can inequities resulting from constricted readings of Islam, that are widely influential, be eradicated? How can the world abounding the “middle sea” with its unique positioning at the nexus of contesting and contested cultures within and across its shores, create a new Mediterranean culture for the 21st century?

The Woman often becomes the symbol of the nation and an emblem of abstract ideals.² The Woman also functions as a negative emblem of the Other. There is perhaps no harsher way of portraying Islam, the religion and the umma (community or faith-nation) as the Other than through gender and the figure of The Oppressed Woman. Seldom in the West has ‘Islam and Woman’ or ‘Islam and Women’ conjured up positive images. Readings of Islam detrimental to women and impositions by Muslims of practices oppressive to women in the name of the religion have often been taken as ‘Islam itself.’ This has distressed many

Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, who have recoiled at injustices perpetuated in the name of Islam. Muslims often take regressive gender ideas and cultural practices from their towns and villages with them when they migrate to the West where frequently their rendition of Islam is taken to be Islam as such. At the same time, conservative men of religion in the form of imams and religious teachers, also take a restrictive view of women and gender with them to the West. Meanwhile, other Muslims from diverse locations around the globe advance understandings of Islam that are a woman-sensitive and gender-egalitarian Islam and strive for its application. This is often called Islamic feminism.

Islamic Feminism: Argument and Definition

The central argument of my paper asserts that Islamic feminism can play a critical role in shaping a new Mediterranean culture and a new West more broadly. I suggest that the egalitarianism that Islamic feminism promotes will help national cultures that constitute a broader Mediterranean culture to become spaces of greater pluralism where rights, liberties, freedoms, and dignity are living practices and where racism, sexism, and religious and national chauvinisms will find no place.

I define Islamic feminism as a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum. Islamic feminism, as Islam, understood as *din wa dunya* (religion and the world), meshes the religious and the secular. Islamic feminism breaks down dichotomies: not just the secular-religious, but East-West, male-female, and public-private. Islamic feminism takes a holistic approach to the world and human experience. Some Muslim women in different locations of Africa and Asia in the late 1980s, and 1990s noting the articulation of this new feminist paradigm called it "Islamic feminism." The term was not invented by non-Muslims in the West as some Muslims displaying umbrage, along with some westerners displaying arrogant contempt, have alleged.³

Who are the Islamic feminists? Human beings or *insan* are exhorted to read (*iqra*) the Qur'an. *Iqra* signifies reciting words and gleaning meanings. The Revelation (the Qur'an) was delivered orally. People recited/repeated it orally. The process of discerning meaning/s is called *tafsir* (exegesis). Those who draw from the Qur'an a message of the fundamental equality of all human beings, inclusive of gender, race, and ethnic variation, and adhere to a discourse based upon this understanding, and who wish to see implementation of this understanding, may be regarded as *de facto* Islamic feminists. Muslims who created this

new Qur'an-backed discourse of gender equality, as I have observed, did not themselves use the term and actually displayed discomfort with it. In time, however, many who had initially resisted the term "Islamic feminism" came to accept it even as they did not accept an identity associated with it. Yet, many also began to identify as Islamic feminists. There do remain some who continue object to the term Islamic feminism and vehemently refuse any identity associated with it.

Those who subscribe to Islamic feminism include born Muslims, who may either be observant or nominal Muslims, and Muslim converts among whom globally Western women constitute the largest number.⁴ Islamic feminists, understood as those who embrace the discourse of Islamic feminism, are mainly but not exclusively Muslims. Islamic feminists include both women and men but women are more numerous. Islamic feminists include Africans and Asians as well as Europeans and North and South Americans. Both 'Western Muslims' and 'Eastern Muslims' (to employ designations some use), who comprise global Islam, are shaping the discourse and practice of Islamic feminism.

I have argued that Islamic feminism will inform other feminist discourses. We utilise plural discourses in our complex worlds.⁵ As feminists we judiciously mobilise a discourse meaningful to situation and circumstance.⁶ In moving forward, we need languages or discourses that intersect and re-enforce each other and which are at the same time, distinctive and responsive to our particular contexts and needs. The insights and dynamics of Islamic feminism, as we shall see in this paper, have already begun to contribute to the shaping of a new Mediterranean culture that draws upon multiple wellsprings.

A Heritage of Trans/national Feminisms in the Mediterranean: A Look at the South

I locate my discussion of contemporary Islamic feminism in the historical context of the creation of feminism/s by women on national soil in parts of the south Mediterranean before, during, and after colonial occupation. Some women in the south Mediterranean, developed a feminist consciousness in the late 19th century in the midst of social and technological modernising processes and the rise and spread of Islamic modernist thought.⁷ This new awareness, maturing as anti-colonial nationalist struggle was accelerating, led some women to engage in feminist activism referred to in the day as "secular feminism" or a nation-based feminism shaped by women sharing the same country (watan) while belonging to different religious communities. Women as feminists and nationalists engaged in the collective struggle to win national sovereignty and to create state institutions gender equal in concept and practice.⁸ Women in Egypt developed a feminist template,

later replicated in other countries of the Arab East, that drew upon secular nationalist, Islamic modernist, and humanitarian discourses. Women honed their feminism in collective campaigning and in pioneering acts of everyday activism to change social practices.

Feminisms everywhere in the world from their early foundational moments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were nationally rooted. Western feminists in the heyday of colonialism built international networks in the early 20th century to strengthen their respective campaigns in their home countries, first organised mainly around suffrage struggle and then around the practice of democratic citizenship. In the south Mediterranean, even as their cross-border movements and communications were heavily constrained under colonial rule, feminists managed to forge transnational and regional networks. They also expediently joined international feminist networks dominated by Western women who were eager to expand their global reach. While women from opposite shores of the Mediterranean contested each other's positions and priorities in the context of colonial rule and anti-colonial struggle, they also offered mutual support.

The Ninth Congress of the International Women Suffrage Alliance (IAW) held in Rome in 1923 marked a turning point in the history of feminism in the Mediterranean when for the first time feminist organisations from beyond the West became members of the IAW. From the south Mediterranean came a delegation from the Egyptian Feminist Union representing Egypt and a delegation from the Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association of Palestine representing Jewish women in Palestine but not Palestine itself. The IAW like other international feminist networks of the day was comprised of national affiliates, confined by protocol to a single organisation representing the country as a whole. The Jewish delegation from Palestine was an exception.

In succeeding years, feminist delegations from the south Mediterranean representing Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria joined the IAW enlarging the international feminist community in a world sundered by colonialism. Women built an international feminist culture, or what Rupp and Taylor have called a "social movement community," but only up to a point, as feminists struggled for common gender interests in the context of colonialism which seriously impeded their efforts, most egregiously in Palestine.⁹ Feminists on both sides of the Mediterranean exploited international space while pressing ahead with their own nation-based feminist movements. In my study of the Egyptian Feminist Union and its concurrent national and international feminist work, I analyzed the

commonalities, divergences, and two-way flows from East to West and West to East within the world global feminism of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Such trans/national phenomena within the Mediterranean context are just beginning to receive extended comparative attention as we see in Sorbera's recent historical investigation of Egyptian and Italian feminisms.¹⁰

Western women within international feminist circles, who were as prone as any to what would be later identified as 'orientalist' notions of Islam and Muslim women, were informed by feminist Muslims about women and Islam. Western feminists learned about women's right in Islam to inherit and to control their own wealth. Western women also discovered that Muslim women retained full legal independence after marriage, including retention of their original name, at a time when women in European states after marriage were still considered legal minors. French feminists in the 1930s fighting for property rights taunted their male compatriots saying that Muslim women "in their colonies" enjoyed legal control of their own wealth while they did not.

In the 1930s and 40s, women from Arab countries of the south Mediterranean, Muslims and Christians together, moved to consolidate a pan-Arab feminist culture. A nationalist cause, the plight of Palestine, catalyzed feminists from the south and east Mediterranean (plus Iraq) to join forces in collective nationalist and feminist activism. At the height of the Arab revolt, which broke out in 1936, when British and French mandatory authorities in the east Mediterranean were obstructing Arab political organising, Arab feminists convened the Eastern Women's Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo in 1938. In defending Palestine, Arab women, at the same time defended their rights as women. As the French and British mandates in the east Mediterranean were being dismantled at the end of World War II, Arab feminists reconvened in Cairo in 1944 for the Pan-Arab Feminist Conference to strategise post colonial nation-state building. The women voted to establish the Arab Feminist Union which officially came into existence the following year. Within this institutional framework, Arab Muslim and Christian feminists worked to forge egalitarian state structures in their newly independent postcolonial countries and to further the acquisition and practice of women's rights.

In the 1950s and 60s, socialist state regimes in the south Mediterranean granted rights to women a citizens and cadres in national development while suppressing women's independent initiatives as feminists. In Egypt women, like men, enjoyed significant gains in education and employment. Women were accorded the political rights they had been demanding since the 1920s when the Nasserist state in 1956 granted them the right to vote

and to be elected to parliament. However, women lost their political, economic, and social independence when that same state shut down the thirty-three year old Egyptian Feminist Union. Feminism in the form of free public activism by women deciding on their goals and priorities was quashed as the state exerted its control. Gender concerns were subsumed by the state.

With the move away from socialist state rule in parts of the south Mediterranean in the 1970s and especially from the 1980s, public expression of religion as a force in society was fostered from on high. This occurred earliest in Egypt which shifted from state socialism to Open Door capitalism (*al-Infithah*) at the start of the 1970s. The move toward a renewed public expression of Islam as a political and social force was meant to break the hold of socialism and its late charismatic leader Nasser and to pave the way for the introduction of a new capitalist order and the state's tilt to the West. An unintended result was the unleashing of a resurgence of Islamism or political Islam. The neoliberal state in simultaneously allowing feminism and Islam to resurface could signal a new freedom of expression allowed by the state and at the same time feminism could serve as a antidote to a resurgent political Islam with its aggressive patriarchal agenda. The unleashing of forces of political Islam in Egypt was repeated elsewhere in the south Mediterranean and beyond.

As their vying for power with the state intensified, Islamists redefined "the secular" and "the religious" casting them as rigid terms in an oppositional binary. Islamists redefined secular to signify unreligious and even anti-religious. Islamists branded "secular feminism" (which had been shaped in part by Islamic modernist thinking) anti-religious, with a blanket condemnation of being "Western." Islamists meanwhile spread an atavistic hyper-patriarchal definition of "the religious." Emergent second-wave feminisms in the south Mediterranean in the final third of the 20th century met less with state control, than before although states continued to play manipulative roles. Meanwhile the hardening forces of political Islam were out to de-legitimise the egalitarian definition of religion and society that feminists supported.

By the end of the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, women in the south Mediterranean and in other Muslim societies, had begun to confront the virulent gender atavism unleashed in the name of religion. They did this by advancing a strong gender egalitarian Islamic discourse. In the first decade of the 21st century Islamic feminism has begun to help shape a new Mediterranean culture. On both shores of the Mediterranean Islamic feminism is becoming one of several discourses calling for the application of gender equality and gender justice. In the south Mediterranean, Islamic feminist discourse and local secular

feminisms have been interconnecting in common pursuits, most notably in efforts to reform religiously-backed family law. Islamic feminism is finding a place in the discursive arena in the north Mediterranean in conversation with various local feminisms and human rights discourse. The common concerns and shared force of multiple discourses have the potential to produce enhanced difference- respecting, egalitarian, pluralistic democracies.

Islamic feminism presents a very different Islam from the one that patriarchal Islamists broadcast which has conveniently played into the hands of the Islamophobes. Why do conservative and reactionary articulations of Islam act as the lens through which Islam is so often seen? How can Islamic feminism, promoting an egalitarian understanding of Islam have an impact in shaping a new Mediterranean culture? We look at the Spanish experience.

Islamic Feminism in Spain

Islamic feminism appeared in Spain in the 1990s, the decade this new discourse was circulating more widely.¹¹ In Spain, Islamic feminism was promoted initially by new converts, mainly from the old Left. Prominent among these were Mansur Escudero, a psychologist, who became president of the Islamic Council (Junta Islámica) and Jadicha Candela, lawyer, who founded and headed the Asociación Al-Nisá (The Al-Nisa Association). At the first Conference of Muslim Women in Spain in 1991 held in Barcelona, Candela gave a keynote titled: “The Egalitarian Revolution of Islam.” She spoke about the principle of human equality to be found in the Qur’an, calling the sacred message “the first universal declaration of the rights of man [the human being] and the citizen.”¹² Candela denounced misogynist readings of Islam perpetuated by conservative *ulama*. She pointed to Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi’s investigation of *hadiths* (sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet) and her exposure of misogynist *hadiths* as fakes. She noted that a misogynist version of Islam has also been circulated in the West to discredit Islam and Muslims, by the very same West that benefited centuries ago from the rational thought of the Muslims of Andalusia. Candela spoke of Islamic feminism’s deep roots in its own indigenous past at a high-point in the Spain’s history when Islamic culture and science flourished within its borders and beyond.

Candela is among those who approach the Qur’an and other religious texts through *ijtihad*, rational investigation. She makes clear that she does not come from the ranks of the *ulemah* with their traditional training in the religious sciences and who claim this training as the source of their religious authority. Candela positions herself within that expanding group

of educated professionals who examine the Qur'an and other religious texts directly on their own, whose readings resonate among Muslims, and who are being increasingly regarded as new authorities. Among the new critical interpreters is Abdennur Prado who was the major driving force behind organising the first International Islamic Feminist Conference that convened in Barcelona in 2005. Prado wrote a paper called "Gender Jihad" in which he outlined the egalitarian message of Islam. It is patriarchal readings and practices of Islam that come into conflict with current norms in Spain, he stressed, not egalitarian Islam.

He noted that subjugation of women was now coming to be seen, not as a mark of Islam but as a distortion of Islam. Islamic feminism, asserted Prado, can serve Muslim immigrants, both women and men, as a path to integration into the broader society. The Catalan Islamic Board (Junta Islámica Catalana) on which Prado acts as Secretary, has set itself the task of sharing an egalitarian understanding of Islam among fellow Muslims who are newcomers to Spain.¹³ It is not easy as Muslim immigrants, who mainly come from Morocco, are mostly poor and uneducated. The patriarchal cultural practices they bring with them are entangled with their notions of religion and are typically imposed on women more aggressively in contexts of immigration. Yet, the new realities of immigration can also loosen the hold of patriarchal controls.

Islamic feminism in Spain has been informed by the work of Moroccan feminists Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet. Over some three decades, Mernissi produced a vast corpus of work including her already alluded to critique of misogynist *hadiths* in her book, *The Veil and Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Womens Rights in Islam* regarded as a founding text of Islamic feminism.¹⁴ Widely translated into Spanish, her work, has circulated among Muslims in Spain in print and through cyberspace on the portal web Islam and the digital magazine *Verde Islam*. Mernissi is esteemed not only among Muslim liberals in Spain but as well among non-Muslim secular feminists and progressives. In recognition of her work, the Spanish state awarded Mernissi its prestigious Asturias prize in 2004.

Moroccan medical doctor Asma Lamrabet writes on the Qur'an. Her books, *Musulmane tout simplement* (2002) and *Aicha, Epouse de le profet ou islam en féminine* (2004) have been influential among Islamic feminists in Spain. At the International Conference of Spanish Speaking Muslims in Seville in 2003, Lamrabet presented a paper titled: "Féminisme islamique?"¹⁵ Lamrabet, like Mernissi, is part of the crescendo of voices in the south Mediterranean that deplore the centuries-old patriarchal take-over of Islam, or what

Egyptian Islamic feminist Zainab Radwan branded “un- Islamic patriarchy.” In Seville, Lamrabet declared that “Passive faith has no use in our Islamic emancipation. We have no choice but to continue to mobilize Muslim women to regain their rights.”¹⁶

Islamic feminism among Muslims in Spain, draws inspiration from twin sources: a gender-progressive re-interpretation of the Qur’an articulated by the new women exegetes; and the enlightened scholarly tradition of their own past when the Islamic civilisation that flourished in Spain was a font of learning in Europe.¹⁷ Spanish Islamic feminism “is rooted in al-Andalus, as an inspiration and symbolic reference” declares Prado “and a sign of our own distinctiveness.”¹⁸ In the looping effect characteristic of Islamic feminism in Spain, as elsewhere, protagonists both draw upon and feed into the global circulations of Islamic feminist discourse. During the intense debates in the media and cyberspace on women as *imams* leading congregational prayer in the mosque, ignited when Islamic theologian amina wadud performed as *imam* in leading a congregational prayer of women and men in New York in 2005 on March 18, international women’s day, Prado wrote a strong piece in support of women as imams. He backed his argument referencing two renowned Islamic luminaries of twelfth century Spain: Ibn Rushd (known as Averroes in the West) and Ibn Arabi.¹⁹

Islamic thought in Spain was occluded at the end of the fifteenth century when the last of the Muslims were silenced or driven out of the country in 1492 and their religion was suppressed. In 1992, the Government of Spain signed an agreement with the Islamic Commission of Spain officially recognising Islam and permitting Muslims to practice their religion once again in public for the first time in five hundred years. Freedom of religion signified broader freedom for the Muslim community and as well for the entire country. It marked a new moment in the integration of Muslims into society as equal citizens.

Islamic feminism in Spain, as elsewhere, is coalescing in conditions that are highly charged and culturally politicised. Muslims, although now an officially recognised religious group able to practice their religion freely, appear not to be widely well received in Spain. Religion in Europe more generally conjures up a hindrance to individual and societal freedom rather than connoting freedom. In Spain, the situation becomes complicated with reactionary influences at work among the Muslim immigrant community which is said to number 600,000 (an estimated 6,000 Muslims are Spanish converts). The Islamic Commission of Spain (Comisión Islámica de España) officially represents Muslims vis-à-vis the state. The Islamic Commission is composed of two bodies: the Federación Española de Entidades Religiosas Islámicas, collectively called FEERI and the Unión de

Comunidades Islámicas de España or UCIDE. The Islamic Commission was headed by its liberal founder Mansur Escudero, until 2005 when it fell under Saudi influence. UCIDE, headed by Ryad Tatary of Syrian origin, became linked to the Muslim Brotherhood

Muslim liberals and Islamic feminists in Spain take a two-pronged approach. One, they confront the inherited patriarchal Islamic scholarly tradition perpetuated by conservative *ulemah* originating from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere abroad. Two, as noted, they promote gender egalitarian readings and practices of Islam. Feminist Muslims and other Muslim liberals in Spain communicate their views in public talks, journals, and cyberspace. They are active as well in convening women's conferences like the Conference of Muslim Women in Barcelona in 1999 and the Conference of Muslim Women in Cordoba in 2002 which took a firm stand against wife-beating. They also participate in meetings organised by others such as the Conference of Spanish Speaking Muslims in Seville in 2003.²⁰ The population of Spanish-speaking Muslims world-wide is growing rapidly, especially in the Americas, and is said to range from ten to twelve million.

International Islamic feminist networking in Spain

Spanish Muslims organised the first ever global conference on Islamic feminism. Convening in Barcelona in 2005 it gathered an impressive array of scholars and activists from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Secretary of the Islamic Council in Catalonia, Abdennur Prado was at the forefront in organising this path-breaking event along with the Spanish Muslim NGOs: the Sakina Social Cultural Association and the Social Cultural Association for the Development of Islamic feminism. The conference received sponsorship from the government of Spain and the Catalan state, as well as backing from the UNESCO office in Catalonia. The cooperation of civil society and Spanish regional governments in organising this pioneering Islamic feminist initiative, along with receiving international backing, demonstrated what could be achieved with broad support.²¹

Spanish conferees included feminist activists, Arabists, leaders of Muslim organisations, and public officials. Among the feminist activists were Jadicha Candela, Ndeye Andujar, and Lidia Puigvert. Arabists included Dolores Bramon and Gema Munoz. Leaders in the Muslim community included Yaratullah Monturiol, President of the Catalan Islamic Council and Mansur Escudero, Secretary of the Islamic Commission of Spain. Public officials came from the Board of Religious Affairs in the Catalan Autonomous

Government, the Women's Affairs and Civil Rights in the Barcelona City Council, and the Women's Institute of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the central government.

The Barcelona conference gathered an array of scholars and activists from around the globe. The scholars included two women whose works have been widely accepted as foundational texts of Islamic feminism: African-American theologian amina wadud, author of *Qur'an and Woman* (1992, 1999)²² and Pakistani-American international relations specialist Asma Barlas author of "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002).²³

Activists included many globally recognised women in the Islamic feminist scene. They dealt with a broad set of issues: progressive religious education at the grass roots level for both sexes, women's access to mosques for congregational worship, women's right to function as *imams*, reform of Muslim family laws; rights of women to their bodies, and questions of sexuality. Lily Munir, head of the Center for Pesantren and Democracy Studies in Indonesia, active in grassroots Islamic feminism promoting progressive educational initiatives in Islamic boarding schools serving girls and boys, discussed lived experience in her country. Indian-American mosque activist Asra Nomani spoke about organising the gender-mixed congregational prayer in New York in 2005 when amina wadud acting as *imam* led the prayers and gave the *khutba* (sermon). Earlier, Nomani had taken the initiative in encouraging women at her local mosque in West Virginia to enter through the main door and pray together in the same space with men. Raheel Reza, a Pakistani-Canadian shared her experience as a Muslim community activist and performing as *imam* at Friday congregational prayer in Toronto. Zainah Anwar represented Sisters in Islam, the pioneering Islamic feminist organisation created by professional women in Malaysia who reached out to the broader Muslim community, publishing booklets giving Qur'an-backed answers to questions on issues of immediate concern to women.²⁴ Mufaliat Fijabi Dasole from the Nigerian organisation, Boabab for Women's Human Rights, a secular association with a Muslim and Christian membership which belongs to the global network Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLURL), discussed Boabab's recent success in taking the lead in appealing cases before higher *shar'iah* courts of two women who had been convicted of adultery and sentenced to death under recently introduced *hudud* (Islamic criminal laws). These landmark cases demonstrated how gender justice could be achieved through the application of enlightened reading of Islamic jurisprudence.

The organisers of the Barcelona conference believing it could be productive for Islamic feminists and Islamists to engage in face-to-face debate invited Nadia Yassine, the head of

the Moroccan Islamist organisation, the Justice and Spirituality Association (founded by her father Abdesallam Yassine, an Islamist jailed by the Moroccan government). She was, however, barred from traveling to the conference by Moroccan state authorities who held her under house arrest. In her writings and talks Yassine decries the hijacking of the gender egalitarian message of the Qur'an by men going back to the early days of Islam. While upholding the ideals of an egalitarian Islam Nadia Yassine locates herself in the Islamist movement (called by some the Islamic revivalist movement) revealing complex and contradictory politics at work in the world of Islam and gender.²⁵

The 2005 International Islamic Feminist Conference in Barcelona attracted wide media coverage, especially from mainstream media which displayed amazement that an Islamic feminism could exist. The Barcelona conference led to an expansion of global scholarly and activist networks and demonstrated the rich diversity of Islam and Islamic feminism.²⁶

Through an Islamic Feminist Looking Glass:

Collective Activism in Spain

I continue my discussion of the Spanish experience of Islamic feminism by shifting from the global to the local. I look at an incident relating to violence against women in the form of the circulation of a discourse alleging that Islam sanctions wife-beating. The incident raised issues of authority and authenticity. Whose Islam? What Islam? Islam in what social and political context?

The question of violence against women was taken up in the south Mediterranean by Muslim and Christian women in Egypt in the second-wave secular feminist movement from the 1970s and 80s and has remained on the agenda ever since. Egyptian feminist Nawal Al-Saadawi, a writer and physician, drawing upon observations in her clinical work, confronted violence committed in the family against women in her 1972 book *al-Mar'a wa al-Jins* (The Woman and Sex) in 1972. Al-Saadawi insisted that Islam opposed violence of any sort against women.²⁷ In Malaysia the organisation Sisters in Islam countered the rampant belief that Islam authorised a husband to beat a wife by publishing a booklet in accessible language intended for wide circulation titled: "Is Wife Beating Condoned in Islam?" Referencing the Qur'an, the answer was: "No."²⁸

The issue of wife beating as allegedly condoned by Islam came to the fore in Spain in 2003 when the imam of the mosque in the town of Fuengirola in southern Spain, Muhammad Kamal Mustafa of Egyptian origin published a book titled *La mujer en el Islam* (The Woman in Islam) declaring that the Qur'an permitted wife-beating.²⁹ The book, which was said to have sold three thousand copies, occasioned loud public outcry across the country. Three Muslim women's organisations: the Asociación An-Nisá, the Asociación Cultural Inshallâh, and the Asociación Baraka demanded that Imam Muhammad remove the problematic discussion of wife-beating from his book. The Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Organisations (FEERI) also requested that he amend his text. Mustafa refused. He claimed authority as the holder of a doctorate from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, declaring he was one of two Muslims in Spain qualified to issue *fatwas* (religious pronouncements). He branded as heretics those who opposed his opinion.

Muslim women's organisations and human rights associations filed a legal case in a Spanish court against Muhammad for inciting gender-based violence. At his trial Mustafa insisted that he was acting in accordance with his religion. He argued that the Qur'an condoned wife-beating and that he was merely reflecting with what was found in the holy book. In advocating light beating to discipline a disobedient wife, he portrayed himself as sympathetic to women.

The court sought clarification concerning Islam and wife-beating. Witnesses including Jadicha Candela, president of Asociación An-Nisá; Maryam Cabezos, president of the Asociación Cultural Inshallâh; and Medhi Flores, Secretary of FEERI, who advanced arguments against a Qur'anic endorsement of wife beating based on their readings of the Qur'an and *hadith*. The Third Conference of Muslim Women in Cordoba in an affidavit to the court asserted that physical and psychological abuse, were prohibited in Islam.

The judge in his summation pronounced that the defendant Mustafa was advancing his own opinion in his book and that his pronouncement did not constitute definitive doctrine as he claimed. Citing Article 15 of the Constitution of Spain which prohibits inhuman and degrading treatment, along with citing the Spanish Penal Code, the judge convicted Muhammad on the grounds of incitement to gender violence. Muslim liberals together with other Spaniards saw the indictment as a victory for gender justice and human rights. The incident, at the same time, dredged up old fears and stereotypes, rekindling contempt for Islam and Muslims provoking many Spaniards to reconfirm their view that Islam is a misogynist religion.

The wife-beating case underscored the significance of interpretation (*tafsir*) in understanding religion as opposed to the idea of fixed and undisputed doctrine valid for all time. The Spanish case occasioned the re-articulation of understandings set out so cogently by wadud and other women interpreters demonstrating that the Qur'an does not condone violence, physical or psychological, against any human being. Their readings assert that the principles of the equality and dignity of all human beings to be found in the scripture take precedence over wordings in any particular passages that might seem to suggest otherwise. All three Abrahamic religions of which Islam is the last, can and have been read in ways that 'justify' patriarchy and they can be read in a more gender-egalitarian manner as Jewish and Christian liberation theologies and Islamic feminist discourse demonstrate. The verdict in the Spanish case showed how a judicious interpretation of Islam and the application of Spanish law together were able to deliver justice.

Muslims are exhorted to approach the Qur'an for guidance and understanding. At the same time, there have arisen historically in Muslim societies bodies of religious scholars who have generated knowledge that has been institutionalised and given official authority by the religious establishment and that has often been endorsed by the state and in instances has formed the basis of statutory law. In the last several decades, global Islam has witnessed the appearance of individuals emerging not from the ranks of those trained in the religious sciences in Islamic seminaries, but from those educated in secular institutions in the social sciences, liberal arts, women's and gender studies, engineering, medicine, and the natural sciences, who have offered compelling interpretations of the Qur'an and other religious texts. Increasingly these new interpreters have been spontaneously accepted by people as sources of inspiration and de facto authorities. These new interpreters of religion include women, some of whom have received education in the religious sciences to the highest levels at Islamic institutions of learning including Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the same institution from which Imam Mustafa received his doctorate.

Condoning wife-beating must be placed in the context of a patriarchal reading of Islam. In this context, the reason given for condoning a man's beating of his wife is to coerce her into obeying his authority. In an egalitarian understanding of Islam, the two spouses who in the Qur'an are identified by the same term, *zawj*, or partner, are mates and "protectors of one another." In 2004, Morocco amended its religiously-backed *Mudawwana* or Civil Code legally casting the two spouses as co-heads of family. The reformed Civil Code also extended ways a wife could affect a divorce, as did a 2002 law in Egypt where, however, the husband is still the legal head of the family. If a wife is seen to be 'recalcitrant' presumably there is a problem in the marriage and if spousal relations cannot be resolved

amicably the answer is not resource to compulsion though the violence of beating but a dissolution of the marriage. Gender oppression in marriage, as outside marriage, is not acceptable. It is a commonplace that: “there is no compulsion in Islam.”

While the resolution of the case in Spain elicited widespread support from Islamic feminists and Muslim progressives globally, it also occasioned reiterations among reactionary and conservative *ulemah* of patriarchal readings of Islam concerning wife-beating. Prominent among conservatives is Yusuf al-Qaradawi (like Mustafa, an Egyptian educated at al-Azhar), a founder and head of the European Council for *Fatwas* and Research (headquartered in Dublin) who resides in Qatar. Al-Qaradawi’s patriarchal readings of Islam are found on his website Islam Online and in his 1984 book, *The Lawful and the Prohibited: The Future Civilisation*. Such thinking was of the sort circulated in Spain in Mustafa’s book. It is this thinking that conservative Muslims in their countries of birth or of immigration typically cling to as they remain beholden to established authorities, whether family or community, or religious leaders and elites. Islamic feminism undermines patriarchal Islam threatening the grip of Muslim conservatives. Islamic feminism at the same time is unsettling to Western Islamophobes as its egalitarian understanding of Islam removes a trump card in their denigration of Islam and Muslims. Prado contends that the resolution of the Mustafa case constituted a turning point, or a new defining moment, for Islamic feminism in Spain. The wife-beating case spurred collective activism among Muslims as immigrants and new citizens and Spanish born converts, and deepened ties between them.

Concluding Thoughts

In considering how Islamic feminism contributes to the creation of a new Mediterranean culture I have focused on Spain, the site of the first International Islamic Feminist Conference and locus of a burgeoning Islamic feminism in a country that was once the center of a brilliant Islamic civilisation in Europe where enlightened thought and religious and cultural pluralism thrived. Today, two versions of Islam are struggling to implant themselves in Spain: a patriarchal Islam and an egalitarian Islam.

The assertion of retrogressive thinking that legitimises violence against women in the name of Islam was successfully countered by a reading of the religion that eschews violence. Harmful assertions and behaviors were not condoned in the name of religion. Multicultural arguments were not an excuse for aiding and abetting violence of any sort, through word or deed.

How can Islamic feminism help create a new Mediterranean culture? The Spanish experience offers insight into what may develop in the north Mediterranean world more generally. In Spain, women who articulate Islamic feminist ideals are generally well-educated professionals. Along with well-educated Muslim women as new residents and citizens, Muslim converts of Spanish heritage are well-positioned as co-religionists to share Islamic feminist ideals with Muslim immigrants, who are mainly poor and under-educated, and cling to patriarchal versions of Islam brought with them from their countries of origin. The potential of Islamic feminism in immigrant cultures, presaged by the Spanish experience, in fashioning a new inclusive egalitarian Mediterranean culture has yet to be fully realised. Islamic feminism, meanwhile, can help erode Islamophobia.

In the south Mediterranean, Islamic feminist discourse has been appropriated by secular feminist activists in their struggles to attain egalitarian Muslim family laws. The greatest success, as noted above, was achieved in the Morocco an experience where activists across the secular-religious spectrum mobilised egalitarian arguments of Islam. Countries of the south Mediterranean face the greatest challenges in fostering the practice of equality among citizens in overhauling the remaining patriarchal Muslim family laws, and inheritance laws (which often stand apart from family laws). Islamic feminism provides the thinking and the tools.

Through the spread and development of Islamic feminism a new Islam in the Mediterranean is slowly being forged. On the northern shore this new Islam finds its place in secularised states and societies. On the southern Mediterranean shore, Islamic feminism emerges in nations that are officially secular, albeit where Islam is the state religion (as forms of Christianity are in some European states) but where (unlike in such European countries) state and religion are bound up through religiously grounded personal status or family laws. In countries of the south

Mediterranean religion remains a strong force in everyday culture. In the south Mediterranean, Muslims belong to old majoritarian communities (with the exception of Lebanon) and in the north are typically members of still relatively new minority communities in countries which have difficulty accepting Muslims and people of non-European ethnicities as equals in their midst. Through the interchange of Islamic feminist thought and of lessons learned from activist campaigns on both sides of the Mediterranean an egalitarian Islam can be seen slowly but perceptibly to have a positive impact in fostering more egalitarian cultures, states and societies. A new Mediterranean Islam is part

of a new Mediterranean in the making. For both Islam and the Mediterranean, the process will be long and tortuous, but, it is to be hoped, with a light at the end of the tunnel.

NOTES

¹ I wrote the paper in English in 2005-06; it should be read with this time frame in mind. I thank political economist Danilo Zolo for inviting me to contribute to this Mediterranean volume and forcing me to rise to the challenge of thinking Mediterranean. I thank Abdennur Prado for generously responding in detailed emails to my questions and offering information and insights, and for sending me materials.

² For a recent study see Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

³ For reference to the early use of the term Islamic feminism among Muslims from non-Western societies see Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?" in Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) pp. 242-52. Originally published in *al-Ahram Weekly*, 17-23 February 2002.

⁴ On women and conversion see Karin van Nieukerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006. In this volume see Margot Badran, "Conversion and Feminism: Comparing British Dutch and South African Life Stories."

⁵ See miriam cooke, *Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature: Women Claim Islam*. London: Routledge, 2001.

⁶ See "Introduction to the Second Edition," xv-xxi, Margot Badran and miriam cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*. (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004, 2nd edit.

⁷ Feminist consciousness and early feminist thought in the Middle East first surfaced in the latter decades of the 19th century as I discuss in my book: *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. Published in Arabic as Arabic translation: *Raidat al-Harakat al-Niswiyya al-Misriyya wa al-Islam wa al-Watan*. Cairo: Supreme Council of Culture, 2000. For

women's early written expressions of this see: Margot Badran and miriam cooke, *Opening the Gates*. On feminist consciousness and expression through biography in Egypt (where Arab women from the Levant lived and wrote) see Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes be Multiplied: Biography and Gender in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. On secular feminist movements and their contexts in the southeast Mediterranean see: Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*; Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; and Ellen Fleishman, *The Nation and its New Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement: 1920-48* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁸ See Kumar Jayawardena's classic *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed, 1986).

⁹ Rupp, Leila J., and Verta Taylor, "Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach to Twentieth Century Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26 (2): 363-386, 364.

¹⁰ PhD dissertation: Ca'Foscari 2006. For a commemorative piece on the eightieth anniversary of the 1923 IAW meeting with a focus on the Egyptians and Italians see Margot Badran and Lucia Sorbera, "In No Need of Protection: Nationalist Militants and Determined Feminists," *Al Ahram Weekly* (Cairo) 24-30 July 2003.

¹¹ See "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?", Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) pp.243-52.

¹² The full title is: "The Egalitarian Revolution of Islam: Reflections on the Rights of the Woman in Islam and her Status in the Social System the Qur'an Inaugurated in the First Century [Hijra]." *Islamverde* Nov. 1999.

¹³ Webislam, Sept. 2005.

¹⁴ New York: Addison - Wesley, Trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland. 1991; originally published as *Le harim politique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987).

¹⁵ Both books are published by Tawhid press in Paris.

¹⁶ This talk is available at www.oumma.com. Lamrabet also draws attention to Saida Rahal Sidhoum, “Féministe et de culture musulmane dans la société française, une identité contrôlée,” *Confluences Méditerranée*, no. 7, automne 1998.

¹⁷ By way of noting past and present circulations of knowledge Tajik scholar and feminist Munira Shahidi in a major work *Ibn Sina and Dante* (first serialised in Moscow in Russian, then published as a book in Dushambe in Tajik and later published in translations in Italy and other Western European countries) explores the transfer of liberal thought from Central Asia to Spain and from there to the rest of Europe in the Middle Ages. See Margot Badran, “Tajik Gender and Identity,” *Al Ahram Weekly*, 10-16 May 2001 (based on an interview with Shahidi).

¹⁸ Email communication from Abdennur Prado, Mar. 14, 2006.

¹⁹ Abdennur Prado, “About the Friday Prayer led by amina wadud,” www.webislam.com (Spanish Islamic website) which also appeared on the websites of WLUML and alt-islam. While Prado does not draw specific attention to Ibn Rushd and Ibn Arabi in this piece he talks about their contributions in an email communication of Mar. 24, 2006 to the author.

²⁰ Hisham Aidi, “Let us be Moors: Islam, Race and ‘Connected Histories’” in *Middle East Report*, no. 229 offers an account of the spread of Islam among Spanish-speakers in the Americas as well as in Spain.

²¹ On the conference see the organisers’ website www.feminismeislamic.org; for accounts of those attending see Ulises Mejias, “A Jihad against Gender Oppression,” www.ideant.typepad.com and Asra Nomani, “A Gender Jihad for Islam’s Future,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 2005

²² Published in 1992 in Kuala Lumpur by Penerbit Fajar Bakati and in 1999 by Oxford University Press.

²³ Published in 2002 by University of Texas Press.

²⁴ Zainah Anwar is the author of numerous articles. Her “Muslim Women Speak Out,” appeared in *Islam 21: A Global Network for Muslim Intellectuals and Activists*, no. 36, May 2004, pp. 9-12, also on line at www.Islam21.net.

²⁵ She sent her paper titled “On the Status of Woman in Islam” to the Barcelona conference. See her website: nadiayassine.net. Her book *Toute voils dehors* (Casablanca: Le Fennec, 2003) is now available in English as *Full Sails Ahead* (Iowa City: Justice and Spirituality Publishing House, 2006). Also on Nadia Yassine see Mark LeVine, *Why They Don't Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2005, passim.

²⁶ By way of noting past and present circulations of knowledge Tajik scholar and feminist Munira Shahidi in a major work *Ibn Sina and Dante* (first serialised in Moscow in Russian, then published as a book in Dushambe in Tajik and later published in translations in Italy and other Western European countries) explores the transfer of liberal thought from Central Asia to Spain and from there to the rest of Europe in the Middle Ages. See Margot Badran, “Tajik Gender and Identity, *Al Ahram Weekly*, 10-16 May 2001 (based on an interview with Shahidi).

²⁷ Al Saadawi was joined by others in leading a vigorous movement for women's rights and a whole generation of women were influenced by her landmark book *al-Jins wa al-Mar'a* (Woman and Sex, published in Beirut in 1972).

²⁸ On Islamic interpretations of wife-beating and the issue of interpretation and authority see three articles in *Hawa*, vol 2. no. 3 (2004: Hadia Mubarak, “Breaking the Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-examination of Verse 4:34,”) pp. 261-89; amina wadud “Qur'an, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities,” pp. 316-36; and “Gender Biases in Qur'anic Exegesis: A Study of Scriptural Interpretation from a Gender Perspective,” pp. 337-6.

²⁹ Published by the House of the Arab Book in Barcelona. This incident was widely reported in the international media, which often appeared more intrigued by the negative face this put on ‘Islam’ than by the feminist issues it raised. While I have read much of this reportage which supplies a certain amount of information, I have drawn in particular from Abdennur Prado's article “The Qur'an in the Spanish Courts: The ‘Kamal Case’ and Freedom of Islam in Spain available on webIslam. In a personal communication Prado said that this incident proved a turning point in Spanish Islamic feminism as it forced people to take an unequivocal stand.

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