Being a Pious French Muslim Woman

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There has been much recent discussion about the challenges that French laïcité poses to the integration of Islam. According to the notion of French laïcité, a particularly strict version of secularism, public spheres are defined in a more normative way than in other European societies; equally, the demand on the individual to conform to those norms is also much stronger. It requires, among other things, to respect the “obligation of restraint,” which means to refrain from displaying any signs of religious or other particularistic allegiance.1 From this follows that the Islamic code of modesty that pious Muslim women adopt—most visibly embodied through the headscarf—implicitly denotes a questioning of the definition of the laïque public sphere and therefore significantly endangers their successful participation in these places. Another matter which, though less likely to attract public attention, also involves a physical commitment to one’s faith is the performance of salat, the prayer ritual performed routinely by pious Muslims. 

In this context, upholding one’s religious practice cannot be taken for granted and pious women generally have to consider whether or not, and how, to introduce these practices. Practically, this means to reflect on the degree of visibility, which might be accompanied by either a claim for expressing one’s religiosity or by an accommodative stance in regard to the demand for restraint in public. While Islamic rituals and bodily (hence visible) practices are first and foremost ethical self-disciplines crucial for fashioning the pious self,2 in a secular context they are generally understood as “symbols,” by which these acts become “texts” to be deciphered by others. In a context of migration and minority, they are potentially deciphered with negative connotations. None epitomizes this better than the hijab. Pious women are highly aware that they have to engage with this negative reading by the majority society. This is where identity politics comes into play.

Struggling for recognition

One of the central considerations for many pious Muslims in France is the question of gaining recognition from the majority society both as pious and modern Muslim women. This struggle for recognition is regularly framed in terms of claiming rights, i.e. the right to live as a practicing Muslim in the French society. It is by referring to rights that many women frequently issue statements like the following: “We have to demand our rights. We should go to work with our veils, if we are qualified. We have to show that we exist.”

Not only does the much-discussed question of the headscarf, but also the less-debated question of praying, give rise to such demands. And as much as the hijab has done, salat has the potential to give rise to a struggle over the definition of secular space. The following account given by one woman about the situation at university clearly reflects the tensions which arise from these claims; tensions which can be played out in an almost theatrical fashion: “We used to pray under the staircase, outside the building. But to bother us, the secretaries walked their dogs there to dirty the place. My brother told me that they prayed in a room in the cave of his university. But when the janitors found out, they closed the room. The students decided to pray in the hall in front of everyone. Finally, the administrators preferred to reopen the room. There are a lot of stories like that.”

Religious practices such as salat and hijab, which render oneself visible within public spheres, mark and claim one’s presence—something which is one of the more general objectives of contemporary Islamic movements.3 The search for recognition through visibility—a visibility which is also articulated in terms of “Islamic self-confidence”—equally reflects the desire of Islamic revival movements to reject the inferior image of Muslims and to claim, with the same act, pride for a consciously appropriated identity. Therefore, from a “public deficit,” the Islamic identity becomes a “subcultural advantage.”4 This hints at a typical feature of the struggle for recognition by minority and stigmatized groups: visibility is considered a source of power whereas its opposite, invisibility, becomes a sign of oppression.5

The struggle for recognition is however not always articulated through the principle of public visibility and can, at times, be articulated in quite different terms, as for example by referring to da’wah. While this term is also used by the women in its classical meaning, that is “calling” to the righteous path of Islam, here it denotes the struggle of representing “Islam” positively to the non-Muslim other, thereby countering its negative image. Since this “representative” da’wah is now perceived to be the precondition for the (social, political, and spiritual) well-being of the Muslim umma in the West it has thereby been elevated to the status of religious obligation.

While this form of da’wah can equally be practiced in different domains of social interaction and everyday politics, pious Muslim women often feel that they have a particular role to play in counteringact the negative images of Islam, which prevail in French majority society. One of the most effective means to counter these images is, according to these women, to participate actively and successfully in society—especially by pursuing a professional career and thereby embodying the image of a “modern” Muslim woman.

However, the wearing of hijab as well as the punctual performance of the ritual prayer is difficult to accomplish in the workplace. Not only because, in the French understanding, the hijab constitutes an illegitimate intrusion of a private practice into the public sphere, but also because of the general public perception of these practices in France. In this perception, the headscarf, as the successive debates of the “headscarf affairs” have shown, is almost unanimously disapproved as a symbol of female oppression. Correspondingly, praying regularly (i.e. visibly) is considered either as a sign of lack of integration or of holding radical views.6

In this context, pious women face two seemingly irreconcilable Islamic duties: the honouring of (socially stigmatized) religious obligations and the promotion of da’wah in the sense of well representing Islam. And while both duties are inscribed into the overall goal of constructing a morally strong and flourishing community, they are grounded on completely different logics: Islamic dress and prayer are considered to be part of the Sharia, the clearly defined norms at the level of ‘ibadat and mu’amalat that function as crucial self-practices for the constitution and consolidation of the pious subject one aspir

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leading a pious life. As a woman who teaches in an Islamic organization explained: “If I claim my rights but do not also ask for Allah’s help, my approach is wrong. If I put … my hope in human beings instead of in Allah, my approach is wrong. Of course, you have to claim your rights, although this is pretty hopeless these days, but I do not lose hope in Allah’s help in this situation.”

Without actually doubting the usefulness of claiming rights, many women regularly insist on the importance of attributing the first “agency” to the divine rather than to the human. This idea needs to prevail in the believer’s conscience and should never be forgotten whenever claims, such as the right to wear the headscarf at work or the right for a prayer space, are articulated in opposition to the wishes of the majority society. By placing one’s “hopes in Allah” rather than “in men,” the idea of an autonomous subject, determining alone its acts, is clearly rejected.

Closely linked to confidence in God is the duty of patience (sabr) in the face of hardship. When talking about the difficulties they faced in regard to the headscarf, either by not finding employment because of the veil or by being obliged not to veil (whether out of considerations of da’wa or out of necessity), many pious women refer concretely to sabr. One woman, for example, who unveils for work and for whom this act is not unproblematic, addresses the idea of trust in God and sabr: “Insha’allah, times will change. I have confidence in Allah and one day, we will be accepted with our headscarf. We have to be patient right now.” The statements of these pious women invoke somehow a divine intervention at the same time as they insist on the necessity of resisting and combating actively pressures and prejudices in regard to the headscarf. While the latter appears to be affirming agency, the former appears to abandon the concept altogether. To better apprehend the apparent contradiction, Asad’s reflections on the concept of agency are helpful. He shows that notions like suffering and endurance are not synonymous with “passivity,” but that, in certain traditions, they may “create a space for moral action.” That is to say, they render certain modalities of engagement with the world possible and constitute a form of agency, albeit one that is different from the dominant secular, progressive understanding.

**Between visibility and invisibility: a pious negotiation**

The choices pious women make in regard to their Islamic practice within French secular public spheres differ significantly (the concrete social consequences of their choices vary even more). These different choices are the result of the individual and subjective evaluations and interpretations of the different ethical requirements the women are faced with. Accordingly, da’wa is understood as representing Islam or as the cultivation and practice of Islamic virtues, such as placing trust in God and endurance of hardships; requirements which have to be pursued in regard to the overall goal of leading a God-pleasing life.

By analyzing how these particular pious negotiations in the context of French secularity result in concrete choices of visibility and invisibility, it becomes evident how much the constitution of Muslim subjectivities depends on concrete social conditions (here strict secularity and minority condition) out of which new moral requirements ensue. The pious negotiation undertaken by pious Muslim women should be considered one of the contextual practices shaping ethical Muslim selves in a secular, non-Islamic environment.

**Notes**

1. While this obligation legally only affects civil servants and pupils in public schools, in practice, it is required by everyone who participates in the (semi-) public spheres of social life, most notably at the work place.
4. Ibid.
7. See Mahmood, op. cit.

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