

## CONFRONTING CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

### *Limitations of Secularization and Western Feminism in the Muslim World*

EMMA HOWE

WITH THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENTS AND THE ENDURANCE OF RESTRICTIVE MARRIAGE LAWS, IT APPEARS THAT PREVIOUSLY ACCEPTED WESTERN THEORIES SUCH AS SECULARIZATION AND FEMINISM HAVE BEGUN TO LOSE THEIR GENERAL APPLICABILITY AND VALIDITY IN THE MODERN WORLD. IN ORDER TO ADEQUATELY ADDRESS THIS ISSUE, IT IS CRUCIAL TO EXAMINE THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THESE WESTERN THEORIES WERE INITIALLY DEVELOPED, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE DEVELOPMENTAL AND CONSEQUENTIAL FAILURES OF THE “SECULARIZATION THESIS,” AS WELL AS THE CONSTRUCTION OF WESTERN FEMINISM AND ITS LIMITATIONS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD. BY CONTEXTUALIZING THE BIRTH OF THESE TWO CONCEPTS, ADDRESSING THEIR LIMITATIONS, RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THEM WITHIN THE MUSLIM WORLD, AND OFFERING DIVERSE ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE ISSUES, THIS PAPER SEEKS TO BETTER ASCERTAIN THE NUANCED RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL, AND IDENTITY-RELATED ELEMENTS THAT UNDERLIE THE UNSUCCESSFUL INCORPORATION OF THESE WESTERN CONCEPTS INTO THE MUSLIM WORLD.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most puzzling issues facing society today is the claim that certain “progressive” Western paradigms, i.e. secularization and feminism, have lost their validity due to failures to take root in the Muslim world. In order to properly address this issue, it is crucial to examine the context in which these Western theories were initially developed, taking into account the development and consequential failures of the “secularization thesis” and the limitations of the second wave feminist movement in the Muslim world. The Western narrative of Islam is largely shaped by Western media, which tends to portray the religion as unfairly biased in terms of gender issues and its implicit assumptions of the inferiority of women. Yet, when taking into account the views of many prominent Muslim intellectuals, especially those who highlight the importance of the large gap between what Islam stands for and what the social reality is in the Arab world, particularly in terms of secularism and the status of women, the alleged incompatibility of Islam with these Western constructs becomes unclear.

The belief that secularization is simply the natural and inevitable result of modernization—i.e. that the entire world will be rid of religion as it progresses—seems to be increasingly unlikely in the modern world. In fact, according to Professor Peter Berger of Boston University, the process of secularization, which mainly concerns a decline of the social significance of religion is now proving to be false.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, this “secularization thesis” has failed to



A PROTESTER WAVING THE TUNISIAN FLAG DURING THE ARAB SPRING PROTESTS (COURTESY OF FLICKR)

reflect society, especially when considering the increasingly salient role that Islam has played in the Arab world. The main issue here is that since a major component of Islam deals with how society should be managed and regulated via Sharia law, secularization comes not just as relinquishing legal social control, but also implies renouncing a substantial part of Islamic doctrine, one that teaches that all aspects of human private and social life equally represent God’s will. This is what makes secularization so complex and limiting in the Arab world, as it entails the restructuring of the entire Islamic identity and culture.

Secularization renounces the holistic character of Islamic teaching, and thereby derails a great number of social norms and regulations declared to be God’s law. In fact, some Muslim scholars even suggest that when Islam becomes entangled with Western theories such as secularization, the Arab world succumbs to Gharbzadegi (or “West-struckness”). The famous Iranian writer and scholar Jalal Al-e Ahmad argues that if the Arab world were to “continue to behave as Westerners superficially” then it would be seen as “the donkey who posed as a lion and ended up being eaten by one,” revealing the perceived dangers of surrendering to the Western standard that would surely incite social alienation and eventual self-destruction.<sup>2</sup> Since secularization in the Arab world entails the reimagining of Islam and its transformation “to a shell of its religious philosophy,” it seems very unlikely that the secularization thesis will hold and continue to be viewed in high regard in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Western intellectual feminists have often found serious issues with Islam due to its discrimination of gender and its implicit assumptions of the inferiority of women. Often failing to acknowledge the gap between Western and Muslim social realities for women, these elites often see feminism in a reductionist manner.<sup>4</sup> Because feminism in the Middle East is not an idea that arose indigenously, but rather one that came to the Arab world externally, many Muslim women have come to see the movement as a new sort of colonialism that overgeneralizes women’s rights. Thus, in order to fully grasp what feminism means in the Arab world, one must first understand the limitations of Western feminism, following the transplantation of the concept into a “Middle Eastern, predominantly Islamic environment, and its different interpretations in the locally different cultures of the Middle East.”<sup>5</sup> Though many Western feminists argue that Islam is simply incompatible with feminism, others believe that Western feminist movements have laid the framework for

the development of a new sort of feminism, one that takes into account issues surrounding Islam and Sharia law.

When viewing Western feminism in this context, it seems that two crucial factors are at play: first, the Arab world seems to have increasingly complex cultural traditions regarding women, and second, the society's attitudes and relationship toward the origin of feminism are problematic as the concept comes from the Western world. Lelia Ahmed, an Egyptian American writer on Islam and Islamic feminism, states in her book *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* that "since the late nineteenth century, when feminist ideas first began to gain currency in the Middle East, a Middle Eastern society's formal stand on the position of women has often been perhaps the most sensitive index of the society's attitude to the West—its openness to, or its rejection of Western civilization."<sup>6</sup>

Since both secularization and Western feminism have had similar impacts on the Arab world, it is useful to examine the initial development of each concept and the reasons prohibiting their successful indoctrination into the Arab world. By first contextualizing the indigenous birth of these two concepts, addressing their limitations, re-contextualizing them within the Arab world, and offering divergent academic perspectives on the issues, this paper seeks to better identify the nuanced religious, cultural, and identity elements that underlie the unsuccessful incorporation of these Western concepts into the Arab world.

### RETHINKING THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

#### *Failures and Limitations of the Secularization Thesis in The Arab World*

Throughout the nineteenth century, many believed the world to be progressing in a linear manner that would ultimately lead to a complete separation of religion from the public sphere. As this discourse spread throughout the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its developers, i.e. the vanguard social thinkers of the time such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, argued "that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society."<sup>7</sup> This secularization thesis was not a new concept, however, as leading intellectual figures had been postulating that religious practices were simply products of the past that would soon be surpassed in the modern era ever since the Age of Enlightenment. As point-

ed out by scholar John L. Esposito, modernization and development theory had postulated for decades that "the development of modern states and societies required Westernization and secularization" and that religion would thereby become restricted to private life.<sup>8</sup>

Stemming from what appeared to be clear evidence of secularization in Western Europe after the Second World War, "the death of religion was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century."<sup>9</sup> American sociologist C. Wright Mills, a staunch proponent of the thesis, argued that the secularization was unequivocally sweeping across the globe in the twentieth century, loosening the dominance of the sacred and that "in due course, the sacred [would] disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm."<sup>10</sup> Yet despite the rapid de-Christianization of Europe in the late twentieth century, the fervor for secularization did not spread to other areas of the world. In fact, much of the world, the Middle East in particular, was starting to see a great resurgence of religion instead. This increasing religiosity became even more pronounced after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought with it the rise of "Islamic fundamentalism" and various other forms of religious nationalism, serving to further entangle Islam within the public sphere.

Islam complicates the secularization thesis because the Quran is seen as the source of ultimate legislature and serves to link religion and the public sphere. This can be seen, for example, in Saudi Arabia's very strict public connection between Islam, politics, economics, and other areas of society. Even greater evidence stems from the fact that the nation is called the "Holy House of Muslims" as it contains the two holiest mosques in the Islamic world: Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, destination of the annual Hajj pilgrimage, and Medina's Masjid an-Nabawi, burial site of the prophet Muhammad. Thus, Saudi Arabia is also the perfect example of the failures of secularization to take root in the Muslim world. In Saudi Arabia, Sharia law is a source of the state's rule and legislature, as it places Islamic rules at the forefront of public life and society, which goes directly against the supposition that modernization necessitates the complete separation of religion from the public sphere.

On the other end of the spectrum, Turkey, one of the only nations in the Muslim world to have successfully "secularized," is now seeing numerous attempts to reject secularism in favor of Islam. Modern Turkish politics reveals the

struggle between religion and secularism, as Islamic parties have tried to fight for a return to religious law by reinstating Islam in the state's secular constitution in recent years. Secularism in Turkey has been widely contested by various Muslim intellectuals, especially regarding its origins, as it came about as a sort of radical fundamental secularization over all aspects of life without taking into consideration the demands of a large number of Turkish people who refused to live without Islamic rules. For nations like Turkey, "secularism is not simply the separation of religion and politics but, as past and current history demonstrates, an anti-religious and anticlerical belief."<sup>11</sup>

These two examples highlight the failures and limitations of the secularization thesis in the Muslim world, illustrating the complex relationship between secularism and Islam in countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. While the former takes hardline stances against secularization, the latter, which initially embraced secularization in its efforts to modernize, is now experiencing great backlash from the Islamic religious groups and political parties. This increase in religious fundamentalism has now opened the doors for challenging other Arab secular regimes, including Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan, perhaps signifying the need for a new teleological paradigm.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Re-Contextualizing Secularization in The Arab World*

In contrast to the nineteenth century, when many believed secularization to be inevitable and inextricably linked with modernization, today's world is now seeing the increasing incidence of religious fundamentalism in the world, especially in the Middle East, as evidence for the unraveling of this thesis. While the conventional wisdom of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was that religion would become a solely private affair, the ideology has been widely contested in much of the Arab world today. Thus, it seems the resurgence of Islam in Muslim politics and society has triggered, what John L. Esposito has called, a "retreat from the secular path."<sup>13</sup>

For over three decades, the Muslim world has seen the rise of Islam in public life in newly created Islamic states and republics, as well as from mainstream political and social movements and in major jihadist movements. The global political resurgence of religion has challenged, and perhaps even discredited, the theory of secularization. The debunking of secular paradigms has been particularly salient in the Islamic world with the occurrences such as the Iranian revolution, the emergence of new Islamic repub-

lics in Iran, Afghanistan and Sudan, and the use of Islam by Muslim governments and opposition movements.<sup>14</sup> Though some Muslim critics speak of the collapse or bankruptcy of secularism and the need to replace it with religiously based states, others seek to modify secularism by placing it in a more religious, pluralistic framework.

Proponents of secularization have often viewed it as the only means to promote tolerance, pluralism and fairness in a society by ensuring that the government is not dominated by any one religious ideology. As Talal Asad warns, however, secularism does not necessarily guarantee peace and tolerance, despite its roots in the liberal Enlightenment movement. Asad warns that "a secular state does not guarantee toleration," but rather "puts into play different structures of ambition and fear" where the law never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to regulate violence.<sup>15</sup> This negative view of secularism has led many Muslims, and Islamists in particular, to cast out secularism as stemming from a completely foreign, inaccessible ideology imposed on the Arab world by colonial powers. Putting religious fundamentalism in stark contrast to secularism, Islamists have constructed an ideal model reflecting religious principles guiding the Ummah (community) in all areas of life, aspiring to renege on traditional Islamic society and values.

In response to these issues, the renowned judge and Arab historian Tariq al-Bishri presents several reasons why all Muslims should reject the idea that modernization and secularization are inextricably linked. Citing Muhammad Ali's "so-called" secular regime in Egypt, Bishri argues that Ali's regime was not purely secular, but rather it took aspects of military science and technology from Europe to



A WOMAN ATTENDING A PROTEST (COURTESY OF FLICKR)

*“Thus, until the day comes when a genuine state based off Islamic consultation (shura) principles is established, the next best option is to implement secular democratic regimes, as such regimes abide by the rules of reason.”*

aid an essentially Islamic political entity. He believes that the non-sectarian Islamic movement started in response to the “geographically-based secular nationalist movement,” which allowed it to grow until there was a clear split between “an inherited and revitalized Islam and a newly-arrived secularism.”<sup>16</sup> This initial split, according to Al-Bishri, has amounted to a fully entrenched “war of ideas” between the two sides to this day.

Though many see little hope for the secularization of the Arab world, others still believe the concept of secularism itself can be re-contextualized and reinterpreted within the modern Arab world. In fact, several prominent Islamic intellectuals and activists such as Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im and Rachid al-Ghannouchi have dedicated their lives to demonstrating the complex relationship between the theory and the political and historical aspects of the Islamic tradition within modern states. Ghannouchi, in particular, emphasizes that a major issue underlying the secularization of the Muslim world is that fundamentalism and secularism are almost always pitted against each other. Ghannouchi argues that authoritarian secular governments take the worst of secularist doctrine and use it as a weapon against Islamists by equating Islam with extremism and secularism with democracy. Paradoxically, this often results in the secular regimes themselves serving as impediments “to the preservation and development of civil society.”<sup>17</sup> Ghannouchi contrasts an ideal, Islamic civil society with that of “pseudo-secular” and “pseudo-modern” regimes, linking secularism with liberalism and highlighting the factors of Western secularism that serve to undermine society, “i.e. violence, crime, isolation and lack of trust and cooperation between neighbors.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Ghannouchi claims that the process of secularization is inextricably linked with liberalism, which he sees as an outlet for selfishness, greed, and individualism to grow from its distinctly western roots.<sup>19</sup> By separating the doctrine of secularism from the Western roots of secularization, Ghannouchi rejects the common assumption that religion leads to violence and extremism in favor of a toler-

ant, pluralistic Islamic world where religion is closely linked to both the public and private sphere.

Though it seems that a state based on religious principles as well as pluralistic tendencies is perhaps the best adaptation of secularism in the Middle East, Ghannouchi and many other prominent Muslim intellectuals recognize that this ideal regime will be very difficult if not impossible to achieve under current circumstances. Thus, until the day comes when a genuine state based off Islamic consultation (*shura*) principles is established, the next best option is to implement secular democratic regimes, as such regimes abide by the rule of reason and are less harmful than despotic systems of government.<sup>20</sup>

#### *An Intellectual Conversation: Berger vs Berger*

Up until the 1980s and early 1990s, many social scientists believed that the modern world was becoming increasingly less religious. Renowned theologian Peter Berger was particularly influential in the development of this “secularization thesis,” which is quite astonishing as he is now one of the most adamant challengers of the paradigm. In 1974, Berger began to refute some of his previous suppositions about secularization, arguing it was a mistake to assume that modernization necessitates a global decline in religiosity.<sup>21</sup>

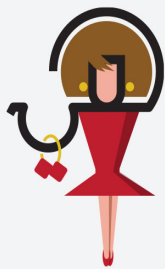
In the late 1960s, Berger had made two very important contributions to the secularization thesis: first, he argued for the “increased rationalization of the world,” and second, he promoted the impact of the pluralization of life worlds<sup>22</sup> on the “plausibility of religious belief systems.”<sup>23</sup> Berger’s 1963 essay on the Israelite prophets was especially crucial in sowing the seeds of rationalist monotheism in the Old Testament, building upon the framework that Max Weber and Robert Merton had laid out for secularization by supposing that Judaism, Christianity and Protestantism had inadvertently “nurtured the seeds of their own decline.”<sup>24</sup> He also asserted that there was no way for the world to modernize while maintaining a religious attitude



in the public sphere due to the conflicting nature of pluralism and the natural progression of tolerance. Berger is also quick to address the political and social consequences of cultural diversity. He claims that if the modernizing state must encompass diversity, it logically follows that it must become increasingly accepting towards religious diversity in the private sphere in order to avoid high levels of social conflict. This relegating of religion to the private sphere, Berger asserts, is the only way for a society to properly incorporate and accept many competing religions without biasedly imposing one on its people.

Years later, however, Berger repudiated his earlier claims of the linear progressivity of secularization, arguing instead that “the world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”<sup>25</sup> Berger thinks that due to the failure of intellectual elites to recognize the limitations of their theory in areas of the world other than Europe, the “whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.” With the rise of religious fundamentalism in the world and public sphere, Berger believes there must be some factors preventing the success of the secularization thesis in the Muslim world.

Berger also reflects on his contributions to the development of the secularization thesis, claiming that secularization is inherently flawed because of its predominately Western origins and is “essentially a globalization of the Enlightened intelligentsia of Europe.” This is problematic because the intelligentsia consists mostly of a non-representative minority of elite thinkers who at the time were ignorant of the mass support for religion in the Arab world. Berger claims that it was their failure to take into account the



AN ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF THE ARABIC WORD FOR SHE “HIYA” (COURTESY OF BEHANCE)

distinct cultural and religious differences of Islam that ultimately led to the demise of the secularization thesis.

Berger goes on to describe how his only visit to Iran occurred in 1976, two years prior to the Iranian revolution, and though all of the intellectuals he met were opposed to the shah and expected a revolution, none of them thought this revolution would actually succeed. About the same time, his wife, who was lecturing in Turkey and on her way through Istanbul, noticed green flags flying from houses and storefronts.<sup>26</sup> She asked her host, an enlightened university professor, whether these flags signified a resurgence of Islam. He replied, “Not at all, they are just put up by migrants from the provinces, ignorant people, who will never have much of an influence.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the dismissive reaction of intellectual elites to religious fundamentalist movements allowed for the creation of an intense division between the westernized, secularized elite and the more obdurately religious general public.

Berger ultimately concludes that though fundamentalism is destructive for democracy, it is crucial to recognize that there exist both religious and secular fundamentalists in the world. Both are unwilling to question their assumptions and tend to be militant, aggressive, and contemptuous of anyone whose thought differs from theirs. Berger points out that “there are fundamentalists of one stripe who think that religious tyranny is around the corner if a Christmas tree is erected on public property,” while there are fundamentalists of the other stripe who believe that the nation is about to sink into moral anarchy if the Ten Commandments are removed from a courtroom.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Berger believes that the secularization thesis has seen its last days and that the root of its failure stems from the negligence of intellectual elites to recognize increasing notions of religiosity in areas of the world such as the Middle East. Perhaps it is now more accurate to say that the Western world is the exception to a new type of theological thesis, rather than to say that the Muslim world is the exception to the secularization thesis.

## RETHINKING WESTERN FEMINISM

### *Limitations of Western Feminism in the Arab World*

Second-wave Western feminism began in the 1960s and was characterized by the formation of active networks of women’s groups in the United States and parts of Europe. Its inception is often dated from the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, in which Friedan calls for a feminist revolution that “had to be fought

## *“[T]he key distinction between the current and past definition of feminism is the inherent ideological differences between Western feminism and Islam...”*

because women quite simply were stopped at a state of evolution far short of their human capacity.” While there was a diversity of perspectives within second-wave feminism, including liberal, radical, and socialist/Marxist approaches, much of this work was predicated on the concept of “universal womanhood.”<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this meant that no attention was paid to racial or cultural distinctions/ variations, allowing Euro-American feminists to wrongly assume that their voice represented the experiences of all women.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, African American feminists as well as Third World feminists are now challenging Western notions of feminism, arguing they cannot adequately address marginalized groups of women. They claim that Western feminism only represents the realities of a particular group of women, namely, First World, white, middle-class women. In fact, Muslim feminists such as Sa’diyya Shaikh point to major shortcomings of the Western feminist discourse, arguing that because general feminist thought ignores issues related to cultural and social differences, it cannot be used to empower Muslim women. Thus, she and many other Muslim intellectuals believe it is now their duty to “reflect the conceptual difficulties and ideological biases experienced by many groups of Muslims with regard to certain developments in Western feminism.”<sup>31</sup>

Shaikh defines feminism as including a critical awareness of the structural marginalization of women in society and the engagement in activities directed at transforming gender power relations in order to strive for a society that “facilitates human wholeness for all based on principles of gender justice, human equality, and freedom from structures of oppression.”<sup>32</sup> However, the key distinction between the current and past definition of feminism is the inherent ideological differences between Western feminism and Islam, which are embedded in a history of larger civilizational harangues between the Islamic world and the West.<sup>33</sup> Gender discourse in contemporary Islam is haunted by a deep history of conflict between early European colonial encounters in different parts of the Muslim world. As a result of the processes of imperialism

and globalization, neo-colonial power structures exist throughout the economic and social spheres of the Muslim world. From the perspective of many Muslims, Euro-American cultural hegemony remains largely coupled with a prejudice propagated against Muslims. This problem is accentuated by the Western stereotyping of Islam as a “violent, medieval, and, especially, misogynist religion,” as reflected in the enduring legacies of colonial scholarship on Islam.<sup>34</sup>

The homogenization of women within dominant Western feminist paradigms, in particular, has led to limitations on the ideology’s applicability, serving to further marginalize women that live in societies with certain cultural traditions and values. The Western feminist approach does not examine the particular material conditions and ideological frameworks that engender disenfranchisement for a specific group of women. Instead, many Western feminist intellectuals cite very basic examples of disempowerment in order to prove the general thesis that women as a group are “powerless.” For example, as Omid Safi writes in *Progressive Muslims*, “Western feminist discourses that represent the hijab as simply symbolic of Muslim women’s subjugation often muddy both the particularity of such a phenomenon as well as the multiple levels of meanings that it may have for different Muslim women.”<sup>35</sup>

These different interpretations have led to a very complex relationship between “Western feminism” and the Muslim world to coalesce, one that is further complicated by the imposition of Western feminist ideals and ideology on Muslim societies. Though many Western scholars argue that recent trends in the Middle East are serving to undermine previous accomplishment of the feminist movement, this assertion woefully ignores the underlying cultural, social, and political factors at play in the Arab world. For example, women in the Middle East are actually increasing their political activism by embracing what many in the Western world assume to be oppressive practices, instead using these traditions as tools to effectively work within the social, cultural and political system in place in the Middle East.

### *Re-Contextualizing Feminism in the Arab World*

In response to the failures of Western feminism and current social pressures stemming from the rise of Islamist ideology, many modern Muslim feminists are now seeking to adopt a new strand of feminist thought. Many have sought to find aspects of gender equality within the Quran, working within the confines of the Islamic ideology in order to reclaim their Islamic rights. This type of behavior has opened the door for a new wave of feminism in the Muslim world. “Islamic feminism” stems from the belief that the feminist commitment is integral to Islam and responsive to the core call to justice in the Quran. However, there still exists a clear schism between the true egalitarian ideals of Islam and the problematic reality that many Muslim women experience injustice in the name of religion.<sup>36</sup>

Though past feminist movements laid down crucial groundwork for the development of Islamic Feminism in the Middle East, these movements were also inherently flawed as they often ignored the cultural, social, and economic needs facing the most impoverished, religious women in the Middle East. Even more concerning is the fact that the modern world seems to be engaged in a period of religious revivalism, which clearly points to the failure of Western women’s movement to address these crucial cultural differences and traditions. The Western stereotypes surrounding the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism rarely encompass the nuances of how the movement has affected national and local politics and women’s rights issues in the Muslim world. For example, women’s demands for greater political voice in any Islamic-based state may have seemed absurd half a century ago, yet great progress is being made in many of these places today. In fact, there are now twice as many women in school in Iran than there were under the previous “secular” regime.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, the place of women is not set within Islamic societies, but rather amenable to each society’s perceived needs and historical contexts and backgrounds.

Thus, many modern Muslim feminists have rejected traditional colonial feminist representations of Muslim women as the “victimized” and voiceless “other,” in support of the re-defining of feminist discourse, providing a more heterogeneous representation of cultural and identity-related factors. Islamic feminism not only addresses contextual issues, but it also takes into account the multiple identities of women. By definition, the ideology makes the salient the question of religious identity in the experience of Muslim women, allowing for

the “collusion of feminist discourse with Muslim women’s articulation of their engagement with gender issues.”<sup>38</sup> This re-contextualizing of feminism in the Arab world allows for the crucial development of a meaningful dialogue between groups of Muslim women and women from other religio-cultural backgrounds.

### *An Intellectual Conversation: Mohanty vs Wadud*

In staunch opposition to Western notions of feminism, author and scholar Chandra Mohanty stresses the importance of recognizing the political significance that the term “colonization” has come to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the “Third World.” In particular, Mohanty argues that the way in which the second wave feminist movement has defined feminism has had a lasting impact on the way Muslim women describe their own experiences and struggles. Mohanty sees immense fault in the fact that privilege and ethnocentric universality are fundamentally part of feminist theory, as this has led for women in the third world to see themselves as living in the context of a world system dominated by the West.<sup>39</sup>

Mohanty argues that, because Western feminism entails cross-culturally monolithic notions of patriarchy, this only leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous type of “Third World Difference.” She believes the term perfectly captures the essence of the oppression of most (if not all) women living in the Third World, stemming from vastly different patriarchal and gender-related traditions and values. Western feminists are quick to “appropriate and “colonize” the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes in these countries” within the context of this “Third World Difference.”<sup>40</sup> Mohanty claims that this very process of Western homogenization and systematization, which has allowed for the oppression of women in the Third World, must now be re-interpreted within a third world context.

One such significant effect of the dominant “representations” of Western feminism is its likeness to imperialism in its view of particular third world women. The “average third world woman” leads a predominantly restricted life based on her feminine gender and also her being “Third World,” something that Mohanty feels represents ignorance, poverty, lack of education, tradition-bound, and vic-



timized. She suggests that modern representations depict women with the freedom to make their own decisions, which stems from implicit self-depiction of Western women as being educated, modern beings with the freedom to make their own decisions. The distinction between the Western representation of women in the third world and the Western feminist self-representation is the fact that “the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent has allowed western feminists to cast Third World women in terms of ourselves undressed.” Mohanty claims that this problematic premise must be fully overcome if there is to be any success for the Islamic feminist movement moving forward.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to Mohanty, Muslim scholar and professor Amina Wadud is not so quick to reject Western feminism, seeing the ideology as an important catalyst for the larger feminist movement in the Muslim world.<sup>42</sup> Wadud has made it her mission to argue against the influence of patriarchy on their interpretation of the Quran and the practices of Muslims, as she believes this has constricted the true realization of the Quranic message of equality and justice. One of her key arguments is that the patriarchy is a form of shirk or making partners to God, and because one fundamentally contradicts the Quranic vision of equal and reciprocal relationships when one places men above women, this violates the prerequisite that God is supreme. She remarks that though she used to think that “Islam” and “Muslim” were one and the same, she now recognizes that there a number of situations that may arise where one may be forced to choose between the two.

Since writing the book *Qu’ran and Women: Rereading The Sacred Text From A Woman’s Perspective*, Wadud has consistently found others calling her “Western” and a “feminist.” But rather than see this as a negative label, Wadud optimistically interprets the name-calling, taking “Western” to mean that she “can only be who [she] [is]: a daughter of the West, born and raised American of African descent.<sup>43</sup> Yet, she feels the true intent of the label is to be meant in a reductionist manner that is anti-Islamic, which she finds to be rather offensive. Similarly, she interprets the term “feminist” to mean that all women are human beings, yet again asserts that others simply use the term in a derogatory fashion without reference to the true definition of feminism. Wadud is appalled that even though she never refers to herself by this title, this does not prevent others from calling her “out of her name,” as if she does not even count as a human being.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, with great humility, Wadud remarks that in the battle for gender parity where the trenches are deep and the fighting unfair, she has come to the conclusion that she must keep leading the fight for feminism in the Muslim world. She feels that one of the most special merits of Islam is *din*, or way of life, is that the “establishing and re-establishing orthodoxy sets an agenda for Islamic praxis,” and that one cannot stand on the sidelines in the face of injustice and still be recognized as fully Muslim.<sup>45</sup> Though she does not necessarily agree with the term “Western feminist,” she still dedicates her book to all women: young and old, wise and simple, rich and poor, who are [her] sisters in Islam.” Though Wadud made the decision in her early twenties to become Muslim and did not personally witness Islam as oppressive to women, she still devotes her entire scholarly life to rereading the Quran to find Islamic equality for women.

Both Mohanty and Wadud agree that Western feminism is flawed in its ability to properly address cultural and Islamic issues in the Muslim world, but both women share very different interpretations and perspectives for why they feel this way. While Mohanty staunchly opposes Western feminism as another form of oppressive colonialism, Wadud more or less accepts the label in the sense that she is in the most basic sense a “Western Feminist” due to her background and activist work, both of which have fueled her passion to keep finding new ways to place issues of equality and feminism within the context of the Quran.

#### CONCLUSION: A NEW WAY MOVING FORWARD

Since both secularization and Western feminism have had similar impacts on the Muslim world, it is useful to examine the initial development of each concept and the reasons prohibiting their successful indoctrination into the Muslim World. In recent years, with increasing occurrence of religious extremism as well as enduring practices such as veiling and arranged marriages, it seems these Western teleological theories long believed to promote stability and tolerance are now losing their general applicability and validity. Paradoxically, it seems that secularization and western feminism have often served to undermine these values through the marginalization of religion as well as women in the Third World.

One of the key issues with secularization in the Middle East is that secularism, a political doctrine that grew out of Christian Europe, is often seen as being indissolubly linked with a history of foreign colonial invasion and oc-

cupation. For many Muslims, the efforts of colonial regimes to impose secular political doctrines from above were only the beginning of a supposition that secularization was inextricably linked with modernization. As Abdelwahab Elmessiri writes, “secularism is a world-outlook that is embedded in the simplest and most innocuous cultural commodities, and that forms the unconscious basis and implicit frame of reference for our conduct in public and in private.” Elmessiri believes that the secular state as it stands in the Arab world is not only aimed at dominating public life, but has also problematically made it its goal to exploit private life.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it seems increasingly likely that a more tolerant society requires a more pluralistic view of religion for society, a paradigm that may be able to better incorporate issues related to Islam and Sharia law as the supreme governing legislature in the Muslim world.

In a similar vein, many of the traditional feminist movements in the Middle East came out of secular movements based on Western models and espoused Western ideologies. Yet, this type of movement was often in direct contention with the powerful religious elite, as it often ignored basic religious doctrine and challenged the patriarchal structure of Islam itself. Thus, many of the religious elite saw this rebellion by women as a symptom of a bigger disease, Western imperialism, or “Weststruckness,” a problem that had to be refuted at all costs. As this tension threatened the power relationship between the political elite and the religious elite, many Muslim feminists felt that the only way they could move their feminist agenda forward was through the creation of a new thread of feminist dialogue, one that was able to operate within the bounds of Islam. Again, this is primarily a reason why Western feminism has failed in the Muslim world. It fails to take into account the context and culture of the Muslim world. Thus, it seems that the best way for Muslim women to move forward is to realize that they no longer have to abandon their socio-cultural identities to have a voice, but can instead refuse to operate within the bounds of Western feminism by placing their feminist movement within the context of Islam.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, if both concepts were to be reinterpreted with regards to the cultural, religious, and identity-related boundaries within the Muslim world, this would allow for the creation of a new Muslim identity—particularly the renegotiating of gender and religious identity. Furthermore, it is important to note that identity negotiation is, to a large extent, dependent on future circumstances and the nature of the Muslim world. Though the modern Western world

believes Islam to be prohibiting the development of tolerance, secularism, democracy, and women’s rights, we may very well see a change in the dominant paradigms of secularization and feminism if these ideologies can be reinterpreted in a more pluralistic and inclusive manner.

## ENDNOTES

1. Peter L. Berger et al., *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 87-88.
2. Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "The Outline of a Disease [Weststruckness]," In Lloyd Ridgeon, *Religion and Politics in Modern Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 163-174.
3. *Ibid.*, 173.
4. For the purposes of this paper, the term elites refers to a select and small group of citizens and/or organizations that controls a large amount of power. Most of these selected groups are constantly searching differentiation as well as separation from the rest of society.
5. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Norris Pippa and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
8. John L. Esposito, "Islam and Secularism in the Twenty-First Century" (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 1.
9. Pippa and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 2.
10. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32-33.
11. Nazik Saba Yared, "Secularism and the Arab World: 1850:1939" *Choice Reviews Online*, 2003.
12. Binbing Wu, "Secularism and Secularization in the Arab World" *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (in Asia), (2007): 63.
13. John L. Esposito, "Rethinking Islam and Secularism (ARDA Guiding Paper Series)" (State College, PA: The Association of Religion Data Archives at the Pennsylvania State University), 3, accessed December 4, 2016.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6-7.
16. Esposito, "Rethinking Islam and Secularism" 5-6.
17. Rachid Al-Ghannouchi, "Secularism in the Arab Maghreb" (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 97-124.
18. Esposito, "Rethinking Islam and Secularism" 9.
19. *Ibid.*, 6
20. Al-Ghannouchi, "Secularism in the Arab Maghreb" 97-124.
21. Peter L. Berger, Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas, and David Martin, *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 87-88.
22. Life worlds can be defined as the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective "worlds" of the sciences, which employ the methods of the mathematical sciences of nature; although these sciences originate in the life-world, they are not those of everyday life. The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Life-world." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 1998. Accessed January 19, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/life-world>.
23. *Ibid.*, 88.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 87
26. The green flags are associated with Islam as it is said in the Quran (Surah 18:31) that "those who inhabit paradise will wear fine silk garments of green." This particular verse has thus been interpreted over the centuries and the color green has now been associated with Islam for a very long time. "Islamic Symbols." *Islamic Symbols*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.
27. Peter L. Berger, "Secularization Falsified," *First Things* (2008), accessed December 5, 2016.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Here, universal womanhood refers to the values and rights that the predominantly white, educated, middle-class women of the second wave feminist movement believed to be undeniable. Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women, and Gender Justice*. Pg 153. (2003).
30. Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women, and Gender Justice" In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 153
31. *Ibid.*, 152
32. *Ibid.*, 147
33. *Ibid.*, 148
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 152
36. *Ibid.*, 155
37. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003)
38. *Ibid.*, 158-159
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*
42. Born into a Methodist African-American family, Wadud became a Muslim at the age of twenty, and moved on to become a Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the Virginia Commonwealth University and was also one of the founders of the group Sisters in Islam "Amina Wadud." *Islam & Feminism*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2016.
43. Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).
44. *Ibid.*, xviii, xix
45. *Ibid.*
46. Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence, and Destruction" (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 52-81.
47. Safi Omid, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 2-3. *Pluralism* (Oxford:

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