

A Perspective on the Women's Mosque Movement in Cairo

■ Leslie R. Lewis

Doctoral candidate, University of California, San Diego

Debarking the plane, with children in tow, we move into the receiving area of Cairo International Airport and find a tearful family waiting for us to emerge from the final baggage check. Every one of our numerous female relatives present is wearing the new Islamic dress, covered head to foot to hand in a dark flowing *abaya*. We embrace them all, but discover someone missing from their welcoming ranks: my husband's sister, Ameena. It is explained that, *mash' Allah*, Ameena has taken the *niqab*, a small sartorial addition (a rectangle of fine mesh material covering the face and eyes) that nonetheless signals a radical change in her life choices and physical movement. Ameena has sent word that she will meet us at home; she prefers to avoid mixing with unrelated men at the airport.

Back at my mother-in-law's apartment we settle in and relax after our long flight. The conversation meanders from topic to topic: relatives, marriages, children, illnesses, local events, world affairs. When the extended family has gone and it is just the immediate family alone together, my husband queries his sister about her apparent escalation of religiosity.

"*Ley, ya Ameena? Ley kidda?*" he asks, "Why do you do

this! Why do you hide yourself away from the world?" Ameena gives her calm explanation, "It is my choice. I do it to please God, because it is preferred."

We find, as we spend months with the family, that everything Ameena does is for God. For everything she receives, ranging from food to gifts to her own natural talents, she gives thanks to God. She offers up words of gratitude even for hardships, illness and want, because she believes Allah's greater wisdom is at work. There is a plan to which she is not privy, but she trusts it because she trusts in God. "*Il-hamdulileh*" is her constant refrain. "I thank God for all."

The extent to which Islam infuses Ameena's life has grown steadily over the years. She gradually put away what she considers *haram* or forbidden: her music collection, her guitar, her occasional attendance at the cinema, the viewing of non-Islamic television, any casual interactions with men, birthdays, and singing. She says, when I ask her if these things were difficult to give up, that they are mere secular distractions which take one's focus away from the appropriate pursuits and behavior. She is happier now, she insists, and it seems that she is.



Ameena undertakes extended prayers through the night, sometimes drifting off to sleep in a supplicatory pose. She memorizes the sonorous liits and caverns of the Qur’anic arias. Her collection of cassette sermons and Islamic literature is extensive. She fasts on Mondays and Thursdays, as well as the middle of each Islamic month, following the practice of the Prophet. She breaks her fast with dates and milk, according to his advice, drinks only while sitting, yawns with her palms facing outward, sleeps only on her right side, all following Mohammed’s words or model.

Are her habits strange? Extreme?

In fact, Ameena is representative of a growing number of women and men who believe that, contrary to trends across the world towards relegation of religion to a private and periodic sphere apart from civil society and one’s everyday living, Islam should infuse every aspect of one’s life and society at large. One of my informants emphatically stated, “Islam is not something that can be put aside in the corner, no. It is a part of everything.” Islam, they say, provides a clear prescription for living

a life that is ordained by God and (thus) the basis of a just and moral society.

Though many people would lump this movement into the broad category of Islamist, the goals of the group are in fact distinct. While Islamism, or political Islam, takes as its focus the transformation of the secular nation-state to an Islamic version of the same (by various means, depending on the philosophy of the particular group), women in what has been called a mosque or piety movement (Mahmood 2001) focus instead on teaching and studying Islamic scriptures and translating them to everyday social and personal practices.

Women in the movement do seek the transformation of many aspects of social life in Egypt, towards greater piety and new (Islamic) moral standards. However, their starting point is the individual rather than institutions, laws or political structures. Explicit social or political change is not their immediate aim. Participants expect that an Islamically-grounded society will evolve gradually. In the end, however, this outcome is more an effect of their efforts than their driving goal.

Participants are motivated by a desire to please God, to be closer to Him. They believe this occurs through self-discipline and by developing Islamic virtues through daily practice and repetition until such virtues become automatic and ingrained in the self. One seeks to learn God’s laws and desires, and in following these, an individual pleases and feels closer to Allah.

Practices

Women in the movement organize and participate in lessons and discussions about how to live better – more Islamically correct – lives. They try to culture an “ideal virtuous self” through specific forms of prayer, dress and bodily comportment (Mahmood 2001). Beyond developing new habits of the body and mind, women engage in *dawa’*, or proselytizing the faith. They advise others on proper forms of behavior, dress, worship, and interaction. They also undertake “good works,” i.e., give of their time and money towards charity (economic and health charity), teaching skills and providing opportunities to other (disadvantaged) women. In some cases, they form groups and even organizations in order to engage in this work more efficiently. They do not march on the streets or lobby the government. On the contrary, they believe that one should not try to force change in either governing structures or specific leaders. They contend that the unknown consequences could be far worse than the present circumstances. In the recent elections almost none of my informants bothered to vote. They expected a Mubarak victory, and believed that this was the proper course of things. They do not typically involve themselves in public politics (though many have strong opinions about local and international affairs). Rather, they focus on the moral and religious state of their society, using themselves as starting points, and moving gradually outward to their own families, immediate social networks, and beyond. They believe that a leader comes from society and thus reflects the values and practices of his/her people. If, they explain, the people are more pious and Islamically adherent, a leader will eventually emerge with that same disposition, and this will be better for all.

“And in the meantime?” I ask.

“We must wait,” is the universal response. It is a patient, optimistic creed.

“*Insha’Allah*,” they say, “we will all improve with God’s help; society will improve.”

Context

This latest wave of Islamic revivalism, termed *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* (or the Islamic awakening) by participants, emerged in the late 1970s, gaining momentum through the eighties and nineties. The Egyptian context within which it has grown has been one of authoritarian political rule, limits on civil liberties and human rights, high

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unemployment, increased cost of living and infiltration of Western commercial interests with many negative results for the majority of Egyptians. Popular discourse holds that Western influence has led to rampant materialism and corruption of traditional morality. Linked to this, and fueled by the rhetoric of growing Islamic groups, many people blame political, social and economic woes on the diminution and separation of religion in everyday life and seek to remedy this by re-integrating Islamic principles and practices into civil society. They propose an Islamic social model as the way to improve society and people's lives as an alternative to what is widely perceived to be the unredemptive failure of nationalism, pan-Arab socialism and Western capitalist models. Morality has come to be perceived as the central social problem in society and Islam as its only solution.

Over the past 20 years the number of Islamic books, schools, religious programs, mosques and NGOs has multiplied. Local mosques hold religious lessons for women with 25-500 attendees from across the socioeconomic spectrum (Mahmood 2003). The combined efforts of numerous devout and committed individuals, spreading *dawa'*, combining it with charitable works, teaching and learning and preaching, serves to build an ideological infrastructure and fosters a specific brand of behavior and interpersonal practice and discipline. Islamic influence can be seen and heard throughout the public sphere. Shop windows, lampposts, trashcans, kiosks, and fences carry religious admonitions, and, some even believe, messages from God, as when the name of Allah is perceived in a fallen leaf or in the ornate design of a fence (Starrett 1995).

Fruit stands and taxi cabs broadcast public sermons at decibels so high that transactions are hampered. This amalgam of visual and aural imagery creates an atmosphere in which the discussion and practice of Islam is not merely tolerated but commonplace. Hirshkind (2001) writes of a conversation among an older woman, a teenage boy and a middle age driver riding in a taxi about whether listening to music is *haram* in Islam. Such occurrences are typical; people frequently debate points of Islamic jurisprudence and advise others on proper forms of prayer and comportment.

Early trailblazers rejected liberal (often Western) styles of dress and modes of interaction between women and men that had become more common through the middle of the twentieth century. They adopted a new form of Islamic dress (protesting its historical legitimacy as authentic wear for women at the time of the Prophet, worn most exemplarily by the Prophet's wives). They eschewed casual interaction with unrelated men, arguing that such behavior invited temptation and sin. Today,

three decades of increasing Islamic religiosity have left their mark and the *hijab*, or modern head and neck scarf, is the norm. Certainly there are variations within this larger pool, ranging from the more conservative *khimar* and *abaya* to the basic head covering that young women combine with snug fitting, Western-style clothes. But the baseline standard for modesty and proper dress has been raised. Now it is women who don't cover who stand out and who signify a more questionable morality and religiosity. Despite the Islamic dictum that one cannot judge what is in another's heart, women in particular are scrutinized for their choice of garments, and the strength of their faith (and thus, morality) is presumed based on this superficial evidence. Such a context similarly "ups the ante" for those interested in demarcating a particular brand and level of piety. In order to distinguish oneself as pious beyond reproach, one must not only cover with a headscarf and clothes that cover most of the body, one should wear a garment that conceals all suggestion of bodily form, accompanied by the *niqab*. Growing numbers of women walk the streets in just such a fashion, murmuring recitations from the Qur'an and sunna as they move through the streets.

Social Composition

One of the remarkable features of this movement is the extent to which it cuts across class boundaries, traversing levels of income and educational attainment. Contrary to modernist assumptions about the reliance and connection of the poor to religion, the poor do not comprise the majority group in this case. It is the middle classes, many of them high school and university educated, that make up its bulk. But women from all social classes can be counted among its ranks. This is a point of pride since part of the discourse of the movement is that all are equal in the eyes of God. Lila Abu-Lughod (1997) argues that the discourse of morality associated with the "new veil" works to produce a false sense of egalitarianism that distracts from the significant and ongoing problems of class inequality in Egypt (503). Class, though muted as a discourse, does indeed seem to affect the experiences and motivations of individual participants in the movement, as well as society at large.

What Draws Women?

The range of motivations for women is broad. There is no doubt that many women are powerfully drawn to this particular expression of Islamic living and for whom mak-

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ing life changes is rewarding psychologically, even empowering. Women report feeling that they are doing something deeply right, and experience a sense of righteousness and inner strength as a result. Durkheim recognized the powerful feelings evoked by such devotion and commitment to God.

The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, wither to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them (416).

Participants describe a sense of sureness in their hearts, a “love for all things for the sake of God.” They exude this passion and conviction in their words of advice and guidance to others. A number of women describe feeling almost “held” physically within the protective hands of

God during times of difficulties. “He smoothes the way for me,” one woman reported. The devout believe that their obedience and sacrifice is worthwhile because it will ultimately be rewarded. They may struggle day to day with trying to be better, to rise in the early morning for the *fegr* prayer, to fast, to be calm in the face of anger, to dress as they deem they are commanded to do in layers of black clothing in the pressing heat of Cairo summers.

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However, they believe they are on the right path, the “straight path,” and they believe that if they are sincere and they live by their understanding of God’s will, they may escape the fires of hell and be accepted into paradise.

The women who expressed these moving sentiments were all of comfortable means. They had the time and financial support to engage in extensive prayer and study, to engage in *dawa’*, and to be a part of organized and casual charity work. They had cars and homes with air conditioning. But women’s lives, their access to power and economic resources as well as their social and legal standing vary from one community or class to another (Tucker 1993). I did not see the same kind of passion and fervor among my informants in the poorer classes. These were women who worked as maids, vegetable vendors and occasionally factory workers. They struggled financially, and bore the greater burden of legal and bureaucratic institutions (lacking the money for bribes or legiti-

mate services that speed one through the morass of red tape). They pressed into hot, crowded public transportation to travel to work across the city. They were often the recipients of aid from Islamic NGOs or informal mosque charities. In order to collect aid, however, they were scrutinized for worthiness by their benefactors and subtly pressured to adopt the pious, modest practices of the movement, as well as to attend *durus*, or religious lessons. Probably some attended willingly, inspired by the faith and commitment of charity workers who provided help where the government failed to do so. But it is difficult to know the internal psychological landscape of these women, i.e., the extent to which their commitment equaled that of the women with more ample means who had the luxury of being less preoccupied with everyday survival.

It begs the question: Given the economic, social and political conditions in which women live, work and worship, are the choices that they make about levels of expressed and practiced religiosity, gender and sexuality truly “free” in the sense of a completely autonomous subject and an open field of options? The rhetoric of the movement certainly argues so. But actors’ decisions and actions are inevitably over determined. They are limited and shaped by modern social practices, institutions and discourses. Economic conditions, family traditions and political and religious pressures and policies influence behavior as well. And yet, in spite of these molding forces, these women are agents; they act, they choose from among multiple subject positions. They affect the very social field that constitutes them. So how do we account for their decisions and actions, and for their attachment to this particular religio-social project?

Push and Pull Factors

A range of socio-psychological factors simultaneously draw women towards a particular discourse and form of practice. The women’s mosque movement offers a deep sense of connection and purpose. Durkheim (1954) spoke of the importance of social cohesion and solidarity, and believed that these phenomena, when present in people’s lives, buffered the blow of personal crises. Researchers Soraya Duval (1998) and Sherine Hafez (2003), in two separate studies of Islamic women’s groups, noted that a strong emphasis on sisterhood, community, and shared values contributed to women’s sense of well-being. “The sense of solidarity, satisfaction, and bonding that comes from helping others was emphasized by many of the women. They found it was the main reason they kept coming back to the group” (Hafez, 60).

One woman in the movement, named Hala, made a gradual evolution towards greater and greater piety (in

dress, prayer, and everyday comportment) following an incident in which she experienced profound disconnection from her family, her primary source of social and psychological support and intimacy. Years prior, a rumor had been circulated that she was going out during the days while her husband was at work (and thus, by implication, engaging in an extramarital affair). The veracity of the claim was never established, but the damage to her reputation and marriage was done. She became depressed and inward for many months, enduring the wrath of her husband (whose physical violence escalated in the wake of the rumors), and the cool distance of her in-laws.

Slowly she began to adopt more modest dress and pious practices. She prayed with regularity and took solace in the Qur'an. After many months and repeated requests, her husband finally allowed her to leave the house to attend public sermons and religious lessons with his (famously devout) female cousin. Since this was for a valid purpose (Islam), and his extended family was encouraging such behavior in all family members, he found it hard to say no, in spite of his continued bitterness and skepticism. After much time, the acrimony in the marriage dissipated. Hala became more serene. With every new Islamic step (the addition of gloves, the addition of extra fasting and prayer) she felt the warmth of the family opening to her again. It was clear that while she may have sought spiritual redemption or rewards in heaven, there was a very real motivation in her daily life, a relational incentive. Her world changed dramatically and positively from her perspective as a result of her "Islamic awakening."

Such relational rewards are likely a powerful incentive, not only for women starved of connection and companionship, but for ordinary women as well, for whom familial idioms and structures resonate deeply with their cultural models and early experiences. Suad Joseph (1996) describes a particular mode of relating, both within families and in the larger social field, which she terms patriarchal connectivity. It is characterized by gender and age domination, but also by love, protection and distinct roles and expectations which offer comfort and clarity in an often ambiguous, ambivalent world. Women are subordinate to male authority but they also (at least theoretically, and in the imagined ideal) have sacralized, unambiguous spheres of female authority. For example, the education and moral formation of children is the most important task of the family and the mother is the central figure in these activities.

In many ways, the mosque movement mirrors the cultural-familial form described by Joseph. Members refer to one another as "sisters," and there are hierarchical rela-

tionships (with *Haajas* and women who are models of piety in the upper echelons), along with a patriarchal authority figure (sheikh). Such idioms and relations offer a familiar touchstone in a world perceived to be hostile and fraught with enemies, both political and spiritual.

Foucault's concept of self-refinement through technologies of the self (1988) is useful for understanding the sense of power and accomplishment that women report experiencing. Disciplinary technologies work not through repressive mechanisms but rather through comparatively subtle and persuasive forms of control. Disciplinary forms of power are located within institutions (hospitals, schools, religious institutions) but also at the micro level of society in the everyday activities and habits of individuals. They secure their hold not through the threat of violence or force, but rather by creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviors and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves. The Islamic Awakening has offered up a new norm of womanhood that appeals to women and acts as an ideal to which they aspire.

In our extended family, the challenge to improve the self is explicit and frequently discussed. Family members often vocalize their desire and efforts to be better, to be more modest, to carry out God's commandments and desires with greater reliability and sincerity. They fast for long hours and engage in acts of charity and kindness, suffer the stifling heat in heavy clothes, and hold all this up to God asking that it be accepted. As they learn larger and larger sections of the Qur'an, come to know the stronger Hadiths by heart, and perfect their posture during prayer and repose they feel a gratifying sense of accomplishment. Family members both self-monitor, propelling themselves to greater piety and virtue, and advise one another on every detail of proper comportment and behavior. Excellence nets internal satisfaction, as well as external kudos and recognition from within the family and mosque circles. The individual is thus spurred on to greater self-refinement.

Additional Perspectives

One observer in Egypt, a Muslim and self-described secular women's activist, proposed that some of the women who are adopting this new, extreme religiosity are experiencing personal crises that come to be expressed in

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Islamic terms because religion is the primary conceptual frame through which people perceive and make sense of the world. She described a woman named Heba who lost her brother to cancer and felt the juggernaut of mortality. Following her brother's death, Heba made a sudden and extreme shift toward greater piety, to the confusion and frustration of her husband and children. She spent most of her time in prayer and avoided going out. Her only solace was God and her hopes for the afterlife. She believed herself to have become unforgivably focused on the material world and its distractions, and remiss in her devotions to God. She now sought to right the balance.

At least six other women were known to have similar stories. The ordinary pressures on women in Egypt today are strong enough even without specific psychosocial burdens like death and serious illness. Women face conflicting demands and discourses about what makes (and what ruins) a good Muslim woman. Often the messages are contradictory and irreconcilable. Women are left feeling a failure on all fronts. Arlene Macleod (1991) wrote of some of the tensions lower middle class women face in her study of aspects of the larger Islamic movement.

Middle class women are equally, if not more, plagued by conflicting and impossible expectations. Their work outside the home is often viewed as superfluous, in contrast to that of poorer women which people accept as necessary for survival. As a result, middle class women are criticized for not staying at home and embracing their primary role. Families suffer, it is believed, and morality declines when mothers are absent. With so many discursive, social, economic, and familial pressures operating, it is not surprising that many women would seek spiritual succor and guidance.

Conclusion

The women's mosque movement in Egypt offers women many rewards. It provides a guiding purpose, explicit rules for living, a framework for understanding the world, and a social network of like-minded people. There are certainly secular alternatives in the social field where many of women's psychological, social and economic needs might be met. However, as poverty and marginalization grow, and as people's disillusionment and discontent with the secular nation-state grows, more and more people will be drawn to alternative solutions, with religious options foremost among them.

All names in this article have been changed.

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