Sexualising the Sacred, Sacralising Sexuality: An Analysis of Public Responses to Muslim Women's Religious Leadership in the Context of a Cape Town Mosque

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Abstract

This paper analyses the discourses of sexuality that can be gleaned from debates on Muslim women's religious leadership in Islam. In order to present a focused discussion on this topic, I pay particular attention to the public responses and commentaries that emerged in the wake of Amina Wadud's delivery of the Friday *khutbah* (sermon) in a Cape Town mosque in 1994. Although this event took place twenty years ago, the discourses on sexuality that unfolded in these public debates continue to inform contemporary public engagements on this topic. This paper is not concerned with the vexed question of prohibition or permission of women's religious leadership in Islamic legal traditions and/or Muslim history, but rather with the kinds of assumptions regarding women's sexuality that inform the politics of religious inclusion/exclusion. In conclusion, the paper offers a discussion on women's religious leadership through the lens of Islamic feminism in order to foreground some of the distinct voices that shift the focus of public debates—from an emphasis on women's sexuality to questions of women's spirituality and humanity.

Introduction

Women from a number of different religious and spiritual traditions, situated in diverse historical and contemporary geopolitical contexts, have challenged protective patriarchy and androcentrism by taking up positions of religious and spiritual leadership (see Fiedler 2010; Bano and Kalmbach 2012; Ngunjiri 2010; and Wessinger 1996). At times, women navigate through vast and polemical religious topographies, offering informal religious guidance to other women in home-based settings, sisterhoods, and local communities. At other times, they develop alternative spiritual pathways where traditional hierarchical and dualistic religious discourses are wholly abandoned in favour of more inclusive, integrated, and holistic perspectives (see Christ 1997; Eller 1993; Hunt 2006; and Fox 2006). Although women's religious and spiritual leadership is amply demonstrated by controversial foremothers and their contemporaries, diverse faith traditions still employ theological and legal arguments to reinforce male normativity (see Fiedler and Pomerleau 2006; Yusuf 2007; and Reisenberger 2005). Hence, much work still needs to be done in order to adequately address women's equal capacity with respect to religious and spiritual leadership.

Feminist scholars of religion trace the history of women's restricted access to positions of religious and spiritual leadership to patriarchal religious anthropology, and relatedly, to distinct assumptions about women's "natural" or "God-given" gender roles. Commonly, patriarchal religious anthropology does not distinguish between sex and gender. Rather, sex is held to determine gender; or alternatively, particular gender roles are perceived as an organic extension of biological sex (Lindley 2006: 23-26). Accordingly, no distinction is made between biologically distinct features (sex) and socio-cultural constructions of femininities and masculinities (gender). From these essentialist and deterministic perspectives, women's biological "nature" became deeply intertwined with nurturing and caring capacities, rendering women ideal for motherly and wifely duties in the domestic realm. Men's assumed rational and dominant "nature", on the other hand, solidified their leadership roles in public spaces and within religious structures, including in the mosque (Shaikh 2012: 7-9).

Normative assumptions about gender complementarity characterise many traditional and modern Muslim discourses (Abugideiri 2004: 233-242). Earthly differentiation of gender roles, following the gendered public/private split, emerged from dominant assumptions about women's sexual/emotional natures and men's spiritual/rational natures (Anwar 2006: 118-122). The tendency to view men and women as fundamentally different had certain implications for various social mores in premodern eras — such as

the practice of polygyny, easy male access to divorce, and women's limited witnessing and inheritance capacities — many of which still hold social currency in contemporary societies (see Mir-Hosseini 2007).

Traditional and contemporary readings of Islamic texts further inform and regulate social praxis and cultural norms. For example, the notion that "men are the protectors and maintainers of women" (Qur'an 4:34) tends to strengthen patriarchal understandings of "natural" relations of power within marriage, rendering gender asymmetry normative and religiously appropriate.[1] Such readings of religious scripture also buttress androcentric understandings of women's "God-given" place in the home as the primary "givers" of nurture, comfort, and (sexual) pleasure. These preconceived female characteristics and responsibilities — harnessing women's *habitus* to the home — arguably form the backdrop for dominant religio-political positions against women's religious leadership in many Muslim communities.

Conventionally, Muslim men are required to attend the weekly Friday congregational prayer (*jumu'ah*) in the mosque (Wiegers 2004: 332). Women's attendance, however, has been vigorously debated among Muslim jurists. Commonly, jurists agree that women are not *obliged* to attend the *jumu'ah*, but differ on whether or not women's attendance in the mosque is in fact *permissible* (Ali and Leaman 2008: 84).[2] The *hadith* (Prophetic tradition) in which the Prophet Muhammad is recorded as having said that the best place of prayer for women "is the innermost part of her home" is repeatedly referenced to oppose women's participation in the mosque (Ali and Leaman 2008: 84). In contrast, another *hadith* recounts the Prophet saying: "Do not prevent God's female servants from [going to] God's mosque" (as quoted in Ali and Leaman 2008: 84).[3] Hence, in contemporary times, women's access to mosques — ranging from unrestricted participation to unequivocal exclusion — depends on national, political, and religious histories, and continues to be an important topic for discussion among jurists, historians, feminists, and other social actors.[4]

Regardless of the prevalence and extent of women's attendance in mosques in contemporary contexts, Muslim communities that *allow* women access to mosques commonly demarcate different degrees of gender separation within the mosque space. Furthermore, although this stipulation is frequently contested in the contemporary era, only a Muslim male can assume the position of public prayer leader (*imam*), deliver the obligatory *khutbah* (sermon), and lead a mixed-gender group in prayer (Mattson 2006: 616).[5] This gendered norm is noteworthy considering that there is no ordained clergy in Muslim societies. Rather, members of local communities nominate those amongst them who are held to embody particular Islamic pietistic ideals while also exhibiting a thorough grasp of religious knowledge.

From a feminist perspective, such gendered praxis reveals various degrees of women's exclusion from centres of religious learning and as purveyors of religious knowledge (see Hassan 1990).[6] More so, the exclusion of women from positions of religious leadership subtly signals that irrespective of a woman's religious knowledge and piety, her corporeality *as a woman* renders her contribution inappropriate (Elewa and Silvers 2010-11: 142).[7]

It is here, where the performance of spiritual or religious capacities takes on a gendered form, that questions pertaining to women's sexuality emerge as salient. The following sections of this paper explore and problematise the discourses of sexuality that can be gleaned from public responses and commentaries emerging in the wake of Amina Wadud's delivery of the Friday *khutbah* in a Cape Town mosque in 1994.

The Claremont Main Road Mosque's Gender *Jihad*[8]

On the 12th of August, 1994, Professor Amina Wadud delivered the Friday *khutbah* in front of a mixed-gender congregation at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. This historic event rendered visible the contested terrain of women's religious leadership in Islam as fervent protests, objections, and condemnations problematically ensued, together with calls of encouragement and support in national and international public forums. Notably, the public debates that took place focused predominantly on, and gave priority to, the fact that a Muslim *woman* delivered the *khutbah,* thereby implying distinct assumptions concerning traditional gender norms and roles.

The Claremont Main Road Mosque is known for its progressive and inclusive approach to Islam. In particular from the 1980s, under the tenure of Imam Rashied Omar (who also served as the president of the Muslim Youth Movement from 1987 to 1990), the Claremont Main Road Mosque increasingly engaged socio-political issues through sermons, political activism, and community outreach programmes. The leadership of the mosque encouraged interfaith dialogue and frequently invited non-Muslim clerics to address the congregation. They also urged the attendance and participation of women in the mosque, and welcomed lectures and talks focusing on Muslims living with HIV/Aids, as well as on drug awareness, gender violence, and human rights (Gamieldien 2004: 53-68; 80-88). Thus, it is not surprising that the board decided to invite Professor Amina Wadud to address the Claremont congregation. The invitation coincided with the commemoration of an event on the 9th of August, 1956, when thousands of women marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the apartheid pass laws. Prof. Wadud's address was also timed to celebrate the year of South Africa's first democratic election.

Gamieldien reports that the decision to invite Professor Wadud "was taken without much fuss" (2004: 80), consistent with the mosque's tradition of progressive and gender-inclusive decision-making. However, this time around, the decision was met with tremendous criticism from various segments of the South African Muslim population, as well as from Muslims internationally. There were reports of violent attacks, both physical and verbal, against the main protagonists associated with this event. Imam Rashied Omar received several death threats, and the Forum of Muslim Theologians (an organisation that was formed as a result of Wadud's sermon) lobbied to remove him from his position (Gamieldien, 2004: 89-91). Across the Atlantic, members of Wadud's local mosque demanded her dismissal from her academic position in the Islamic Studies Department at Virginia Commonwealth University, USA (Wadud 2006: 169).

Why did this event cause such extreme and fierce opposition? In examining the public debates that emerged in the wake of Wadud's sermon, two issues of contention seem to dominate: 1) as mentioned above, that a Muslim *woman* delivered the *khutbah*, and 2) the new gender-inclusive spatial arrangements of the Claremont Main Road Mosque. I will briefly clarify the latter before presenting an analysis of the discourses of sexuality that traversed the public debates, as both points of contention are interwoven in these public scripts.

Commonly, in South Africa, strict gender separation exists within the mosque. Most mosques accommodate women by demarcating separate entrances, distinct rooms to undertake the obligatory ritual ablutions (*wudu*), and designated balconies, mezzanines, basements, and in some instances, backyards, in which woman are to perform the ritual prayer.[9] In the Claremont Main Road Mosque, women would normally access the upper mezzanine floor to participate in prayer and other social events, whereas men occupied the main prayer area. In preparation for the Wadud sermon, the board decided that women should have equal access to the main prayer area, and consequently divided the normative male space into two parallel sections divided by a single rope (Jeenah 2001: 33-34). Women were invited to occupy the one side of this space, rendering the main prayer area shared and gender-inclusive. Wadud herself inhabited the prestigious space traditionally reserved for men, in the main section of the mosque facing the congregants.[10]

Sexualising the Sacred: Problematising Gendered Space as a Condition for Islamic Purity

The Forum of Muslim Theologians declared via a press release that "[a]lthough Islam is all for the progress of women, it has segregated the

sexes, so as to maintain the purity of the religion" (as quoted in Gamieldien 2004: 136). This statement is specifically addressed to the leadership of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, who (it was implied), given their knowledge of Islam, really "should know better" than to welcome a woman to address a mixed congregation. Their reference to gender segregation as a condition for the "purity" of Islam constituted the ammunition for opposing both Wadud's prominent role and location in the mosque and the gender-inclusive congregational space (albeit divided by a rope).

I read their statement as signalling certain assumptions about sacred space in Islam, and concomitantly, about incidents that might de-sacralise or defile such a space. To be clear, my application of the term "sacred" in the context of the mosque space is used in the Durkheimian sense, as "that which is set apart", and which serves as a place of religious meaning for Muslim believers.[11] In other words, the sacred quality of the mosque space is contingent on its continued function as a house of worship for Muslim believers. As such, the mosque space constitutes a temporal sacred centre, not because of particular sacralised qualities or inherent axial signification (as commonly found in the Christian tradition), but because Muslim congregants gather here to participate in religious meaning-making through the performance of supplicatory prayers and expressions of pious belonging and commitment.

The normative rendering of the main mosque space as a male space, however, as exemplified through the confinement of women to peripheral mosque locations, notably has implications for the configuration and regulation of the purity and sacredness of the mosque space. In delivering the *khutbah*, Wadud somehow destabilised the (patriarchal) Islamic ideal of gender segregation by physically occupying a space traditionally reserved for men — in front of men (and women). Furthermore, her physical presence constituted a fissure in the customary workings of the mosque space as a sacred space of worship. In effect, from the perspective of the Forum of Muslim Theologians' emphasis on preserving the purity of Islam, Wadud, through her female corporeality and imminence, introduced impurity into the mosque. Likewise, the presence of the gender-mixed congregants, equally occupying the main mosque space, challenged the normative gender-regulated spatial arrangements as well as contributed to the de-sacralisation of the sacred (male) mosque space.

Commenting on (then) Regional Health and Welfare Minister Ebrahim Rasool's statement that Wadud's central involvement was part of a "corrective process of healing Islam", the Forum of Muslim Theologians asserted that although Islam is "a religion of progress which has benefited mankind [*sic*] throughout the ages ... innovations [*bid'ah*, heresy] such as these, taking

place under the guise of Islam and in the name of progress [are] detrimental to Muslims" (as quoted in Gamieldien 2004: 136). The unintended irony in employing the term "*man*kind" in the context of this argument is hard to miss. The position taken by the Forum of Muslim Theologians is undoubtedly informed by its members' belief in the lack of historical precedent for women's religious leadership — although they do mention in passing the example of Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet, who occasionally counselled men in religious matters (however, from behind a screen).[12]

I would like to draw attention to the forum's reference, in this case, to women's religious leadership as an act of "innovation" (read: heresy) "detrimental to Muslims". The Forum of Muslim Theologians is rather vague on the details regarding the particular "detrimental" outcome. Do they envision a disaster of apocalyptic proportions? Will women's religious leadership lead to the fragmentation of the global Muslim *umma* (community)? Does "Muslims" in the above quotation in fact refer only to men; hence, will women's religious leadership have serious consequences for Muslim men, in particular, as they will now have to compete for the prestigious position of *imam*?

Or are we rather moving into the complex area of morality and modesty — or alternatively, immorality and immodesty? Therefore, will women's religious leadership roles have negative effects on Muslim (male) public morality, since such women are breaking with centuries of traditional mores related to specific codes of normative male/female roles and conduct? It is this latter question that I believe goes to the heart of the debate on Muslim women's religious leadership. In fact, I argue that notions of traditional gendered norms, constitute the primary nexus through which deep-seated assumptions pertaining to women's sexuality — and relatedly, men's morality/spirituality — can be explored.

Out of Sight, out of Mind: Problematising Women's Sexuality as an Obstacle to Worship

In order to further explore the views expressed by the Forum of Muslim Theologians — keeping in mind their dual emphasis on the importance of maintaining the purity of Islam and the detrimental (moral) effects of women's religious leadership for Muslims (men) — I shift my attention to perspectives voiced by members of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC).[13]

In a series of interviews undertaken by Yusuf Mataar (1999), members of the MJC elucidated the reasons for their objection to the Wadud sermon. Their first point of contention relates to the construct of a woman's voice as *'awrah* (lit. nakedness).[14] In their opinion a woman's voice constitutes part of

that which should be concealed (in public): her *'awrah*. Their view is based on a particular understanding of the Qur'anic verse 33:32, where God appeals to the wives of the Prophet Muhammad to guard their speech in public so as not to stir desire in men.[15] In other words, a woman's voice seems to hold a sensual capacity that may distract men from important public and religious affairs, possibly leading men into salacious and licentious thoughts/acts. Extending the notion of *'awrah* to include women's bodies, members of the MJC in Mataar's study (1999: 48-52) argued that women are not allowed to address men in the sacred space of the mosque.

This is not the first time such an argument has been used to prohibit women from public speaking. The establishment of *Radio Islam*, in 1997, caused ample controversy when its founders decided not to allow female radio presenters. Reason: they believed that a woman's voice is part of her *'awrah* and should as such be precluded from public consumption (Jeenah 2001: 47-51).

From a feminist perspective, *'awrah* emerges as a distinctly gendered construct — indeed, a property of the female body — that is inextricably linked to issues of women's (public) modesty. Commonly invoking particular forms of Muslim dress (e.g. *hijab*, *niqab*), the ethical category of modesty also encompasses and regulates bodily conduct, behaviour, speech, and performance. Revealing clothing, lewdness, and promiscuous and flirtatious behaviour are considered contrary to modest enactment. However, when women's bodies and voices are rendered as *'awrah*, women's modesty is by implication defined in sexual terms. In other words, a woman's modest behaviour is ultimately contingent upon her ability to conceal her body and voice so as to not provoke or invite the salacious gaze of men. Accordingly, the onus of sexual morality seems to rest with women's ability to be sexually modest — en-*gendering* women as the primary repositories of modesty.

It becomes evident, from the opinions voiced by the MJC interviewees, that a woman's bodily presence in the mosque, together with her voice (when audible), diverts men's attention from solemn and devotional prayer to sexual temptation. From a critical feminist perspective, women's corporeality in such a space thus seems to constitute a serious threat to men's moral capacity and ability for self-control. Concurrently, a woman's modesty also becomes compromised in such a setting, as she invariably contributes to the sexualisation of the mosque space.

The particular ideological position of the MJC interviewees conveys notions of women as (active) sexual distractions, as well as hyper-sexualised objects of desire. Traditional sexual segregation in the mosque and compulsory male religious leadership seem to emerge as preventative and indeed necessary means of control that condition and enable men's

cultivation and expression of religious devotion. However, what do these assumptions about women's potent sexuality imply about men's spirituality and sexual morality? Arguably, a man's inability to perform worship in the presence of women, or to receptively listen to a woman delivering a sermon, signals a fragile spiritual self that lacks the capacity for sexual self-control.

In her opinion piece aptly titled "Sexual Men and Spiritual Women" (1994) and published by the South African national Muslim newspaper *al-Qalam*, Sa'diyya Shaikh critically engages the pervasive gendered responses that emerged in the wake of Wadud's *khutbah.* Having herself been present at this controversial Friday sermon, Shaikh records a few congregants' initial reactions that eloquently speak to notions of sexual morality and spirituality. The contrasting statements of two congregants, in particular, render transparent the different frames of reference employed in response to Wadud's sermon and to the new gender-inclusive spatial arrangement in the mosque. A male congregant expressed that "the women were so close that one could just stretch across and touch them". Conversely, a female congregant noted, "We are here because of our love for Allah and for justice" (as quoted in Shaikh, 1994: 7).

The male congregant's singular focus on women's presence and close proximity illustrates a certain level of discomfort, while his response simultaneously projects a sense of physical restraint as he quite effortlessly could "touch" the female congregants. However, why would he want to do that in this place of worship? Why are women's bodies the locus of attention? The female congregant's impassioned response, on the other hand, foregrounds a profound relationship with God as the primary motivation for her embodied presence in the mosque. She does not allude to the sexual politics of the mosque space, nor does she define herself in such terms. Rather, she highlights "love" and "justice" as the key ethical categories that inform her attendance. Considering the particularity of this Friday sermon, the female congregant's reference to "justice" may also suggest a commitment to gender justice. Shaikh notes that the female congregant was active in women's rights advocacy; hence, her invocation of justice possibly signals men and women's equal capacities for religious leadership, as well as an equal right to inhabit a communal sacred space.

Shaikh (2012: 7-9) problematises the existing tensions between, on the one hand, the gendered and sexual body as the locus of attention (external), and on the other, the human self as a spiritual and moral centre (internal). Arguing that the prevailing focus on sexuality in debates on women's religious leadership reduces male subjects to pubescent voyeurs incapable of moral responsibility and spiritual dedication, she powerfully destabilises the normative binaries of spiritual men and sexual women. As reflected

in the title of her 1994 opinion piece, men's fixation on women's sexuality (and bodies) in the mosque significantly disturbs their ability to engage in any meaningful spiritual immersion. Inversely, women seem to embody impassioned and unadulterated spirituality when welcomed into the sacred space of the mosque, be it to partake as receptive and devotional listeners or to offer sincere and meaningful reflections from the *minbar* (pulpit).

In probing the question of what it means to be *human* in the context of Muslim women's religious leadership, it is clear that particular understandings of women's sexuality, together with conceptions of what (or who) constitutes a sacred space for worship, weave through these public debates. The opponents of women's religious leadership and full participation in the mosque seem to hold a binary view of male and female nature, overlaid with hierarchical and regulatory mechanisms. In other words, understandings of women's active and visible sexuality render men as natural religious leaders and normative congregants. Likewise, the purity of the sacred is maintained by men when they inhabit the main prayer space of the mosque. Ironically, though, women's presence in the mosque is strictly regulated so as to preserve the moral purity of men, and concurrently, the purity of the sacred.

This being the case, it seems to me that it is men who possess "naturally" vigorous sexual libidos, as they are dependent on the removal of external stimulus in order to remain spiritually devoted and cognisant. This point is reflected in Mataar's interview with a *shaykhah* (one of the few South African female graduates of Al-Azhar in Egypt) who stated that "by permitting a woman to address an audience of men and women from the front of the sacred precincts of the mosque, one will disturb the desired spiritual balance since the natural sexual inclinations of men could be aroused" (1999: 54). Besides being a clear example of women's complicity in perpetuating patriarchal binaries, this interviewee's perspective clearly highlights the ways in which men's instinctive sexual drive organically emerges as a result of women's bodily presence, and how men are perceived as incapable of maintaining a "spiritual balance" in the presence of women. I read this notion of a "spiritual balance" to indicate a disruption of men's spirituality, as well as a sexualisation of a place of worship — signifying the mosque space as a sexually charged site through which spirituality and corporeality ambivalently intertwine.

Lastly, I wish to probe the functioning of traditional gendered norms in the context of Muslim women's religious leadership. Wadud's *khutbah* attracted many protesters, men and women alike, who were carrying placards stating "Our women know their place in Islam" (as quoted in Shaikh 1994: 7). What kinds of gender norms are reflected through such a public response? What

is Muslim women's place in contemporary South Africa? Clearly, from these protesters' point of view, a woman's place is *not* in front of a mixed-gender congregation, nor is it in a shared congregational space. Rather, this slogan regrettably perpetuates women's Otherness in the mosque space, designating women as not yet fully welcomed to participate in religious worship alongside men, nor as conveyors of religious knowledge and reflection.

Since women's place is seemingly *outside* the communal centre of religious worship (at least outside the purview of the men inhabiting the main mosque space), certain traditional assumptions about gender roles come to mind. As mentioned earlier, earthly differentiation of gender roles, following the gendered public/private split, are premised on dominant assumptions about women's sexual/emotional natures and men's spiritual/rational natures. These binary constructions are echoed in those voices opposing women's religious leadership, as it is women's assumed overt sexual nature, in particular, that is foregrounded as the primary obstacle to their inclusion. Following this traditional logic, then, women are positioned as natural domestic caretakers and caregivers, sustaining a harmonious moral society through their primary responsibilities in the home. This type of essentialised approach and response to contemporary gender relations frames human ontology as innately gendered. In this religious imaginary, gender difference becomes the central node through which spiritual engagements are mediated and governed.

Bearing these public contestations in mind, I now turn to a discussion of women's religious leadership through the lens of Islamic feminism. My aim here is to divert the focus from women's sexuality to questions of women's spirituality and humanity.

Sacralising Sexuality: Islamic Feminists Reclaim Women's Spirituality and Humanity

Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud and Sa'diyya Shaikh have long argued that human beings are created equal before God, holding equal capacities for spiritual perfection and social action (see Wadud 1999 and Shaikh 2004). The need to incorporate, acknowledge, and value women in positions of religious leadership is thus premised on the notion that since women are innately human, restrictions on (or condemnation of) women's religious leadership imply that women's humanity is not fully recognised; or alternatively, that women somehow lack certain human qualities or capacities. By underscoring equality as the primary religious category framing human relations, the notion of women's equal opportunity to act as purveyors of religious knowledge within spaces of religious worship becomes particularly poignant.

Amina Wadud, who by virtue of her own central participation became the focus of much attention in debates on Muslim women's religious leadership, devotes a chapter to this topic in her renowned book *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (2006: 158-186). Here she narrates her own experience of "the Claremont Main Road Mosque Event", and elegantly responds to and problematises the circumstances of her own involvement. She begins the chapter with a transcription of her *khutbah* in order to invite the reader to become familiar with the actual content of her sermon, which regrettably was oft forgotten and/or deprioritised in public debates — reminding us that contemporary patriarchal discourses often function to displace and marginalise female participation in ways that effectively hamper dialogical and meaningful exchanges.

In many ways the content of Wadud's *khutbah* constitutes a cathartic ground through which the debilitating debates on women's religious leadership in Islam can be approached. Wadud's *khutbah* distinctly spoke to notions of being human, and of God-human relationships. She illustrated the importance of engaged surrender — the meaning and purpose of being Muslim — by employing the metaphor of a woman giving birth to a child. By selflessly following the will of God in carrying and caring for the baby in her womb for nine months, the "becoming mother" also engages her whole embodied being in surrender to God when the time comes to give birth to her child. Through this evocative metaphor, Wadud powerfully decentres the normative male religious subject by situating women at the heart of religious performance and surrender to God.

One of the principal religious constructs that Wadud employs to destabilise male normativity is the notion of *tawhid* (the unicity of God). She argues that the oneness of God "unites existing multiplicities and seeming dualities in both the corporeal and the metaphysical realm" (2006: 28). *Tawhid* brings together male and female as equal subjects governed by an ethics of reciprocity and interdependency, for the one cannot be hierarchically situated above the other. Accordingly, both male and female have been endowed with equal capacities for spiritual and social responsibilities (Wadud 2006: 168). The inequality reflected in women's common exclusion from positions of religious leadership in Islam signals, not only the continued gendered view of humanity in the social sphere, but also the marginalisation of women's experiences and corporeality *as women* from centres of religious worship (Wadud 2006: 183). In other words, the clearly delineated androcentric borders of the mosque markedly diminish women's participation and contribution to public reflections on what it means to be a religious human being. Conversely, men's dominant engagements and expressions of hu*man* ontological and epistemological religious realities are not neutral, nor

necessarily responsive, to the realities or experiences of women, although they are commonly presented as such. Women's peripheral presence in the mosque is further compounded by the sexual politics discussed above; hence, the need to conceal female corporeality becomes essential, and in effect re-inscribes the mosque space as normatively male.

Responding to patriarchal readings of women's sexuality as "dangerous" (for men) and potential sources of *fitna* (social disorder/chaos), Asma Barlas and Aysha Hidayatullah, for example, argue that sexuality in Islam is conceived of as a natural and necessary manifestation of human experience and spiritual expression (see Barlas 2002 and Hidayatullah 2003). Barlas further contends that the Qur'an conveys an ethos of "sexual sameness", rendering women and men equally "sexed" (2002: 152). In other words, women and men's sexual drives, lusts, and desires are not described in binary terms. Rather, a notion of sexual equality imbricates and traverses broader Qur'anic conceptualisations of human ontology. From this ideological position, feminist scholars of Islam highlight sexuality as an organic part of humanness, and subvert the corrosive binaries of sexual women and spiritual men so prevalent in contemporary public discussions on Muslim women's religious leadership. Moreover, by acknowledging that sexuality forms an intrinsic part of spiritual performance — as pious devotion is inherently dependent on embodied practice — feminist scholars of Islam also rekindle the precarious relationship between corporeality and spirituality with the purpose of reclaiming human wholeness.

Speaking to the importance of deconstructing patriarchal assumptions that result in gendered social norms such as exclusive male religious leadership, Shaikh asserts that "it is only by breaking down oppressive categories and accepting responsibility for our own behaviour that we — believing men and believing women, God-conscious men and women — can reclaim our full humanity, our Islam" (1994: 7). Here, the onus of responsibility is powerfully placed on individual selves, whose humanity and "Muslimness" are spawned by, and indeed conducive to, moral agency and accountability. By appealing to egalitarian constructs of religious anthropology and God-conscious morality, Islamic feminists such as Shaikh poignantly reconfigure current androcentric norms that exclude women from fully participating in spaces of religious worship. Correspondingly, Muslim women's religious leadership in Islam can be seen as a human enactment of moral agency, an expression of gender justice, and responsive to the right to participate as equally enfleshed, sexual, and spiritual subjects in the production of religious meaning and meaning-making.

Notes

1   For critical feminist engagements with Qur'an 4:34, see for example Sa'diyya Shaikh (2007: 69-74), Kecia Ali (2006: 116-126), and Asma Barlas (2002: 184-189).
2   For an overview of jurists' opinions, see for example Christopher Melchert (2006: 59-69).
3   Additionally, feminist scholars of Islam such as Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi argue that women in early Muslim societies frequently attended the mosque (see Ahmed 1992: 72-75 and Mernissi 1991: 102-114). Such a feminist approach of reclaiming women's religious histories provides a powerful supportive framework for encouraging Muslim women's contemporary participation in the mosque.
4   In this regard, see Cleo Cantone's wonderful anthropological study of women's mosques in Senegal (2012) and Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun's groundbreaking book on the history and development of women's mosques in China (2000).
5   For contemporary contestations of Muslim men's exclusive religious leadership, see Ahmed Elewa and Laury Silvers (2010-11: 141-171).
6   However, contemporary feminist writings on Islam and gender also demonstrate that many Muslim women held prestigious leadership positions in the premodern era. See for example Omaima Abou-Bakr's "Teaching the Words of the Prophet: Women Instructors of the Hadith" (2003: 306-328), where she presents a number of female scholars who were leading experts and teachers of *hadith* (*muhaddithat*) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
7   It is important to note the extensive literature on Islamic law that engages the question of women's religious leadership in Islam. Legal debates, interestingly, also include *as* legal questions discussions about women's bodies. See for example Ahmed Elewa and Laury Silvers (2010-11: 141-171) and Zaid Shakir (2005: 1-12). Although legal perspectives certainly add an important level of analysis to debates on women's religious leadership in Islam, this paper is primarily concerned with public debates on women's religious leadership and the kinds of discourses on women's sexuality that can be gleaned from such debates.
8   The term "gender *jihad*" was coined by Imam Rashied Omar in the wake of Amina Wadud's visit to South Africa in 1994. In its basic denotation, the Arabic word *jihad* means "exertion" or "effort in the direction of a certain goal". There is a fundamental distinction between two forms of *jihad*: the "great" *jihad* and the "small" *jihad*. The "great" *jihad* denotes an effort imposed on oneself to achieve moral and religious perfection, whereas the "small" *jihad* refers to the duty to do battle against an outside enemy.
9   For a contextual and insightful study regarding Muslim women's access to and participation in Cape Town mosques, see Uta Christina Lehmann (2012: 481-506).
10 Amina Wadud's *khutbah* undoubtedly inspired Muslim women's participation in the mosque. The Claremont Main Road Mosque continues its gender-inclusive spatial arrangement, and also invites women to address the congregation. Since her pioneering 1994 *khutbah* in the Claremont mosque, Wadud has led gender-mixed congregational prayers in the USA (2005) and the UK (2008), among other places. These events have similarly caused great controversy. For a self-reflective account of her 2005 *khutbah* in New York, see Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006: 246-253).
11 For a more thorough engagement pertaining to various definitions of sacred space, as well as to the production and functioning of sacred space, see David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (1995: 1-42).

12 Islamic feminists and others scholars of Islam contest the notion, often presented as a fact, that in Muslim history women did not give talks or sermons in front of mixed congregations. See for example Sa'diyya Shaikh (2012), Omaima Abou-Bakr (2003), and Juliane Hammer (2012).

13 The Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) is the largest body of religious authority in the Western Cape, where the Claremont Main Road Mosque is situated. Commonly, it caters to the needs of the Muslim population pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody matters. Other significantly influential *'ulama* (religious clergy) bodies in South Africa include the *Jamiatul 'Ulama Natal* of KwaZulu-Natal and the *Jamiatul 'Ulama Transvaal* of Gauteng. Based on their knowledge of Islamic law, these religious bodies have to a large extent monitored and regulated the conditions for religious practice in the South African context. For a discussion of the role and functioning of Muslim religious clergy in South Africa, see Abdulkader Tayob (1995).

14 *'Awrah*, lit. nakedness, refers to aspects of the body that should be publicly concealed. It includes a range of referents from the "genitals" or "pudendum" (for men and women alike), according to some perspectives, to women's hands, faces, and voices, in the view of others.

15 Qur'an 33:32 reads: "Wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other woman. If you truly fear God, do not speak too softly in case the sick at heart should lust after you, but speak in an appropriate manner." (Haleem, 2004)

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