



## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE “RIGHTS OF WOMAN”: WOMEN’S APPROPRIATION OF RELIGION IN SAUDI ARABIA

AMÉLIE LE RENARD

A number of intellectuals have drawn upon the concept of “Islamic feminism” as part of an effort to re-interpret sacred texts and provide specifically Islamic arguments for improving women’s rights and increasing gender equality. Their interventions reveal a desire to participate in the movement to “reform Islam” and serve to exclude women who are active in Islamist circles, whom they sometimes describe as “anti-feminists”.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, some academics have also on occasion described the activities of the latter group as “feminist”, particularly in Turkey<sup>2</sup> and Iran, where activists have drawn upon religious arguments to criticize the legislation of the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup>

One might thus wonder whether Islamic feminism is not simply the process of demanding rights (whatever they may be) on the basis of Islamic sources. On this understanding, such demands count as “feminist” when they call into question dominant interpretations of religion, whether they be those of the state or those of Islamic militants. This raises the question -- of immediate interest to those who do research in the area -- of whether actors who do not

---

<sup>1</sup> Concerning this “Islamic reform” approach, see the 2006 symposium held by the “Islam and Secularism Commission” and UNESCO, the proceedings of which were published as *Existe-t-il un féminisme musulman?* Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007. In 2005, a symposium on Islamic feminism was held but its proceedings have not been published.

<sup>2</sup> Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, and “Islamisme et féminisme en Turquie”, *Confluences Méditerranée* 27, Fall 1998, pp. 87-93.

<sup>3</sup> Fariba Adelkhah, *La Révolution sous le voile: femmes islamiques d’Iran*, Paris: Karthala, 1991; and by the same autho, “Iran: femmes en mouvement, mouvements des femmes”, in Mounia Bennani Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule (eds.), *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003, pp. 243-269. See also the contribution of Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud elsewhere in this issue, “Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjection or the Emergence of Active Subjects”, *Critique internationale*, 46 (original publication, January-March 2010).

themselves accept the label of “Islamic feminist” should be described as such. If so, on the basis of what criteria? Given the diversity of movements that have historically identified themselves as “feminist”, any attempt to settle on a definition is necessarily perilous.

As the actors I discuss below would not wish to be described as “Islamic feminists”, the present study will empirically examine the various manners in which women appropriate religion. The changes and displacements that thus result expand women’s opportunities and help win acceptance for new lifestyles, though these may not be explicitly avowed goals.<sup>4</sup> From a methodological standpoint, understanding such displacements requires one to take into account the context -- or, rather, the plurality of contexts -- in which they occur. The configurations of authority, modes of legitimization adopted by the state or the regime, the stance taken by the religious establishment and the way in which the “woman question”<sup>5</sup> is posed all must be taken into consideration when studying the various ways in which women appropriate religion. In other words, when women or groups of women rely on religious sources to claim greater rights, one must identify the political or social configuration in which this takes place: *whose* interests are affected and in the furtherance of *what* goal?

In Saudi Arabia, religion is a ubiquitous point of normative reference in education, the media and political discourse, especially since the “Islamic awakening” (*Al-sahwa al-islamiyya*) that began in the 1960s. It supplies the basis of legislative texts and judicial action.<sup>6</sup> It is a source of legitimization for the regime and is presented as a constitutive element of national unity, as distinct from various sub-national allegiances.<sup>7</sup> In these circumstances, reliance on Islamic sources is indispensable to any argument that seeks acceptance in the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> A range of protagonists may draw upon such sources but in doing so they will not all enjoy the same degree of credibility. “Liberal” intellectuals,<sup>9</sup> though they sometimes justify their claims by referring to the Quran and Sunna, are often described in Saudi Arabia as “secularists”

---

<sup>4</sup> This was the procedure adopted by Stéphanie Latte Abdallah in *Femmes réfugiées palestiniennes*, Paris: PUF, 2006; in addition, see the introduction to the present issue of *Critique internationale*. See also Jacques Rancière, “L’histoire ‘des’ femmes: entre subjectivisation et représentation”, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 48 (4), 1993 p. 1013.

<sup>5</sup> This is the formula normally adopted in Saudi Arabia, hence the inverted commas.

<sup>6</sup> In principle, laws are supposed to be based on the Qur’an and the Sunna (the tradition of the Prophet). The *shari’a*, by contrast, is not formally codified as part of civil law. The judge bases his rulings on *fatwas* and a corpus of Hanbali Islamic legal texts. Consequently, he has considerable latitude.

<sup>7</sup> Abdulaziz al-Fahad, “The ‘Imama vs the ‘Iqbal: Hadari-Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State”, in Madawi Rasheed and Robert Vitalis, *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; François Pouillon et Thierry Mauger, “Un Etat contre les Bédouins, l’Arabie Saoudite: jalons pour une thèse”, *Maghreb-Machreq Monde Arabe*, 147, January-March 1995, pp. 132-148.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Cefai, “La construction des problèmes publics. Définitions de situations dans des arènes publiques”, *Réseaux. Communication – Technologie- Société*, 14 (75), 1996, pp. 43-66.

<sup>9</sup> This use of the word “liberal” is quite specific to Saudi Arabia, hence the inverted commas. As Laurence Louër puts it, “liberal” is an “undefined label that applied mainly to former Arab nationalists and Marxists who are today basically defined by their opposition to the concept of society described as ‘conservative’ by the Islamists.” See Laurence Louër, “Changez ou vous serez changés’: démocratisation et consolidation de l’autoritarisme dans le Golfe”, *Politique étrangère*, 4, 2005, pp. 757-768. For example, the view of “liberal” women on the subject of gender segregation is contrary to that adopted by Islamist women (who favor it).

(*'ilmaniyyat*) since their demands do not include the increasing Islamization of society but rather broader autonomy for women. Islamist women,<sup>10</sup> for their part, militate for the Islamization of society, which they believe will lead to greater justice in relations between men and women by bringing them into conformity with the precepts of Islam. In this context, they also advance a discourse affirming “the rights of the woman<sup>11</sup> in Islam”.

This article shows how the appropriation of religious discourse by Saudi women belonging to different social groups helps bring about greater autonomy for women by modifying the relationship between state and family power without necessarily challenging or contesting the dominant interpretation. Moving beyond the simple distinction between “liberals” and “Islamists”, I will trace the circulation of a rhetoric (which is nevertheless a site of competition between the two groups) that is employed to demand greater rights for women in the name of Islam as well as the ways in which other women appropriate this rhetoric for their own purposes. I will also examine discourse of another kind. It circulates in women’s religious spaces and I will refer to it as the discourse of “Islamic personal development”. Its objective is to facilitate self-fulfillment and -realization. I will show how, by drawing on Islamic sources, such discourse allows women to de-legitimize normative sources such as the positive laws of the state or the rules imposed by a women’s family members.

The present work is based on ten months of fieldwork in Saudi Arabia undertaken between 2005 and 2009. I carried out interviews with “liberal” intellectuals, female preachers<sup>12</sup> and women active in Islamic institutions. I also visited religious institutions and attended lectures there. Finally, in the context of my academic work, I had access to other female social spaces where young women gather, such as university campuses and places of work. This helped me understand how Islamic-inspired discourse circulates outside of religious spaces. Most of my research was undertaken in Riyadh.

### *The Emergence of Exclusively Female Religious Spaces*

In the early 1990s, some women began to express their ideas in religious terms and develop religious institutions of their own, with some becoming respected preachers along the way. In Saudi Arabia, the word “preacher” when applied to a woman designates one who has in

---

<sup>10</sup> In the framework of this article and, more generally, the Saudi context, I define “Islamist women” as those women who aim at increasing the Islamization of society without necessarily adopting a position critical of the regime.

<sup>11</sup> I prefer to use “woman” in the singular as this corresponds to usage in Saudi Arabia. In the remainder of the text, the expression “the rights of woman” is often placed between inverted commas to draw attention to its rhetorical nature. The use of such an expression is not at all obvious in a context where it is far from usual to speak in terms of “rights”.

<sup>12</sup> For more on Saudi preachers, see Amélie Le Renard, “From Qur’anic Circles to the Internet: Gender Segregation and the Rise of Female Preachers in Saudi Arabia”, in Hillary Kalmbach and Masooda Bano (Ed.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, pp. 105-126.

some way played a role in spreading Islam (e.g., by delivering neighborhood sermons or lectures). These women have often received academic training in Islamic subjects. Since the Islamic awakening, such women have become increasingly numerous. In their eyes, the stricter application of the precepts of Islam to society should lead to “greater respect between men and women”<sup>13</sup> and facilitate increased access for women to education and religious knowledge. So-called “liberal” women, on the contrary, see the Islamic awakening as a blow to the advancement of an elite of educated women who have studied abroad, only a miniscule number of whom occupied senior positions in the 1960s.

### **Women as Stowaways of the Islamic Awakening**

Women have long been more or less excluded from religious spaces in Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> They do not pray in mosques, except during Ramadan. Before the creation of public schools, Qur’an reading classes were the only forum for education for girls and boys alike in the central regions of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>15</sup> Historically, the legitimacy of the Saudi state depended on an alliance between the ruling dynasty and a group of *ulema*, who over time became ever more closely identified with state institutions. In the 1960s, there arose a movement of Islamic awakening, composed of a variety of more or less oppositional currents of thought born of the hybridization of official Saudi Islam and the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>16</sup> This movement first emerged in male educational institutions under the control of the Ministry of Education. Female institutions at that time were still embryonic and fell under the authority of the Directorate of Girls’ Education, a committee of *ulema* set up in 1960 who answered to the *mufti*, the Kingdom’s highest religious authority.<sup>17</sup> As a part of official Saudi Islam independent of the Ministry of Education, this institution was less affected by the Islamic awakening. It was not until the 1980s, what’s more, that the Islamic universities of Imam Muhammad ibn Su’ud in Riyadh and Umm al-Qura in Mecca, hitherto reserved for male students, opened their campuses to women.

---

<sup>13</sup> Author’s interview with a female student participant in the young women’s group of WAMY (World Association for Muslim Youth), 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Doumato, *Getting God’s Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Fawziyya Bakr Al-Bakr, (in Arabic) “The Historical Evolution of Saudi Women over 100 Years (1319-1419 AH)” in *Saudi Women’s Journey and Development over 100 Years* (collective work), Riyadh: King Saud University, Centre for Research in Humanities, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> For more information about the history of the *sahwa*, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1999 ; Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic voices of a new generation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Thomas Hegghamer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010; Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam. The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011 ; Pascal Ménoret, “Leaving Islamic activism behind : ambiguous disengagement in Saudi Arabia”, in Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vayrel, *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Initially opposed to instruction for girls, the *ulema*’s control over female education is widely seen as recompense by King Faisal. In the aftermath of a scandal, authority for women’s instruction was in 2002 given to the Ministry of Education. See Alain Gresh “Paroles libérées en Arabie Saoudite”, *Le Monde Diplomatique (Manière de voir)*, 68, “Femmes rebelles”, April-May 2003, pp. 80-84.

At that time, women gradually appropriated the Islamic rhetoric that in contemporary Saudi Arabia has been mainly developed by men. In particular, a handful of intellectuals, most of whom had received some education abroad, became well known for their Islamic learning. These included Fatima Naseef, a graduate in history and *shari'a* from the University of King Abd al-Aziz in Jeddah and the University of Umm al-Qura, who is said to have travelled to Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet *jihad*;<sup>18</sup> Suhayla Zayn Al-'Abidin Hammad, a graduate in Islamic history from Al-Azhar University; and Nura Al-Sa'ad, who received a Master's degree in sociology in the United States and then a doctorate from the University of Imam Muhammad ibn Su'ud on the basis of a sociological analysis of the writings of the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi. Starting in the 1980s, these three female intellectuals wrote newspaper articles and books, including some dealing with the issue of women's rights in Islam (though these did not break in any significant way with the interpretations advanced by the Kingdom's *ulema*).<sup>19</sup> In the Kingdom's Eastern Province, the *intifada* of 1979 saw the emergence within the Shi'ite movement of a large number of female activists, some of whom went on to study in Iran.<sup>20</sup> These female Islamist graduates expressed opposed those women who demanded the right to drive cars or criticized physical segregation by sex, referring to them as "supporters of women's liberation", a strongly perjorative expression in religious circles.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning in the 1990s, this movement spread beyond the confines of the intellectual sphere,<sup>22</sup> as the growing number of young female graduates of Islamic universities sought to spread their religious knowledge. With B.A., Master's degrees or Ph.Ds in *shari'a* (Islamic) law – the academic structure of these universities followed the American model – they were recognized as preachers and acquired a degree of religious authority among women. Gradually, some of them developed their own female religious institutions.

---

<sup>18</sup> Amal Zahid, (in Arabic) "Female Saudi Preachers", *Al-Majalla*, 1339, 2005, pp 24-32.

<sup>19</sup> Fatima Naseef, *Droits et devoirs de la femme en Islam à la lumière du Coran et de la Sunna* (translated from Arabic) Lyon: Tawhid, 2005 (adapted from the author's doctoral thesis at Umm Al-Qura University). Suhayla Zayn Al-'Abidin has also published numerous books on the subject in Arabic, three of which were published in Jeddah by Al-Dar Al-Su'udiyya li-l Nashr wa'l- Tawzi': *Whither the Saudi woman?* 1982; *Woman between excess and neglect*, 1983; and *The Role of the Muslim Woman in our Present Circumstances*, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> On the *intifada* of 1979, the Shi'ite rising in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, see Laurence Louër, *Chiisme et politique au Moyen-Orient: Iran, Irak, Liban, monarchies du Golfe*, Paris: Autrement, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Suhayla Zayn Al-'Abidin was particularly trenchant. The debates that took place between Saudi female intellectuals in the 1980s are described in Saddeka Arebi, *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: the Politics of Literary Discourse*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Mai Yamani discusses this phenomenon in her paper "Some Observations on Women in Saudi Arabia" in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, London: Ithaca Press, 1996, pp. 263-281.

## *A Quasi-Autonomous Platform for the Expression of Religious Discourse*

The physical segregation of female and male institutions has been conducive to the development of a specific religious discourse produced by and for women. Ever since they were first created in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, university campuses for women have been separate and at a distance from male campuses. Some female religious venues were branches of pre-existing masculine institutions. This was the case, for instance, with WAMY (World Association for Muslim Youth), which in 1990 became the first religious institution to open a women's section, first in Jeddah and then in Riyadh. Others were the Mecca Foundation (*Mu'assasat Makka*) and the Foundation for Construction and Development (*Mu'assasat al-I'mar wa-l-Tanmiyya*), which opened a women's section almost at the same time as its men's section was opened in the late 1990s. Though these sections were not organizationally independent of the men's foundations, their physical separation and the fact that they were run by women who never met their male counterparts resulted in relative operational autonomy. In practical terms, this meant that lectures and prayers held at these institutions were led by women. These women's sections offered a wide range of activities, ranging from Qur'an memorization courses to lectures on personal development, English and make-up and dress-making. More recently, two women preachers in Riyadh have founded their own religious centers. Asma' Al-Ruwayshid created the "Asyeh Centre" and Rugayya al-Maharib established "Laha Online".

Female religious spaces have provided an opportunity for single-sex social relations to develop in an urban context where few locations are accessible to women, particularly in Riyadh. They are also a vehicle for individual commitment, as distinct from family responsibilities. Religious gatherings, organized by groups of women in each other's houses, in turn provide legitimate occasions for women to leave their family homes. This is not so prevalent in Riyadh, where many young women, especially those who are single or divorced and live with their parents, are not permitted by family members to visit female friends at their houses.<sup>23</sup> The possibility of entering different spaces permits a degree of autonomy to women in relation to their family obligations. Social relations in these spaces are more elective and friendly and are based on affinities along lines of religious engagement. Though custom holds that a woman should prioritize her role as wife and mother, the activities promoted in these spaces are not directed towards the family. As the preacher Asma' Al-Ruwayshid stated: a woman "should take part in voluntary activity in charitable and social works, in the promotion of social progress and development in a female environment and in

---

<sup>23</sup> This prohibition, intended to "protect" young women, is justified in various ways. It is sometimes derived from a principle practiced by their extended families to protect the reputation of the girls of the family, something especially important in what concerns marriage. On the other hand, the private space of strangers is also perceived as dangerous.

the alleviation of specific problems that face women.”<sup>24</sup> Some of the women who participate in these groups seek to apply a maximalist interpretation of the precepts of Islam in every detail of their daily lives.<sup>25</sup> Such women refer to themselves as *multazimat* -- literally, the “committed” -- in order to distinguish themselves from the majority of women, who do not rigorously observe religious principle in all aspects of their lives. Not all women who frequent religious institutions describe themselves in this way. When questioned, some explained that they made compromises in their daily lives with what they took to be the precepts of Islam -- not being able, for example, to restrain themselves from watching music videos on television. Outside such institutions, many Saudi women watch such videos and do not regard them as contrary to Islam.

In parallel with the proliferation of female religious institutions, new space has opened up in the media for the expression of a religious discourse by and for women, especially through the medium of Islamic women’s magazines such as *Majallat Al-Usra* (The Family Magazine), which was founded in 1992. Since 2000, the number of magazines and online religious sites, often aimed at the young, has multiplied.<sup>26</sup> These publications are marketed inside female religious institutions (Qur’an memorisation centers and religious foundations, for example) and at the religious stalls of women’s university campuses and elsewhere.

The discourse developed by and for women differs from masculine religious discourse to the extent that it focuses on themes specifically concerning them. For instance, the “Letters to the Editor” rubric in the magazine *Hayat* offers an explanation aimed at 15-25 year old women of how to claim their rights. The Asyeh center holds a weekly meeting for divorced women to inform them of their rights and how to defend them, especially as regards the care of children and the payment of alimony. A number of articles in *Hayat* have dealt from a practical point of view with the issue of paid work for women -- for example, giving readers information about professions in which employing women is far from generally accepted.<sup>27</sup> Finally, these religious venues are characterized by the opportunity they give women to talk about themselves in the context of classes on personal development and through advice services and psychological and educational counseling. In *Hayat* a number of sections within

---

<sup>24</sup> Asma’ Al-Ruwayshid, “The Culture of Voluntary Work and the Role of Saudi Women” (in Arabic), a pamphlet sold by the Asyeh Centre, Riyadh: 2007.

<sup>25</sup> For example, they insist that one must not listen to music and that a full covering (the *abaya*) be worn. This does not preclude them from having social and/or professional commitments.

<sup>26</sup> See especially the sites [www.asyeh.com](http://www.asyeh.com) and [www.lahaonline.com](http://www.lahaonline.com). A further magazine, *Al-Mutamayyiza* (“The Distinguished Woman”), was founded in 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Examples of such professions : the profession of dentist (see *Hayat*, 82, March 2007, pp 56-57); occupations referred to as “simple” whose exercise by Saudi women is often badly regarded, such as that of salesgirl (ibid. pp 20-25); studies at technical colleges (*Hayat*, 85, June 2007, pp. 46-48); or small businesses run from home (ibid., pp. 18-23).

the paper invite readers to talk about their personal problems, not excluding issues regarded as shameful.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, it is graduates in religious subjects who have taken the initiative in developing a religious sphere by and for women.<sup>29</sup> This sphere does not in general present a challenge to male religious institutions. Nevertheless, the development of relatively autonomous religious spaces for women enlarges the range of possibilities in terms of women's activities.

### **The Assertion of “Woman’s Rights in Islam”: Legal Rhetoric in Political Context**

Since the events of 11 September 2001, and especially since the developments that have since 2003 plunged Saudi Arabia into a deadly struggle between the security forces and supposed “deviants”,<sup>30</sup> the theme of the rights of woman in Islam has been an authorized and even prescribed subject for discussion. It fits nicely into official discourse of the struggle against “terrorism” and the promotion of the “reform” of a “religion of moderation”, “tolerance” and the “balanced middle”. This discourse is intended, not only for Washington –which has pushed a Greater Middle East project that includes proposals concerning the status of women, but is also the national population. The terms “nation”, “reform”, “human rights” and “the rights of women in Islam” have persistently featured in the rhetoric deployed by the government since 2003. Intellectuals, Islamist and “liberal” alike, have been invited to discuss “the rights of women” and the “role of women in society” before various institutions, including the Consultative Council (an assembly established in 1991 whose members are chosen by the government)<sup>31</sup> and the National Association for Human Rights (set up with the government’s blessing in 2004). A “national dialogue”<sup>32</sup> concerning women, which extended over four sessions, including one devoted to “women’s rights and duties”, took place in Medina in June 2004.<sup>33</sup> Papers presented at this dialogue dealt with such themes as the

---

<sup>28</sup> See for example the contribution of a reader under the heading “My girl friend and I are on the way to deviance” (in relation to an attraction that was going beyond the bounds of friendship), *Hayat*, 100. August 2008, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> The fact that the initiative comes from graduates in religious subjects was confirmed in interviews with male and female preachers, including Fawz Kurdi, a woman university professor and preacher resident in Jeddah (interview undertaken in April 2006), and Salman Al-’Awdah, a former opposition figure and leading preacher (interview in April 2007).

<sup>30</sup> The term used in official Saudi propaganda. See, for example, the discussion of “young deviants” in the manual, (obligatory in the universities), “Islam and the Building of Society” [provide original Arabic title here], essays, Riyadh: Maktabat Al-Rushd, 2005, pp. 63-65.

<sup>31</sup> In regard to the choice of intellectuals as “advisers of the Consultative Council” see *The Christian Science Monitor*, 12 January 2004, and *Arab News*, 29 June 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Steffen Hertog, “Building the Body Politic: The Emerging Corporatism in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf”, *Chroniques Yéménites*, 2004 (12), pp. 103-118.

<sup>33</sup> The three other sessions concerned women at work, women in education and women in society (the title of which might be read as implying that women were not already part of society).



rights and duties of women in Islam and “family violence”.<sup>34</sup> The intention of such governmental initiatives, which continue to this day, is to affirm the existence of a “moderate” Islam as a national unifying factor and thereby allow religious “deviants” to be sidelined. They contribute to the circulation of a legal rhetoric affirming women’s rights in Islam, the content of which varies according to who is promoting it.

Renowned preachers critical of the regime in the 1990s, such as Salman Al-‘Awda, have begun to contribute to the discourse of religious “moderation”. They often lecture to women in the universities and elsewhere,<sup>35</sup> where they have had much success. The female intellectual Suhayla Zayn Al ‘Abidin Hammad, renowned in the 1980s for her biting criticisms of “liberal” writings in the periodical *Al-Muslim*, a publication with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, has begun to take part in public forums as a defender of women’s rights and member of the National Association for Human Rights. The objective of this institution is to help battered women and struggle against “domestic violence” (*al-‘unf al-usari*). At the same time, various “liberal” intellectuals, including Hatun Al-Fasi,<sup>36</sup> a high profile media figure, in 2004 -2005 started to demand that women be given the right to vote in municipal elections.<sup>37</sup> Like those who had demanded that the right to drive a car be extended to women in the 1990s, this group of intellectuals drew on the Qur’an and the Sunna to support their arguments.<sup>38</sup> Both initiatives have been criticized by some female preachers and Islamist intellectuals.<sup>39</sup>

Women preachers themselves took up the rhetoric of “the rights of the woman in Islam” with some ambivalence. It should first of all be said that, in the twin contexts of official discourse concerning the “rights of women in Islam” and the supervision of religious activities, women preachers have come under tighter control by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs even as they have gained greater recognition. . Since 2004, a degree of official recognition has been achieved in the form of a forum for female preachers that is held twice a year in Jedda. In addition, a pamphlet published by the Ministry in 2006 that was explicitly addressed to what it termed “the woman preacher” explains how to preach in favor of “moderation” and “love of

---

<sup>34</sup> The list of participants and the papers given may be found at [www.kacad.org/third\\_national\\_meeting.asp](http://www.kacad.org/third_national_meeting.asp) (consulted on 18 January 2009). See also Amélie Le Renard “Only for Women: The State and Reform in Saudi Arabia”, *Middle East Journal*, Autumn 2008, pp. 610-629.

<sup>35</sup> Lectures are relayed by video link from the male campus to the female campus.

<sup>36</sup> A historian, she militated for Saudi women’s rights in her newspaper articles. In particular she demanded that women be given the right to vote in municipal elections and, in 2006, criticized the plan to distance the space reserved for women in the Grand Mosque from the *kaaba*. See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/74780254/Women-s-Rights-in-the-Middle-East-North-Africa-2009-Gulf-Edition-p.99> (consulted 29 January 2012)

<sup>37</sup> In the municipal elections, held over three phases in 2004-2005, Saudi men were asked to elect half of all municipal councilors, with the other half consisting of appointees. Political parties are banned and the powers of municipal councilors are strictly limited

<sup>38</sup> See Eleanor A. Doumato, “Gender, Monarchy and National Identity in Saudi Arabia”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19 (1), 1992, pp. 31-47; and, by the same author, “Women and the Stability of Saudi Arabia”, *Middle East Report*, 171, July-August 1991, pp. 34-37.

<sup>39</sup> For example, 500 women signed a petition against the authorization of women to drive. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 December 2005.

one's country"<sup>40</sup> while steering clear of both "westernization" and "religious extremism". The Ministry has also planned to make female preachers salaried employees, who would then become civil servants,<sup>41</sup> a move symptomatic of the state's desire to exert tighter control in this field.

With only one exception,<sup>42</sup> the manner in which Islamist female intellectuals and preachers have defined the rights of women in Islam does not run counter to the *fatwas* of the Council of Senior *ulema*. Their discourse is not directed against the official religious institution but rather against what is referred to as the "western" view of women's rights, on the one hand, and non-Islamic "customs", on the other. For example, in an article first published on her web site,<sup>43</sup> the well-known preacher Rugayya Al-Maharib<sup>44</sup> advocated that women should "close ranks" against the infiltration of western ideas and condemned "the failure to emphasize collective action, the lack of practice in working together, the tendency to cling to old ways of doing things and the fear of new ideas."<sup>45</sup> In her view, there should be mobilization reflecting that of "western feminism" precisely in order to fend off the latter's influence over Saudi women. "The rights of women are protected in the *shari'a* and we have no need of pacts formulated in different social circumstances;<sup>46</sup> we have no need of western organizations to defend the rights of the Muslim woman; and since when have these organizations defended our rights?"<sup>47</sup> In another article, the preacher suggested that, if the "partisans of westernization" were not to be alone among activists opposing what she called the "desperation of reality", the social and economic problems faced by women must first be recognized. "We must put an end to the view of women as inferior beings: the theft of her property is against religion; to prevent her from marrying is a crime; to make her marry against her will is shameful."<sup>48</sup> No consensus exists on what should be included in these rights and some women preachers have adopted very conservative positions -- for example,

---

<sup>40</sup> The pamphlet was based on a lecture organized by the Ministry for Islamic Affairs. See Salih ibn 'Abd Al-'Aziz ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al-Shaykh, *The Female Preacher and the Various Styles of Religious Discourse* [provide original Arabic title in brackets here], Riyadh: Ministry of Islamic Affairs, King Fahd National Library, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Najah Alosaimi, "Guiding All to the Straight and Narrow", *Arab News*, 24 August 2008. ([www.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=113279](http://www.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=113279))

<sup>42</sup> In 2006, Suhayla Zayn Al 'Abidin Hammad used the media to condemn new legal definitions of marriage issued by certain *ulema*. She described what is known as a "distance marriage" (*nikah misyar*) (much less onerous for men) as a "hoax concealed in the guise of the *shari'a*". See: Suhayla Zayn Al 'Abidin Hammad *The Journey of Saudi Women: Where To?* [supply original Arabic title in brackets here] Beirut: Mu'assasat Al-Rayyan li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2003, vol. 2 p. 91. She also supported women's right to vote in municipal elections as well as their role as representatives and religious scholars specializing in women's questions.

<sup>43</sup> [www.lahaonline.com](http://www.lahaonline.com)

<sup>44</sup> She appears to have followed the teaching of the late *mufti* of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Ibn Baz, who passed away in 1999.

<sup>45</sup> [www.saaaid.net/daeyat/roqea/51.htm](http://www.saaaid.net/daeyat/roqea/51.htm) (consulted 12 May 2008)

<sup>46</sup> Rugayya Al-Maharib was referring to Saudi Arabia's 2000 ratification of the UN Human Rights Commission's "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" (CEDAW), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly as resolution 34/180 on 18 December 1979 and came into force on 3 September 1981.

<sup>47</sup> [www.saaaid.net/female/m23.htm](http://www.saaaid.net/female/m23.htm) (consulted 12 May 2008)

<sup>48</sup> [www.saaaid.net/female/m23.htm](http://www.saaaid.net/female/m23.htm) (consulted 12 May 2008)

in regards to restrictions on the range of professions open to women or the duty of a woman to obey her husband -- while at the same time speaking elsewhere of “women’s rights in Islam”.

Female preachers have thus prioritized the fight for the Islamization of female society and the protection of “Islamic values”. The affirmation of women’s rights in Islam is meant to advance these objectives. In this process, various female Islamist intellectuals criticize, not so much the religious institution of the state, as the government’s pro-American inclinations and what they regard as the instrumentalization of the “woman question” since 11 September 2001. The fact remains, however, that the discourse of female Islamist intellectuals, like that of the liberals, reinforces a specific way of thinking , about the difficulties and restrictions facing Saudi women, which are represented as “customary practices” opposed to “Islam” . As such, it is part and parcel of the ongoing discourse of regime legitimization, which has from the outset criticized so-called “tribal customs” in contrast to Islam, which is presented as a source of unity.

### **The Circulation and Appropriation of “the Rights of Women in Islam”**

What needs to be examined is how the rhetoric of “women’s rights in Islam” circulates at various levels. The young women I interviewed in Riyadh -- all of whom were in their twenties and were either students, employed or seeking employment -- made repeated appeal to two justificatory discourses: that of the affirmation of women’s rights in Islam (in contrast to “customary practices”) and that of self-realization as a life objective. For these young women, this normative posture constitutes a response to their particular situations. In what follows, I will attempt to show how these normative appeals are used in a context of economic liberalization to legitimize urban lifestyles characterized by greater mobility, emergent physical spaces and the development of a broader, more elective form of sociability.

In contrast to the female Islamist intellectuals who challenge “liberal” arguments, young women who adopt the discourse of the “rights of women in Islam” do not do so in the sense of opposition to “westernization”; rather, they do so in order to draw a distinction between Islam and non-Islamic “customs and traditions”. Their strategy is to distinguish, given the restrictions that are imposed on them, those that derive from religion and those based on “customary practices”. It should be noted that the content of these two categories is not fixed and varies depending on the interlocutor. These young women also affirm their “right” to study, to work or engage in other activities, their “duty” to serve society (by, for example, teaching and transmitting their knowledge in the case of educated women) and their “right” to refuse to marry an unacceptable suitor. In their daily lives, they are more often affected by family interdictions relating to the idea of reputation than the state-imposed restrictions that

reflect the articulation between state and family in the Saudi context.<sup>49</sup> For example, they are subject to the authority of their legal guardian for permission to study, work, travel or marry.<sup>50</sup> In preference to collective disobedience to the law, which some regard as religiously grounded, they negotiate the issue of rights within their immediate circle in the course of day-to-day interactions, deploying a legal rhetoric that opposes the precepts of Islam to “customs and traditions”. In doing so, they appropriate a discourse promoted by the government itself and that circulates among Islamists and liberals. Such appropriation is made possible by their level of education, which is higher than that of their mothers. In a context in which it is better not to draw attention to oneself or differentiate oneself from others by what is seen as abnormal behavior, some young women still succeed after lengthy negotiation in persuading their family members that conformity to various Islamic principles (on the basis of scriptural evidence) is today preferable to observance of what are dismissed as “out-dated” traditions. One 24 year old secretary, who is divorced and works in a charitable organization, explained her split with her parents, whom she described as “ignorant” and “behind the times” as follows: “My parents ... are conservatives but not religious.... All the time, they just say, ‘this is shameful’ (i.e that it is ‘*ayb*). I say to my father, ‘don’t tell me things are shameful; tell me what is permitted (*halal*) in Islam and what is forbidden (*haram*).’ For instance they say, ‘You’re divorced: don’t put on make-up.’<sup>51</sup> I tell them it isn’t ‘*ayb*: maybe people used to say that, but nowadays we are in a different society.”

This informant underscores the distinction between religious interdiction, *haram*, and social prohibition, ‘*ayb*, which stems, according to her, from the “old-fashionedness” of society and, in this instance, that of her own parents, with whom she is in conflict. It is in these terms that she has negotiated her right to work with them, an extra-familial activity that she sees as a daily breath of fresh air and escape from a family context to which she was obliged to return after an unhappy marriage. By relying on Islam as a point of normative reference, she was able to defend her right to work and adjust her appearance as she wished, even though this might not “be done” among divorced women according to her parents’ frame of reference, one based on the concepts of honor, reputation and respectability. Her discourse stigmatizes what is old, or customary, and insists on the need for conformity with Islam, in her account the benchmark of modernity.<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that the substance of these so-called

---

<sup>49</sup> Amélie Le Renard, *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite*, Paris: Dalloz, 2011. For a summary of works dealing with the linkage between state and family in the Arab world, see Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Genre et politique” in Elizabeth Picard (ed.) *La politique dans le monde arabe*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2006, pp. 127-147.

<sup>50</sup> The legal guardian may be a woman’s father, brother, husband or uncle.

<sup>51</sup> She refers here to the issue of wearing make-up in women’s company or in front of the men of her family since, in common with the majority of women in Riyadh, she covers her face in front of men who are not members of her family.

<sup>52</sup> As Nilüfer Göle has pointed out in regards to a different national context. See *The Forbidden Modern*, op. cit.

“customs and traditions” is as much a matter of representation or reinvention of the past in the context of the modern urban situation as it is one of historical reality.

Another young woman who was interviewed -- an unmarried, 25 year old graduate and director of the women’s section at a private training center -- also applied this distinction to rationalize the boundaries imposed on the activities of Saudi women: “I have no difficulty with the application of religious precepts but I do have a difficulty with customary practices. The religion of Islam is suitable for every generation. But here in the Kingdom, the problem is that we have mixed up customs with religion. Everyone believes that these customs and traditions are part of the faith. We grow up with this way of understanding things, even though it is wrong.... For example [it is believed] that mingling between the sexes is prohibited by religion. In fact, mingling is forbidden in Islam only if I don’t respect the rules of modesty. If I find myself in an enclosed space outside work with a man and I am not modest and reserved, that is what is forbidden by religion. But it is not forbidden for me simply to remain with a man.... Among these customs and traditions, there is also the idea that a woman does not argue with anything and that she does not express her point of view.... Certainly, there are today many changes relating to customs: change in Saudi society is something very rapid.”

This type of appropriation of official religious discourse -- applying Islam and expunging from it the influence of “customary practices” -- was widespread among my informants. The excerpt cited above is indicative of the tendency to employ Islamic discourse to legitimize change and new lifestyles for women, either in the form of salaried employment in an environment where women and men are relatively mixed or in that of academic pursuits. The remarks of the second interviewee quoted above echo the way in which the government itself has since 2004 chosen to legitimize increased flexibility in the application of rules governing the mingling of the sexes in order to promote the employment of women in the private sector.

The appropriation of religious discourse by young women thus allows them to legitimize their presence in new spaces, enlarge the field of possibilities available to them and develop new activities. It also contributes to the propagation of a particular way of conceiving of the country and society’s history according to which the difficulties encountered by women are the result of reinvented “traditions”, which are identified with “backwardness”, as opposed to Islam, which is seen as “a religion of moderation” compatible with their ambitions. These arguments form part of a dominant discourse according to which the obstacles and obstructionism observed in contemporary society are no more than relics of the past. This version of history is one that is all the more salient among young women who see themselves as “committed to religion” -- that is, women for whom the contemporary rights

enjoyed by women are the result of an “Islamic awakening” that broke with the oppression experienced by preceding generations, who were “ignorant” of the precepts of Islam.

### **Islamic Personal Development and the Legitimization of Individual Ambition**

Though not directly connected to women’s “rights”, the narrative of personal development also contributes to the range of possibilities available to women, inaugurating new models and norms of existence and engendering widespread enthusiasm, at least among the urban young women I interviewed as part of my research. In the course of these interviews, the desire to study or work was often justified in terms of the need for self-fulfillment and -realization.<sup>53</sup> These ideas, however, are particularly widespread within religious institutions. While the theme of women’s rights is seen as a political issue and is handled by the press and in cyberspace as expressing support for or opposition to official institutions, the discourse of Islamic personal development is regarded as non-political and is the subject matter of lectures and training courses. A religious foundation, the “Ibn Baz Project for the Promotion of Marriage among the Young,”<sup>54</sup> organizes free lectures in Riyadh on the theme of personal development several times a month. These lectures are given by graduates in religious studies and/or psychology and are solely intended for women. Held at small venues and attended by hundreds of women of all ages and social origins, these lectures are so popular that some of those who attend them are obliged to sit on the floor in the aisles. At the end of each session, which normally lasts for about four hours, each woman is given a certificate. The lectures cover such subjects as self-knowledge (“Would you like to know more about yourself and know yourself better?”),<sup>55</sup> the development of personal abilities -- (“self-confidence”, for example, presented as a matter of emulating “those who have achieved success”)<sup>56</sup> and relationships and inter-personal communication, especially in the family and workplace (e.g., “the art of family conversation”, “conjugal happiness” and so on)..

In women’s Qur’an centers, Islamic personal development is especially oriented towards the “Young Woman of Today,”<sup>57</sup> with lectures on such topics as “How to be a positive woman”, (Mecca Foundation, Riyadh, 2007) and “How to live a life without sadness” (Dar Al-Sumu,

---

<sup>53</sup> This theme has been discussed in other contexts by Fariba Adelhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; and Patrick Haenni, *L’islam de marché: l’autre révolution conservatrice*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> This foundation, established by relatives of Ibn Baz, offers among other things low interest loans, marriage counseling and lectures.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted from a poster advertising a course in personal development intended for young women at the “Dar Al-Sumu”.

<sup>56</sup> This message, received by a female subscriber to a women’s SMS network, seems typical of such off-the-peg techniques for the development of potential and success in life. Here, such successful persons are described thus: “They seek alternative routes and solutions and are not satisfied with a single way forward; they have strength of will and are decisive; they have clear objectives which they aim to achieve; they ignore the negative remarks of others; they do not fear failure; they do not accept routine; they take the initiative and are enthusiastic.... These qualities, which everyone can achieve, are those of the truly creative.”

<sup>57</sup> The title of a lecture given at Dar Al-Sumu.

Riyadh, 2007). Meetings intended for “young women only” are given by the most celebrated women preachers, who explain on the basis of their own experience how to achieve a reputation as a preacher and become a woman of accomplishment. This discourse mixes American style self-help with references to the Qur’an and the personality of the Prophet, who represents the ideal of someone who has achieved success and has been able to develop his full potential, qualities and abilities. In the lecture on “How to be a positive woman”, the preacher referred to the fact that, like the Prophet, she had a strong personality and was confident and heedless of the criticism of others. She also stressed the necessity of knowing the Qur’an by heart and applying all of the rules of Islam. Similarly, Sheikh ‘A’idh Al-Qarni’s latest best-selling book, entitled “Be the Happiest Woman in the World,”<sup>58</sup> juxtaposes quotations from the Prophet with references to “American psychologists”. It should be noted that translations of best-selling American self-help books sell very well and that young women do not necessarily make a distinction between what is Islamic and what is not in writings on this subject. The lectures on Islamic personal development run by the Ibn Baz project attract many psychology students who regard the certificate delivered at the end of the course as a useful qualification for future employment in hospitals or charitable associations. Despite their obviously American inspiration and the claims of certain feminists, these ideas are not seen by female Islamists as a Trojan horse for western hegemony.

Though female preachers insist that women’s role within their families takes precedence and part of the advice they offer relates to the maintenance of harmonious family relationships, they also promote a degree of individualism, something they nevertheless condemn when speaking of women’s rights in Islam. Individualism in that context is seen as “western” and subject to accusations of breaking up the family. Yet, though their position is therefore ambivalent, these two narratives are not necessarily incompatible, as they are deployed in different contexts and addressed to different audiences. One is intended to help women in their everyday lives and in their religious, social and professional commitments while the other is brought forward in opposition to “advocates of westernization”.

The enthusiasm with which Islamic personal development is embraced by Saudi women accompanies and legitimates their increasing prominence in the professional world, as they are encouraged to regard themselves as individuals in search of success and self-fulfillment.<sup>59</sup> The ideology of personal development enables such women to justify and prioritize activities they perceive as necessary to fulfillment, whether in relation to

---

<sup>58</sup> ‘A’idh Al-Qarni, *The Happiest Woman in the World*, Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005 (translated from the Arabic).

<sup>59</sup> One slogan constantly repeated during the course in “Self-Confidence”, for example, is “Each of us is a unique and independent individual”.

engagement in professional or associative activity or the development of friendships and leisure activities. Many informants mentioned their “need” to work in order to achieve fulfillment and some referred to their desire “to become an exceptional person” through their professional career, writing or the development of some project of their own. They often formulated their life-story in terms appropriate to the discourse of self-help: depression, followed by maturity and then self-fulfillment. Some of those who were engaged in salaried work indicated that courses in personal development represented one of their principal items of expenditure.

The discourse of personal development has ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, it holds out the promise of the pursuit of personal objectives and therefore accompanies and legitimates an enlargement of the possible range of activities for women outside the family; on the other hand, it implies that individuals are responsible for what happens to them and presents the resolution of problems as reducible to some kind of explanation couched in vaguely psychological terms rather than dependent on the condemnation of social injustice. For example, the lecturer who spoke of “The Art of Family Dialogue” asserted in the course of her lecture that, “women don’t fight: if a woman did fight she would get what she wants.” Such exhortations encourage women to have greater confidence in themselves in the face of the obstacles they encounter on an individual basis. However, since this discourse implies that conditions very much depend on the disciplined subjectivity of the individual, it also has the effect of devaluing broader concerns and undermining collective mobilizations aimed at greater observance of women’s rights or even the revision of the texts relating to their status. In this respect, the works of ‘A’idh Al-Qarni<sup>60</sup> go further, since they convey the message that each person should be content with what they have, as happiness -- henceforth, the key value -- is simply a matter of will-power.

Nevertheless, in the circumstances experienced by my young informants, enthusiasm for personal development does not seem to express in the terms of resignation. Rather, in a context of rapid economic change, it is reflected in a desire to adopt a way of life based on personal fulfillment and guaranteed by expanded freedom of choice in women’s activities, mobility and modes of consumption. By promoting this discourse, they participate in the production of new lifestyles: in fact, the discourse of personal development is vehicle of an exhortation to master one’s life and to rationalize one’s emotions by means of the application of techniques (“How to achieve self-confidence”) that are simultaneously objects of consumption (e.g., self-help books and training courses).<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> ‘A’idh Al-Qarni, *The Happiest Woman in the World*, op.. cit.; *Don’t Be Sad*, Riyadh, International Islamic Publishing House, 2005 [insert original titles in brackets here]

<sup>61</sup> See Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, London: Polity Press, 2007.



In the context of contemporary Saudi Arabia, the various ways in which religion is appropriated by women are more a means of negotiating family authority than of opposing the official religious institution.<sup>62</sup> In this way, young women contribute to the homogenization of behavior and the reaffirmation of Islamic normative references as distinct from customary practices. Because they contribute to transforming the interrelations between legal and religious power, on the one hand, and family authority, on the other, women's appropriation of religion today plays an active part in the construction of the Saudi state.

Beyond promoting a rhetoric that addresses women's issues in terms of Islamic rights, female religious institutions serve as a platform for a discourse of personal development that contributes to changing power relations between women and their family members via the construction of alternative subjectivities and ways for women to imagine their positions and roles in society. This is ethic that can also validate a woman's pursuit of her career or at least of her personal goals. It plays an indirect role in reinforcing the dedication and discipline of young women as employees in Saudi Arabia's expanding private sector, since wage labor is seen as a source of personal fulfillment and a means for emancipating themselves from family authority, whatever form it may take. At the same time, it encourages the emergence of discussion groups and individual advice sessions as a way of dealing with private feelings and problems as the object of shared analysis. It thus contributes to rendering public what were hitherto private problems. In contrast to the discussions encouraged by the feminist movement, however, these examinations of private life do not seek to expose injustice but are rather designed as a form of therapy, the ultimate goal of which is the promotion of "personal" success.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, this sketch of the manner in which Saudi women have appropriated religion should not obscure the fact that many other practices that contribute to the extension of the boundaries of what is possible for women do not draw upon religion (though they may not be opposed to it for all that). The achievement of expanded autonomy, miniscule though it may be, has been the result of a multiplicity of negotiations, subversions and transgressions. In this context, religion is but one resource among others.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Most women nonetheless maintain their distance from the official interpretation of religious precepts.

<sup>63</sup> On the ways in which therapeutic and managerial discourse have been adopted by "popular culture", see Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, op. cit.

<sup>64</sup> My thanks are due to Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, Nabil Mouline, Abir Krefa and Amin Allal for their comments on previous versions of this article. However, I alone am responsible for the ideas expressed here.

Amélie Le Renard is a permanent researcher in sociology at CNRS (Centre Maurice Halbwachs, Paris). She has published *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite* (Paris : Dalloz, 2011), a monograph adapted from her PhD dissertation, as well as “From Qur’anic Circles to the Internet: Gender Segregation and the Rise of Female Preachers in Saudi Arabia”, in Hillary Kalmbach and Masooda Bano (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, pp. 105-126; and “Only for Women: Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* (Autumn 2008, pp. 610-629).

Email address: [amelie.lerenard@gmail.com](mailto:amelie.lerenard@gmail.com)