Imams in Western Europe

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Islamic female religious authority between agency and governmentality

From the Moroccan model to ‘multicultural’ Europe

Sara Borrillo

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the 2004 reform of the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, which established official women preachers and experts in Islamic Law. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I discuss whether these female religious authorities mark a real evolution in the traditional male monopoly of Islamic spaces and discourses. The study also explores some of the challenges that the adoption of a similar model would imply for Europe. With reference to the recent debates about multiculturalism, gender equality, and Islam, I finish with a reflection on the contemporary challenges of the eventual promotion of official Muslim women preachers and scholars in Europe and the changes they might bring to Islam, religious authority, and the gender equality debate.

Keywords: Islamic female religious authority, agency, dispositive of power, governmentality, multiculturalism

1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse the gender-based reform of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs of Morocco which, in 2004, institutionalized women’s participation in the official Islamic bureaucracy and knowledge-production structures. This reform established *murshidāt* (sing. *murshida*), women preachers who have the task of teaching the ‘right’ Islam in mosques, as well as encouraging *ʻālimāt* (sing. *ʻālima*), female scholars in Islamic Law,
to participate in the construction of a national Islamic discourse. The fact that a woman is allowed to speak about Islam officially and in the public space of the mosque and other Islamic institutions, which are traditionally monopolized by male voices, has been perceived as a significant step towards the application of gender mainstreaming in public – including religious – institutions, and as a form of ‘Islamic State feminism’ (Eddouada and Pepicelli, 2010). Islamic feminism aims at a deep egalitarian access to religious discourse and institutions based on the right to have the authority needed to interpret sacred texts, from a ‘gender jihad’ perspective (Wadud, 2006). From this perspective, religious authority can contribute to questioning the Islamic patriarchal tradition and to affirming gender equality in society (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate that the Moroccan reform analysed here does not aim at establishing respect for legal gender equality in public and private spaces, however inclusive it may be of women religious authorities: it merely renders it in continuity with the patriarchal conception of the gendered division of labour in the country. Therefore, the reform of the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2011) appears to be one of the results of a bi-dimensional political strategy, interested first in disciplining the national Islamic discourse – a project that is contested by some Islamist movements, such as Al Adl wal Ihsane (the ‘Justice and Spirituality Movement’) –, and second in showing that Morocco is respecting the universal gender equality narrative recognized by international conventions on human rights. During ethnographic fieldwork, I consulted the voices of women preachers and scholars of Islam to compare their personal views on women’s rights and liberties in the public and private spheres with those expressed in their functional discourse. In particular, I aimed to problematize whether or not this 2004 reform produces a female religious authority that marks a real evolution of the traditional discourses on gender relations, which have been based on the male monopoly of Islamic spaces and discourses. I have come to consider women preachers and scholars as agents of both central state power and changes in religious authority. I also explored some of the challenges that the adoption of a model similar to the Moroccan one would imply for Europe. Even though the presence of Muslim women in pious movements is increasing in Europe, their claim to religious authority seems to still be contested. With reference to the recent debates about multiculturalism, gender equality, and Islam (Abu Lughod, 2010; Bracke and Fadil, 2012; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006), I finish by reflecting on the contemporary challenges of the eventual promotion of official Muslim women preachers and scholars in the European context and the changes they might bring to religious authority and the gender equality debate.
The dispositives of Islamic power in Morocco

The 2004 reform was meant to restructure the ‘Islamic field’, and was advanced by the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs of the Kingdom of Morocco. It institutionalized the murshidāt (‘female religious guides’), who were charged with iršād, the function of guiding and orienting the believers. They have the task of teaching other women ‘right’ Islam in the public space of the mosque. Moreover, murshidāt work in other domains of the welfare state, such as hospitals, schools, and prisons. At the same time, the reform encouraged the presence of ālimāt, women scholars and experts in Islamic Law, in the national network of ulama councils, official Islamic training schools, and other institutions of Islamic power. The difference between ālimāt and murshidāt resides in the fact that ālimāt have an official religious authority to elaborate the interpretation of sacred Islamic sources based on ijtihād (‘individual reasoning’), while murshidāt spread the official religious discourse. In addition, murshidāt’s work is controlled hierarchically through periodic meetings with local ulama councils and delegations from the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. This reform is relevant, because the presence of women in the traditionally male-dominated official and public Islamic space and discourse seems to be a symbolic change that could influence the patriarchal organization of society, which is also legitimized by the gender divide in religious authority (Mernissi, 1987).

In Morocco, as in all Muslim-majority countries, it is possible to identify a close relationship between Islam, central power, and the patriarchal social order. First, the construction of Islamic legal and ritual knowledge is very important for the legitimation of the central power: Morocco is a monarchy, in which Islam’s central role emerges from the king’s double title of ‘Head of State’ and ‘Commander of the Believers’ (in Arabic, amīr al-mu’mīnīn). Rather than following the common description of the Moroccan political system as a theocracy, I argue that it makes more sense to speak of a nomocracy, following the definition of Muhammad Talbi (1996, pp. 109-112). This term (which comes from the Greek words nomos (‘law’) and kratos (‘power’)) indicates a mixed regime, in which an elected parliament exercises legislative power under the patronage of a figure – the king, in this case – who guarantees the conformity of state laws with a higher law, in this case inspired by Islam. This conformity is present in the Moroccan Constitution, including the most recent version of the text (1 July 2011) that was approved after the uprising sparked by the 20th February Movement in 2011. It is possible to observe the accordance of this last version of the
constitution with the historical symbolic pillars of the nation based on
the Islamic legitimacy of the central power, territorial continuity and
integrity, and the monarchy – well explained by the national formula ‘God,
Homeland, King’.

These constants are strictly linked to the foundations of the state’s
official Islamic discourse, which are the Quran and Sunna, the dogma of
the king’s role of ‘Commander of the Believers’, the theological doctrine
of Asharism, the Maliki madhhb ('juridical school'), and Sufism. At a
social level, the family represents the institution that maintains the
social patriarchal order which, after the achievement of independence
in 1956, was codified in the Personal Status Code (1957), later reformed
and renamed as the Family Code (1993, 2004) thanks to the lobbying
activity of the feminist movement. This code is inspired by Islam, as
well as by the political power that is nourished by the structures that
produce, organize, and spread official Islamic discourse: therefore,
Islamic power in Morocco is a guarantee of both central and patriarchal
power (Charrad, 2001).

A review of Moroccan religious and political studies (Belal, 2012; Darif,
2010; Laroui, 1977; Zeghal, 2005) shows that in postcolonial Morocco
official Islamic power functions through some structures that, from a
Foucauldian perspective, we can consider dispositives (Agamben, 2006;
Foucault, 1976). According to this notion, central power acts through
‘dispositives of control’ that are useful for the production and consolidat-
on of the national ‘regime of truth’, namely the discursive narratives
that influence and discipline the worldview, behaviours, and relations
between citizens. Specifically, a ‘dispositive of control’ is defined as a set
of technologies and mechanisms of the production of truth, namely rules,
rituals, and institutions that are simultaneously imposed by an external
power and internalized by the citizens through systems of beliefs and
feelings (Foucault, 1976, pp. 72-76). In this sense, the ‘dispositive’ can be
interpreted as the main instrument of a repressive power that, through
its own governmentality – the art and processes of governing – controls
and disciplines the sets of values and attitudes of the faithful and citizens.
Thanks to these Foucauldian concepts, it seems possible to interpret as
dispositives the following seven structures of Moroccan Islamic power:

1 The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (2007a, 2007b, 2007c,
2011). It manages the system of awqaf (sing. waqf, ‘endowments’) and
mosques, and supervises all official religious activities in the country
through its mandūbiyyāt ('local delegations'). It provides competitive
examinations and training courses for imams and murshidāt. The
ministry also provides for some institutions of the ‘Islamic legitimization system’ (Darif, 2010): for example, it organizes local and national awards for Quran readings and publishes journals like Daʿwat al-ḥaqq (Spreading the truth) (Fernandez, 2012).

2 The Superior Council (al-majlis al-ʿilmī al-aʿlā) and the local councils of ulama. The Superior Council of ulama is the high council that has the power to issue legal opinions, fatwas, on the conformity of national life and policies with national Islam. It is composed of the most prestigious ulama in the country, while the regional councils of ulama work at a local level.

3 The al-rābiṭa al-muḥammadiyya li-l-ʿulamāʾ; an association of ulama that is considered independent from the central power, but whose general secretary is appointed by the king. According to the secretary Ahmed Abbadi, whom I interviewed, ‘this institution has the role of adapting Islam to modernity’ (Rabat, 4 May 2012).

4 The dār al-ḥadīth al-ḥassaniyya. Established in Rabat, this is the main institution in Morocco for Islamic training of the official ulama.

5 The al-durūs al-ḥassaniyya. Every year at the Royal Palace in Rabat, the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs organizes a set of daily conferences and meetings on Islam. These conferences, first initiated by King Hassan II, take place during Ramadan in the presence of the king, and Moroccan and foreign ulama. During the conferences, distinguished scholars are invited to speak on issues related to Islam and political and social life.

6 Islamic TV and radio. In 2004, the religious channel Al-Sādisa (‘The sixth’) was founded as the sixth national television channel in honour of King Muhammad VI. There is also the radio station Muhammad VI du Saint Coran, which broadcasts Islamic contents.

7 University courses in Islamic Studies. Departments of Islamic Studies are part of the Faculties of Humanities, in addition to courses in Islamic studies and Islamic thought offered by other departments.

Women are now part of these different structures through which the official Islamic discourse is produced and articulated. In the next section, I analyse their different roles and the discourses that – depending on the level of religious authority – are both opening space for the participation of women in the national Islamic discourse and reinforcing that same national discourse.
3  Mapping women’s Islamic professions in Morocco

During four years of fieldwork (2008-2012), I analysed the participation of women in the seven dispositives of official Islamic power described in the last section. My research particularly focused on Rabat, the capital of the kingdom and the core of national Islam, where the central offices of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs that organizes the training course for murshidāt and imams are located. In total, I interviewed more than twenty murshidāt in Rabat, Meknes, Fes, Tanger, Tetouan, and Tata. I also interviewed fifteen ‘ālimāt, including members of the superior and local ulama councils. I also interviewed two imams, three male scholars and academics in Islamic Studies, and nine officials of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. This led me to draw a cartography of women’s participation in official Islamic professions, in which I analysed the work experience and discourse of women preachers and scholars in the seven dispositives of Islamic power described above:

1  At the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, women are preachers in mosques and other educational centres. According to Aziz Darwiche, the ministry’s General Director of the Division for Mosques from 2005 to 2012, 1,021 imams and 359 murshidāt have been trained: women therefore make up 26 per cent of the total number of those trained (interview, Rabat, 23 April 2012). Women are employees as well as officials. No woman, however, is in the highest levels of the administration, as emerges from a United Nations study (UN-Women and Ministère de la Fonction Publique, de la Modernisation et de l’Administration, 2012).

2  In the network of ulama councils, women exercise the role of employees and, more importantly, ‘ālimāt, thanks to a quota system that provides for the presence of at least one woman in every council. Three women are currently (i.e. in 2017) in the Superior Council.

3  In the al-rābiṭa al-muḥammadiyya li-l-‘ulamā’, women are researchers, ‘ālimāt, and employees.

4  In the dār al-ḥadīth al-ḥassaniyya, women are students; there is one female professor of sharia.

5  In the al-durūs al-ḥassaniyya, women are allowed to participate in personal conferences since of 2003, but only one woman has ever delivered a speech during the period of the monthly conference.

6  In religious TV and radio programmes, there are female tele-preachers and speakers.

7  In university courses in Islamic Studies, women are both students and professors of fiqh, sharia, and Islamic thought.
In Table 1, I summarize the in-depth interviews that I conducted with 55 actors in the Islamic field in Morocco.

**Table 1  List of in-depth interview participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Total interviews: 55</th>
<th>Female: 35</th>
<th>Male: 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs</td>
<td>9 officials</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 preachers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulama councils</td>
<td>6 scholars</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-rābiṭa al-muḥammadiyya li-l-ʿulamā’</td>
<td>2 officials</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 scholars/researchers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dār al-ḥadīth al-ḥassaniyya</td>
<td>3 professors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 officials</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-durūs al-ḥassaniyya</td>
<td>2 scholars</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious TV and Radio</td>
<td>some interviewed female preachers work here</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Islamic courses</td>
<td>1 professor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were conducted in three different sections corresponding to the individuals’ socio-economic origins, personal motivation to be part of Islamic dispositives, and individual opinions about women’s rights in Islam and in Moroccan families and society. In particular, I checked if the individual agreed with the gender equality or with the gender complementarity principle. The principle of *takāmul* (‘complementarity’) provides for rights and duties related to the sexual and biological characteristics of women and men, respecting the primary male role of breadwinner and the primary female role of family care and reproduction. This last section was articulated through three dimensions related to the following points:

1. **Marriage.** Questions such as the following: Do women have the right or duty to share responsibilities with their husband, or do they have to accept his decisions? Do women have a role in decision-making processes inside the family? Do women have the right to divorce? Do they agree to the principle of polygyny?

2. **Economics.** Questions such as the following: Do women have the right to work without male permission? Do you think that the unequal system of inheritance is right?
3  **Body and sexuality.** Questions were asked about issues like abortion, the obligation to respect the ‘idda,¹ the relationship between female virginity and family honour, and the phenomenon of violence against women.

Finally, I related the analysis of the views emerging from these perspectives with general questions about the self-representation of the informants as feminists, as Moroccan citizens, and as Muslims. In particular, I asked religious actors whether and in what sense giving women religious authority could change the patriarchal organization of society.

4  **Women's religious authority between piety and agency**

In the scenario described above, I analysed the discourses of women preachers and scholars, paying attention to variations in their approaches depending on their different authority levels. These correspond to their different roles, which for murshidāt consist of irshād (‘guidance in understanding and simplifying Islam’), and for ‘ālimāt consist of the production of ‘ilm, Islamic knowledge based on the capacity to interpret sacred texts through ijtihād (‘juridical reasoning’). I conducted my analysis from a gender history perspective, highlighting the historical gender divide in the religious field and in religious authority that reflects the gendered divide of the public-private continuum of the social and political spheres (Butler, 2006; Harding, 2012; Mernissi, 1975; Scott, 1988). In *Genèse et structure du champ religieux* Pierre Bourdieu underlines the interests of those who produce and spread religious discourses that are useful to maintaining the social order, contributing to the ‘legitimation of the power of dominant groups and to the domestication of the dominated’ (1971, p. 299). Inspired by Marx and Weber, he defines the ‘religious field’ (*le champ religieux*, in French) as a market of religious goods, in which symbolic values and ritual practices are produced, sold, and demanded according to the need of producers to symbolically dominate others. This hegemony is established thanks to a profit derived from a surplus of religious authority capital (Bourdieu, 1971). In this system of power relations in Muslim majority societies, we observe a historical ‘gender division of religious labour’ that Fatima Mernissi explains through a kind of ‘elite’s theory’. According to this perspective, the professionalized

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¹ This is the sexual abstinence period of three menstrual cycles that women must follow after divorce or the death of the husband. The reason for this social practice is to demonstrate that the woman is not pregnant by her earlier husband so that there is no confusion in the patrilineal line.
male elite of ulama and imams works with the central power to marginalize women from the construction of religious knowledge and legal scholarship (Mernissi, 1987). In the Maghreb, Bruno Etienne observed that the ‘sacred’ field has been historically associated with written discourses produced by men, while female religious roles have been limited to an informal space, with the consequent exclusion of women from official religious authority (Etienne, 1990). Indeed, in the Moroccan tradition female religious works have been mainly oral and based on memorization of the Quran and Sunna, but at the same time they have also been crucial for the survival of what we can call ‘national Islam’. In fact, some Moroccan historical sources testify to the historical continuity of women’s participation in the construction of Islamic knowledge as mufassirāt (‘female exegetes’), qāri‘āt (‘female experts in the Quran’), muḥaddithāt (‘female experts in the transmission of the sunna’), and female experts in tajwīd (‘Quranic psalmody’), sīra nabawiyya (‘prophet biography’), and as teachers of Islam in private houses (Al-Matimāh, 1978; Lakhmari, 2012; Zahrawi, 2008) – like in the entire Islamic world (Nadwi, 2007). Nonetheless, some Moroccan scholars also observe a historical ‘invisibilization’ of women from the main Islamic functions and related religious authority (Chickhaoui, 1999).

From this perspective, in the introduction of Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies, Gudrun Kramer and Sabine Schmitdkte answer the question ‘Who speaks for Islam?’ by affirming the male monopoly of religious knowledge and authority (2006, pp. 1-14). According to them, religious authority is the

capacity to influence others’ conduct without the use of coercive power, or the ability – chance, power, or right – to define orthodoxy and orthopraxy; to identify, marginalize, punish or exclude deviance, heresy and apostasy. In the monotheistic religions founded on revealed scriptures, religious authority further involves the ability – chance, power, or right – to define the canon of authoritative texts and the legitimate methods of interpretation. (Kramer and Schmitdkte, 2006, pp. 1-2)

At the same time, religious authority can also contribute to bringing Islamic patriarchal traditions into discussion (Abou El Fadl, 2001). In this framework, Islamic feminists and reformist scholars like Nimat Barazangi, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Asma Lamrabet, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Amina Wadud, and many others aim for egalitarian access to religious discourses and institutions and the necessary authority to interpret sacred texts from a gender equality perspective (Barazangi, 2006; Lamrabet, 2012; Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Wadud,
The supporters of an Islamic feminist approach emphasize the compatibility between the claims of gender equality in international discourse on human rights and Islam, which is conceived as a moral and spiritual system of values promoting social justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination against women (Badran, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 1999).

Based on these considerations, I evaluate the potential and limits of the reform of the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, which appears to aim at modifying the basis of traditional religious authority to create a more equal gender perspective. What content do Moroccan women preachers and scholars profess? Is this content oriented towards gender equality? Can we speak about a new women's religious authority, and in what sense? I attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

5 The gender-based reform of the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs

Royal decrees 1-03-103 of 4 December 2003 and 1-03-300 of 22 April 2004 started the reorganization of the Islamic bureaucracy in Morocco. The first decree reorganized the fields of intervention of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, while the second strengthened central control over the councils of ulama by redefining their functions. After the implementation of the New Family Code in 2004, the Moroccan Islamic sector was also restructured through a gender-based reform that included women in the activity of spreading and producing the content of official national Islamic messages.

A new training programme for preachers has produced 50 women murshidāt and 150 imams every year since 2005. To be admitted to the programme, candidates are required to hold a bachelor's degree and be no older than 45 years. They take exams that assess their knowledge of the Islamic sciences and their capacity to memorize the Quran. Because men can become imams, they are required to memorize the whole sacred text, while women are only required to memorize half. The programme consists of a one-year training in religious and social disciplines, such as the Islamic sciences, Arabic, sociology, economics, law, and history, as well as the arts of preaching and public speaking. This course allows graduates to serve as religious guides across the country. After the training, murshidāt receive a monthly salary of nearly 5,000 Dirhams (nearly €450) for their work in mosques, which consists of teaching the basics of a modern, non-violent, and moderate Islam in conformity with the pillars of national Islam, which
are articulated in the manual Dalīl al-imām wa-l-khaṭīb wa-l-wā‘īz (Guide for the Imam, the Preacher, and the Spiritual Guide; Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 2007a). The classes taught by murshidāt in mosques are structured to address specific disciplines: fiqh al-usra (‘family law’), ethics, and relations within the family and with neighbours. Classes often include explaining and reciting the Quran and exegesis; using Moroccan colloquial Arabic, the dominant language of communication in Morocco, is useful for better conveying their message. There are also counselling sessions where women discuss their social and psychological problems. The work of murshidāt is organized through commissions in partnership with other ministries: women preachers work in prisons, hospitals, schools, orphanages, and nursing homes.

Even though the first women had access to the Islamic University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fes in 1956, in an interview Hanan Haddad, the national Coordinator of the network of the Units for Women, Family and Children of the ulama councils of Morocco, told me that the ‘ālimāt (female Islamic scholars) accounted for around 13 per cent of the total ulama (Rabat, 6 July 2012). Haddad has introduced a journal for women scholars, guides, and preachers called Majallat al-‘ālimāt wa-l-wā‘īzāt wa-l-murshidāt (Review of Female Experts in Islamic Law, Spiritual Guides and Preachers), published by the Superior Council of Ulama since 2011. In this journal, the ‘ālimāt write comments and opinions on different issues related to women's conditions in society and the Islamic field, such as women's access to religious professions and authority throughout history and in contemporary society, or specific questions related to women's rights in Islam. The review has proven to be a first step in the passage from ‘invisibilization’ to public recognition of women's role in the field of official Islam. However, it is noteworthy that although Haddad had been working on this project since 2004, the first issue of the review was published only seven years later, in 2011 (interview, Rabat, 6 July 2012). In the first issue of the review there is a report on the first national meeting of ‘ālimāt, murshidāt, and wā‘īzāt (‘female experts in Islamic law, preachers and spiritual guides’), which was organized in Tetouan in 2009. On this occasion, the king encouraged women to actively take part in the official Islamic space and discourse to contribute to the struggle against social exclusion and violence, to guide people and awaken their religiosity. The king's message testifies to the clear intention of the central authorities to support women's participation in the Islamic field.

Nonetheless, beyond this rhetoric, the gender-based reform of the Ministry appears to be a result of a bi-dimensional political strategy that was established with a double political purpose. At a national level, this reform
was aimed at disciplining the internal Islamic discourse in the country and was contested by some Islamist movements that are very critical of the monarchy. One example is *Al Adl wal Ihsane*, the Justice and Spirituality Movement; Nadia Yassine, the well-known daughter of the movement’s founder, created a programme of religious training for women that was later forced to stop functioning due to state repression and resistance within the movement (conversations with author, Rabat, 2012). At an international level, the government’s reform may be meant to show that Morocco is respecting the gender mainstreaming proposed by the universalizing narratives of international conventions.

Although this reform could effectively be perceived as a significant gain in the application of gender mainstreaming in public secular and religious institutions, my interviews demonstrate that the discourse of female religious actors complies with the traditional principle of gender complementarity – rather than gender equality – and male dominance in decision making in both the family setting and the state. Based on this observation, the question is whether it is possible to consider women preachers and scholars as not only agents of the central power but also agents of change, and in what ways their female religious authority could help to improve women’s rights. Even though Moroccan women preachers and scholars cannot become imams, they could be considered, and do consider themselves, examples of a new female religious authority that is based on their religious agency.

This religious authority can be identified through three traits: piety, social recognition, and civic engagement. First, a central element in preachers’ religious authority is the spiritual sentiment of piety, conceptualized by Saba Mahmood in terms of the cultivation of religious virtues embedded in a specific Islamic tradition (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006, p. 619; Mahmood, 2005, p. 148). Rausch indicates that piety could manifest through all fields of participation in public life, in which these women represent a model of Muslim citizens conforming to Islamic morals (Rausch, 2011). An interesting aspect of preachers’ and ‘ālimāt’s agency is their capacity to negotiate the recognition of their authority, adapting the contents of their discourses to different audiences through what Mahmood calls the ‘pedagogy of persuasion’ (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 79–117). The second trait of the religious authority of murshidāt and ‘ālimāt is the social recognition and admiration directed towards them, which I observed when following some of them in their daily work in mosques and at the university of Rabat, as well as during a sermon in an association in Meknes, and in a school and a prison in Salé during Ramadan. Indeed, I found that the students,
families, and neighbours of women preachers and scholars communicate a deep respect and reverence for them. The third trait of civic engagement emerged in their self-representation: *murshidāt* and *ʿālimāt* are visibly enthusiastic about their work, which is perceived by them as key factor in the progress of the whole society. In the interviews I conducted, religious guides and scholars proved very conscious of their subjective and collective role ‘firstly as Muslims, then as women and as Moroccan citizens’ (interview with a woman preacher, Rabat, 2012).

These aspects of the agency of female religious authorities show that these women are able to redefine the relationships between the public and private spheres of Islamic authority by inhabiting and performing in religious spaces, such as mosques and councils of ulama, as men do amidst other males. Thus, they could be considered ‘docile agents’ – the protagonists of a process of change that concerns the whole society – because the recognition of women's religious authority could also underline women's empowerment (Mahmood, 2001), hence further facilitating the acquisition of women's rights. This is a valid argument, even though they spread values and social visions that are generally in conformity with the hegemonic patriarchal discourse.

6 Institutionalizing Islam in Europe: What space is there for female religious authority?

In the European context, especially in Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, and the Netherlands, the presence of Muslims is increasing due to immigration flows and religious conversion (Allievi and Nielsen, 2003; Nielsen, 1992; Pew Research Center, 2010). The cultivation of pious sensibilities by Muslim women within liberal-secular European societies, in particular, emphasizes the central role of Islam in public life and in defining women's identity and trajectories (Aune, 2011).

In general, western liberal discourse is presented as opposed to any religious consciousness or spiritual dimension. Secular modern values and Islam are therefore often imagined as incompatible. The secularity of the public sphere and women's equality with men are considered to be chief among European values, while the ‘religionization’ of the public sphere and intrinsic discrimination against women are considered chief among Islamic values. Secular liberalism in particular, too easily juxtaposes Islam with gender-egalitarian regimes (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Ahmed, 1992), opposing modern assumptions (regarding personal autonomy, freedom, self-realization, and equality) against their traditional counterparts (submission,
lack of freedom, and so forth) (Jouili, 2011). This attitude has contributed to a ‘moral panic’ towards the growing presence of Muslims in Western Europe and towards Islam more in general (Reilly, 2011). In the post 9/11 ‘war on terror’ context, and from the ‘clash of civilizations’ perspective, the growing visibility of Muslims in Europe has often been analysed through the lens of an essentialist assumption that Islam is regressive and intrinsically opposed to human rights and women’s rights ‘frame’ (Abu Lughod, 2010).

European debates on multiculturalism are profoundly infused with questions of gender and Islam, while public discourses aimed towards Muslim women highlight women’s empowerment as an achievement of secular modernity and something that Islam supposedly lacks (Jouili, 2011). This is exemplified in the frequency with which topics like the ‘headscarf’ are broached in relation to multiculturalism (Bracke, 2011). The European practice of distinguishing between multicultural, as a description of situations, and intercultural, as a description of a process (Nielsen, 1992, p. 152), could be critically conceived (Bracke and Fadil, 2012). According to Bracke and Fadil, multiculturalism ‘could be understood as a dispositive that creates distinctive fields of problematization [...], identifies a particular set of actors (“the immigrants” or “Muslims”) and is accompanied by an institutional apparatus that seeks to transform the non-integrated “other”, in order to include it into the social body’ (Bracke and Fadil, 2012, p. 42).

In the recent debates about multiculturalism, the rhetoric of Muslim women’s emancipation continues to be inspired by the colonial narrative of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1988), under the influence of an orientalist theoretical framework that conceives Muslim women as a homogeneous group of eternal victims that have to be accompanied to emancipation (Mohanty, 1988), with the exception maybe of educated covered Muslim women (Bracke, 2011). This kind of attitude also emerges in nation-states’ attempts to institutionalize Islam in Europe. Despite European Muslims’ relatively low levels of formal membership in any religious organization, including mosques, the ties between European Muslims and religious networks and movements is perceived as controversial, or as an obstacle to integration and intercultural processes (Nielsen, 1992; Pew Research Center, 2010). Muslim movements and networks often exert significant influence by setting the agendas and shaping debates within Muslim communities in Western Europe. Whether or not they reflect the views of most Muslims in the community, they are often instrumental in determining what ‘Muslim issues’ are addressed by the media, in government circles, and in the broader public debate about Islam in Europe. They are also instrumental in the construction
of an ‘Islamic other’ in the West, and specifically in Europe. Over the last few decades, states and civil societies in Western Europe have focused on the ‘integration’ of Islam through its institutionalization in the European context (Amir-Moazami, 2011; Karlsson Minganti, 2012; also see Sunier and Laurence, Part I). For example, through the Deutsche Islam Konferenz (German Islam Conference), initiated in 2006, Germany has undertaken some initiatives with the objective of entering a structured conversation with Muslim communities and finding spokespersons who can serve as partners for the political authorities (Amir-Moazami, 2011). The process of an emerging ‘institutionalization’ of Islam has been analysed in its micro political articulation and in regards to its primary goal of institutionalizing the communications between local state actors and Muslims to improve the conditions in which Muslims practice their religion as well as regulate their conduct (Amir-Moazami, 2011). Using Foucault’s category of governmentality, the German initiative becomes a tool of a broader hegemonic civilizing liberal project, not an instrument of a realistic dialogical encounter that is necessary for real intercultural processes (Amir-Moazami, 2011).

The articulation of the relationship between gender and Islam has been (and still is) a main aspect of the attempt to regulate Muslim subjects’ and communities’ presence in the European context (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen, and Malik, 2011; Amir-Moazami and Salvatore, 2003; Jouili, 2011). This especially emerges in the way in which gender and Islam have played out in initiatives like the German one, where, according to Amir-Moazami, a hegemonic civilizational discourse has taken up concrete forms of political action with the goal of ‘smoothly but authoritatively transform[ing] Muslims into liberal democratic subjects’ (Amir-Moazami, 2011, p. 20). In the Netherlands, as Bracke explains, over the last few decades Muslim women’s emancipation narrative has been used as part of a wider ‘arsenal of tools to control Islam’, linked to the surveillance of mosques and Islamic associations (Bracke, 2011, p. 35). Other sociological studies emphasize the subjectivity of women and of female religious authorities in Islamic groups in France, Germany (Jouili, 2015), Flanders (Jacobsen, 2011), the Netherlands (Bracke, 2008), Norway (Vanderwaeren, 2011), and Sweden (Karlsson Minganti, 2012). In countries like France and Germany, prayers rooms, religious instruction, and other services exclusively for female believers started to appear in the first decade of the twenty-first century in some mosques and Muslim organizations (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006). Muslim women participate in the Islamic life of their community; organize religious activities; deliver sermons and lectures in mosque associations, study circles, informal groups,
or other grassroots associations; and participate in da‘wa activities within the Islamic revival movement in Europe (Jouili, 2011; Karlsson Minganti, 2012; Vogt, 2010).

These ‘religiously committed women’ (Jouili, 2011) face multiple obstacles as a result of patriarchal dynamics both inside and outside their community, in concert with racist and islamophobic prejudices. Concerning religious authority, they face a twofold pressure: from inside their community, they face obstacles to their active participation in Islamic discourses and practices because their claim to religious authority is often contested by their brothers in faith (Jouili, 2015; Karlsson Minganti, 2012; Vogt, 2010). From outside, pious Muslim women, especially young, highly educated pious Muslim women, face the imperative of emancipation following the secular European model. In this sense, Bracke explains that they could be considered a ‘disturbing presence in relation to the hegemonic “saving Muslim women” script as they interrupt the linear time of emancipation upon which the dominant script relies’, i.e., a linear time of emancipation distributes emancipation unequally and in a binary way between an emancipated ‘us’ and a non-emancipated ‘them’ (Bracke, 2011). Some sociological studies call into question this secularization thesis based on the narrative of a single modernity, whereas religion is expected to be a private aspect of individuals’ lives (Reilly, 2011). They testify that discourses about women, gender, and Islam imply multiple reflections about religion, culture and state. This has given urgency to debates on the contradictions between discourses on women’s rights and Muslim religious practices, spirituality, and forms of religious life in Europe, but also to possibilities of reconciliation between them (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen, and Malik, 2011). Research on female religious authorities in France and Germany shows that the acquisition and dissemination of Islamic knowledge are not elements of women’s subjection to authority; on the contrary, they could themselves be elements of the acquisition of religious authority (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006). Some women interviewed by Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006) claim that the acquisition of religious knowledge reinforces their faith and makes them resist secularist ‘temptations’.

Islam and gender equality as objects of governmentality in a multicultural context

In this discussion of official Moroccan women preachers and scholars, I have interpreted them as having agency and the ability to perform their
identity first as Muslims, then as women and as citizens. Their acquisition of Islamic knowledge is directly connected to their acquisition of a religious authority that, depending on the role they play as a preacher or scholar, challenges and reconfigures the hegemonic male-monopolized Islamic discourse. I observed that the work of the official Moroccan women Islamic scholars and preachers has a high impact on their community life, because it goes beyond the walls of the mosque and thus takes on a wider social scope. As Miriam Al-Haitami argues, women religious guides and scholars in Morocco construct a third space between the public and private (Al-Haitami, 2012). Here public and private spaces are conceived from a praxiological perspective that considers the definition of public and private as a contingent categorization, depending on the interaction between people, contexts, and situations (Dupret and Ferrié, 2005). The mosque, in fact, is effectively reconfigured: its public role could change and it could become an intimate and private and even collective space, as Amina Wadud suggested (interview, London, 11 September 2012). In this way, the space of the mosque could change from a symbol of the crystallization of a past where men monopolized Islam to a performative space of change and the reform of ‘tradition’ in a process of internal negotiation (Bano and Kalmbach, 2011; Holmes Katz, 2014). I also observed that Moroccan women religious authorities’ discourse about gender relations is inspired by gender complementarity, not gender equality, and that they support a gender-based division of labour and a gender-based system of duties and obligations. In their vision, motherhood represents a fundamental value for women, in which an Islam-based educational model is preferred because of its capacity to serve the community. The high sense of responsibility that these women attribute to the role of a mother comes close to ‘political motherhood’ (Jouli and Amir-Moazami, 2006, p. 622), because motherhood and its manifestation in domesticity have a public impact on the whole community. Teaching the ‘right’ Islam to children through education and family care activities makes the private/domestic sphere capable of significant societal impact. Therefore, being a pious subject who is conscious of her Islamic knowledge reflects the ability of a female religious authority to go beyond the private/public binary, and could also have an impact on the redefinition of the patriarchal social order, which dictates the strict separation of the two social dimensions.

The post-colonial approach results in a more relevant framework for analysing the spectrum of female agencies in Morocco. Some studies of Islamic female experiences and discourses return respect to the voices that promote an ideal female model by appropriating Islamic symbols in
the public sphere (Gole, 1996) or through Islamic pedagogy in the space of the mosque (Mahmood, 2005). In analysing female participation in Moroccan religious institutions, I consider women preachers and female Islamic experts as both agents of central power and agents per se, far from any perspective that considers only liberal secular feminists as the unidirectional perspective for the evolution of society. I consider all of the women religious authorities I encountered in Morocco to be agents of change. The result of the study is, then, a complex interaction of convergences and divergences of discourses, systems of values, experiences, and agencies that leads to considering women’s bodies and subjectivities as ‘contested spaces’ in the debate about equality of citizenship – a focal element of any transition to democracy or, much more important, of any possibility of real respect for women’s rights in Morocco.

Comparing the Moroccan case with the European context, we observe that both Islam and gender equality still appear to be objects of state governmentality, governmental techniques in a top-down political dynamic. In Europe, there are some national attempts at the institutionalization of Islam through a liberal discourse of gender equality; in Morocco, it seems that dispositives of Islamic power are useful to manage, control, and re-signify gender equality. In the European context, the interaction between the claim of women’s equality and the claim of religion is a contested issue that some scholars have problematized by exploring the attempt of some states to create an institutional apparatus that seeks to discipline Muslim communities while instrumentalizing values of gender equality and promoting Muslim women’s participation in a ‘post-secular’ public life (Amir-Moazami, 2011; Bracke and Fadil, 2012; Habermas, 2008). The European context could be defined as ‘post-secular’ because secularism is not a sine qua non condition for modernity, which could be – and practically is – more characterized by spirituality, pious identities, and piety movements. A more vital presence of female religious subjectivities could re-signify patriarchal dynamics within their community of faith, and at the same time the meaning of women’s emancipation in Europe. The ways this process could interact with different European social contexts and institutions, or, in other words, how female religious leadership can contribute to the European inter- or multicultural process and the amelioration of women’s lower status within their citizenship and faith communities, remain an open question that is worth researching further.

At the institutional level it could be very difficult to imagine a singular European model of ‘state-sponsored Muslim women religious authorities’ as implemented in Morocco. The national institutions of the different
states play a role in how politics manages internal minorities. In this sense, the German case explored by Amir-Moazami presents some potential normative and normalizing implications of national initiatives for dialogue with Muslim minorities (Amir-Moazami, 2011). For example, there could be obstacles to the effective capacity of Muslim representatives chosen by the state to represent the whole community of faith, and the power-related implications of the acquisition of this possible role are not easy to manage. It could be possible to imagine the creation of a board of Muslim women spokespersons that would point European policies towards a more intercultural society, struggling against both stereotypes and islamophobia and the instrumental and patriarchal use of Islam within their community of believers. Encouraging a European process of dialogue between female religious authorities, women active in piety movements, Muslim and secular feminists, and activists in Islamist movements could provide different perspectives of women's rights and eventually arrive at a confrontation about women's common emancipatory priorities. Rather than constituting monoliths, Islam and gender equality values are continuously re-signified by individual and collective performances and agencies beyond the boundaries of public and private spaces, beyond the juxtaposition that perceives Islam as traditional and gender equality and liberal Western values as modern. In this regard, it is worth recalling that a segment of Muslim women socialized in Europe also redefine liberal values by articulating their piety and being fascinated by liberal discourses on dignity and self-realization (Jouili, 2011; Salih, 2010). In both Europe and Morocco, female religious authorities appear to be pious subjects and active citizens. Even though they may appear to not yet have produced a legitimized or very visible religious knowledge, their activity has an impact beyond the boundaries of Islamic costumes, religious discourses, or the socio-political division of spaces. Through the acquisition of religious knowledge, they appear as agents of a redefinition of the Islamic tradition while confronting their own pious subjectivities with the imperative of secular gender equality. At the same time, they are the protagonists of their own empowerment through a trajectory that is mainly religious: an empowerment that, in the long run, could match Islamic feminism's aims to promote gender equality also thanks to an equal access to the knowledge needed for the interpretation of sacred texts. Because of their dynamic capacity to bridge Islamic communities and women's empowerment, the very potential of Muslim women's authority should be far more recognized and discussed in contemporary Europe.
References


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