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How Islamic feminism could shape gender equity

Ahead of a lecture as part of the Religion and the Global Future speaker series, Assistant Professor of South Asian Religions Megan Robb discusses Islamic feminism's potential influence on grassroots feminist movements.

Megan Robb's ongoing study of South Asian religion began with a childhood trip to India.

She recalls embarking to the country with her grandmother. "It was important to her that her grandchildren get a broader view of the world, because growing up on a farm in Illinois and then raising a young family, she hadn't had that opportunity until much later in life," she says. Her fascination with its culture and language only grew from there. Now, as assistant professor of South Asian religions in the Department of Religious Studies, she spends a lot of time considering, among other religions, Islam and its relationship with language.

"Over time, I realized the connection between language and religion is strong, and I was fascinated by the way that in South Asia, languages have become aligned with specific religious identities," Robb says. "It

turns out that's a very important question in my field."

Megan Robb. (Photo courtesy: Megan Robb)

And especially important to gender studies in Islam, she's discovered. In the past at Penn, she's taught the course Gender, Sexuality & Religion three times (initially the course was called Women & Religion).

Because of that expertise, Steve Weitzman (https://www.sas.upenn.edu/religious_studies/profile/steven-weitzman), who has been hosting a series of talks under the banner of the Religion and the Global Future (https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/education-outreach/religion-and-global-future) series (spun from a spring class of the same name), asked her to deliver a talk about how religion relates to the future of women. She jumped at the opportunity to consolidate her learnings from her own course on the subject and present them to a new audience. She'll deliver her lecture, titled "Religion and the Future Lives of Women," on Tuesday, March 12, at the McNeil Building at 3 p.m.

In a Q&A with *Penn Today*, Robb (https://www.sas.upenn.edu/religious_studies/faculty/robb) discusses Islam's relationship with feminism, feminist readings, and why international movements shouldn't be trigger-happy with jumpstarting coalitions that don't consider local contexts.

What will your lecture talk about?

I'm interested in alternative models of feminism. I'm going to talk about how Islamic feminism, as a diverse movement, emerged against what it saw as Western feminism's lack of diversity in perspectives. Islamic feminism was also a tendency to structure a version of feminism around a set of concerns that fit Muslim women. I'll talk about how Islamic feminism engages with the language of Islam unapologetically. There are three major strands I'm going to talk about: a historical approach, an exegetical approach focusing on Quranic interpretation, and a postcolonial approach. These thinkers have charted paths where Islam is not contradictory to feminism and neither is feminism contradictory to Islam. I think it's a good example of an unexpected model of where one version of feminism may be going.

Who are these thinkers?

I'll be talking about the work of Homa Hoodfar, Lila Abu-Lughod, Asma Barlas, and Leila Ahmed. This cluster of thinkers stand in tension with the readings the class members will be doing before they arrive that day. For example, everyone in the class will have read a lecture entitled 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' by Susan Moller Okin, and that article in particular is calling out accommodation of Muslim minorities in the European context, under the auspices of multiculturalism, something contradictory to the status of women. Okin argues that since it elevates minority group rights over the rights of individuals, multiculturalism is bad for women. My lecture will put the European examples in context, laying out just

how problematic it is to say that Islam cannot be part of the solution for improving the status of Muslim women. In response, I lay out the diverse approaches of four Islamic feminist thinkers who are doing important work to challenge this manufactured dichotomy between Islam and concerns for the status of women. For instance, Homa Hoodfar looks at the connection between the colonial context, the focus on the veil, and the obsession with saving Muslim women from Muslim men.

And what do you mean when you say 'the veil'?

I mean women wearing the hijab, or the burqah, as a way of practicing Muslim identity. Often, Western critiques of Islam focus on the veil as something contradictory to feminism. But Islam is not necessarily contradictory to feminism, not least because there is this discourse of Islamic feminism that is attempting to chart a path between them.

Hoodfar does this by making us aware of the colonial history between Islam and the 'Western world' that has resulted in an obsession with veiling as something that could only be a symptom of oppression. While the veil could be a sign of oppression, certainly, in other contexts, the veil had more complicated meaning. For instance, the veil in Algeria became a sign of anti-colonial resistance.

Abu-Lughod is doing that by going back to the time of the Quran and historicizing the origins of Islam and how Islam was both a continuation of attitudes to women in Jahilliya, or the period prior to Islam, and a source of change. Once we look closer we realize neither was the origin of Islam a time of unliteral liberation for women, but neither was it the sole source of restrictions on women. The relationship between the origins of Islam and the status of women was in fact a lot more complicated. Thinking about those nuances sets us up well to accommodate nuance in the present day.

Finally, Asma Barlas as a theologian takes a much more textual approach, rereading the Quran and, through a hermeneutical approach, doing a feminist reading of the Quran, a text that is the foundation for Muslim belief.

What does it mean to do a feminist reading?

Barlas acknowledges that patriarchal readings of the Quran can result in oppression. But, she argues that this prevalent reading as the only way to interpret the Quran confuses the holy text with a specific reading of it. There's a section of the Quran that talks about the importance of the power that a man has over a woman, right? This is a quote from the Quran:

‘Oh human we created you from a single pair, of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other, not that ye may despise each other, verily the most honored of you in the sight of god is the one who is most virtuous of you.’

For example, she reads this passage to show that gender difference is not something that’s pathologized in the Quran. She critiques the readings of specific passages that have misogynist overtones out of context of the text of the Quran as a whole. She is very upfront about rereading the Quran. She says, ‘I’m doing a reading according to a feminist lens,’ and she’s unapologetic about that. She allows for the fact that the Quran lends itself to this sort of interpretation because the Quran is a polysemic text, or a text that can hold multiple meanings. According to her interpretation, because the word of God is always separate from the world of man, in transposing the world of God into the world of man there will always be slippage. This creates space for interpretation. In this way, for Islamic feminist theologians like Barlas to bring a feminist reading to the Quran is entirely justified and authentic.

Q **Do you think this notion of the Quran not being interpreted as something friendly to the feminist movement, is that something popular thought gets wrong? What is the misconception?**

First of all, the feminist movement is a diverse movement. It is true that Western feminists generally do not think of the Quran as an important reference point needing reconciliation, and there is resistance to the term ‘feminism’ in many Muslim contexts for many reasons.

But the bigger problem is that, in general, there is a tendency to think of texts in religious movements as things that are static and don’t change over time. So, when we’re assessing attitudes that talk about the Quran as antifeminist, we have to go back several steps to unpack what is troubling about that approach. What you’re doing by asking that question, which many people do, is assuming that the Quran, in interpretations of it, hasn’t changed over time, and that interpretations of it won’t change. In fact, built into readings and application of the Quran is the importance of context both locally and in terms of time. This is the case in other religious movements as well.

But I think, in general, in a place like America, where Christianity is still the dominant idiom, we are more comfortable accommodating diversity in interpretations of Christianity than we are in minority religions like Islam. It sometimes requires a shift in thinking to realize the type of capaciousness that we attribute to Christianity can also exist in Islam as well. The thing I think the Islamic feminist thinkers do really well is to open up our horizons to the capaciousness of Islam by demonstrating there is a significant strand that is building a bridge to feminism. And I think that bridge is exciting and interesting to look at. It does present a kind of alternative vision of the future relationship between religion and feminism.

Q **In this context, what does the path forward look like, for religion and the global future?**

The big takeaway, for me, is that local context matters. When we're thinking about the global future for women and the context of feminism and religion, we need to be very cautious about building international feminist movements. We need to be very careful about asking questions about local context and ascribing characteristics to entire religious communities. For example, the Okin article is an example of this troubling tendency to make Islam into a monolith that has a particular, static attitude toward women. I think we need to think about local conditions—in a way that the Islamic tradition does naturally. That's where I think the path forward is. Context matters.

It's a constant thread in a lot of issues, really. The generalization of a single issue that is multiple issues.

For sure. Fourth-wave feminism. You can think of it as the age of the digital natives. Where we're all really excited, talking over time and space, talking in lightning fast speeds, it can be intoxicating to think of it as a moment to build a movement around international feminism, but it's even more important, in these contexts, to be aware of the competing publics that exist in those spaces.

What are practical implications of this progress?

If we're thinking about policy, we need a broader range of expertise available to the people who are making the policies. You need greater diversity of views of people at the table. I think when we're talking about—let's say the level of government. I think that's a natural place to think about in terms of practicalities. You need to have a diverse range of perspectives not just as a cosmetic or PR issue, but as a way to genuinely bring different ways of approaching this question of progress for women to the table. In practice, I've seen what a huge difference that can make. I did a short stint at the Department for Religious Freedom in the State Department, and I thought that office did a really good job of being committed to bringing different voices to the table, and when they did that, it contributed to the strength of foreign policy.

How do you combat the proposed idea by some that religion doesn't matter?

When someone just says, 'Religion doesn't make sense and it's something we need to phase out.' [Laughs] Actually, one of the readings that we're thinking about in the class I think gets very close to making that argument, because it's a quantitative study that associates inequality for women with religious belief overall —'Religion' with a capital 'R.' But what I think that doesn't capture is the way that religions are constantly changing and different religious communities have been responding to questions about the status of women over time in a way that is authentic and effective.

I just don't think it's accurate to say religion isn't relevant, because it clearly is to many people. The question of 'should religion matter?' is, I think, really interesting and sometimes a little bit insidious. Some people seem to be saying, 'If we could just get rid of religion as a category we could solve all of these problems!' And I just don't think it would work because I think religion isn't the problem when we're thinking about gender relations. The issue is kind of culture more broadly, and religion is a very big part of that.

One of the readings that the class will be doing before I speak emphasizes that it shows a correlation between religious belief and ideas of inequity between what they call unequal beliefs about the status of men and women. And it's not a causative relationship, but the language veers in that direction, suggesting that if there's a connection it must be that religious beliefs are causing those ideas of inequity. But what I think we're missing when we see that is the ways that religion changes dramatically, and can be an effective force for change. We're not going to get rid of religion even if we wanted to, which I don't. On a different level, I think we're asking the wrong question if we're trying to say, 'How are we going to get rid of religion?' If the goal is to pursue gender equity. Religion is far more likely to be an effective tool in the pursuit of that than it is an obstacle.

Which is where these reinterpretations are helpful.

Yes. Because ultimately, Islamic feminism is engaging at a deep level with the sources of authentic Muslim tradition to reread it in a new way for a new age. And sure, the success of Islamic feminist approaches have been very limited so far; but they demonstrate one set of possibilities for combining two movements long considered inconsistent or incoherent with each other.

CREDITS

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SUBTOPICS

Religious Studies, Faculty, Q&A

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