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Female Religious Professionals in France

AMEL BOUBEKEUR

In France, Islamic knowledge was formally transmitted and reproduced to Muslims through associations aimed at controlling the religious market. "Religious market" refers to the growing demand by Muslims for religious education and services such as the issuing of fatwa (religious legal advice), and the performance of rites such as prayer and marriage. Individuals from mosques, Muslim associations, or religious authorities supplied all these religious services.¹ These institutions catered mainly to male followers who were expected to transmit religious knowledge according to the in-house ideology; they did not usually promote the interests of youth and women who were on their margins.

Young women, particularly, were not satisfied with their marginal roles in Islamic organizations. Especially since the events of 11 September 2001, they seem to have grown tired of hearing the Islamist militant speech of these associations and wanted to learn about their religion through more spiritual and academic channels. Thus, more and more young female students left the political and social militant associations in favour of the religious teaching of the institutes for Islamic Studies. They also took part in the activities associations of young Muslim students such as Etudiants Musulmans de France and Jeunes Musulmans de France who tried to move away from the strategies of the central organization Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (akin to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in France), especially concerning the headscarf controversy. Consequently, they were more liable to promote the principles of freedom of individual choice with regard to issues such as, whether to wear the headscarf in schools and workplaces, rather than to be a part of a collective Islamist utopia movement. Within these new organizations, the role of women was no longer that of the messenger of a pre-formulated normative and ideological message expressed by a religious militancy, but of a "source" capable of offering others an education in Islamic sciences.

In a highly diversified knowledge market, the obligation to promote a religious, pragmatic, and methodological learning rather than a political Islamic ideology made it thus possible for women to integrate into programs devoted to the propagation of the latter. Because these women could not be seen in the past as traditional active militants, male religious leaders did not conceive as viable the use of female activism in the religious market. For example, it is within a collective movement that is not exclusively Islamic (CEDITIM), which fights against the expulsion from school of young girls who wear the headscarf, that the very recent, and still discreetly visible Siham Andaloussi (the secretary of Tariq Ramadan), became a spokesperson. However, the potential risk of defection of the male audience in the process of immigration led them to re-consider women as a necessary reinforcement to a risk of weakening of a religious Islamic market uprooted from its national conditions of production.

Islam in France has been experiencing a significant evolution of traditional gender roles as more Muslim women have access to schooling and employment. Increasingly, first and second-generation Maghrebi women, as well as new immigrants, seek out and benefit from religious training in institutions that have traditionally been male domains such as mosques, religious associations and Institutes for Islamic Studies. Could it be that new public female Muslim elite with religious skills and competencies is emerging? Do Muslim women occupy a new position within a religious education market?

As far as women were concerned, they did not conceive of their participation as exceptional but rather as a way to introduce themselves into the power structures of the power-through-knowledge milieu. In this respect, the Muslim organizations and institutes show a turning point in their internal management of their marketing policy around the "Muslim woman." For instance, patterns of attitudes that had been imposed as the one and unique normative avenue (like, for instance, wearing the headscarf, or having to sit at the appointed place for

women) are now presented as subject to a legitimate free and individual choice. Moreover, the religious education market is open to competition in the French context. No obligation of belief can now be imposed upon the young female students who have experienced a successful socialization out of the religious milieu. The place of female religious elites in France makes also sense, thanks to a greater presence of the feminine clientele, who do not only go to the Institutes, mosques, and religious lectures, but also buys books and Islamic cassettes. Seen as professional models with which women can identify, they strongly appeal to a clientele that represents "between 65 and 70% of the audience of the new lectures, that is about 33, 000 girls."²

The unofficial female market

The changes in the production pattern due to immigration should not hide the fact that, even if female students in the Institutes are as numerous as male students, their presence in the religious job market remains symbolic (less than 15%). The female religious elites, which include various types of profiles such as preachers, intellectuals, or even translators of Islamic works, appear as a very fragmented group. An open-to-women religious education training system does not necessarily imply that women will be recruited for prestigious professions. They are rather confined to a more classical niche, the women associations, while the dominant positions in the religious market being still occupied by men. Even though they do not fit in the formal religious economy, they cannot be totally excluded from it. Thus, these new feminine professional abilities represent a new contender for the traditional male roles.

Clearly though, the establishment finds itself well advised to educate and in the last instance equip women with adequate skills, even if it assigns them a lower position. Long excluded from the institutional structures of religious knowledge, women usually meet at homes for sharing religious information, making it easier for some of them to become unofficial religious authorities, and proving to be a real source for influencing other women. Women can now alone bring forward the religious standards, and their unofficial information can possibly meet head-on the interests of the male religious monopoly.

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PHOTO BY MEHDI FEDOUACH, G.A.P., 2001

In comparison to the far away traditional Maghrebi societies where religiously knowledgeable women can be easily discredited as healers or holy female marabouts, neither institutionalized nor accredited with real knowledge, the social mobility of Muslim female elites in France makes them first-rate competitors in the religious market. In fact, they are no longer playing the cultural community go-betweens relaying religious opinions to protect "the real image of the Muslim woman" from the influences of the non-Muslim world. As they move, they bring along their own clientele. In other words, the more prominent they appear, as visible actors, educated and upper middle-class citizens, the higher is the corresponding profile of their audience. They can therefore occupy the central position of producing religious meanings in society.³

The traditional dominant religious character is now being questioned, and new Islamic indigenous feminist battlefields are emerging against, for example, polygamy practices, and cultural and economic male domination. Even if the new standards are the expression of an unofficial market, they are nevertheless seriously competing in the religious market. Since those women hold positions in public circles and know how to use their religious abilities in a professional capacity, they are not confined to the former scheme of traditional relays of knowledge. Their roles are no longer restricted to raising children and contributing to the smooth running of an "Islamic society," but they execute their roles according to a well-planned scheme. They transform the old small-scale, family-minded corporate approach into a larger, rationalized production of their knowledge, making their abilities fit in with the logics of self-interest and profit, notably with children, youngsters, or women.

How feminine religious elites were born

The women-centred production of elites, either through written production (for example, the books on Muslim women in France by Dounia Bouzar or Malika Dif, both members of the French Board of Muslim Worship), fatwa, or *ijtihad* (interpretation of the Quran),⁴ all signal strategies of professional redeployment. The shift of what used to be a professional stigma⁵ (i.e. being a woman) into a highly researched quality on the religious market is a revealing phenomenon. Following

their relative exclusion from the global religious market, the new women elites have become specialists who can both secure a female clientele and remain as a legitimate part of the religious market institution.

Subsequently, and as a sine qua non condition for their introduction to the religious market, they, on the one hand, comply with the norms and traditions that exclude them from the canonical authority like the sermon of the Friday prayer (which is still considered a male prerogative). On the other hand, they directly compete with the establishment, lecturing in front of mixed audiences or teaching religious courses. By doing so, they secure a balance between their "feminine" abilities and career-oriented strategies, while keeping in touch with the global religious market, now more competitive than ever.

Setting aside and belittling the achievements of women professionals created an unofficial religious market that competes with that of men. Women also inherit some benefits from the structural legitimacy of the official market allowing them to put forward their own production. These ambivalent market strategies and the extreme diversity of the feminine religious proficiencies produce great instability, but only because it is still relatively new. Will this market become an autonomous and exclusively feminine market (so limiting their field of activity and clientele) or will the recent feminine religious economy gain enough value to be fully integrated to the global religious market, thus providing religious women elites with new perspectives and positions, far from the traditional women "ghetto"?

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Meeting of Etudiants Musulman de France, Bourget, 30 April 2001

Notes

1. See Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Introduction to the Economics of Religion," *Journal of Economic Literature* 36 (September 1998): 1465-1496.
2. Dounia Bouzar, *L'islam des banlieues* (Paris: Syros, 2001): 129.
3. See Valérie Amiraux, "Discours voilés sur les musulmanes en Europe: comment les musulmanes sont-ils devenus des musulmanes?" *Social Compass* 50, no. 1 (2003).
4. See the work of the lecturer and Islamic lawyer Schaiyma al Sarraf, *Ahkām al mar'a bayna al ijtihād wa at-taqlīd* (Paris: Al Qalam, 2001).
5. Nilufer Gole, "The Voluntary Adoption of Islamic Stigma Symbols," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2003).