

Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe

Jeanette S. Jouili

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A research study grounded in both anthropology and ethnography, the aim of Jeanette S. Jouili's *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe* is threefold: (1) to explore how women cultivate Islamic subjectivities in secular European contexts that stigmatize and politicize such religious practices; (2) reveal the practical and discursive techniques they have devised to deal with the difficulties that emerge from engaging in pious practices; and, finally, (3) attempts to show how living as a religious minority in a secular-majority society can reshape traditional Islamic discourse and provide an alternative to the dominant language of autonomy, individual rights, and equality. Since the early 2000s, Jouili has come into contact with a wide range of practicing Muslimahs attending courses in various Islamic centers of learning, specifically in Paris and the region around Cologne. These centers are distinctive for their willingness to explore a multiplicity of doctrinal lineages and attempt to transcend cultural and ethnic traditions.

In the case of this most recent publication, there is the added value of a much-needed overview of pious women who have been active in Islamic revival circles in Europe, together with perceptive insights into their daily lives. This book, therefore, contributes to a high-profile body of work by Talal Asad (1993, 2003), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Charles Hirschkind (2006) around ethics and ethical self-cultivation, which explores contextual power relations at play in the construction of religious discourses and practices, as well as Armando Salvatore's work on the public sphere (2007). Jouili's findings shed light on the incompleteness and nonlinearity of these Islamic moral codes, as well as demonstrate how "[t]he individual's work on herself [is] significantly and long-lastingly complicated by prior habits and by the availability of other sets of moral codes" (p. 15).

Drawing on Aristotelian ethics, with its insistence on practice rather than reason, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Jouili investigates how the embodied/practical ethical process molds an Islamic modernity within a secular European context (chapter 1). The subsequent chapters provide an in-depth study of these practices, which are aimed at strengthening through the internalization of an "authenticated" knowledge of Islam learned within formal settings (chapter 2) and the specific techniques of self-cultivation, specifically

ṣalāt (prayer) and modest dress (chapter 3). Chapter 4 focuses on the controversial issues surrounding gender and religion. Through a detailed analysis of the practices, reasoning, and desires of pious Muslimahs, Jouili reveals their particular understanding of virtue and morality, which are often overlooked by mainstream debates on gender and religion. This is showcased by how emphasizing duty results in the gendered division of labor in their lives that necessarily foregrounds their roles as mothers and wives. The limitations of adhering to an “authentic” Islam, however, does not exclude a variety of interpretations. This ongoing negotiation facilitates a move towards ethical discourses that valorize interdependency and, at the same time, stress *tawakkul* (confidence) and *yaqīn* (trust) in the Divine when everyday impediments tend to work against the construction of a virtuous subject.

Chapters 5 and 6 return to an analysis of education and the visibility of Islamic practices, such as *ṣalāt* and wearing the hijab, in light of the discussion on gender and ethics. The practical consequences of defining motherhood and career within an “ethics of care,” which is geared towards the self and others, and the awareness of the broader social dimension when enacting pious practices, often result in painful compromises. This constant effort, struggle, and even suffering is slowly being absorbed into bodily and discursive enactments of piety on the part of Muslimahs, thus shaping a new ethical subject. The final chapter (7) argues for an ethics of citizenship informed by this remaking of the virtuous Muslim practitioner, who feels an obligation toward the common good and social justice of the wider society. The phronetic reasoning displayed, as well as the ability to reflect and be critical of discourses, shows that “[t]his modality of detachment was not based on the peculiar modern reflexivity [...] but instead connected to certain Islamic traditions of ethical reasoning” (p. 196).

In the plethora of books currently being published on Islam in Europe and, in particular, the experiences of Muslimahs, Jouili’s research stands out for its attention to the ethical subject, in revealing the women’s own strategies for coping with the secular space and, as a result of this, the redefinition of pious discourses. Like many of her other works on Islamic artistic circles and popular culture, the ethical subject, constituted at both an individual and a social level, is placed at the center of the author’s enquiry. The study’s gendered approach adds an extra dimension to the overall picture as the visibility of her interlocutors – often targets of legislation and political debate, which, in its continuous attempts to impose “acceptable” versions of Islam in a public national space, reimagines the female Muslim subject – tends to amplify collective and individual anxieties and reactions. In analyzing what these pious Muslimahs feel

and experience in their daily lives toward themselves, their own communities, and the wider public sphere – a “representational burden” – Jouili offers an insight into how their own coping strategies might have led to a redefinition of this embodiment of piety vis-à-vis secular space in ethical terms.

The inclusion of long excerpts, personal stories, and experiences from the women themselves shows the gradual transformation that is both taking place in their lives and shaping their ethical structures. On the one hand, obligations, restrictions, and duty are chosen as the basis of a discursive framework, in opposition to a modern discourse based on the importance of individual rights. Jouili convincingly argues that these perceived restrictions are now in the process of becoming discursively combined with narratives of personal desire and emotions. This represents a point of rupture with the perceived “mechanical,” imposed traditions of former generations and reveals a far greater acceptance of the multiplicity of discourses to which they are exposed in the Franco-German context, referred to by Jouili as “the new economy of emotions and the novel languages through which the ritual duties are experienced and expressed” (p. 69).

The concepts of “quest,” “journey,” and “pursuit” semantically capture Jouili’s field of study, that is to say, the processes by which pious Muslimahs attempt to become virtuous subjects in societies characterized by secularism and a growing suspicion of the Muslim Other. The book’s opening question, “How can we reconcile Islamic practice and worship with an active life in a secular society?” discussed by participants in a morals class in one of the Islamic centers in the Parisian banlieu of St. Denis, is the basic dilemma Jouili is attempting to answer. Although knowledge (*‘ilm*) and practice strengthen faith (*īmān*) and stir pious emotions, neither of these can be approached in a linear, mechanical, or unreflexive way. Throughout the book the author cleverly interweaves an analysis of *self*-cultivation, influenced by both the classical Sufi traditions and modern ideals of the self, with a reflection on the ever-growing relational character of these practices. The reader is reminded of the importance of establishing a “community of learning” not only because of the benefits of sociability in the practitioner’s path toward *taqwā* (God-consciousness), but also as a gradual move toward a far more democratized and less hierarchical space for questioning and understanding.

A little more could have been made of the link between Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical reasoning) and Islamic *istiṣlāḥ* (reasoning in Islamic jurisprudence), especially given the context of the philosophical exchange between ancient Greece and the Islamic world. Jouili, however, will be forgiven for concentrating on what she does best – sympathetically recounting the

dilemmas and painful compromises that her interlocutors face in their everyday lives. The ease and confidence with which the author moves among disciplines and her clear exposition of theoretical frameworks will ensure a wide readership of specialists and lay people alike. While her “unorthodox” approach in combining theories from different disciplines may provoke criticism, Jouili openly admits that she is not concerned with producing a work of abstract philosophy. The daily struggles presented here are all too concrete and immanent, underscoring how the discourses, whether religious or secular, in which Muslimahs engage are challenged by a growing hostility in the European environment. Only by acknowledging that notions of citizenship can also be informed by religious ethics and give space to the voices of pious citizens could these Muslimahs eventually translate their “ethical subjectivity” into a political self. This final upbeat analysis makes Jouili’s beautifully written work well worth reading.

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