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Source: *Feminist Review*, No. 98, islam in europe (2011), pp. 65-82
Published by: Palgrave Macmillan Journals
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41288861
Accessed: 05-09-2017 16:52 UTC

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98 troublesome threesome: feminism, anthropology and Muslim women's piety

Christine M. Jacobsen

abstract

This article critically addresses recent anthropological and feminist efforts to theorize and analyse Muslim women's participation in and support for the Islamic revival in its various manifestations. Drawing on ethnographic material from research on young Muslims engaged in Islamic youth and student-organizations in Norway, I investigate some of the challenges that researching religious subjectivities and practices pose to feminist theory. In particular, I deal with how to understand women's religious piety in relation to questions of self, agency and resistance. Engaging with Saba Mahmood's work on *The Politics of Piety*, this article suggests ways of understanding the young women's religious engagement that move beyond the confines of a binary model of subordination and resistance, coercion and choice. Grounding the discussion in ethnographic analysis of how young Muslim women in Norway speak about the 'self', I argue that critically revisiting feminist notions of agency, autonomy and desire, is necessary in order to understand the kinds of self-realization that these women aspire to. However, the article argues against positing Muslim conceptions and techniques of the self as 'the other' of liberal-secular traditions. Rather, I show how configurations of personhood, ethics and self-realization drawn from Islamic and liberal-secular discursive formations inhabit not only the same cultural and historical space, but also shape individual subjectivities and modes of agency.

keywords

Norway; young Muslims; piety; self; agency

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introduction

More than twenty years ago, Marilyn Strathern (1987: 87) pointed out the awkward relationship between feminism and anthropology. If we add religion, we face a no less awkward and even more troublesome threesome. As Sarah Bracke (2008: 52) notes, 'the gender politics of the "return of religion" intensively interpellates European feminist thought, with its largely secular roots'. This is nowhere more evident than in what Saba Mahmood (2005) calls 'the vexing relationship' between feminism and Islam, which is due, in part, to the historically contentious relationship between the 'West' and 'Islamic societies', but also to the challenges that contemporary Islamist movements seem to pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral, if critical, part.[1] While feminist anthropology has, for some time, contributed to questioning ethnocentric accounts of Muslim women, not least through 'thick' ethnographic accounts, many such accounts have nevertheless been significantly influenced by the secular-liberal politics, which has also informed much anthropological thinking (see Moore, 1994). Given the awkward relationship between feminism and the 'return of religion', women's participation in and support for the Islamic revival in its various manifestations has caused both unease and spurred attempts at theorizing, which can account for such participation and support. To a large extent, theorizing has focused on the question of the freedom and autonomy of the subjects engaged in Islamic practices (Mahmood, 2001a; Ismail, 2007).

In this article, I draw on ethnographic material from my own research among young Muslim women in Norway to investigate some challenges that researching religious subjectivities and practices pose to feminist theory in general, and anthropology in particular. How should we understand young Norwegian women's engagement in Islamic revivalism?[2] What are the forms of subjectivity and agency involved in such engagement? In pondering these questions I draw both on a reflection of my own positioning as a scholar in the field over time, and on theoretical debates on women's piety in feminism and anthropology. In particular, I engage with the work of Mahmood (2005) and her efforts to conceptualize agency in a way that moves beyond the confines of the binary model of subordination and resistance and that detaches agency from the goals of feminist politics.[3] The Norwegian context is of course very different from the Egyptian, and the importance that Mahmood attributes to historically specific conditions of subject formation should caution us against reading her work as a general model of Muslim women's piety (see Bautista, 2008: 81). The modes of inquiry into religious subjectivities and practices developed by Mahmood may nevertheless contribute to our understanding of young Norwegian women's engagement in Islamic revivalism. However, in the Norwegian context at least, the forms of subjectivities and relationships that are enabled should not be constructed as 'the other' of secular-liberal politics. Rather, as I will attempt to demonstrate, the subjectivities and particularity of the agency of the women I worked

1 Liberalism is of course a complex historical tradition and its relation to the term 'secular' no more transparent. In this article, I use the terms 'secular-liberal' to refer to a 'discursive space', which provides a political and moral language in which to identify and dispute problems; a space to which such ideas as, among other things, individual autonomy, freedom, rule of law and equality are central (see Asad, 2009: 25).

2 I'm using revivalism for a broad array of Islamic movements whose efforts to 'revive', 'revitalize' or 'reform' Islamic traditions have been variously entangled with colonialism, decolonization, nation-state building and class and gender relations.

3 One could argue that the binary should be constructed as involving subordination/emancipation, as many approaches within, for example post-structuralist theory would not see

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resistance as necessarily counter-conceptual to subordination. However, in using subordination/resistance I want to suggest, in line with Saba Mahmood, that also those authors who are critical of what Butler (1995) calls an 'emancipatory model of agency' tend to focus on agency in relation to those operations of power that resignify and subvert norms (Mahmood, 2005: 21).

with also reflect ways of relating to the self and models and techniques for self-construction that can be seen as the effects of particular forms of liberal governance, centring on personal authenticity and autonomy.

engaging a troublesome threesome

My interest for the troublesome threesome between anthropology, feminism and Islam has been shaped by my own (shifting and critical) feminist engagement and by my ethnographic studies of gender and Muslim religiosity. A point of departure for my fieldworks in Marseille and Oslo in the second half of the 1990s, was, in line with many feminist anthropologists at the time, a wish to place women at the centre of my inquiry, and to see them not only as victims of patriarchal structures and norms, but also as actors in their own lives. In Oslo, I followed two inter-ethnic and mixed-gender Muslims' youth and student groups, attended mainly by descendants of Pakistani, Turkish and North-African labour migrants, as well as by descendants of refugees and asylum seekers from across the Muslim world. The youth and student organizations, oriented as they were primarily towards the challenges of living as a Muslim in Norwegian society, but also towards a transnational Islamic umma, professed a 'return' to Islam based on the scriptures, as opposed to Muslim practices associated with the 'cultural traditions' of the parental generation.[4] My studies showed how the criticism of these latter practices served to challenge culturalized representation of 'Muslim immigrants' in the Norwegian majority population, that have since the 1990s, as elsewhere in Europe been largely negative and problem oriented. They also showed that young adult's engagement with revivalist Islamic discourses allowed them to challenge gendered and other regimes of power within the ethnic and religious migrant communities (e.g. Jacobsen, 2002, 2004, 2006). Like numerous studies from across Europe (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar, 1995; Khosrokhavar, 1997; Jacobson, 1998; Amiraux, 2001; Tietze, 2002; Saint-Blancat, 2004), my studies of young Muslims in Oslo showed how religious argumentations were used against women-unfriendly 'traditional' practices, and how an engagement with the Islamic tradition allowed young women to negotiate intergenerational gender issues across numerous social fields (in the organizations, in the family, in marriage).

4 A number of studies have noted this tension between the national and the transnational and between culture and religion with respect to young Muslims in Europe. See for instance Andersson (2005), Jacobson (1998), Roy (2004), Schmidt (2002, 2005).

When I started my second round of fieldwork with these groups in 2002, I felt that something was missing from my analysis. I had assumed Islam to fulfil a certain role that could be explained in terms of the young women's desire to be free from relations of subordination (including structures of male and majority domination). Also, I tended to search for women's agency in the ways in which they challenged or strove to re-signify religious traditions, and in which they deployed Islam to resist or oppose structures of subordination. As I reviewed my earlier notes, it was obvious that my work had what may be called a secularist

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bias that had prevented me from getting an understanding of some of the goods and motives that the young sought to realize through their religious engagement. I recognized the need to understand the subjectivities and practices of young Muslims also in terms of the visions of self, social relations and society that was offered to them by the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad, 1986, 1993) as mediated in religious lectures, Islamic literature, audio-visual edificatory material, and by parents, friends and religious leaders. My interest was thus increasingly drawn towards the kinds of subjects that these religious discourses presupposed, and the subjectivities that were shaped as young Muslims invested in a religious subject-position.

At this point I was faced with new challenges in understanding women's participation in the Muslim youth and student organizations in question, and their attraction to Islamic revivalist discourses. How was I to explain the moments when subversion and redeployment of religious concepts and practices was not the goal of the women I talked to – when they focused instead on submission to religious norms and emulation of authoritative religious figures? Or, when they at times naturalized and authorized complementary essentializing gender constructions with reference to Islamic ideals (see Amir-Moazami and Salvatore, 2003)? I will address these questions first by engaging some theoretical perspectives on women's religious piety and secondly by means of an ethnographic case that will be discussed in terms of (and in turn allow me to further engage the theoretical approaches to piety) self and religious practice. While the ethnographic case is used in a somewhat 'anecdotal' manner to draw out some of the issues I am concerned with in this article, the analysis as such builds on extensive fieldwork and interviewing among young Muslims in Oslo over a period of more than ten years.[5]

5 The ethnographic material I draw on stems from long-term fieldwork (several periods from the end of the 1990s onwards) and interviews with young Muslims in Norway who are active in Muslim youth and student organizations in Oslo.

theorizing women's piety

The complexity of women's religious piety and the crafting of religious selves have been recurrent topics in feminist theology and feminist research on women and religion more generally (see, for example, Gross, 1996). A wide range of literature has explored the complexity of gender relations and women's engagement in various revivalist and/or fundamentalist religious movements (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Harding, 2000; Bracke, 2003; Deeb, 2006; Stadler, 2009). In Norway, a number of works deal with the historical involvement of women in the various Protestant pious movements that have been so influential in Scandinavia (Predelli, 2001, 2003; Okkenhaug, 2003). While feminist readings initially emphasized patriarchy and the naturalization of gender hierarchy professed by these movements, more recent studies have shown that women were also actively taking part in these movements and that their participation contributed significantly to the entrance of women in the public domain (Okkenhaug, 2003).

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The same shift towards an increasing emphasis of women's agency can be noted in the literature on the Islamic revival. Here, the view that women passively adapt to Islamist revivalist movements was challenged by authors who 'start from the women's perspective' and in various ways attempt to show how women participate in processes where norms are opened up and renegotiated – enlarging women's room to manoeuvre (Ask and Tjomsland, 1998).

A perspective that has contributed significantly to the body of scholarship on feminism and Islam, challenging both accounts of Muslim women's engagement in revivalist Islam, in terms of victimhood and oppression, and their re-reading in terms of resistance and emancipation, was developed by Saba Mahmood. Mahmood's perspective has been crucial to theorizing women's piety in the Arab world but also in Europe and South East Asia (Jacobsen, 2006; Jouili, 2006; Minganti, 2007; Scott, 2007; Bracke, 2008; Fadil, 2008; Turner and Tong, 2008). A central concern to Mahmood (2001a, b, 2003, 2005) is that the liberal-progressive agenda undergirding feminist theorizing on freedom, agency and the human subject limits the ability to comprehend women's piety in its complexity. Attempting to parochialize key assumptions in feminist theory and liberal accounts of politics, Mahmood draws on Foucault's studies of ethics as a point of departure for analysing pious Muslim women's subjectivities and practices. Foucault describes 'ethics' as the dimension of moral prescriptions that relates to 'the kind of relationship that you ought to have with yourself', and which 'determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions' (Foucault, 1997: 263). Mahmood demonstrates how, within the context of the Egyptian piety movement she studied, religious practices such as veiling and praying fit into a broader process of self-fashioning and remodelling of one's affects and interiority. The revivalist movement has a strong individualizing impetus, she argues, in that there are no centralized authorities that enforce the moral code and penalize infractions, but rather a requirement for each person to adopt a set of ascetic practices for shaping moral conduct (Mahmood, 2005: 30).

Mahmood's analysis of processes of self-formation engaged by women in the Mosque movement resonates with anthropological concerns with the cultural construction of personhood. Her argument is that the conception of self among the women she studied differs from, and can not be fully grasped in terms of, liberal-secularist conceptions of the self that prevail in Western modernity and undergird feminist accounts of Muslim women's participation in the Islamic revival. In order to understand the religious practices of pious Muslim women, Mahmood suggests, 'self-fulfilment' needs to be dissociated from 'autonomy'. The women she worked with acquired a level of self-fulfilment not by referring to 'autonomy-discourses' but rather by 'subjugating themselves' to religious prescriptions. Mahmood's use of the concept 'piety' can be read as a 'counter-conceptual idea' that is juxtaposed with concepts of freedom and autonomy, as they have been formulated within liberal thought (see Jouili and Amir-Moazami,

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2006). It refers to a cultivation of religious virtues that are embedded in a specific Islamic tradition (*ibid.*).[6]

Critics have argued that the empiricism of Mahmood's method lends itself to the same kind of cultural essentialism she has sought to avoid, by fixing desires, goals and subject forms as unique to specific 'cultures' (Waggoner, 2005: 248). The implications for 'critique' that seem to ensue from Mahmood's perspective have also been addressed (Waggoner, 2005; Ismail, 2006, 2007). Ismail (2006: 604), for instance, commends Mahmood for 'suspending judgement derived from her feminist ideas', but nevertheless calls for a more 'critical assessment of the political implications of certain types of claims to truth'. It is not my point here to try and settle the important epistemological, normative and political questions that arise here, but rather to engage with Mahmood's perspective to further explore conceptions of self and religious practice among young Muslim women in Norway, and to question the secular-liberal premises that seem largely to be taken for granted in existing analyses of such conceptions and practice.

6 This notion of 'piety' as cultivation of virtues, in the Aristotelian sense, has also been elaborated by Bryan S. Turner (2008), who, drawing on Foucault and Mahmood, argues that piety is par excellence a technology of the self – designed to produce religious excellence or virtues.

killing desires and working on the self

One afternoon a group of five young Muslim women,[7] an anthropology student[8] and I were gathered in the apartment I rented during fieldwork in Oslo. The anthropology student and myself were planning to conduct a semi-structured group interview on identity and belonging, but the topic of the discussion soon shifted as one of the young women shared reflections about how her *iman* [faith] was sometimes weak, and the kinds of questions that she asked herself about what was entailed in acting 'as God wants us to'. In the discussion that ensued, the women stressed the importance of striving to better one's character, and talked about how one should go about improving oneself in what they referred to as 'our materialistic world'.

Of importance, they agreed, was 'controlling *nafs*' [wilful self, see below] and 'trampling on your ego' so as to achieve a balance between the different dimensions of the self. Noor talked about how important it was to work with the self, with the inner consciousness, and to always bear in mind Allah and Islamic prescriptions and proscriptions, and how this would ensure both happiness in this life and in the hereafter.

Alesha intervened, arguing that it is difficult to find a balance: 'When you eat, work, or read – everything you do is supposed to reflect your *iman*. At the same time you're not supposed to be absorbed exclusively by Allah day and night. You're also supposed to go about your daily tasks in a proper way'. Safa objected that 'Islam doesn't tell you to do *salah* [prayer] all day. That is not what Allah wants. It's the things you do in your everyday life, when you do it in a way that is

7 This particular conversation took place in 1999. All of these women were members of, or more loosely affiliated to, the two Muslim youth and student organizations where I did my fieldwork. These organizations attract young people between thirteen and thirty-five years with various family backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, nationality, social standing and religious denomination.

8 Monica Aarset later wrote a Masters Thesis (Aarset, 2006) on the subject.

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halal [allowed], like going to school to get an education. That is also a form of *ibadat* [worship], you know'. Alesha agreed with this, and Safa asked her why she then found it so problematic that her everyday acts should reflect *iman*. 'It is because we are not like the Prophet', Alesha explained 'we can strive to become as good as possible, to perfect ourselves – that is an eternal goal. If we don't have that goal of perfecting ourselves all the time we have nothing. But if we think that we are perfect, we are not humble'.

Aadila objected that if Alesha found it so difficult it was because she had not properly submitted herself, 'You have to think that you have submitted yourself; that is what Islam is. I'm working for God. That is how you do it. If you don't understand what you have been designated to do, and feel that you are working too hard, it's because ...'. Alesha was getting somewhat annoyed at Aadila's suggestion that she had not submitted herself and tried to explain her point of view, 'What Islam wants is not always the same as what you yourself want, right, because we don't have the knowledge Allah has. Allah knows what he says, right, but I don't have the knowledge to understand it. Sometimes I can hardly believe that certain things could really be what God wants from me, but then I just have to force myself and say: no, Allah says that I should do this. When you live in a certain society there are so many weird things cultivated in you and some of it you have to reject and some of it you have to accept and make a part of your being. But it is not easy to just integrate and reject things that are part of your personality, right'. Aadila agreed that one's desires are not always compatible with what Allah wants, and gave an example 'So many times, to be honest, guys have come up to me and said: I would like to go out with you. And I have liked it; I have wanted to go out with them. But still I go: No, it's out of my principles. I can't date you. [...] So you have to kill the desires'.

different forms of self-realization

It is not my point to draw from the ethnographic case I have presented a particular 'Muslim ethics' or a general model of the Muslim self that young Muslims in Norway seek to realize or understand themselves in terms of. Rather, what is interesting is precisely the fact that young women from a variety of backgrounds draw on different discursive traditions and different understandings of the self when they speak about the kind of relationship they ought to have to themselves and others. In the conversation quoted above, Aadila makes an analogy between the distinction between body, spirit and mind, the tripartite ego, superego and self/identity, drawn from modern psychology, and what she refers to as the understanding of the self from 'an Islamic point of view' in terms of its three dimensions *ruh*, *nafs* and *'aql*.

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Anthropologists have described these latter concepts, and the way they relate to each other in somewhat different ways. In Metcalf's (editor) *Moral Conduct and Authority*, several of the authors describe:

> [...] a theory that humans possess two important faculties: 'aql, the faculty of moral discrimination shared with the angels, on the one hand, and nafs the self in the sense of the will or, more typically wilful principle, on the other. Both, generally speaking, are expected to coexist. Man's realization comes through cultivation of 'aql and the consequent disciplining of the nafs. One seeks to refine, not destroy, the nafs. It is the very tension, the process of discrimination, the fact that there are choices to be made and control to be exercised, that gives man's life its value. It is this, not holy war, that is the 'greater' jihad: unceasing effort to discriminate the boundaries set forth in the Quran and relentless self-control in eschewing excess and living within them. (Metcalf, 1984: 10)

Janice Boddy's (1989) work from Hofriyat in Southern Sudan similarly discusses how, as is common in many Muslim societies, all persons are conceived as being composed of three vital essences, *ruh* (soul), *nafs* (animal life force including lusts and desires) and *'aql* (reason, rationality, control of emotions and the ability to behave in socially appropriate ways). All persons have *ruh*, but in the Hofriyat context men develop *'aql* to a considerably greater extent than women.

In an article about immigrant youth, freedom, power and resistance the Norwegian anthropologist Inger Lise Lien (2003) argues that Muslim ideas of the moral soul (*ruh*[9]) represent the force of parental and male control against the individual freedom of youth and in particular girls. In Lien's interpretation, the control of *the moral soul* over *nafs* amounts to a subjugation of the ego to the superego; the norms of (patriarchal) society, codified and understood as God's will.[10] My purpose here is not to assess Lien's argument as such, but rather to point to a particular understanding of the self, which underpins her argument. Muslim ideas of the moral soul are in Lien's account constructed as a counterpoint to the authentic and autonomous 'true self' and 'finding one's true self' is presented as the capacity to realize one's own interests and desires *against* power, whether it be in the form of the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or parental control. The (moral) self is thus pitted *against* the social and desires are naturalized as expressions of an unmediated autonomous will pertaining to the 'authentic self'.[11] In Lien's account, agency is attributed to those who 'resist' and 'rebel' (against imprisoning traditions); they are described as in a process of liberation; they want to 'find themselves' and 'own themselves', realizing a 'constructive creativity' (Lien, 2003: 327). Those who do not 'resist' or 'rebel' appear to be controlled almost entirely from the outside, and in so far as they are attributed any agency at all, it is one of self-control that secures their own oppression rather than their 'self-realization'.

Unlike Lien, Borchgrevink and Brochmann (2009) open for the possibility that Muslim women's turn to religion may be a technique for furthering equality and to

9 Lien (2003: 212) bases her discussion mainly on conceptualizations of the self in Punjab in Pakistan, and focuses on the relationship between *nafs* and *ruh* – understood as 'an incorporeal, transcendent and purely moral and spiritual intellect that after death ascends to God'. It is not my intention to dispute how these terms are understood in a Punjabi context, but rather the way in which Lien interprets them in relation to the issues of freedom, power and resistance.

10 It is interesting to note that Lien, like the young women quoted above, defines, *ruh* as superego and

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nafs as ego, in the Freudian sense, but without reflecting upon the potential transference of meaning that might thus occur.

11 Some would argue on this basis that also illiberal practices are tolerable in so far as they are the result of her own choice and free will (see Gressgård and Jacobsen, 2008).

formulate one's autonomous agency. Borchgrevink and Brochmann reflect explicitly on the unease caused by the 'return of religion' among Norwegian feminists, themselves included. Their unease is discussed in relation to debates about Muslim sartorial practices (in particular the hijab), which they read as embodying a conflict between women's freedom and freedom of religion. From one perspective, they argue, women who claim the right to wear the hijab in secular contexts (such as in the police which was what the controversy in 2009 concerned) can be read as a signal of a will to adapt to majority society and to rethink Islam 'on women's premises' (Borchgrevink and Brochmann, 2009: 62). However, Borchgrevink and Brochmann remain uneasy about the hijab, in so far as it is impossible to know 'which hijab is individually chosen and which is not?' (2009: 62). They also point to the apparent paradox through which the hijab, by those who wear it, is theorized both as a religious duty and as a matter of personal choice. Unlike Lien, Borchgrevink and Brochmann do not read women's embracement of religious concepts and practices as univocally threatening women's autonomy. It is nevertheless in light of such 'liberal values' – which they, quoting Charles Taylor (1994), characterize as a 'fighting creed' – that they hold women's religious practices accountable.

If we look at how the young women in the conversation above talk about how one should relate to the self, however, the assumptions about autonomy that underpin Lien's as well as Borchgrevink and Brochmann's account seem to prevent us from fully capturing what is at stake.[12] Notwithstanding the fact that the self articulated by the young women is informed by multiple religious, philosophical and psychological discourses, the young women converge on the understanding that being Muslim implies that there is a certain mode of being that one should seek to achieve, and that this mode requires an effort on the part of the individual to work with herself. Whether this effort is seen as strenuous or less so, differs. The 'techniques of the self' that the young women stress for realizing this mode of being are also numerous, including; meditation, contemplation, remembering Allah, prayer, living your everyday life within the limits of what is *halal*, love of God, the eschatological fear of God and the Day of Judgement, and trying to obtain a pure intention in your acts. '*Nafs*', 'ego', 'lust' and 'desire' are singled out as domains of the self that these practices are directed at, and they incite and call upon themselves and each other to recognize the moral obligation to submit to the 'will of Allah', to realize that 'I'm working for God'. The young women also negotiate the separation of 'faith' from 'everyday life' – as in Safa's stress on integrating faith and quotidian life as a modality of acting in the world (in a way that is *halal*). She thus questions the relegation of Islam to a purely 'ritual' and 'spiritual' sphere, and stresses its concrete bearings on the practices and routines of daily life.

12 The relationship between ideas of individual autonomy and authenticity is, despite their constitutiveness for modern understandings of the self and the way in which they both hinge on the opposition of inner/outer, and invoke notions of bodily integrity, also one of potential tension; reflecting, respectively, Enlightenment ideas of sameness and Romantic ideas of distinctness (Taylor, 1989, 1994). The purpose of this article is not to discuss the tensions in modern subjectivities this may engender, and I will speak here of autonomy and authenticity as aspects of dominant modern notions of the self.

A decisive role is also attributed to the acquisition of religious knowledge in order to know 'what God wants from me' and to shape your self in accordance

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with this will. This stress on the acquisition of knowledge was, as has also been underlined in other studies of young pious Muslim women in Europe (Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006; Minganti, 2007; Fadil, 2008; Jouili, 2008), largely effectuated through the idea of an individual and personal search for truth. The women's desire to 'learn about Islam' in order to better 'understand' was paralleled by their critiques of their parents' generation, in particular, their supposed 'traditional', 'non-reflexive' emulation of religious practices (Jacobsen, 2002; 2004; 2006). However, the young women, like Alesha, also stressed the significance of obedience to principles that they could not 'fully understand'. The idea of having a 'weak' and 'unstable' *iman* was intimately related to the failure to achieve the attitude of obedience that God requires of those faithful to him (as in Aadila's suggestion that Alesha had not properly submitted herself and needs to understand that she is 'working for God').

While the construction of the self as something that needs to be disciplined and controlled seems to contradict self-realization understood as autonomy and authenticity, the picture gets more complex when we pay attention to the way in which the young women talk about desire. The self that emerges from the conversation is a site of shifting desires that do not express an autonomous will or authentic self. As we saw above, the young women saw desires for 'un-Islamic things' as products of the 'materialist' and 'egoist' world they lived in, and argued that if these desires had become a 'part of your personality', they could be hard to change.[13] Changing one's personality required vigilance and consciousness of one's acts as well as knowledge of 'what God wants from me'. If this was successful, piety could eventually become part of one's 'faith' and 'personality'. The self that the young Muslim women seek to discipline is a self that has been led away from its nature (*deen-al-fitra*), and in which socialization and the social context of materialism and egoism produced a set of 'un-Islamic desires'. Disciplining *nafs* is thus not about being prevented from 'realizing one's true self', but about realizing a self that is truly Muslim. Each person is seen as responsible for acquiring knowledge of Islam, for following the moral codes of Islam, and for intents, as well as for their acts.[14] While the stress is thus on obedience to God's will, and on embodying Islamic norms, resisting the 'cultural traditions' of the parents and the norms of majority society becomes necessary when such traditions and norms prevent self-realization as a true Muslim, for example through the production of 'un-Islamic desires'.

If disciplining *nafs* is analysed within the grammar of concepts about the self in which it appears rather than as a subjection of the ego to the superego, or of the autonomous and authentic self to the norms of society, it does seem to point towards modes of agency that are not captured by a binary model of subordination and resistance. Rather, as Mahmood (2005: 15) suggests, we can identify agency 'not only in those acts that resist norms and prescriptive structures, but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms'. To Noor for

13 The themes of materialism and egoism are not related in any straightforward manner to the 'non-Muslim' and the Western, however. Young Muslims often criticize the parental generation for being too materialistic and egoistic.

14 It should be noted that this latter understanding of the self is profoundly individualizing, in that the Islamic discourses address individuals and call upon them to effectuate a work on the self (e.g. disciplining desires, working on one's intention, doing individual *dawa* in one's daily conduct).

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instance, a central part of disciplining *nafs* had been to work on purifying her intentions,[15] so that she would not act piously in order to gain praise and recognition from her social environment but to 'submit' and realize the exemplary model of the pious self. She thus engaged in a scrutinizing of, and effort to rearrange, her inner motivations. Her acts in this respect are not directed towards 'emancipation' or 'resistance', but towards developing the skills and capacities necessary for undertaking particular kinds of moral action (Foucault, 1997; Mahmood, 2005). The reworking of intentions and disciplining of *nafs* was central not only to the individual's realization of the pious self but also to the arrangement of social relationships. In the context of the mixed-gender organizations the women belonged to, the motivations of members were central to negotiations of norms of gender separation. Gender-mixing was not perceived as counter to piety as long as people's intentions were to work for God and not to date and flirt.

15 For a more elaborate discussion of intention, see Jacobsen (2010).

The question nevertheless remains how piety relates to gender. How do young Norwegian Muslim men relate to norms, to others and to themselves as desiring subjects, and how do they shape themselves as (pious) Muslims? Just like the young women quoted above, several of the young men talked about the struggle to control *nafs*, not least in relation to interaction with the opposite sex. However, while young men and young women were equally concerned with controlling their desires and working on themselves as moral agents, they tended to construct women more as the objects of (sexual) desire and men as the desiring subjects. Through acting piously (e.g. wearing a hijab, lowering their gaze, etc.) the women were concerned both with controlling their own desires and with avoiding arousing (sexual) desire in their male colleagues. While the young men also performed a work on the self to shape themselves as pious Muslims, they were not subject to the same standards of guilt and sin as the young women. This was often spoken of by the young as a 'double standard' that gave women the main burden and responsibility for guaranteeing social morality. While most of the young women, like Adeela, avoided dating on the grounds that it was counter to Islamic norms, more of the young men did date (mainly non-Muslim or non-pious Muslim) girls, although often with a 'bad conscience' or by assuring themselves that the way they did it remained within the 'limits' of Islamic norms. Gender thus importantly structures the agency involved in shaping the self as a pious Muslim.

ethics of authenticity and autonomy

The case I have discussed attests to the importance of exploring the different ways in which desire is socially constructed, and how it relates to different conceptualizations of self and self-fulfilment. However, it would be a mistake to see the kind of relationship that the young women I worked with had to

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themselves and how they constituted themselves as moral subjects as uniquely shaped and moulded within a singular and coherent Islamic discursive tradition that can be 'counter-posed' to the secular-liberal tradition, which is of course neither homogeneous nor static. On the contrary, as evident from the discussion between the young women, the shaping and moulding of subjectivities takes place at the intersection of several internally heterogeneous and contested discursive traditions. A number of studies have focused on processes of 'individualization' as central to the shaping of contemporary Muslim subjectivities in Europe, and related this to processes of deterritorialization and disembedding of Islamic traditions from communal life, from religious authorities and from the sphere of law. While such analyses of individualization are important (see Jacobsen, 2006, 2010), I want to explore 'individualization' among somewhat different lines, focusing on what Foucault calls a 'mode of subjectivation' (Foucault, 1997). In particular, I want to explore how a (liberal) ethics of personal authenticity and autonomy traverse the ways in which young women engage the Islamic discursive tradition and negotiate the notion of submitting to Allah.[16]

The commitment to an ethics of personal authenticity and autonomy was evident not least from the way they spoke about their individual 'religious careers'. The young women conceived of themselves as in a position of choice[17] *vis-à-vis* the Islamic tradition. In their narratives of how they had come to practice Islam, they insisted on the fact that they themselves had desired and chosen to know more about the religious tradition, to wear or not to wear the hijab, to pray five times a day, and so forth. Further, stress was not only put on the importance of disciplining desire 'to please Allah', but also on how living piously gives you 'a balance in life' and 'happiness', that you 'gain a lot', and that living piously is not contrary to 'having fun'.[18] To have made a 'choice' was seen to secure the legitimacy of religious practice as a true sign of obedience to Allah, to be distinguished from obedience that emerged rather from social conformity or pressure, unreflexive traditional practice and acceptance of the authority of parents or imams. 'Choice' was thus constructed as intrinsic to their moral agency as Muslims; 'obeying Allah' was an act of faithfulness and worship only to the extent that it was 'willed'. But choice was also constructed as necessary for the individual to stay 'truthful to themselves'. For instance, the hijab, while acknowledged to be a practice geared at shaping a self that is 'working for God', was also assessed in terms of an ethics of personal authenticity and autonomy, as an expression of 'who I am', and 'who I choose to be'.

In particular, relations to the parental generation were negotiated through an ethics of autonomy and freedom. Noor, for instance, deplored the fact that her parents were so strict with her little sister when it came to clothing and out-of-school activities that they caused her to 'rebel' and turn away from Islam. Her younger sister had started wearing the hijab to get more 'space' at

16 See Jacobsen (2006, 2010). Fadil (2008) makes a similar argument regarding 'orthodox' Muslim women in Belgium.

17 This insistence on choice can be read as an effect of particular forms of governing modern individuals, who, as Rose (1999: 87) notes, 'are not merely "free to choose", *but obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice'.

18 As Fadil (2008) has noted, the notion of 'happiness' leads us to a liberal-utilitarian register, one which underlines the primacy of one's own well-being.

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home, Noor explained, but it was just to get the parents off her back. The young women agreed that trying to coerce children and youth into religious observation was wrong (and also counter-productive as it would cause people to 'rebel'),[19] and that a person's individual choice should be respected.[20] Parents could of course legitimately try to guide their children, but this should be done through teaching them and 'explaining' to them so that they themselves chose to do the right thing.[21] Coercion was regularly portrayed as something of 'the past' – associated with 'tradition' or 'culture', while 'individual freedom' was viewed as modern and advanced – associated with 'authenticated Islam' (Deeb, 2006: 21). In particular with respect to issues concerning gender and sexual morality, the 'parental generation' and their 'culture' and 'traditions' often represented the 'other' against which the young women's own subject position was constructed. While the experience of homely coercion was central to how some spoke about their upbringing during our interviews and in discussions with other young people, others acclaimed how their parents had 'given them a lot of freedom' and 'always let them make their own choices'. However, 'modernity' was not seen as guaranteeing individual freedom in itself, as they also deplored the 'peer-pressure' of youth culture, that made juggling the demands from home and school so difficult to Noor's little sister, and that prevented her from 'being herself'. While the discussion among the young women quoted earlier focused on crafting the self through submission and obedience to (religious) norms, issues related to gender and intergenerational dynamics, in particular, portrayed the self as needing to be crafted 'against' social norms represented by the 'parental generation' and the 'youth culture' (yet, one could argue, through subjection to normative ideals of self-fulfilment through choice).

This very brief discussion can only hint at how a liberal understanding of freedom (as autonomy and authenticity) importantly shapes how young Muslims in Norway relate to themselves and others. In contrast to Lien, I do not see the young women's concern with autonomy and authenticity as a sign of their 'liberation' from oppressive traditions and social structures, or as a guarantee of their 'creative agency'. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, (Jacobsen, 2010) it manifests the effects of a particular form of liberal governance, a particular mode of relating to the self in which the individual is responsible for creating his/her own identity and future and where the value of autonomy and free choice serves as a basis for evaluating the good, moral person (Rose, 1996; Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2005; Brown, 2006). The importance attributed to tearing oneself loose from one's parents, discovering one's separate identity, 'possessing oneself', being responsible for one's proper behaviour, conquering the power to decide over one's everyday life and following one's own will – that Lien (2003) identifies as characteristic of what it means to 'grow up' in Norway – can be seen as a particular mode of subjectivation, which is informed by particular liberal affects and sensibilities; it is a way of relating to the self that is grounded on the

19 In contrast to Lien who views rebellion as the only truly 'free' mode of agency for young women of Muslim minority background, the women tended to view 'rebel' as a reactive form of agency that was the result of particular conditions; such as coercion from parents and peer pressure, rather than of 'individual choice'.

20 This was also the general attitude in the two organizations the young women affiliated with. The hijab was considered a religious obligation, but it was up to each individual to decide if, how and when to wear it.

21 This is line with the shift, particularly visible from about the 1970s onwards, that Gullestad (1996) has noted in Norwegian discourses on the upbringing of children, from a popular rhetorical emphasis on 'obedience' to an emphasis on 'being oneself', choice and independence.

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language of authenticity and autonomy. Given that, as I have argued above, young Muslims are positioned at the intersection of different, ambivalent and sometimes contrasting discourses and traditions, it is not possible to see the 'self' they relate to and work on as reflecting one particular and integrated cultural or religious understanding of self and personhood. This also complicates the notions of 'self-realization', which does not unfold within a single teleology or discursive formation. While anthropological studies of different cultural notions of self and personhood have been criticized for assuming a homogenous notion of a self that is coextensive with a given culture, structure or temporality, Mahmood (2005: 120) emphasizes that different configurations of personhood cohabit the same cultural and historical space, and that each configuration is a product of a specific discursive formation rather than of the culture at large. However, Mahmood is concerned primarily with elaborating such concepts of self and personhood in the context of the Islamic piety movement in Egypt, as distinct from and opposed to those suggested by secular-liberalist frameworks. My focus has rather been on how different concepts of self and personhood shape the religious subjectivities and practices of young Muslims as different configurations of personhood, ethics and self-realization inhabit not only the same cultural and historical space, but also shape individual subjectivities and modes of agency. Contra Lien, this way of relating to the self should not be opposed to the self-conceptions entailed by concepts such as *nafs*, *ruh* and *'aql*. Rather, it seems that these concepts themselves, and the self-crafting associated with them, are transformed by and negotiated through a (liberal) ethics of authenticity and autonomy. This also has consequences for how we think about, in Mahmood's (2005: 23) words 'the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated'. In the case of the young women I worked with, their relationship with religious, cultural and social norms was contextual and varied as their lives unfolded.[22] Thus, the agency located in 'willing submission' should not replace other modalities of agency such as 'resistance' and 'subversion', in the analysis of young Norwegian women's engagement with Islamic traditions and attraction to revivalist discourses.

22 Age was particularly important here, as the teenagers more frequently saw themselves as individuals *against* religious and social norms.

conclusion

As Strathern (1988: 29) has noted, 'feminists who are also anthropologists are engaged in a double negotiation of both anthropological and feminist premises'. In trying to make sense of young European Muslim women's attraction to Islamic revivalism I have struggled to negotiate the premises of anthropology and feminism, and not least the normative liberal assumptions that underlie many (feminist and non-feminist) approaches to religion, gender and piety. In particular Mahmood's discussion of piety in Islamic revivalism provided me, and other scholars dealing with Muslim women in Europe, with a perspective that

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allowed us to critically revise some of these assumptions and to explore women's engagement in Islamic revivalism beyond the dichotomy of 'rebels' or 'conformists'. However, the attempt to read young women's attraction to revivalist Islam through the perspective of piety also made me aware that at least in the Norwegian context, 'piety' can not easily serve as a counter model to a liberal ethics of autonomy and authenticity. Rather, subjectivities and modes of agency are shaped at the intersection of different conceptions and techniques of the self, creating both convergences and tensions as people's relationship to norms and ethical conduct unfold over time. But while this line of analysis may have made me more tuned to the sensibilities and ethics involved in young Norwegian women's engagement in the Islamic revival, it has not solved the remaining tension between feminism as both an analytical and a politically prescriptive project (Mahmood, 2005: 10). The different readings of Muslim women's concepts of self and agency that I have discussed in this article reflect the continued (and sometimes productive) tensions within feminist and anthropological approaches to Islam. Some argue that feminist (or anthropological for that matter) studies of Islam need to ground themselves in the liberal tradition in order both to describe, analyse, evaluate and change women's condition in the direction of increasing autonomy and freedom from norms. Others use ethnographic descriptions to displace the liberal-progressive agenda undergirding much feminist and anthropological theorizing on freedom, agency and the human subject, and to question the way in which this agenda underpins neo-imperialist projects as well as governmentalizing calls for remaking the sensibilities and commitments of those whose lives contrast with feminist emancipatory visions (Mahmood, 2005; Brown, 2006; Butler, 2008). My intention has not been to resolve this tension, but to sustain a discussion of the questions it raises for the practice of anthropological and feminist theory.

author biography

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