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**Women and Islamisation -  
Carving a New Space in  
Muslim Societies**

**Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland**

**R 1997: 3**

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## **Summary**

The diversity in Muslim women's religious practices and positions within contemporary resurgent Islam, often referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism", has so far been given little attention. The different chapters in this volume describe gendered practices and female participation in a number of groups related to Islamic movements. We analyse how the muslim component of a woman's identity is made relevant in new ways for self-understanding and pragmatic choices in every day life. The analytical arguments and ethnographic data presented seek to dislocate understandings of Islamist and Islamic "fundamentalism" that analyse the movement mainly as a reaction against "Westernisation" and modernisation".

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## Preface

This collection of papers originates from a seminar organised around the theme *Construction of Gender relations in processes of Modernisation - Women and Islamisation* at Chr.Michelsens institute. The seminar received funding from the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-sponsored the work on editing and publication of the papers. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support received from the above mentioned agencies and institution.

Much of the material has been changed since the original seminar, and some of the participants who presented papers and contributed to the development of arguments in the seminar in late 1994 have for various reasons been unable to publish their papers in this volume. We like to thank Trude Eide, Aynur Ilyasoglu, Kirsten Sandborg, Heidi Skramstad and Annika Rabo for their contribution to the seminar that encouraged the advancement of the project! Three of the chapters in this volume written by Marjo Buitelaar, Willy Jansen and Soroya Duval have been included by invitation.

The different chapters in this volume grapple with the understanding of persons, groups and phenomena that in Western popular and scholarly presentations often are defined and presented under the label 'religious fundamentalism'. We probe what unites these groups apart from *our* ascription of a specific negatively defined identity to them by the attributes non-modern, non-democratic, ir-rational.

To highlight substantive differences and similarities among the groups presented we attempt to give meticulous ethnographic descriptions of how religious and ritualistic devotions and practice form an important part of present-day life of certain categories of women in Muslim communities from Senegal to Jordan. Implications of the analysis presented of women's active involvement in Islamist practices and organisations presents us for several paradoxes; Why do women seek their submission under religious authority and dogma that deprive them of free judgement and command over specific areas of their life ? How is the believing female subject constituted in one of the world's major patriarchal religions? Are there specific pragmatic gains in the secular realm for the women seeking religious involvement ? How may religious merit be converted into secular prestige? The dominant approach to understand the contagious effect of Islam is to appeal to extra-religious factors produced by a sense of threat from the dislocation wrought by modernisation and explain the attraction of Islamic movements as a reactive response to the impure West, that is, one seeks to bolster and protect own identity by purifying religious practice. A common ground for the different papers presented at the seminar was to seek to explain ways practicing Muslim women cultivate and seek an active voice in religious discourse.



All of the ethnographic cases presented in various ways highlight the active creation of rooms of their own by the women engaged in Islamist revitalisation - encountered in their particular socio-historical realities. The implications of the cases presented and the questions we raise mark an opposition to generalisation where women's relation to Islam is reduced to its victims par excellence. Our analytical approach seek to conceptualize the ways that religious involvement by women challenge traditional representations of gender and articulates interests through self presentation and identity management that also challenge restrictions imposed from above that curtails women's freedom in the name of religion.

We explore how women are engaged in lifeprojects that are encompassed in and regulated by religious dogma and ritual practice. Attempting to give reasons for women's active involvement in Islamist practices and organisations presents us for paradoxes; Why do women seek their submission under a system that deprives them of their free will and power. So, what is in it for the women seeking religious discipline ? One approach to understand the contagious effect of Islamisation is to appeal to the extra-religious appeal produced by a sense of threat from the impure west, that is one seeks to bolster and protect own identity by purifying religious practice. All of the ethnographic cases presented in various ways show the active creation of rooms of their own by the women engaged in Islamist revitalisation - with this focus on practice we wanted to mark opposition to a reduction of questions on women's relation to Islam as its victims par excellence.

The unifying analytical approach aspires to conceptualize ways that religious rituals and beliefs challenge dominant representations of gender in traditional Islam through creative, voluntary reworking and presentations of self in religious discourse. In this subdominant discourse female identity management emerge also as counteraction to restrictions imposed that curtails women's freedom in the name of religion.

## Notes on contributors

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# Introduction

*Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland*

What is Islamism? More than fifteen years have passed since the Iranian revolution first revealed the potential power of this phenomenon and elevated it from a status as one scarcely recognised religious interpretation among others to a mass mobilising force at the centre of the world's attention. Since then, it has come to play an increasingly important political role in more Muslim countries than not, and it has become part of everyday language way beyond the Muslim communities of the world. On a general level, most people - with the eager assistance of the mass media - have acquired a layman's understanding of the concept based on images of extremism and women's oppression, guns and veils. On a specialised level and thus more interesting in this connection, social scientists, orientalists, and most other research disciplines dealing with the Muslim World have during the last fifteen years produced an abundance of studies of the phenomenon. Still, one has as yet failed to reach a general understanding of what it *is*; in fact, there may be reason to argue that one today is as far from a clear and unanimous comprehension of it as ever before. This is evident already at the most basic conceptual level: A multitude of concepts are currently applied to connote the phenomenon, some of the more frequently used being Islamic fundamentalism, Islamism, Islamic resurgence, political Islam, and radical Islam. The different valeurs of these concepts clearly indicate that divergent perceptions of the phenomenon are at play. In addition, there is a sizeable field of conceptual derivatives of what will here be called *Islamism*. *Islamisation*, which is a central focus of the contributions to this book, is one such derivative, and refers not so much to organised political expressions of the phenomenon as to wider impacts - cultural, religious, or others - it has come to have on contemporary Muslim societies. How can one make sense of this jungle of approaches to apparently the same phenomenon?

Attempts at explaining Islamism may be usefully categorised according to what aspects of the phenomenon they give importance to. While some concentrate on what has brought Islamism about, thus seeking the 'real' reasons behind the Islamic resurgence, others focus on the ideas and practices it implies, applying a basically descriptive approach. The first of these approaches tended to be more widespread in the Eighties, while the latter has been gaining ground during the Nineties. This shift in emphasis over time should be understood in a broader theoretical context: The Iranian revolution was the first in a row of political events of international dimensions which forced the social sciences to seriously reconsider

central established truths about the nature of social development. It was the first major 'incomprehensible' popularly supported take-over of power of the post-colonial era, in the sense that it contradicted the until then hegemonious classical theory of modernisation, which approaches modernisation mainly as a historical and ideological process first undergone by the West but necessary anywhere if development is to be reached, and at the same time as a self-evident good which all societies will aspire to achieve. The Iranian revolution provided a first time experience with a popular revolt seemingly aiming at retreating to a previous stage of development, voluntarily stepping off the path to modernity. Thus, Islamism from the beginning was labelled an anomaly, a deviation, and as a consequence, the initial theoretical approaches to understanding Islamism tended to focus on what had gone wrong. One were looking for the causes *behind* the Islamist revival, for the 'real' problem of which Islamism was perceived to be a symptom.

Analyses of Islamism presented within this frame of understanding vary considerably with regard to the causes they identify as crucial in having brought the derailment about. However, for instance Dekmejian's (1985) approach to Islamism as result of *crises* in relation to modernisation processes is representative of a bulk of the contributions. From this analytical point of departure he seeks to explain both individuals' disposition for supporting what he chooses to term *Islamic fundamentalism*, states' disposition for developing a fundamentalist mass movement, and Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab World as a whole. Some of the key crises in his analysis on the two latter levels are those of identity, misrule, military impotence, and culture (Dekmejian 1985:7). Such crises constitute, according to Dekmejian, the underlying, 'real' causes of Islamic fundamentalism as mass movement. On the individual psychological level, he identifies personality traits like alienation, complexes of inferiority, aggressiveness, authoritarianism, paranoia and several more equally unattractive features as characteristics of the fundamentalist Muslim (1985:33-35). Thus, his theory is one of social and psychological defects, of modernisation - in the classical sense - gone wrong.

Daniel Pipes (1983) represents an other way of approaching this empirical field. His main hypothesis is that high oil-prizes have produced the current resurgence of what he, too, prefers to call Islamic fundamentalism. He bases his analysis on the fact that most Islamist movements are subsidised by Saudi Arabia, Iran or Libya, subsidies afforded by these states due to their large oil resources. Their regional political ambitions make support to neighbouring countries' Islamist movements instrumental in that it keeps their rivals busy with internal political problems. Hence, to Pipes Islamic fundamentalism is basically a political artefact which existence depends on the economic state of the international oil-market as much as on anything else, and thus without a genuine belonging in modernising Muslim societies.

Though representing distinctly different ways of explaining Islamism, these two examples of early analytical approaches to Islamism have a lot in common. First, they tend to concentrate on what makes Islamism *occur*. On an aggregate level they seek to explain what makes Islamist movements spring into existence, and if operating on an individual level, they look for what makes people become

Islamists. Considering that these studies were conducted at a time when the bulk of contemporary Islamist mass movements were in creation, they can hardly be blamed for this. However, one should keep in mind that what makes a phenomenon *spring* into existence not necessarily is the same that makes it *stay* in existence. Second, and in spite of due remarks about the complexity of the phenomenon of scrutiny, they tend to trust their analysis to one-factor explanations. Pipes concentrates on oil wealth, while Dekmejian focuses on modernisation crisis. Finally, and connected to the above mentioned problem, they both treat Islamism as a substantially homogenous phenomenon. That is, it is a precondition of their studies that Islamism everywhere is result of the same or very similar processes, and that it rises and decreases everywhere for the same or very similar reasons. Moreover, it is assumed that all expressions of the phenomenon contain some basic elements, among which anti-Western sentiments hold a central position. When drawing on a perception of modernity as a basically Western phenomenon, the conclusion that Islamism is also anti *modern* is thereby close at hand. This is, however, a problematic conclusion in the sense that many Islamist movements do in fact not perceive themselves as anti modern - on the contrary, the project of developing an *Islamic* modernity is central to quite a few of them. Needless to say, they have a different understanding of modernity, characterised by a separation of its 'hardware' - its technical and scientific achievements - and its 'software' - the social and cultural aspects of modernity as it exists in the Western societies. Accepting the hardware, they are reluctant to the software - the atomization of society, consumerism, what they perceive as moral decay - and seek to develop their own modern cultural code, based on the values of Islam.

This brings us to the question of how one may most usefully understand modernity. Central to the already mentioned ongoing process within the social sciences of redefining this concept is the recognition that contemporary modernity is a genuinely global phenomenon. Global modernity is characterised by certain fundamental characteristics, but has at the same time taken on culturally specific forms, depending on the local contexts within which it exists. As a consequence of this empirical *fait accomplis*, it has become necessary to reconsider the assumption of an inherent connection between modernity and the Western civilisation that until recently dominated this field. This is being done in various ways. For instance, Antony Giddens - a central contributor to this project - detaches modernity from the specific Western context by focusing on the *institutions* of modernity rather than on its historic and cultural origin. Modern institutions are, according to Giddens, based on certain fundamental preconditions, such as the separation of time and space that is a necessity for the modern perception of time as 'empty', independent from what happens during it and where it happens. Closely related to the time-space separation is the *disembedding* of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space (1990:21). Thus, it is the de-connection of society from a specific setting, the 'stretching' of social relations, which to Giddens is at the core of modernity, and which makes it both a continuously changing and

genuinely global phenomenon. Such a 'virtual' way of approaching modernity differs quite radically from the conventional approach, and makes it possible to a much larger extent than before to relate to the thought of modernity as a culturally diverse phenomenon. Consequently, it also opens up for new ways of understanding the relationship between Islamism and modernity, and encourages approaches focusing on variety and complexity rather than normative studies applying the Western project as template for 'correct' modernity.

This is not to say that the analytical approaches such as those of Dekmejian and Pipes are invalid. Their problem is not necessarily in choice of explanatory factors, but rather in their tendency toward excluding others. As contemporary Islamism is maturing in the Nineties, it becomes increasingly clear that its complexity is so vast that one-factor approaches to it are meaningless - in fact, it appears to be so complex that one may question the usefulness of treating it as one single phenomenon at all. This is a view supported also by people at the inside of the movements. For instance, Rashid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian Islamist movement *En-Nahda*, defines an Islamist as a militant Muslim. Beyond that, he acknowledges no substantial commonalities uniting the different contemporary Islamist movements (interview 1996). Correspondingly, Francois Burgat, French social scientist sympathetic to the current Islamic resurgence, defines Islamism as 'the recourse to the vocabulary of Islam, used in the post-colonial period to express within the state, or more often against it, an alternative political program that uses the heritage of the West as foil, but allows nevertheless the reappropriation of its principal references' (1993:41), thus portraying it as a basically rhetorical framework drawing on Islamic concepts as alternatives to Western ones, and applied by highly diverse political projects to reach highly diverse political ends.

The diversity within the cluster of movements commonly referred to as Islamist has a number of sources. First of all, it is evident that movements spread across a geographical and cultural area as vast as the Muslim World unavoidably will be coloured by their respective local contexts. Furthermore, as basically political projects, most of them are developed as response to concrete national political settings, which further diversifies them. Moreover, within such national political settings the status of the movements vary radically, from guardians of state ideology, like in Iran or Sudan, via positions as legitimate political opposition, like in Jordan or Turkey, to an existence as criminalised rebels, like in Tunisia or Algeria. Obviously, such differences in status are likely to lead to differences in choice of strategy as well as in the ideological appearance of the movements. In addition, in a number of Muslim countries there exists a variety of different Islamist movements with competing political interpretations of Islam; this further complicates the picture. It should also be added that a considerable difference in political and religious views seems to exist in many movements between the elite and the common sympathisers. And last but by no means the least, as Islamism is maturing into an established factor of influence in many Muslim societies, the demarcation line between the Islamists and the 'others' becomes increasingly blurred, due to the process of *Islamisation* of society. This process is characterised

by a general strengthening of the Muslim identity, and takes various forms: Regimes adopt aspects of Islamist ideology and generally emphasise their respect for Islam as a strategy to increasing popular support, women adopt what originally was the Islamist dress-code without meaning to state more by that than that they consider themselves sincere Muslims, traditional forms of worship such as sufi-movements integrate new religious ideas in their repertoire, public discourse takes place within an increasingly religious rhetorical framework, and so on. Thus, Islamisation refers to the increasing number of recently developed politico-religious hybrids and syntheses between the new and the old, the popular and the intellectual, the local and the universal which characterise a majority of contemporary Muslim societies. Furthermore, this process of renewal more than anything else suggests that the initial perception of Islamism as a derailment from the path of modernisation may be erroneous, and rather poses the opposite question of whether it was the after all quite brief period of post-colonial 'normal' process of modernisation that was the anomaly. At the very least, it ought to lead to a shift in focus of interest of the social sciences from the occurrence of Islamism to its existence as an established, influential aspect of contemporary Muslim societies.

Ernest Gellner has suggested that the current revitalisation of religion in Muslim modernising societies, which contradicts the conventional perception of secularisation as central aspect of modernity, may be explained in terms of the ancient division between the scripturalist 'high Islam' of the scholars and urban elite and the less correct 'low Islam' of the basically rural commoners. The relationship between these two versions of Islam has historically never been dynamic. 'High Islam's' attempts to convert the adherents of 'low Islam' have only temporarily been successful, as tradition and folk belief have always reconquered the minds of the commoners and brought the process back to square one. The recent modernisation of Muslim societies has, however, finally put an end to this infertile circle, as it has removed what 'low Islam' has been feeding on for centuries, traditional mind and society. This is, according to Gellner, the background for Islamism's - as the currently most vital expression of 'high Islam' - astonishing strength and vitality. Modernisation decreases the part of the population inclined to identify with 'low Islam', but since 'high Islam' provides a more sophisticated religious interpretation attractive to the growing modernised parts of the population, Islam does not suffer from the secularisation that has come with modernisation in other religions (1992:22). The dichotomy of 'high' and 'low' Islam is too simplistic and thus misleading as a presentation of the religious state of affairs in the Muslim world. All the same, Gellner's argument adds an interesting perspective to the current processes of Islamisation. Islamism, as a vital version of 'high Islam', seems to serve as a sort of 'database' from which modernising Muslims in search for fulfilment of personally felt needs for meaning pick and choose what best serves their purposes. While some are content with fragments of it, others adopt Islamist ideology to a fuller extent. At least in the latter case, opting for Islamism as a way of life appears to be a modern phenomenon: In more cases than not, adherence to it seems to be result of



personal choices made by individuals, often in spite of the attitudes of social surroundings, and in line with personal conviction, and is thus the act of profoundly individualised modern human beings. In that sense, little separates adherents of the Islamist movements from the followers of any other modern social movement. When it comes to more fragmentary application of Islamist ideas, or Islamisation, the variation in motivation and purpose is so vast that few valid generalisations can be made. However, one rather interesting general point should be mentioned: Attempts at generalising these matters appear to be rather irrelevant for a majority of those actually involved in the current processes of Islamisation, and the urge to classify and define them according to concepts like Islamism or Islamisation seems to be significantly stronger in the West than in the areas where they actually have an impact. An illustration of the point: In Tunisia, no parallels to these concepts exist in daily language - in stead, one will tend to apply concepts like 'the religious' or 'the brethren', which both have their own distinct meanings. Concerning the various expressions of the process of Islamisation, one will tend to perceive them as separate phenomena, and generally grant them an independent existence. This is not to say that concepts like Islamism and Islamisation are useless. It is, however, a reminder that they should be applied with caution, and with awareness that they are analytical constructs rather than descriptions of actually existing empirical phenomena.

Thus, grasping the total picture of contemporary Islamism, let alone Islamisation, is not only an unrealistic ambition, but also one that builds on a wrong perception of the issue at hand. We find the provision and comparison of concrete expressions of these phenomena a more instrumental approach to understanding the current processes of Islamisation in the Muslim world, and this volume is meant as a contribution to such a project.

The following focuses upon specific cases of interactions between gender and Islam. Historically the politicizing of gender relations has often emerged as a salient trait of modernisation and as argued by Valentine Moghadam 'the politics of gender may be especially strong in patriarchal societies undergoing development and social change' (1992:4).

Modernisation is frequently associated with liberation from oppressive traditions. Thus, to equate Islamisation with modernisation appears to be a contradiction in terms. However, as argued above we perceive the current Islamism as genuinely oriented toward creating a modern future Muslim society. In focusing upon women's perspectives and motivations for committing themselves to religious practice, a prominent vantagepoint emerge where Islamisation processes materialise as a kind of mediator between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (See Eva Evers Rosander chapter 6 this volume).

From the publication of *Women in the Muslim World* in 1978 the study of women in Muslim communities has shown a tremendous increase. In the preface to the second edition of their book Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie noted the strengthening of Islamic Law in various fields relating to women and the family together with the spread of veiling among urban groups where the female dress code had been more westernized. However, they underline that 'this trend is less

directed at women per se than it is at political and cultural goals - such as breaking with a West perceived as imperialist...' (ibid. viii) .

Since then several publications, academic and popular, have put emphasis on this trend as a central part of policy of various Islamist groups. Debates about women's position have become an integral part of modern Islamic discourse, where challenges are made to go beyond the traditional statements on reiterating the prophet's liberating effects on pre-Islamic gender structures. As noted by Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1996) the rhetoric and arguments used in this discourse acquires a distinctly different quality if it appears in an oppositional discourse of national politics or is appropriated by the ruling powers. The cases presented in this volume draws on ethnographic fieldwork in local communities in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Senegal and Turkey, thus potentially covering both situations of active opposition as well as the ruling powers that be.

While women's positions in the secular and sacred realms is debated by all Islamist groups as a prominent religious and political issue, there is as yet no authoritative Islamist agenda concerning women, or set by women themselves. Publications by various Islamist groups reveal a persistent gap between public discourse and social practice. While discourse remains largely frozen in a conventional mould, practice is beginning to take many divergent and sometimes unorthodox directions where also women emerge as active interlocutors that influence the shaping of religious movements. As argued by Lisa Taraki (1996,159-178) this is 'one area of the Islamist agenda which is most open to debate and most amenable to experimentation.' In the pages that follow we try to capture and analyze parts of this debate.

In the West both scholarly and popular debates seem to presume that there are only one authoritative Islamist agenda that proscribes further development. Most analyses of women's relation to or involvement in Islamic movements, continue to build upon models depicting their position either as instances of false consciousness (on the part of the women) and/or examples of victimization and curtailment of their individual liberty by religious fanatics. While not denying the relevance of these positions, we contend that both women's resistance to and 'complicity' with these movements must be specified in context rather than assumed in advance.

Two edited volumes were recently published that focus specifically on gender and women's relationship to religious fundamentalist movements. In the introduction to one of them, *Refusing Holy Orders* (Eds. G.Sagal and Nira Yuval-Davis 1992) suppression of women is given as a prominent defining characteristic of fundamentalism, while in *Fundamentalism and Gender* (Ed. John Hawley 1994) the possibility of women's involvement is acknowledged and it is argued that 'differences of perspective are apt to ensue when women, not men, speak the language of fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalism perspectives on gender cast a uniquely revealing light on the nature of fundamentalist as a whole'(Ibid:25 and 33). However, as noted above, we do not enter a general debate on religious fundamentalism, but concentrate upon concept Islamism as a primarily descriptive concept to denote phenomena often referred to in Western media as

