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Religion, Law, and Society: Liberationist Theologies within Islamic Feminism in a Post- Arab Spring Middle East and North Africa

Introduction

Throughout the post-Arab Spring Middle East and North Africa, different stances can be seen in terms of how religion should influence law governing the citizens, and particularly that of women. Coming out of the Arab Spring were several new ways of interacting with religion and the government. The implementations of religion in law and a form of governance over the people varies from country to country throughout the region, with some standardizing a set of religious laws for all to follow while others allow religion to influence the laws and governance, but do not specifically set religious laws. These religious laws are found throughout Islamic texts of the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, and Hadith or Sunnah, the collection of the Prophet Muhammad's narratives and direct teachings.

Several countries have taken up a more religion-based form of government, relying heavily on Shari'a Law to police the people, but many other Middle East and North African countries have taken up stances allowing for open discourse and resisting the implementation of religious law upon the people. By doing so, various dialogues concerning life in the Arab world have come about, including the discourse of Islamic Feminism. This movement both within and outside the Arab world, driven primarily by Muslim women, has led to further discussion of women's roles in society, as well as how they can be better included in all aspects of Muslim life.

Before looking into liberationist theologies within Islamic Feminism in the Middle East and North Africa, we must first situate ourselves in the post-Arab Spring period. We must also familiarize ourselves with the key concepts of Islamism and Shari'a Law, as well as critiques from the West in order to better understand the work being done by scholars within the field of Islamic Feminism. I aim to show how liberationist theologies are being used by scholars of Islamic Feminism to reshape and redefine the ways in which the West views agency and perhaps feminism itself within the Middle East and North Africa.

The Arab Spring

First, the period in which I am referring must be elaborated upon. The Arab Spring, as it has been nicknamed, was a collection of major and minor uprisings, revolts, and demonstrations throughout many countries in the Arab world. The Arab Spring began in late 2010, spurred by a singular act of resistance to the Tunisian government. According to National Public Radio (2011), Mohamed Bouazizi, a young man from Tunisia, was slapped by a policewoman for refusing to hand over his fruit cart after being found that he did not possess the necessary permit to sell his goods. In an act of desperation, he set himself on fire in from of a governmental building, resonating with others in his small town, as well as throughout the Arab world. This act of resistance set a wave of uprisings and revolts into action throughout the Middle East and North Africa (NPR, 2011).

The events making up the Arab Spring varied depending upon the country, and in many cases, spurred great progress in the form of governmental and social change. For example, in Tunisia and several other countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the ruler was overthrown

and new governmental agents took their place. Specifically in Egypt, President Mubarak was overthrown, elections took place, and the Muslim Brotherhood, a group aiming to align the government with Islamic tenets, took power, ultimately overthrowing this group in a second revolution in the summer of 2013 (Monier and Ranko, 2013). In other places, such as Morocco, Jordan, and Oman, demonstrations took place in order to promote governmental reform or constitutional changes, such as the Moroccan updates to marriage and family laws and the appointment of a new Prime Minister in Jordan. While the events varied depending on the country, some even having even more minor protests, these events overall created reform and drew attention to struggles and conflicts within the Middle East and North Africa.

Since the end of the Arab Spring era in early 2011, outcomes have varied, including the divide in how religion is utilized within the governmental realm to regulate the behavior and social norms of the people. Changes have been ever more present in the years following the end of the Arab Spring, through today, perhaps due to the polarization between the secular and religious, seen also in Western contexts, as well as the more prevalent media coverage of the region. To analyze the role of religion in the government and society of Middle East and North African countries in a contemporary setting, we must look at the region in the post-Arab Spring context, examining the shift in several instances toward the implementation of Islamic Law as governance.

Understanding Islamism & Shari'a Laws

To better understand this shift toward an active role of religion within the government, we must come to understand what it truly means to be "Islamist," both from a Western

scholarly and media perspective, as well as defined by scholarly work within the region. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2016), Islamism refers to the belief that the political system should be influenced by Islamic religious beliefs and tenets. More notable cases of Islamism within the government occur in Egypt and some Gulf countries. In Egypt specifically, the Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood, began as a party concerned with making the state more Islam-centered, wishing to implement Shari'a Law, but over time their platform expanded to include reform, judicial independence, and popular sovereignty (Hamid, 2011, p. 41). By expanding their platform, the Muslim Brotherhood no longer called for an Islamic State outright, but aimed to have a democratic state influenced by Islam.

Throughout the West, and more specifically in the United States, the term "Islamism" has become increasingly problematic and often synonymous with extremist and terrorist organizations. This link between two unrelated groups of people is dangerous because it presumes that Islamism at its core, the desire to integrate religion in the governmental structure, is not appropriate. It must be noted that the idea of integrating religion into government is not central to the Arab world, but can be seen throughout the histories of the West. Just like James I and Charles I of England justified their actions under divine law in the 16 and 17th Centuries, some actors within the Middle East and North Africa believe Allah has the supreme authority over all (Darian-Smith, 2010, p. 59).

Western ideals of democracy must be understood as such, and additionally must not be projected as the answer within the Middle East and North Africa, where that form of government may not be suited or welcomed. Mahmood (2005) emphasizes that the West

assumes a secular-liberal view of government and women's rights as best, but looking to the typical places of political struggle such as the state and law may not be useful because society functions based on public conduct (p. 192). Furthermore, she states that the West often frames Islamism as a movement or "eruption of religion outside the supposedly 'normal' domain of private worship," but the same religious- secular divide found in the United States cannot be seen the same in the Arab world (2005, p. 189). This is important to understand when speaking Middle East and North African politics and the implementation of religious Shari'a Law as a means to govern the people.

In more religious-based governments, Shari'a Law is implemented to help control public and private actions of the citizens, with some countries adding an additional police force to help regulate these laws from day to day. Shari'a translates to "path" in English, often used as a guide for Muslims "toward a practical expression of religious conviction in this world" in hopes that is will help them in the world after death (Coulson, 2016). These laws or guidelines are derived from religious texts in the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, and the Hadith or Sunna, narratives and direct words of the Prophet Muhammad. These laws pertain to many different aspects of life, from eating habits to appropriate clothing, and although they are applied to everyone within the country, scholars and civilians both within and outside the region often believe it is women who get the most scrutiny under these regulations.

As mentioned, the use of Shari'a Laws vary depending upon the country being observed and are generally used to guide or mandate the actions people take in both the public and private spheres. I hesitate to claim Shari'a as rules because it is an unrealistic expectation for

most Muslims to follow all of these throughout the entirety of their lives. The degree these guidelines are implemented within a given country depend upon the very government that is in control, and they have changed over time as different governmental actors have taken over in power, as was seen in Egypt and elsewhere.

Examples of countries implementing Islamist governments and Shari'a Law can be seen throughout the region. In Egypt under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, women were to veil themselves in public and around those who are not in their immediate families. This is not necessarily how veiling has been viewed throughout all of Islamic history, as waves of veiling and unveiling have come about at various times and to varying degrees. With the rise of a more strict interpretation of Islamic Law came a rise in the prevalence of the female veil in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa.

Although Saudi Arabia was not particularly prominent within the Arab Spring, only having minor demonstrations, the country holds examples of how Shari'a Law can be strictly implemented. Saudi Arabia is one of the most prominent Middle Eastern countries and a primary U.S. ally in the region having Islamic holy sites and operating under an Islamist government. Regulations of religious law within the country often surround that of food brought into the country, all of which must be halal, meaning the animal was ethically killed according to Islamic practices. Other laws pertain to the mobility of the citizens, wherein critique lies in limiting the movement of women unless in the presence of their male guardian (a husband, father, or brother). Both married and non-married women are subject to these laws under scrutiny from Arab and Western countries. In more extreme cases issues of

beatings for not wearing appropriate dress, child marriage, polygamy, and inheritance rights come into play (Johnson and Sergie, 2014). In other countries these religious laws have different implementations, but limitations placed on women can be seen.

Morocco and many other North African countries were colonized by the French, with Morocco under protectorate by the French for more than forty years. The country gained back independence in 1956 from France and Spain, having controlled a northern portion of the country, closest to its own borders (Denoex, 2011, p. 1). Within the countries of Northern Africa, the influence of Shari'a Law has been less prevalent than in many of the Gulf countries. There is no doubt that religion heavily influences the lives of the people in these countries, but for the most part there are no official police to protect the religious laws as in other countries.

As previously mentioned, the Arab Spring demonstrations throughout Morocco in particular aided in the passing of an updates to the marriage and family laws within the country's constitution. Rather than ignoring the wishes of the people as some other leaders in the region did, King Hassan II gave a speech showing "support for a constitutional draft, enhancing the separation of powers in the government and for gender equality" (Karama, 2013). He followed through on his words and updates to better protect women under the law, as well as a governing statement of equality were among improvements made for equality to the existing constitution.

Critique from the West

Within the past two decades, Islam in Western countries has, for the most part, been perceived as "Other," and often times, unwelcome. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist

attacks in New York City, these negative attitudes toward Muslims and Arabs have been exacerbated. The terms "Muslims" and "terrorists" are interchangeable, and Islamism is seen as the root of terrorism against the West (Gada, 2014, p. 205). While "terrorism is not a more common event than deaths through cancer or traffic accidents" (p. 873), "in the immediate aftermath, over half of Americans reported 'unfavorable attitudes toward Muslim and Arab Americans,' while hate crimes against Muslims in the United States jumped seventeen-fold" (Hall and Ross, 2015, p. 869). These statistics are alarming, to say the least, but nevertheless emphasize the shift in discrimination toward Arabs and citizens who adhere to Islam within the United States since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Immediately following these attacks, media throughout the United States promoted an extremely negative view of the enemy to help reinforce the war being waged in Afghanistan. "Dehumanizing media images of the enemy was to paint Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists—and by implication all Muslim and Arab men—as inherently violent towards women" (Darian-Smith, 2001, p. 368-369). This does not paint a pretty picture looking at the nations of the Middle East and North Africa, and has done considerable damage to the ways in which Arab and Muslim men are perceived throughout Western countries today.

These images and rhetoric surrounding the need to "save" women in the Middle East and North Africa from their oppressive men worked to promote U.S.-led intervention within Afghanistan, and helped convince people that there was a need to be in the region. In addition to simply making their presence known, there were occasions in which the Western influences led demonstrations and unveiled Muslim women (Darian-Smith, 2010, p. 369) further

promoting the idea of the need for Western countries to intervene where it may not be necessary.

Western media portrayals of women in the Middle East and North Africa are often only presenting one side of the argument and failing to see how the situation and circumstances of women are not cut and dry. Within the U.S.-led liberation of Afghani women it was clear that women suffered through various forms of oppression, but only looking at this side of the equation "surrounding women in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries, and especially the 'politics of the veil'," ignores the complexity of Islam's influence over the daily lives of people within the region (Mernissi 1987; Mahmood 2005; Keddie 2007; Scott 2007; Jarmakani 2008; Razack 2008; cited in Darian Smith, 2010, p. 270). These structures of inequality are bred through the histories of each country, often times involving European colonizers as facilitators of oppression.

Concept of Agency in the West & Middle East/North Africa

This skewed media coverage can be seen today in discussions surrounding terrorism, the veiling of women, and laws that ultimately limit the movement and rights of women within the region, but in doing so, the complicated nature of the situations, situated within their own histories and religious influences are lost. Women are classified by the West solely as victims and their agency to enact change is taken from them. The United States in particular must be aware that actions of agency within the Middle East and North Africa are present, and actors are making their opinions of equality known as a form of resistance to the regimes they deem unjust and discriminatory.

Saba Mahmood expands upon the term “agency” as it pertains to the work of women in the Middle East and North Africa from multiple perspectives. Mahmood initially explains Western notions of agency to be “understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interest against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (2005, p. 8). This operates within the understanding that self-expression is an important part of one’s life and constitutes one’s freedom. This concept of agency is seen primarily in Western work and that of Western work concerning Muslim countries, concluding that agency is active resistance against the proscribed norms in a given country.

Later in Mahmood’s work, she shows how this understanding of agency “as a synonym for resistance to social norms” may be, perhaps, biased from a purely Western feminism and liberalism (2005, p. 157) further complicating the term itself. She shows here that for agency to be at work it does not necessarily need to outright go against the norms, but can work from within the system and set of accepted social norms to live both a pious and agentive life.

This concept of agency was articulated in one story in particular, told by Mahmood, about a woman learning to be shy in order to become more pious. Within the story shared, Amal, the woman, explains that she originally thought acting shy would be hypocritical because she did not feel so on the inside, but she trained herself to display shyness in order to act as she is supposed to. Mahmood raises an interesting point in the way agency itself is being observed. She states that if we start looking at agency simply as a modality of action, we can see a different relationship between the subject and norm being followed (2005, p. 157). Amal is not letting her innate way of being take over in her day to day conduct, but rather, shapes her

outward conduct in accordance and out of respect to the ways in which she believes she should act.

Mahmood emphasizes throughout her book that agency can be viewed in different ways, depending on who is asked and what context from which they are writing. Another example of agency at work in a way that differs from the standard of the West can be seen in the interview of Dalia Mogahed on the Daily Show with Trevor Noah on the subject of oppression and Muslim women's clothing. Toward the end of the interview she points out that it may be a Western construct to think that privatizing women's sexuality is oppressive, going on to get Trevor Noah to admit that, primarily in the West, women are only seen as powerful when their sexuality is on display in public. I think this brings in a very interesting argument, along with Mahmood's, in how women's agency is seen. Both arguments made by Mahmood and Mogahed are compelling and can be used to rethink perceptions of women's sources of power from Western and Middle East and North African views.

Through these varied explanations and examples of women's agency in the Arab world, we can see that there is not necessarily one answer to the ways in which women should gain power in a given society and/or religion. It is all well and good that the United States, and the West more generally, wishes to help those who need it, but it is important to understand that various regions of the world have different histories and struggles to face than does the West, thus potentially skewing the ways in which agency is utilized and promoted. The Middle East and North Africa is no exception, and simply laying a blanket statement over the region as oppressive to women does not satisfy the complexities women face daily.

Though Mogahed and Mahmood show two different ways in which women can be seen as empowered from working within the system, this theme is not foreign to the scholarly work within Liberation Theology. Innovators of liberationist theologies often work from within a given system to enact change, the same way agency works according to scholars Mogahed and Mahmood. This goes to show that agency takes up many forms, even from within a Western context. Agency, then, can be utilized for any number of reasons whether it is to become more pious as a way of devoting yourself to God or working to liberate marginalized people, both from within the system and both empowering the individual practicing.

Liberation Theology as Resistance

The concept of Liberation Theology can be seen as a tool to spur equality, both within the Middle East and North Africa and the West. When used by women in feminist contexts it can create a dialogue for women's rights over their public and private lives. The term Liberation Theology came about in the Roman Catholic context as work was being done to physically and spiritually liberate the poor in Latin America. It has since been applied in other contexts as a tool to help liberate marginalized peoples. It is somewhat questionable if this term itself can be applied to Islam and the Arab world, as it was brought about to reread the Christian Bible for passages promoting equality and liberation in Latin America in the 1970s (Webster, 2016), but there is no doubt there is work being done in the way of liberationist theology within the Middle East and North Africa. I will lay out here several instances in which Liberation Theology, or simply liberationist theology, has been used to justify the liberation of marginalized populations from their oppressors.

James Cone, a leader in the field of Black Liberation Theology, has been arguing on behalf of African Americans in the United States prior to his 1970 publication of *A Black Theology of Liberation*. His work is focused in the United States, finding justification and a need for the liberation of this marginalized group of people within the Christian Bible. His claim is that Africans and African Americans have been discriminated against for centuries by the White Man in power because he (the White Man) needed slave labor under his watch. Cone explains that even though this discrimination and horrid treatment of Africans as slaves was justified under specific Bible passages, particularly those concerning slaves obeying their masters, Black Liberation Theology "arises from the need of blacks to liberate themselves from white oppressors" (1970, p. 5). It is further explained that this type of theology is necessary for the survival of African Americans in the United States "because it seeks to interpret the theological significance of the being of a community whose existence is threatened by the power of nonbeing" (Cone, 1970, p. 17). Thus, this resistance to the oppressive White Man is critical and crucial to the survival of African Americans as a collective.

Another scholar in the field, Letty Russell, does not use the term Liberation Theology in her work, but nonetheless works from within a religious hermeneutic to prove the necessity for women's liberation. Russell explains that she does not see a separation between her feminism and her religious faith, feeling that they are both part of the larger movement toward sex/gender equality for women in all aspects of life (2009, p. 12). By working within her own faith, she has created a network of women around the world who also work on liberation of women from a Feminist perspective. Russell challenges her readers and students to "search out ways that patriarchal and imperial paradigms are constantly at work in biblical and church

tradition and in the culture" (2009, p. 42). Working to do just this, she is not rejecting faith as an answer or tool in creating equality within a given society, but making it apparent that understanding the patriarchal structure of the religious and societal institutions are crucial to resist them from a liberatory stance.

While the efforts of Liberation Theology within Islam are harder to come by, ideas of liberationist theologies are present in the work of advocates of change. These scholars have "gone back to their religious texts, re-examined them and reinterpreted them in light of modern needs," and have gone on to "assert that it is the moral responsibility of the individuals to work for the betterment of society and it is the proper role for the clergy to lead this struggle rather than simply to tend to the religious needs of their followers" (Yadegari, 1986, p. 38). These efforts are not central to one place or religion, but can be seen throughout the world under various terms. Because the terms for which this work falls under vary depending on the scholar and I do not wish to blindly group scholars within different religious contexts together without their mention of the similarities, for the purposes of understanding how it is used in the Middle East and North Africa, I will be using the terms "libertory theologies" or "liberationist theology." In conducting this work, Islamic Feminists are further justifying their causes and making their fight for equality based within the holy Islamic text.

The work of liberationist theology within Islamic Feminism is not foreign, as some scholars are working to reevaluate Islamic holy texts of the Qur'an and Hadith or Sunna for messages of equality. They argue that these verses have been misunderstood by centuries of patriarchal control and interpretations, and looking at the life of the Prophet himself can prove

that he intended all to be equal. Scholars within the Middle East and North Africa, including Asma Barlas, argue that "misogynistic readings of Islam derive not from the Qur'an's teachings," but instead from those trying to find justification for their oppression of others (2002, p. 8). She goes on in stating, "the Qur'an's warning against reading it in a decontextualized, selective, and piecemeal way emerges also from its criticism of the Israelites who broke their covenant with God: 'They change the words From their (right) places And forget a good part Of the Message that was Send them'" (5:14; in Ali, 245; cited in Barlas, 2002, p. 16). In arguing for equality with supporting evidence against the misuse of the holy books to control others, women's voices can be heard and female characters from holy scripture can be learned about to better understand how women should act and interact with others throughout their daily lives.

It is important to have scholarly voices and activism from within the region, i.e. Muslim activists and Islamic Feminists, to work toward equality for all. Islamic Feminism is a unique way in which women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, can shape the way the Qur'an and Hadiths are interpreted by the male majority in power and open a dialogue to promote equality in both scholarly and on-the-ground ways. While Islamic Feminists would not argue with the notion of oppression done unto them, it must be noted that they are not simply the victims, but actively work as agents of change to promote sex/gender equality and a more prominent role for women in both the public and at home.

When women's voices are not present in deciding how the Qur'an will be interpreted by the leaders of the country, and subsequently, how laws will affect women, the texts will only

condone a patriarchal society. "Islamic feminism uses the Qur'an and *Sunnah* to provide the ideals for gender relationships around which society ought to be structured" (Davids, 2015, p. 317). Because women have been pushed into the private sphere for so many generations, Islamic Feminism and Liberation Theology within Islamic Feminism can be and is being utilized and promoted to help the fight for equality within the Middle East and North Africa. Islamic Feminism uses the unique combination of culture, religion, and women's rights throughout the Muslim world to help reevaluate the true meaning of the Qur'an and open a dialogue through religious texts to benefit all members of the society.

Looking broader, we can see traces of liberationist work within Islamic Feminism as a tool to justify the women's rights and equality throughout the region. It is important to understand that the term "equality" can come to mean different things depending upon the scholar or activism work. Many from Western contexts believe dismantling religion within the government of the region would help women achieve true equality, but this is not necessarily the theme of scholars from within the Middle East and North Africa. It must also be stated that movements of equality are inevitable unequal, as seen in First Wave Feminism in the Western world. While some women gained rights toward equality, they ultimately marginalized other populations of women as casualties to their cause. Equality in the Middle East and North Africa may mean having and fighting for less-restrictive Shari'a Laws, more opportunities for female religious leadership, a more prominent role for women in the public sphere, or a combination of these. There is no one way to view the true aims of activist work within the region, but it is important to know that the work is being done both in scholarly capacities and on the ground.

Critique from Within- Islamic Feminism

Feminism within the Middle East and North Africa has been at work prior to the start of the Arab Spring around 2011, but has since picked up speed in many countries for numerous reasons. Motivated by patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith or Sunna, as well as oppressive laws and systems of government, Islamic Feminists have been working to have their voice heard within the realm of religion, government, and society. As Mir-Hosseini emphasizes, this historical work has helped "by paving the way for women's entry into politics and society in the early twentieth century," but since the rise of more Islamist governments, talks of equality must involve proof from within the religion itself (2006, p. 644). This helps us move toward the current understanding of Islamic Feminism, as well as the debates that exist within the field itself.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the subsequent War on Terror, the West, led primarily by the United States, made it their business to help "liberate" Muslim women from their "oppressive" religion, represented by their "all-enveloping cover, the *chadri*, or *burqa*" (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 630). Placing Muslim women solely in the position of victim of the greater Islamic Patriarchy takes away their agency to enact change and spur equality in their religion and community. As Asma Barlas (2002) states, "so many people are invested in the myth of radical difference; that is, the false but comforting idea that they share absolutely nothing with Others" (p. xxi). Because Muslim women are seen as out of reach to many Westerners, it is easy to claim they are victims and powerless, needing the United States to come in and save them from their misery. For this reason, feminism has existed in the Middle

East and North Africa to help combat the deep-seeded patriarchy within the Muslim world. Despite how authors view the semantics of the term "Islamic Feminism," I believe they would all come to agreement that women, both religious and secular, have the power to shape the ways in which Islam relates to them, thus also changing the ways in which Muslim societies interact with women.

Actions to combat the various regulations of women's appearance and rights over herself are no doubt present throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Debates outside and from within Islam regarding the true teachings of the Qur'an, the Islamic Holy Book, have moved to the forefront and are being used as means of resistance. These conversations are brought about by many different actors, but as Hall and Ross (2015) state, are ultimately promoted and driven by false portrayals of the Muslim world by Western media, resulting in the cultivation of "adverse dispositions" and "subtle racial and cultural biases" (p. 855) as well as the political and military gains of nation-states in Western countries. By doing so, various dialogues concerning life in the Arab world have come about, including the discourse of Islamic Feminism. This movement both within and outside the Arab world, driven primarily by Muslim women, has led to further discussion of women's roles in society, as well as how they can be better included in all aspects of Muslim life.

Before looking into the various ways in which Islam has been critiqued from within, there must be a general understanding that inequality, particularly for women, is not unique to Islam, but can be seen in other faith traditions, including the other two Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Judaism. Mir-Hosseini (2006) helps explain that "gender inequality in the old

world was assumed and perceptions of women in Christian and Jewish texts are not that different from those of Islamic texts" (p. 641). In addition, she helps to emphasize that assumed roles of gender in Islam is socially constructed and constantly changing with history, just as they are and have done in both Christianity and Judaism throughout the ages (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 641). It is one thing to merely read Scripture and chastise a given religion for their perceived lack of sex/gender equality. It is quite another to understand the ways in which numerous religions have worked from a patriarchal perspective to keep women in positions of inferiority. While there are arguments as to why Islamic Feminism is not necessary to help combat inequalities built up from centuries of patriarchal interpretations and implementations of Qur'anic scripture, I find a more compelling argument in the notion that Islamic Feminism is a unique form of advocating for and re-reading the Holy Book in favor of sex/gender equality situated within the religion.

Muslim women are marginalized in society primarily because "Muslim men assume and maintain authority not only based on their own interpretations of the sources, but also because the conception of the public domain of an Islamic paradigm still focuses upon a fixed centre in public space as predominantly defined and controlled by Muslim men" (Davids, 2015, p. 318, referencing Wadud, 2006, p. 8). This speaks to how the Qur'anic interpretations have been used, and are still used, to justify why women should remain in the private, rather than the public, sphere. To some extent, this crosses the line of common interpretations of the Qur'an, into that of how generations have been socialized to act and interact with women in the Muslim world. "The normative view is that Islam corrected pre-Islamic gender bias with its arrival and is, therefore, necessarily a source of liberation for women" (Seedat, 2013, p. 405).

While Islam may have wiped the slate clean, interpretations of the texts have since promoted sex/gender discrimination within the religion and society.

It is not an argument as to whether women have become equal to men in Islam as a religion and the Islamic world, as all of the authors would agree that they have not. Scholars disagree as to where and how the term "feminism," fits into the study and implementation of Islam as a religion because some scholars believe it is a Western construct, imported to the Muslim world, and thus, cannot accurately portray the struggles and challenges women in the region face. I have seen two main groups represented—one that believes feminism can influence the way Islam is related to, and the other that argues feminism is not necessary in interacting with the Qur'an.

The collection of scholars that believe in the power of feminism shaping how the Qur'an is interpreted and implemented includes Valentine Moghadam, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Miriam Cooke, and Na'eem Jeenah, among others. They argue that feminism opens a different conversation and dialogue with religion that has not yet been explored. There is an emphasis in this argument on the fact that feminism within Islam is unique because it works from within the religion rather than critiquing the religion from outside its confines (Seedat, 2013, p. 406-412). Another scholar, Haideh Moghissi, argues that Islam is patriarchal and problematic for feminism, so the two opposing forces must converge in efforts to make the religion more sex/gender equal (Seedat, 2013, p. 32). Although they present the argument in various ways, Asma Barlas is not convinced, stating, "Muslim feminists… derive their mandate not from the Qur'an but from the conviction that Islam is a patriarchal and misogynist religion"

(Barlas, 2004, p. 1). She explains that Islamic feminists are under the impression that Islam itself is misogynistic and in need of a feminist perspective to open it up to new ideas about equality.

Barlas, along with Margot Badran, do not see Islamic Feminism as necessary, and thus, represent the primary opposing argument. They believe that "feminism" is a solely Western term and should not be used in conjunction with the struggles or issues women face in the Muslim world. They also believe that Muslim women do not need feminism in the first place because the issues stem from a misinterpretation of the Qur'an (Seedat, 2015, p. 410-412). Barlas goes on to say:

> "My own view is that the reason Muslims historically have failed to read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal text has to do with who has read it (basically men), the contexts in which they have read it (basically patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it (basically one that ignores the hermeneutic and theological principles that the Qur'an suggests for its own reading)" (Barlas, 2004, p. 6).

According to her, we can work toward equality if we reexamine the Qur'an not only to contest the interpretations justifying violence and inferiority of women, but also for liberatory readings that promote sex/gender equality (Barlas, 2002, p. 3). By doing so, Barlas believes a new conversation about women's role within the religion will change for the better—the same goal as the group she opposes has in their use of Islamic Feminism. This brings about the idea of

Liberation Theology as a form of resistance, a concept that will be covered in the following section.

The hopeful outcomes for both sets of advocates in equality work in Islam are the same, as they are both fighting for a more prominent role for women within the current interpretations of Islamic texts, and thus, the societies themselves. Barlas believes that Islamic Feminists fall short because they do not recognize that "treating women and men differently does not always amount to treating them unequally, nor does treating them identically necessarily mean treating them equally" (Barlas, 2002, p. 5). While this is an important point to keep in mind for Islamic and Western feminists alike, the semantics do not necessarily matter—call it Islamic Feminism or not—the goal is to negotiate "a place for Muslim women's equality work in a predetermined landscape of discourses of women and Islam" (Seedat, 2013, p. 43). For this reason, I believe the argument for Islamic Feminism is justified, and for the purposes of this context, the term "Islamic Feminism" will be in reference to the work of these scholars promoting equality within the Middle East and North Africa. While I understand not all of them would outright consider themselves Islamic Feminists, their work centers around the same set of ideals within the region.

This being understood, Islamic Feminism is a unique way in which women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, can shape the way the Qur'an and Hadiths are interpreted by the male majority in power and open a dialogue to promote equality in both scholarly and on-the-ground ways. Davids (2015) states, "patriarchal representation of the family does not concur with the Qur'anic principles of human equality and gender justice" (p. 313). The Qur'an can be read in

many different ways, as can the Holy books of other religions, in order to justify an action deemed correct by those in power or in positions of superiority. As Michael Grech (2014) further explains, "the cultural categories through which we read and interpret a document are always both historically relative, and utterly inescapable" (p. 359). The issue lies in the centuries of interpretations conducted by men within a patriarchal societal structure.

Conclusions to be Drawn

Through this paper, I hope to have shed light on the various ways liberationist theologies can be utilized within Islamic Feminism, as well as how they can both be used to view women's agency within the Middle East and North Africa. Although the term "agency" comes to mean different things in Western and Middle Eastern contexts, Islamic Feminists and liberationist theologians work from within the system to spur change and an open dialogue about prevalent issues. Scholars and civilians alike use the holy texts of the Qur'an and Hadith or Sunna to better understand their role within a given society. Activists within the Middle East and North Africa also use the holy texts in justification of equality for themselves and others. Equality can come to mean different things to different people, depending upon what they wish to accomplish, but the continued work by people within these communities since before the start of the Arab Spring has enabled change and reform across the region.

By looking into liberationist theologies of the Middle East and North Africa in comparison to Liberation Theology by Western scholars, we can see comparisons and overlaps. Both are working from within systems they deem oppressive in order to prove a need for equality, demanded by God, for marginalized groups. Specific to feminism within the field,

both Liberation Theology in the West and liberationist theologies at the heart of the Muslim world work against patriarchal structures of religion, government, and society to justify their rights and create discourse on the true Shari'a, or path to living a life for God.

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