

**An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion
and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements**

Sherine Hafez

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An Islam of Her Own is a valuable addition to the growing literature on Muslim women's pietistic subjectivities. Unlike others, however, Sherine Hafez is unsatisfied with the unitary portrayal of the identities of Muslim female activists as a struggle between secular and religious subjectivities. Locating herself and the women she studies at the permeable boundaries of these tropes, her study problematizes the neatly bordered parameters of each and argues,

instead, for movement, mobility, and transition between religious and secular spaces. She moves the discussion of religious subjectivities from Saba Mahmood's influential study of non-liberal subjectivity in the Egyptian women's mosque movements (p. 11) to "the complexity of negotiation" and the "inconsistent appropriation" of both secular and religious spaces in fashioning desire among female activists (p. 5).

The articulation between the secular and religious, Hafez explains, is seamless. Activists move easily in the spaces between "pious self-amelioration and secular political values" (p. 5). They make "normalised distinctions between religion and secularism" that are "liberal in principle and secular in practice," and yet simultaneously view "Islam as encompassing all aspects of life" (p. 13). These slippages, she argues, confirm that the subjectivities of activist Muslim women in Egypt are "varied, heterogeneous and unstable" (p. 13) and not fully understood when packaged as non-liberal.

In the first two of the book's seven chapters, the author establishes her project and critiques the representation of religious subjectivity as both emotional and irrational. Chapter 1 examines the uncritical linkages between culture and subject formation, as well as the presumed distance between religion and the public sphere, and chapter 2 presents her arguments for a seamless and fluidly constructed subjecthood. In chapter 3, she contextualizes the historical process of women's Islamic activism in Egypt through modern state building, liberal reform, and nationalism.

Chapters 4 through 6 take the reader into the core of the ethnographic material Hafez uses in her analyses. At first, in chapter 4, she examines the history of and political location of "al-Hilal," the name she chooses to protect the identity of the organization on which the study centers. Chapter 5 comprises a series of profiles of al-Hilal, among them its founder, and chapter 6 examines the social milieu of "Mehmeit" village, where al-Hilal has a development project. This chapter also makes a strong argument for the principles of liberal secular modernity in Islamic activism. The development project, with its instances of record keeping, concern for education and hygiene, along with the contractual relation between benefactors and the impoverished community, illustrates her contention that religious activism draws from secular liberal practices. The final chapter brings our attention back to the contextual nature of subject production and its shifting inconsistencies.

Al-Hilal's founding, its activists, and their work in the village form the ethnographic material for Hafez's arguments. She contextualizes al-Hilal through key ideological distinctions and historic moments in the Egyptian women's movement. Al-Hilal illustrates how Egyptian women, located be-

tween the discourses of modernity and secularization on the one hand and symbols of tradition on the other, embody and also reconstitute this intersection through their activism. As they work to improve their role and status in society, Egyptian women move seamlessly through public and private spheres and thereby make public what the state intends to be private. These effects, she states, “cannot be captured as a single or unitary subject position” (p. 59).

Her analysis also highlights the construction of desire. Her assessment, in chapter 6, of the villagers as modern desiring subjects offers a cogent analysis of the relationship between the female activists and the villagers. The activists’ noble intentions quickly transform into the civilizing force of authoritative change agents whose motivations are sourced upon their own desires for hygiene, household management, material production, and education rather than the desires of the villagers. Using theories of desire and subject formation, she illustrates how disciplinary processes enable the creation and realization of new desires and new material possibilities (p. 143).

Hafez is successful in the primary aim of her study: to describe the geographies of desire that fashion subject formation in Egyptian women’s Islamic activism. However, in questioning the bounded nature of the secular and religious in women’s activism, she also questions the activists’ self-fashioning. The women define their activism in terms of their love of God, their dedication to Islam, and an Islamic ethic of service to the needy (p. 98). To achieve these aims, they construct their religious experience as private and not political. Given that they consider themselves religious, on what grounds is it acceptable to suggest that their self-fashioning is not only religious but also echoes liberal secular modern thought or to argue, as Hafez does, that subject making is the result of imbricated discourses of secularism and religion when activists do not talk about these imbrications?

While the author’s project is clearly not to undermine the activists’ self construction, in identifying the complexities and negotiations they represent, the activists’ accounts of themselves may be replaced by the researcher’s analysis of them. This is a recurring concern in ethnography. A discussion among the activists on the imbrications of religious and secular discourses might have enhanced the study and also told us what the activists think of these imbrications. Her argument for the unstable and continually forming subjectivities of activists is, however, well illustrated in the accounts of al-Hilal’s members, particularly in those of its founders.

By arguing for the mutual imbrications of religion and modernity, Hafez makes new tools available to the longstanding discussion of Muslim women’s activism as Islamic and/or feminist. She moves away from Talal Asad, Homi

Bhabha, ideas of transcultural understanding and hybridity in Muslim women's activism to Judith Butler's gender theory and the rhizome model of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. This allows for an analytical shift from an account of a bounded, stable, and finalized self to an unstable self accentuated by contradictions, inconsistencies, and continuous becoming (p. 104). It further allows her to reject feminist representations of Islamic women torn between Islam and secularism, as well as the reified binary constructs of state and domestic spaces mediated through the struggle over women's bodies. Among her further achievements is the critical assessment of the category "religion" and its normative application in studying Muslim movements.

On opening her examination, Hafez suggested that by recognizing "the theoretical concomitance of religion and secularism as mutually productive discourses," we might "open new considerations of desire and subject production in Islamic movements" (p. 4). Her analysis of Muslim women's religious activism reveals the concomitant principles of Islamism and secularization to show how thinking about religion and the secular in imbricated ways allows for new understandings of their mutual production.

Hafez's conclusions recall the scenes of protest and prayer at Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution. Given the events that unfolded thereafter, I look forward to her future work, particularly her insights on the imbrication of the secular and the sacred, both at Tahrir Square and in the electoral success and popular challenge to President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood.

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