Introduction

This chapter covers thematic foci in scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It engages broadly with historical, social scientific and area studies research that examines contemporary issues of women, gender and Islam. The introduction to this volume states that a large part of scholarship on women and religion falls into two dominant approaches. While some aim to illustrate an inherent emancipatory potential and scope for agency within religious faith or practices, others focus rather on restrictive facets of religious doctrine for women and understandings of gender. Such diverging tendencies in the study of women and religion are not alien to either scholarship of the MENA region or the subfield of women and Islam.

This observation relates to another, earlier, major paradigm that had to be overcome in the context of the Middle East and North Africa, a region comprised by all Muslim-majority states from the Maghreb (Northern Africa), to Egypt, over the Mashreq (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) to the Gulf states. The notion of religion—and Islam in particular—long served as a major explanatory lens for social, cultural and, indeed, gendered practices. It took a generation of (often self-described feminist) scholars of the Middle East to destabilize orientalist notions of Islam as a reified force that determines social and cultural context, including understandings of gender and sexuality (Ozyegin 2015).

This chapter aims to avoid such methodological pitfalls in which religion is either predominantly emancipatory or disempowering, or either ignored or reified as an all-encompassing conceptual lens. The separate sections of this chapter are connected by an interest in the ongoing influence of modernity and (post)coloniality in shaping current debates and practices. I will give particular attention to scholarly work that explicitly upholds a relational perspective. This refers to research that considers the dynamic relationality between ‘West’ and ‘East’ and between the colonial past and contemporary debates. A relational lens offers insight into processes of meaning making and considers the continued influence of modernity, nationalism and (post)colonial power relations on culture, gender, religion and society across the region.

I will argue that scholarly insight into one of the most pressing themes in the region for decades, gender conservativism and familism, could be greatly enhanced by expanding the regional and theoretical scope. Interrogating these phenomena in the Middle East and North
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Africa region by looking comparatively at similar phenomena in other geographical regions and theoretically moving across disciplines would offer new perspectives and enrich current understandings, a focus I am developing in my ongoing research. This chapter highlights the dominant approaches to religion, gender and society in the region. The study of marriage, family crisis, family values and political-religious demands for the re-traditionalization of society is tightly connected to the study of Islamic revivalism. The field of gender, society and Islam in the MENA region could be enriched by including cross-regional and interdisciplinary perspectives that aim to understand developments in light of postcolonial unequal power relations and responses to globalization. In the first sections of this chapter, I will discuss formations of family ideology, gender and the recurring social perception of a family crisis in the MENA region. Subsequent sections discuss the important social role of young people, changing moralities, love, new (reproductive) technologies, the re-traditionalization of society, religious agency and Islamic feminism.

Muslim subjectivities and identities

In the last few decades, the formation of Muslim identity and subjectivity in relation to gender has emerged as an important research theme. Largely developed in the context of liberal-feminist discourse in Europe, it connects to the study of Islam and women more broadly including the Middle East and North Africa (e.g. Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen, and Malik 2011; Jouili 2015). Similarly, foundational scholarship on Muslim women’s subjectivity in the Middle East and North Africa has influenced research on Muslim women in Western European and other geographical areas (e.g. Mahmood 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Ahmed 1992; Abu-Lughod 1998a; Deeb 2006). Theoretically, questions of studying Muslim societies have been thoroughly shaped by historical, deeply power-laden methodological and epistemological perspectives. Critiques of orientalist epistemological vantage points and research perspectives are ongoing. These critiques may have become most strongly articulated in the scholarly debate on religious agency and, particularly, female religious agency (see also the following sections on religious agency and Islamic feminism).

One important critique is the tendency to universalize liberal-feminist ideas of female agency. This tendency has led to a dominant analysis of Muslim women and Muslim society through a ‘civilizational paradigm’ (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen, and Malik 2011, 4) that ties understandings of female agency to ideas of resistance to dominant social and religious norms. Whereas the dialogue, interaction or conflict between different understandings of agency are salient in a European context, the academic debate has been largely spurred by the critical work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood, based on her research on pious women in Egypt (Mahmood 2004, 2001). This example illustrates the difficulty of separating areas of research and academic debate in strictly geographic regions and shows how recent theory making and research has rather been inspired by a more global view on questions of Islam, women, religion and society.

Marriage, family, gender and Islam: modern and postcolonial ideological roots and continuities

A significant amount of academic attention has been paid to the conditions and the role of marriage and divorce in Muslim societies, including changes in Islamic law. Modernity and colonial heritage form the overall background of classic and more recent work on marriage, Muslim law and family formation. Historians and social scientists have studied how practices of marriage
are shaped by the ideology of the modern, colonial nuclear family (in contrast to other, larger kinship structures such as the tribe and extended family). The so-called woman question was largely determined by larger discourses and changes introduced by modernity, the political struggle for national independence and the shaping of the postcolonial nation and citizenship (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1998a; Baron 2007; Moghadam 1993; Bier 2011; Pollard 2005). These scholars pointed at the tight relationship between family ideology; colonial, modern visions of the nation-state; national independence and citizenship.

Similarly, developments within Islamic marriage and family law, or personal status law, are deeply interwoven with modern and postcolonial conditions across the MENA region and reflect liberal changes in the social status of women. A strong scholarly focus is put on constitutional and legal changes concerning the social status of women and practices of marriage, divorce and family, generally granting women greater individual autonomy and liberty. Historian Kenneth Cuno finds that recent changes to the Egyptian constitution expressing a commitment to preserve the family’s ‘cohesion and stability’ and to uphold its ‘moral values’, made in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, still “express a family ideology constructed by modernist intellectuals beginning in the late nineteenth century” (2015, 1). Indeed, current public, intellectual and legal debate is still shaped by the colonial, modern visions of the family and women’s and men’s proper roles in it. Circumscribed social roles for women as caretakers and domestic managers who play a crucial role in child-rearing form part of particular modernist notions of gender and family norms and are not necessarily Islamic, that is, historically transmitted in Islamic scripture and law. Historians and Islamic law scholars have demonstrated how modernist visions relate to and differ from various historical and precolonial principles of Islamic law (Cuno 2015; Charrad 2001). Often, current arrangements and ideals of family, marriage, gender and motherhood are therefore the result of both cultural (modern) and religious (Islamic) entanglements.

Recent scholarship by Islamic law scholars proposed to conceive of women’s role in marriage as a ‘maintenance-obedience relationship’, referring to a husband’s responsibility to maintain his wife in return for his wife’s duty to obey (Sonneveld 2012). This reflects earlier scholarly understandings of marriage as a particular ‘gender contract’ (Moors 1995), and of the centrality of the notion of nushuz (the wife’s) disobedience to the Islamic marital contract (Tucker 2008). Cuno argues how this ideal was equally shaped as a combination of precolonial Muslim thought, on the one hand, and modern European and Middle Eastern reformist visions of the conjugal family on the other (2015). This resulted in a ‘hybrid family ideology’ that retains elements from all those sources (Cuno 2015, 12). Scholars have shown that in reality, society was familiar with women working outside the home throughout history because this is more often than not a simple economic necessity. The ‘maintenance-obedience relationship’ is therefore variously interpreted and put into practice differently across time and across socio-economic classes. This insight reaffirms the call for the necessity of research that combines the study of contemporary Islamic law with a focus on legal texts with social history and the examination of women’s and men’s narratives and actual social practices (Moors 1999).

The underlying rationale of the marital contract as an entanglement of both Islamic and modernist ideas illustrates well the difficulty in separating religion (Islamic traditions) from overall global social, economic and demographic changes in the last centuries (Duben and Behar 2002). In addition to examining modern and postcolonial ideological influences on marriage and family formation, some have focused on the social history and material, economic and social conditions reshaping marital practices (Hoodfar 1997; Meriwether 2018).
Family as the cornerstone of the nation: marriage and the family in crisis?

The theme of family continues to be important in scholarship on the MENA region. This is evinced, for instance, in the way the subject of family has developed through the idea of a perceived crisis. Where marriage was considered as the cornerstone of society—in which a stable and harmonious household symbolizes a strong and prosperous nation—marriage crisis is perceived as a representation of a wider social national crisis. The social perception of such a crisis was widespread at the start of the twentieth century and in contemporary times across diverse regions, such as Northern Africa, Egypt, Jordan and Iran (e.g. Kholoussy 2010; Hasso 2011; Yount and Rashad 2008; Salem 2016). Again, it proves to be a fruitful and relevant avenue for future research to connect historical legacies with contemporary research. The hybrid family ideology, as coined by Kenneth Cuno, considers the conjugal family as the cornerstone of society. The nuclear family forms a fundamental unit that offers needed stability and harmony for childrearing, in this vision. Women in particular play a crucial role as caregivers to successfully raise new generations of citizens (Cuno 2015, 13). The idea of a marriage or family crisis is closely related to this hegemonic, hybrid family ideology.

Historian Hanan Kholoussy has shown that in Egypt at the start of the twentieth century, the perception of a general marriage crisis was widespread. Too many young men and women delayed marriage, and divorce rates were assumed to be growing (Kholoussy 2010). This perception was mainly raised and spread by middle-class press, writers and intellectuals, who held single men, in the main, responsible for causing the crisis. Egypt’s middle class in the 1920–1930s were articulating Egyptian expressions of modern ideas of what marriage should be. Kholoussy argues that this was an internal Egyptian dialogue, influenced by Western and modern thought but at the same time “uniquely and authentically Egyptian and Islamic” (Kholoussy 2010, 6). By comparing media discourse with Islamic court records, she was also able to point at differences between marriage ideology formation and people’s lived practice. While middle-class writers promoted marriage as what “was supposed to be a permanent hierarchical relationship” (Kholoussy 2010, 3) and “as a fundamental national duty” (Kholoussy 2010, 10), her research of Islamic court cases showed how women and men of all classes found their way around it and divorced.

After many decades, in the early twenty-first century, a new wave of social anxieties, public debate and press writings have created another perceived crisis of the family and delayed marriage across the Middle East. Anthropologists and social scientists have illustrated and analysed this second perceived marriage crisis (e.g. Hasso 2011; Schielke 2015; Singerman 2008; Salem 2016). Studies that make use of quantitative data, surveys and statistics have put the discourse of crisis into perspective. Social scientist Rania Salem demonstrated that, for Egypt, cases of never-marriage are extremely rare, and that despite a relative delay in marriage age, the great majority of men and women are married by their mid-thirties (Salem 2016). She argues that the language of crisis is mainly mobilized by some social and religious groups in a response to changing gender relations and new modes of family formation and reproduction more than reflecting a genuine transformation of the social institution of marriage. The main concern addressed by public ‘crisis’ discourse is the delay of marriage age by men, while women’s marriage age was less delayed.

Whilst there is no agreement on the matter, some scholars have argued that the underlying social and economic factors that cause marriage delay are rising costs of marriage (dowry, jewellery, celebration costs, housing costs related to the new conjugal home), in addition to high unemployment rates among a very youthful population in the region (Singerman 2008).
Marriage delay due to economic strain is therefore often mentioned as a conscious but undesired choice by young people in the region. Other factors that play a role in the reported older marriage age may be that women are studying longer and participate in greater numbers within the labour force and keep working longer throughout their careers. While it has been the norm that men marry in their early twenties, in recent decades delayed marriage has more often become the norm.

This situation has placed many young people in a position which Diane Singerman has called “wait adulthood” (2008, 6). Youth waits until the necessary income has been secured to be able to marry while they remain living in the parental home and remain financially dependent on their parents. She argues that it places them in a liminal state situated in between adolescence and adulthood. During this ‘waiting time’, dominant social and religious sexual norms conflict with the realities of young people who establish premarital relationships. Young people have therefore often been the subject of media writings, religious talks and public discourse—not unlike those discussions that Kholoussy (2010) studied in early twentieth-century Cairo—that aim to shape young people’s social and sexual lives.

Youth, changing sexual morality and religion

The circumstances of ‘wait adulthood’ have important political, moral and religious dimensions. The greater economic difficulties of recent decades and the delayed age of marriage have possibly contributed to an increase in ‘urfī marriages, that is, customary, Islamic arrangements that predate the codification of Islamic family law and are unregistered in official state administration. Customary marriage has mostly been studied in the context of Egypt (Singerman 2008; Abaza 2001), but more recently, a rise in unregistered marriages was also noted in post-2011 Tunisia (Voorhoeve 2018), and more attention has gone to informal or religious-only marriages among Muslim minorities in European contexts (Akhtar, Probert, and Moors 2018). Scholars have called for more research on this purported rise of unregistered marriage in the Middle East. Research is often qualitative and examines media discourse and public debate, including the religious responses it draws.

‘Urfī marriages are unregistered and therefore unofficial marriage agreements made between two partners and with two witnesses. These agreements are often called ‘secret’ because family, the neighbourhood and social networks are usually not informed, in contrast with formal marriage which is announced widely. It allows partners to have intimate relationships within an ambiguous normative frame. The few studies available estimate that only a small percentage of the population makes use of these arrangements, especially university students. ‘Urfī agreements resemble other ‘loose’ marital relationship arrangements that exist in the region, such as misyar (emerged originally in Saudi Arabia and refers to ‘temporary’ agreements) or mut’a (a Shi’ī Islamic agreement that has a similar meaning and function). Mut’a is essentially a pre-Islamic practice that was outlawed in early Islam, an act that Shi’ī leadership has never fully accepted. Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, it has become more common, although it never completely disappeared among Sunni Muslims either, especially in countries such as Lebanon (Singerman 2008, 31; Haeri 2014). Through these agreements, partners do not obtain any rights, such as housing, maintenance or sexual access to the partner. These temporary arrangements do not have any legal consequences, and in case of conflict, the partners cannot file any legal complaint, as the contract is not officially binding.

Customary Islamic arrangements have survived until today in the shadow of the codification of Islamic law in family law (or personal status law). Because it has not been incorporated in the recognized Islamic codified regulations, it has obtained an ambiguous in-between status that...
relates both to the religiously and socially accepted norm and to the illicit. It can be argued that such an arrangement is Islamically sanctioned or that it is un-Islamic. This ambiguity lends itself particularly well to the many young people who navigate the interface between dominant gender and sexual norms and actual everyday lived practices that deviate from these norms and are generally frowned upon. Sociologist Mona Abaza proposes, “One may even speculate over the spread of ‘urfí marriages as a hidden protest of second-generation post-Islamist youths” (Abaza 2001, 21). Youngsters who are left disappointed with political Islam and the return to Islam-based social viewpoints, she suggests, may consequently turn to unorthodox practices such as ‘urfí marriages to express their differences with Islamism.

Some argue that unregistered marriages have become commonly considered as religiously invalid and illegitimate, although there is no religious, Islamic, consensus on this matter. Some religious leaders have approved of ‘urfí and misyar arrangements, while others disapproved or expressed an ambiguous position that religiously validates while morally rejecting it. Lebanon’s Hezbollah Shi’i leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah was said “to have made public arguments that premarital virginity is a socially constructed norm that Islam does not privilege as much as contemporary society assumes” (Singerman 2008, 31). This can be considered as an attempt to accommodate current changes in sexual and moral norms. Religious and social discourse on these issues, however, more often reveal underlying anxiety over changing moralities among the younger generations (Deeb and Harb 2013).

Some religious leaders express concern over young people’s neglect of a proper moral and religious lifestyle and attempt to intervene, for instance, by organizing ‘mass weddings’ to reduce marriage costs. Western observers have also shown interest in the same demographic group but rather out of concern for the susceptibility of those ‘waiting’ youngsters to recruitment by radical religious groups. Similarly, delayed marriage is at times represented as a problem in Middle Eastern public discourse fearing that these men may get involved in criminal or rebellious political activity (Salem 2016, 231–233).

More recent work has examined the entwinement of transformations in Islamic law, morality discourse and women’s and men’s legal practices and behaviours (Voorhoeve 2012), and the social and religious public debates surrounding changes in divorce law (Sonneveld 2012, 2019). These changes enabled women to file for unilateral divorce in return for financial compensation by the wife (khul’ in Arabic), where the wife can file for unilateral divorce if she agrees to forfeit certain financial rights. It allows for non-consensual divorce without providing a cause on the condition that women forfeit their financial rights and reimburse the dowry. Men have historically had access to Islamically sanctioned unilateral divorce, but a non-consensual khul’ represents a legal novelty for women. Since Egypt introduced its khul’ law in 2000, other countries in the region, such as Jordan, Algeria, Palestine, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco, have followed suit in one form or another.

Love and sexuality, new reproductive technologies and Islam

More recently, research interests have shifted away from an overwhelming focus on Islamic law to discuss women’s and men’s love and family lives. Recognizing the larger struggle between those seeking a relaxation of social and religious norms in favour of individual rights and liberties and those promoting existing norms, scholars have sought to focus on individual strategies and experiences (Fortier, Kreil, and Maffi 2018, 9). A legal, discursive focus is thereby replaced by a topical focus on experiences and personal narratives of love, intimacy and desire (Wynn 2018; Fortier, Kreil, and Maffi 2016).
Apart from a focus on Islamic family law, scholars have long given attention to systems of kinship and the ways that family ties are key to structuring perceptions of the self (Joseph 1999), following a classic anthropological interest in revealing structural schemes of kinship relations in Arab countries and around the Mediterranean. Love has also been studied in relation to kinship systems (Fortier, Kreil, and Maffi 2018, 14–17), and the distinction between traditional marriage (zawaj taqlidi) and love marriage (zawaj hub) serves as a prominent example. Representations and imaginaries of romantic love as an ideal circulate widely across the region and affect how people experience, express, cultivate and communicate love and desire. This recent work offers new perspectives in their explorations of love, sex and relationships outside, or in interaction with, the realm of socio-religious norms and values. Although this scholarship interestingly focuses on lived practices of dating, formations of relationships, marriage and building families, the role of Islamic traditions or personal interpretations of religious considerations remain often neglected. In contrast, studies that employ textual analysis through a focus on literature, religious texts and historical Islamic traditions generally lack an engagement with lived experience and contemporary practices (e.g. Ali 2006; Bouhida 2012; Shaikh 2012) (see also the later section on Islamic feminism).

At the same time, new research has developed that examines Islamic responses to new technologies and their effects on dominant gender and sexuality norms, particularly reproductive technologies. A large focus has been on infertility and reproductive technologies (Inhorn 1996, 2012 Fortier 2007; Inhorn and Tremayne 2012; Clarke 2009; Sachedina 2009), in addition to sexual health, such as the use of contraception (Wynn and Foster 2018). While (reproductive) technologies invite new creative religious opinion making, major social and political forces propose a reinforcement of ‘traditionalist’ thought that aims to protect existing gender and sexuality regimes. New technologies and media, radical social changes by increased interconnectedness through globalization, the easy circulation of alternative gender, sexuality and family ideologies, and importantly, the growing embrace and promotion of gender equality norms by international institutions and agencies all contribute to the current social context in which voices of support for a ‘re-traditionalization’ of society are loudly expressed.

Re-traditionalization of society and gender conservatism

In the Middle East and North Africa region, and across other geographical contexts, religious institutions and leaders have brought public morality and discussion of gender and sexuality norms into public debate. Such processes have in different geographical, religious and social contexts been analysed as efforts to ‘re-traditionalize’ society and women’s status and social roles (Ismail 1998; Kuhar 2015; Abu-Lughod 1998b, 255; Simanovic 2012). In the MENA region, the general social and religious call for a more Islamic society is often accompanied with a call for more traditional gender roles where women are predominantly cast as mothers and caretakers of the family and men as providers for the family. Gender-conservative discourse has been analysed as being an inherent part of ‘religious revivalism’ in the region. The conceptualization of revival-thinking goes back as far as debates in the late nineteenth century. It has been known as nahda (renaissance) or sahwa (revival) in Egyptian colloquial terms and is also referred to as Islamic modernism (McLarney 2015). Whether couched in terms of religious revival or Islamic modernism, these actors have a desire in common to rethink society and religion within a frame of modern and global transformations (Masud and Salvatore 2009). Central to these efforts is the taking of Islam as a departure point.

Current-day Islamism (i.e. political Islam or formulating political vision and determining political programmes based on or inspired by Islamic law) falls back on key understandings
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Concerning gender, family, childrearing and motherhood that are associated with Islamic revivalist thinking. Analyses of Islamic revivalism that solely rely on the combination of social, cultural and political actors that aim to “re-establish and re-institute Islamic teachings” fall short of grasping their key concern with the “re-traditionalisation of women’s roles” (Sinanovic 2012, 3). Conceptions of a proper Islamic way of life by many revivalist actors are often intertwined with a conservative and traditional vision of gender and family. These religious and socio-cultural dimensions are hard to disentangle, and consequently calls for a ‘return to Islam’ and a return to the ‘culturally authentic’ can hardly be separated in much Islamic conservative thought and writing. Political scientist Salwa Ismail argued that obtaining or keeping power over the definition of religious orthodoxy is exactly what is at stake for Islamists, a process which always occurs through dynamic processes between the religious and the cultural (1998). Practices that are considered as religiously sanctioned may be contested by others who perceive them as merely cultural and un-Islamic. The earlier discussion of customary ‘urfi marriage across the region illustrates this dynamic. The contestations about female genital cutting (FGC) in Egypt as either an Islamic or an un-Islamic practice is another example (Van Raemdonck 2016).

Religious gender conservatism can be situated either in political opposition groups or within power strongholds, dependent on national contexts and shifts over time. Proponents of gender conservatism share an interest in issues of culture and morality and attribute a central role to Islam. According to Salwa Ismail, “[c]ulture and morality constitute the grounds upon which the problematique of the time is articulated: a cultural conflict with the outside and the struggle for the preservation of public morality inside” (Ismail 1998, 202). In the staging of these conflicts, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that Islamists reveal a selective regime of repudiation, “they stigmatize sexual independence and public freedoms as Western but much more gingerly challenge women’s rights to work, barely question women’s education and unthinkingly embrace the ideals of bourgeois marriage” (1998a, 243). Islamist conservatives across the region in the last decades select sexual morality and gender norms in the public sphere to rally against as Western imports that are in contradiction to Islam. While women’s education, participation in the labour market and the notion of bourgeois marriage are equally indebted to Western and modern concepts, these are more generally accepted.

Islamic revivalism therefore promotes dominant conservative gender cultural norms as much as a revival of Islamic discursive traditions and historical legacies of Islamic teachings. This means that “family and the domestic sphere constitute a private space with public or political importance” (McLarney 2015, 7). Women’s roles, gender and family obtain, in other words, political meaning and significance. Many have noted that gender and family play a central role in political Islamic discourse, but such topics remain less studied in comparison to overall political, social or religious developments. Scholarly work has mainly focused on Islamic revivalist aims to transform society at large and place religion centrally in the public sphere. Gendered aspects have caught much less scholarly attention, “even though debates over women’s rights, roles and responsibilities have been a cornerstone of revivalist writings on religion” (McLarney 2015, 8). In sum, the processes through which debates on women’s roles become politicized across and within national contexts, the different political actors that mobilize these topics and the (inter)national political alliances that result out of these developments deserve much more scholarly attention.

Middle Eastern studies scholar Ellen McLarney (2015) examined the writings of key women figures in the Egyptian conservative movement. Contemporary revivalist women’s writings articulate women’s role in the family through acts of mothering and nurturing which become connected to a sense of liberation. Motherhood, ‘motherwork’ and traditional gender roles become interconnected with a cultivation of Islam in a manner that bears
political meaning. Women performing proper family roles become ways of “nurturing [the] Islamic community outside the reach of the secular state, military intervention, and foreign ideologies, even though these practices are clearly conditioned by the politics of domination within which they are proscribed and against which they mobilize” (McLarney 2015, 9). She argues this statement by drawing a parallel between the manner in which Western colonial and missionary discourse approached Islam, “as a religion (and as a form of politics) through its private practices—focusing on women, their bodies, sexuality and family life” (p. 8), and the focus that revivalist conservative writings put on the family and gender roles as a political space. In other words, she explores how old lenses through which the West looked at Islam parallels current efforts of the revivalist and conservative movements. This approach to the study of contemporary Islam joins scholarship that explicitly examines the dynamic relation between Western representations of Islam and actual Middle Eastern political and social movements (Salvatore 2009, 1996, 1997). McLarney shows the high relevance of maintaining a relational lens when studying gender and family politics and its crucial role within political Islam.

Religious agency

The revivalist women studied by McLarney were key figures in Egypt and regional social religious leaders because of the widespread circulation of their analyses, commentaries and writings. In this sense, her work equally connects to scholarship on religious agency and, particularly, women’s religious agency. The seminal work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood on pious Egyptian women and the embodiment of religious agency and ethical striving has sparked numerous studies and theorizing on religious agency of Muslim women in the Middle East as well as outside the region and across religious traditions (Mahmood 2004; Deeb 2006). Analyses of agency are often interwoven with studies of ethical considerations, behaviour and experiences of ethical striving and failure. Studies have investigated how Muslim women (and men) aim to become better Muslims by focusing on ritual discipline, bodily behaviour and ethical thought. Anthropologist Richard Gauvin studied Salafist men and women in Egyptian Salafist circles with great attention to the meanings of gendered ritual differences and women’s interpretations of religious text and principles (Gauvain 2013). Anthropologist Sertaç Sehlikoglu reviewed conceptualizations of Muslim women’s agency by anthropologists of the Middle East to suggest new directions in research that focus more on dimensions of selfhood and subjectification (Sehlikoglu 2018).

When reviewing feminist scholarship on religious agency and drawing from her own empirical research with Orthodox Jewish Israeli women, Orit Avishai distinguishes four major conceptualizations of agency to describe women who participate in gender-traditional religions (Avishai 2008). These four approaches are resistance agency, empowerment agency (empowerment in everyday life through reinterpretation of religious doctrine and practice), instrumental agency (empowerment through material or relational advantages through religious participation), and finally, compliant agency. The fourth approach aims to recognize agency in all other reasons that women may participate and comply with gender-traditional religious norms. She proposes an alternative, fifth approach based on her work with Orthodox Jewish women, and argues that women exhibit agency when they ‘do religion’, regardless of the motivation or outcome of such doing. They strive to act not for themselves but for a divine God. Across different contexts and regions, many interesting similarities appear that could greatly enrich scholarly debate on the conceptualization of religious agency in the Middle East and North Africa.
Islamic feminism

This final section considers female Muslim writers who revise and reinterpret Islamic textual traditions. Although this group of scholars is commonly referred to as Islamic feminists, it is well known that not all authors self-define as feminists. These authors are mostly theologians who are deeply committed to changing dominant reading and interpretation practices and differ from historians and religious studies scholars who engage with gender and sexuality in Islamic history. Muslim theologians have engaged with key sources within the Islamic tradition, the Qur’an and hadith, by making innovative use of a hermeneutical contextualizing methodology (Wadud 1999, 2006; Barlas 2002). They analysed segments and key notions from the Qur’an in relation to women and gender by historicizing and contextualizing sacred text and replacing social hierarchy with spiritual equality between women and men. They argue that it is evident from the Qur’an that both men and women have equal access to religious knowledge and the ability to translate spiritual knowledge into embodied pious behaviour. Other scholarship has focused on making women more visible and audible in the Islamic tradition (e.g. Jardim 2016) and offered reinterpretations of commonly accepted male-female relations in the Islamic legal tradition, such as the earlier mentioned ‘maintenance-obedience’ relationship between spouses (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani, and Rumminger 2015; Al-Sharmani 2017).

A key discussion point in scholarly debate instigated by these pioneering theologians is how ‘Islamic’ relates to ‘feminism’. Both notions are loaded with different meanings in different contexts, and its combination was received by many as ambiguous. Some objected to the usefulness of this notion as an analytical category. Some theologians emphasized the precedence of religion over feminism. For them it was essential to foreground the Islamic frame as an enabler of gender equality ideals. For others, equality ideals ground the revision of religious understanding. Here, Islamic feminism is a manner of seeking gender justice within an Islamic frame and religious discourse serves to mobilize people, movements, political and religious leaders to enable a greater gender-equal society.

Some have attempted to dislodge the discussion on the relation between the religious and secular dimension by placing feminist thought and movements in a broader perspective of different geographical, political and historical contexts (Makdisi, Bayoumi, and Sidawi 2014). Others have offered in-depth historical analyses of the origins of these two different “discursive modes” of feminism (Badran 2009, 300). Historian Margot Badran laid out how both modes have been “flowing in and out of each other”, and pointed at their historical genesis and moments of intersection and distinction (ibid., 306). Rather than seeing them in tension, she proposes to consider the multiple ways in which they reinforce each other and contribute to the advancement of changes toward more gender equality. The circulation of both secular and Islamic feminist thought undoubtedly inspires women (and men) in configuring their own personalized gender value regimes.

Conclusion

This chapter reviews significant themes in the study of women, gender, Islam and society across the Middle East and North Africa. It is guided by scholarship that employs a relational lens in its approach of contemporary social debates, gender and Islam. This means that I was particularly interested in reviewing work that considers the dynamic relationality between ‘West’ and ‘East’ and between the colonial past and contemporary debates.

The themes under discussion reveal the sustained influence of modernity, nationalism and (post)colonial power relations on contemporary society in the Middle East and North Africa.
The scholarship on Muslim subjectivity, identity and religious agency greatly reflects the importance of historical global inequalities. Additionally, it illustrates how research of Muslims in minority and majority contexts is interconnected and shows how theory making travels between geographical regions.

A considerable part of this chapter has been devoted to formations of family ideology, marriage, divorce, gender and the social perception of family crisis in the MENA region. The angle of Islamic family law, or personal status law, remains an essential scholarly approach to study women and gender in contemporary Muslim society. Following sections discuss youth, changing moralities and the burgeoning subfield of love and new (reproductive) technologies. The chapter ends with a discussion of religious agency, Islamic feminism and the re-traditionalization of society by Islamic revivalism. It argues that employing a relational, cross-cultural lens to study broad socio-political and religious developments, such as re-traditionalization processes, is a fruitful avenue for further research. The field of gender, society and Islam in the MENA region could be enriched by looking comparatively to other regions and theoretically moving across disciplines, particularly to deepen our understanding of complex socio-cultural-political phenomena as gender conservatism and familism.

Note

1 The definition of ‘Salafism’ is subject to a large scholarly debate on the different meanings and underlying motivations behind using the terminology of ‘salafism’ (Lauzière 2010). I find Gauvain’s understanding a compelling and nuanced assessment. He considers Salafism as a historical school of thought that shares certain global features despite its numerous local shapes. This universality is based on and manifested by the common ‘educational curriculum’ that is offered by Salafist schools across the globe and intends to “distil the beliefs and practices of the first three generations of Muslims, al salaf al salih, or ‘pious ancestors’” (Gauvain 2013, 6).

References


An Van Raemdonck


