



# The private is political: Women and family in intellectual Islam

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## Abstract

In Hiba Ra'uf's *Woman and Political Work*, she argues that the family is the basic political unit of the Islamic community or nation (the umma). Her thesis is both feminist and Islamist, as she argues that the 'private is political'. By drawing analogies between family and umma, family and caliphate, the personal and the political, the private and public, Ra'uf seeks to dismantle the oppositions of secular society, to challenge the division of society into discrete spheres. This entails an implicit challenge to the secular state, but effected through the politics of the family. An Islamic family, she argues, is a powerful site for the transformation of socio-political institutions; a politics of the microcosmic with macrocosmic ramifications, effected through the very embodiment and practice of an Islamic ethos at a grassroots, capillary level. However, though Ra'uf contests liberal secularism's division of spheres with feminist and Islamist critical methods, she reproduces some of its fundamental assumptions about the nature of the family: as the domain of religion, in opposition to the secular state; as rooting community, in opposition to the individualism of the citizen; as an ethics grounded in affect; and as an essentially feminine world. In making the family the sphere of Islamic politics, Ra'uf re-enacts secularism's division of spheres, sacralizing the affective bonds of intimate relations and making the family the domain of religion. Furthermore, by emphasizing the family as the domain of women's political work, she reinscribes the family as a feminine sphere, so that woman's vocation is familial, as is her ethical disposition.

## Keywords

Islam, Islamic awakening, Islamic feminism, Islamic revival, liberalism, personal status laws, Hiba Ra'uf, secularism

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In the introduction to Hiba Ra'uf's *Al-Mar'a wa al-'Amal al-Siyasi: Ru'ya Islamiya* (1995) – which translates as *Woman and Political Work: An Islamic Perspective* – Tariq al-Bishri, a leading thinker associated with the Islamic revival, describes Ra'uf as a promising scholar of the 'arising' [*nahid*] generation. She is one of the 'stimulants of catalytic change', he writes, 'working to bring about an awakening [*nahda*] of Islamic knowledge' (1995: 16, 29).<sup>1</sup> Ra'uf has had a visible presence in international conferences, public debates, and the Islamic press. She has presented at international conferences, most notably on the subjects of democracy in Egypt and of women's rights and equality in Islam; participated in a dialogue held between Islamists and secularists in 1994; and edited the women's page of the Muslim Brotherhood newspaper *al-Sha'b* until it was shut down in 1997 (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1998; Ra'uf, 1994: 26; Ra'uf et al., 2003). *Woman and Political Work* makes extensive references to foundational texts in Islamic jurisprudence, contemporary Islamic theorizations of gender and the family, Western feminism, and political science works in both English and Arabic. It draws extensively on the Islamic scriptural tradition and Islamic scholarship, both classical and modern. *Woman and Political Work* is part of a growing body of literature, both popular and scholarly, interpreting Islam – and specifically gender relations in Islam – for contemporary audiences.

In *Woman and Political Work*, Ra'uf's argument is that the family is the basic political unit of the Islamic community or nation (the umma). This is both feminist and Islamist, as she argues that the 'private is political' (1994: 27). By drawing analogies between family and umma, family and caliphate, the personal and the political, the private and public, Ra'uf seeks to dismantle the oppositions of secular society, to challenge the 'increasing division of society into discrete spheres' (Mahmood, 2005: 47).<sup>2</sup> Even though this includes a challenge to the secular state, she, along with other activists in the Islamic revival, mainly aims 'to imbue each of the various spheres of contemporary life with a regulative sensibility that takes its cue from the Islamic theological corpus rather than from modern secular ethics' (Mahmood, 2005: 47). An Islamic family, she argues, is a powerful site for the transformation of socio-political institutions; it is a politics of the microcosmic with macrocosmic ramifications, effected through the very embodiment and practice of an Islamic ethos at a grassroots, capillary level. Even as Ra'uf contests liberal secularism's division of spheres with feminist and Islamist critical methods, she reproduces some of its fundamental assumptions about the nature of the family: as the domain of religion, in opposition to the secular state; as rooting community, in opposition to the individualism of the citizen; as an ethics grounded in affect; and as an essentially feminine world. In making the family the sphere of Islamic politics, Ra'uf re-enacts secularism's division of spheres, sacralizing the affective bonds of intimate relations and making the family the domain of religion. Furthermore, by emphasizing the family as the domain of women's political work, she reinscribes the family as a feminine sphere, so that woman 'has her substantial vocation in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in this piety' (Brown, 1995: 147).

Ra'uf's work can be situated in a body of revivalist writings that have used increasingly liberal language of women's emancipation in Islam, human rights in Islam, and equality in Islam. This is partly due to the political conditions of the Islamic opposition in Egypt, whose efforts at grassroots mobilization have been concentrated in social institutions associated with a 'civil Islam', since the movement has been largely denied the opportunity of political participation in the state. The Egyptian state has allowed social mobilization through a policy of partial liberalization, a policy intermittently rescinded when the Islamic movement seems to gain too much power (such as at the end of the 1970s under Anwar Sadat and at the beginning of the 1990s under Hosni Mubarak). This dual policy of partial liberalization and authoritarian crackdowns has resulted in a thriving Islamic movement entrenched in civil society, a movement that retains its oppositional character in the face of the authoritarianism of the secular state. These political conditions have set the stage for the emergence of a liberal discourse calling for freedom of speech, the right to political participation, the right to congregate, as the Islamic revival uses public discourse to criticize what it characterizes as an unjust and tyrannical secular state. The issue of gender relations has been a major motif in this liberal discourse, with a slew of publications treating the issue of women's emancipation in Islam. Ra'uf's writing asserts democracy and equality as political ideals, even as she simultaneously describes a family structured by gendered hierarchies. This is precisely what Wendy Brown describes as liberalism's family values, where equality, freedom, and rights are asserted as political ideals in the sphere of politics, while hierarchies, dependencies, and duties structure the realm of intimate relations (Brown, 1995). These contradictions characterize *Woman and Political Work*, but also revivalist writings on the family in general. In Nadjé Al-Ali's *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*, she roughly defines secular feminists as women who advocate human rights conventions as 'frames of reference for their struggle' (rather than *shari'a* as the primary source of legislation) (2000: 4, 130). Yet these rights discourses are so often the frames of reference for the struggles of Islamic feminists. My analysis focuses on Ra'uf's exegeses of key verses from the Qur'an (mainly 2:228, 4:21, 4:34, 30:21, and 30:30). Her hermeneutic produces a liberal interpretation of Islamic politics, taking democracy and equality as ideals, but asserting a gendered division of labour when men are leaders and women led; men authorities and women obedient.

The particular structure of the Egyptian legal system has facilitated the association of religion with the sphere of the family. The colonial administration first set up a formalized dual legal system, where religious courts adjudicated issues of personal status such as divorce, marriage, inheritance, and domestic disputes (Asad, 2003: 211). Secular courts, based on the Napoleonic code, administered all other cases, such as civil, commercial, and criminal. This legal arrangement provided a space for the formal expression of religion in the political structure of the secular state, as well as constricted this expression to matters of personal status. One historian of the personal status laws observes that

the relegation of *shari'a* law to family matters reflected a new understanding of the family as a social unit and its relationship to public politics and citizenship. Confining *shari'a* to domestic matters politicized the family both as a sphere of intimate, affective relations and as a repository of group identity of which religious affiliation was a defining legal and moral characteristic. Languages of privacy which entered the legal discourse around personal status matters concurrently with the limiting of the *shari'a*'s jurisdiction served to create 'the family' both as a private space and one which was central to political order. (Bier, 2006: 149–50)

In *Formations of the Secular* (2003), Talal Asad analyses this phenomenon in depth, recognizing that secular processes helped define the family as a sphere of religiosity (and analogously, confine religious law to the family):

It is because the legal formation of the family gives the concept of individual morality its own 'private' locus that the *shari'a* can now be spoken of as 'the law of personal status' – *qanun al-ahwal al-shakhsiyya*. In this way, it becomes the expression of a secular formula, defining a place in which 'religion' is allowed to make its public appearance through state law. And the family as concept, word, and organizational unit acquires a new salience. (2003: 231)

This is a dual process, where the family becomes functionally central to both the political order and the 'total body that will eventually be represented as "society"' (2003: 229). Asad's description of how religion became shunted into the sphere of the family, first under the colonial administration, then under the monarchy, then under authoritarian forms of government, is critical to the interpretation of *Woman and Political Work*. This understanding of the private domain as the natural place of religion was, as he points out, a product of secularization in Egypt.

### Public discourse, private matters

Ra'uf's writing is the fruit of a boom in Islamic publishing that began in the mid-1970s. After Anwar Sadat came to power, his campaign of partial liberalization reversed some of his predecessor Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's repressive policies toward Islamic groups (Delacoura, 2007; Hatem, 1994; Wickham, 2002). This included releasing political prisoners, lifting bans on Islamic periodicals, and permitting Islamic student groups and community associations known under the broad umbrella *jama'at islamiya* (or in Egyptian Arabic, *gama'at islamiya*). Islamic activism moved from a clandestine opposition movement into the 'wider arenas of public life, in which the Islamists established independent religious, cultural, and service organizations; acquired their own independent press and publishing houses; and gained control of the country's leading professional organizations. Islamic activism assumed the form of gradual institution building and persuasion' (Wickham, 2002: 34). Recent research emphasizes the social character of the revival, focussing on dimensions of the revival that do not explicitly take politics as its

primary objective. While these analyses recognize the political power of this social mobilization, they are less concerned with the transformation of state politics, and more concerned with how an Islamic sensibility and ethos transform daily practices, bodily discipline, social networks, and modes of expression. These scholars argue that the real power of the Islamic revival lies in its social character, giving it political leverage, without taking political power as its principal aim.<sup>3</sup>

These analyses define what they characterize as civil Islam, an Islam of social institutions that took deep root in the daily lives of ordinary Egyptians. Bayat describes a powerful grassroots social movement made up of Islamic social institutions, religious welfare and professional associations, neighbourhood groups and student organizations (2007: 136–7). Egyptian Islamism at its height in the late 1980s was

a complex web of dispersed and heterogeneous organizations, activities, and sympathies around a distinct core embodied in the reformist Muslim Brotherhood, which aimed to Islamize the society at the grassroots, ultimately establishing an Islamic state, and in the revolutionary Islamists who combined social agitation and armed struggle. . . . Along the political core stood the vast sector of ‘civil Islam’ with its large religious welfare and professional associations, Muslim youth and women’s groups, and Islamic activism in universities, schools, and neighborhoods. (Bayat, 2007: 137)

Cultural production has been one of the most critical institutions of this civil Islam – or what another scholar describes as ‘the parallel Islamic sector’ (Wickham, 2002: 95). Islamic publishing houses and bookstores, Islamic periodicals, books, pamphlets, and journals, and the ‘dissemination of the Islamist *da’wa* [call] through print and audio technologies at the microlevel was intricately related to institutional developments at the macrolevel’ (Wickham, 2002: 134). Since the mid-1970s, there has been a huge rise in the production of religiously oriented literature, a phenomenon that continued through the 1980s and 1990s not just in print, but in visual, auditory, or cyber media as well (Bayat, 2007: 33).<sup>4</sup> Ra’uf is part of a trend in intellectual Islam, where the locus of power has shifted from the *ulema* (religious scholars) and institutions of religious learning, to various, more dispersed loci. Ra’uf, a graduate of Cairo University, exemplifies a new kind of religious knowledge coming out of more secular institutions of higher learning.

A key institution of the parallel Islamic sector is what has been called the Islamic public sphere. It has functioned, as in Charles Taylor’s definition of the public sphere, as a ‘locus in which rational views are elaborated that should guide government’ (2004: 189). What distinguishes this modern public sphere, Taylor argues, is ‘the idea that political power must be supervised and checked by something outside’ (2004: 190).<sup>5</sup> While Taylor is describing the function of the public sphere in securing a free and democratic society, the Islamic public sphere in Egypt has operated as a site of critique of government authoritarianism, and particularly, the abuses of state power and infringement on the rights of religious actors that constitute this public sphere. *Woman and Political Work* was published

at the height of the Islamic revival in the early 1990s, just at the time that the Mubarak government began cracking down on Islamic militants and institutions alike (Bayat, 2007: 141). The Mubarak government's authoritarian reversal of the policy of partial liberalization resulted in the closing down of Islamic publications, barring of Islamist candidates from participation in the elections of professional organizations, incarcerating of militants, policing of mosques, and cracking down on entire neighbourhoods (Bayat, 2007: 143–5; Wickham, 2002: 200). In this environment, Islamic and Islamist public discourse took on an increasing liberal tone, calling for human rights and freedoms in the face of government crackdowns. In such discourses, authoritarianism and secularism are often conflated, especially as the state periodically cracked down on religious actors and institutions, whether under the pre-revolution monarchy or under the Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak regimes. Bayat describes a 'handful of "Islamic liberals"'. . . all of whom appeared to speak the language of *tanwir* (enlightenment) integrating notions of democracy, civil society, and human rights into their doctrines . . . Some critics argued that these intellectuals used such modern concepts to counter secularists with their own idioms and to secure recognition for the Islamic camp' (2007: 178). Bayat himself argues that the Islamicization of the secular intelligentsia helped legitimize the Islamic revival, but also 'helped produce a somewhat "secularized" religion', what he calls the 'secularization of religious symbols' in Egyptian Islam (2007: 41).

Gender rights – especially in the family – have been a core part of this liberal discourse, equating liberation of the family and of women with liberation from forms of (imperial and secular) tyranny. The domain of gender relations, of family, and of religion, became a critical axis of public discourse in Egypt, an axis from which the government was criticized, not only for its authoritarian policies, but also for its secularity.<sup>6</sup> The 1990s especially witnessed a boom in Islamic writings on the nature of women's emancipation, many of them addressing the issue of women's rights and roles in the family (Abugideiri, 2004; Hatem, 1994, 2002a, 2002b). In this discourse, women and the family became bastions against the increasing encroachment of secular society, a locus of emancipation from an imposed secularism, and one of the last defences against secularism's attack on the world of ethics grounded in affective relations. In al-Bishri's introduction to *Woman and Political Work*, he calls the issue of gender relations the 'pinnacle' of 'the intellectual battle between Islamists and secularists' (1995: 17). Scholarly work on gender and the family in the Muslim world, and in Egypt specifically, has tended to reinforce the perception of secular and religious practices as diametrically opposing. This perspective is partly propagated by intellectuals associated with the Islamic revival. An example of this is Leila Ahmed's seminal *Women and Gender in Islam* (1998), where her analysis proceeds by opposing secular versus religious, foreign versus indigenous, Western versus Islamic interpretations of gender relations. Ahmed draws on the work of one of the key figures of the Islamic movement, Muhammad 'Imara, and his claims about secular versus religious understandings of women's liberation.<sup>7</sup> In his *Complete Works of Muhammad 'Abduh* (1972), 'Imara argues that 'Abduh, grand mufti of Egypt and shaykh of al-Azhar, wrote

parts of Qasim Amin's *Tahrir al-Mar'a* ([1899] 2000), or *The Liberation of Woman*. Chapters written by Amin and chapters written by 'Abduh are identified through opposing lists of their secular and religious traits. 'Imara identifies a 'division of labor' within the text: the book has 'two parts' with 'two goals' (1972: 136). Although 'Imara presents no substantial evidence that 'Abduh actually wrote *The Liberation of Woman*, his claim has been widely reproduced in important scholarly literature (Ahmed, 1998: 193; Cole, 1981; Haj, 2009; Zuhur, 1992). Ahmed presents Egyptian feminists in pairs representative of the secular/religious dichotomy: of Amin and 'Abduh; Huda al-Sha'rawi and Malak Hifni Nasif; Doria Shafiq and Zaynab al-Ghazali (1998: 177–84, 197–207). More recent work explores overlaps between secular and religious discourses on gender (such as Hatem, 1994; Abu-Lughod, 1998 among others).

Ra'uf has engaged in public debates reifying this sense of opposition between secular and religious approaches to gender relations. She and Nawal El Saadawi debated the subject of *Al-Mar'a, al-Din, wa al-Akhlak*, or *Woman, Religion, and Morality* (2000) in a book in which both wrote their argument (without reading the other's argument) and then wrote a response to one another. El Saadawi, who has become known for her outspoken stance against religion, argues that the only path to women's liberation is through 'separation from religion'. Ra'uf, on the other hand, calls for launching 'a new women's liberation movement – an Islamic one' (El Saadawi and Ra'uf, 2000: 97–132; Ra'uf, 1994: 27). But even as El Saadawi rails against the family as a repressive institution, calling for women's economic liberation from dependency on men, Ra'uf does not deny problems of economic injustice or of male oppression in the family. On the contrary, she sees Islam as the cure for these problems of injustice in the family, calling for 'reform of the family, fighting oppression, and restoring the balance of justice' (El Saadawi and Ra'uf, 2000: 283). The Islamic order grants women her rights in the family, while simultaneously calling for men to execute their duties. This is woman's 'true emancipation (*taharrurha al-haqiqi*) from oppression' (2000: 286). Men's 'guardianship' is not by patriarchal right, she says, but established as right in consultation (*shura*) with other members of the family. Ra'uf's language draws on certain key liberal ideas, about choice, rights, emancipation, equality, and justice in arguing for an Islamic order. Even though El Saadawi vociferously argues against the family as an oppressive religious institution, both women take liberal concepts of rights, equality, freedom, and justice as feminist ideals. This dialogue has immense significance for the history of Arab feminism – both synthesizing debates and laying out possible avenues for development.

### Islamic unity, secular binaries

As with the Islamic revival in general, Ra'uf sets up her argument in opposition to secular forms of knowledge. Her point of departure, she says, is based in faith tied to inspiration, distinct from secular forms of learning that deny religion as a form of knowledge. She begins by critiquing the 'secularism and secularization of the

Western sciences extending from the age of enlightenment until now, which have exposed the enlightenment project (the liberal project/the project of modernity) to criticism, leading to a stage of crisis' (1995: 44–5). Ra'uf contrasts the theological notion of *tawhid*, 'the crux of Islamic faith', to the presumed split between church and state, religion and politics, faith and science in secularism (p. 47). *Tawhid*, or the unity of God, is a classical theological concept referring to the oneness of God and to the monotheistic nature of Islam and the Muslim community, but has taken on new connotations in the modern period. Contemporary Islamist thought, for example, defines it polemically against secular forms of governance. '*Tawhid* rejects secularism's dualisms', Ra'uf writes, 'just as it rejects the split of the human into body and soul, and the material world into religion and state' (1995: 48). Even though Ra'uf is clearly drawing on classical and modern meanings of *tawhid*, she also imparts to *tawhid* a particular gendered sense, as healing the split between private and public, family and politics, and accordingly, the division of labour between men and women. In this, Ra'uf simultaneously employs both Islamist and feminist language to argue against not only the conceptual split between religion and politics, but also 'the division of social labor on the basis of sex' (1995: 52). She applies this *tawhid* to the relationship between man and woman, because 'the link between them is one of unity and completion, affirming the harmony of this link through mutual instinct (*fitra*)' (1995: 188). The idea of *fitra*, which is both human nature and divine creation, becomes critical to her analysis of gender relations.

Ra'uf formulates her argument in *Woman and Political Work* as a refutation of secularism's conceptual separation not only of religion and state, but of family and government, private and public, personal and political. Her argument reflects contemporary Islamism's understanding of secularism as espousing the split between religion and state, a split that Islam heals by bringing the two together. These assumptions about secularism have contributed to the definition of Islam as the solution (*hall*) to modern problems and as a complete way of life as opposed to the merely private belief of religion in secular societies. Ra'uf argues for a sort of Islamic governmentality of and in the family, what she repeatedly calls the family as the political unit of the Islamic umma and as one of the most important structures of Islamic politics. She develops key notions of leadership within the family, of consultation as a means of choosing this leader, and of law as rooted in the family. By situating leadership first and foremost in the family, she proposes a radical solution to the problem of the nation-state – and its presumed<sup>8</sup> secularism – for Islamic politics. She simultaneously develops the notion of the umma as family writ large, or the family as umma writ small, arguing that the morals and ethics fostered on the microcosmic scale form the bases of an ethical and moral politics. In emphasizing the family as the political unit of the umma, she stresses the family as the site of women's political participation in the Islamic community, playing on the feminine connotations of the word umma. Even though her book is about the family as the political unit of the Islamic umma, the title of the book – *Woman and Political Work* – suggests that this work, in the Islamic view, takes place within

the family. Ra'uf strives to define Islamic politics through gender relations in the family, but her purpose is also to invest women's work in the family with political value. 'Belonging to the basic unit of society that is the family also ties [women] to political work. The family, in the Islamic view, is . . . not separated from the political field' (1995: 165). She also has an analogous aim: infusing politics with religion, partly by politicizing the family.

Ra'uf's definition of the family as the microcosm of the umma is a perspective that has a long history in the region, going back to colonial and missionary discourses that interpreted women's roles in the family as indicative of the level of civilization in Muslim societies. This trope would be used extensively in Egyptian nationalism which equated reform of the household with reform of the nation, progress in household management with progress in the nation, liberated women with a liberated nation (Abugideiri, 2004; Amin, [1899] 2000; 'Imara, 1975; Ra'uf, 1995: 196, 204; Shakry, 1998). The notion of women's emancipation in Islam and an emancipated umma similarly became a dominant trope in the Islamic revival. Muhammad 'Imara, another leading light of the Islamic revival, highlights this notion in the epigraph to one of his books on women and Islam: 'The umma is made up of families. The reform of one is the reform of the other. Whoever does not have a home does not have an umma' (1975: 6). 'Imara dedicates the volume to the 'Egyptian, Muslim, and Eastern family', arguing that the only way to cure the social ills plaguing the region is to cure the ills plaguing the family (1975: 4). The solution for both, he says, is the Islamic *shari'a*. In contemporary Islamic thought, the family is the 'building block, the very core, of the larger unified Muslim umma. Whatever affects the microcosmic unit certainly and necessarily impacts on the macrocosmic one . . . Few Muslims, if any, deny the centrality of the family as the bedrock of Islamic society, and therefore Islamic law' (Abugideiri, 2004: 232). Drawing on a wide range of political theory in both English and Arabic, Ra'uf describes how in secular societies, the family lost its function as a unit of solidarity in civil society. In this process, the religious became invested in the family as the sphere proper to private belief, in opposition to 'the civil', the sphere of secular (Western, modern) sociability (1995: 173). Citing Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), she discusses how the family's responsibility for social education was parcelled out to other social institutions, with consumer relationships supplanting familial ones. While Ra'uf aims to show how the family became divested of its role in social education, for her, the most critical part of this process is how *religion* became stripped of its function in social education, consigned to an artificially depoliticized domain of private relations. The 'removal of religion from society was one of the last steps of secularization. Despite this, the family and relationships of human love and understanding connected to religion despite all that had befallen it' (Ra'uf, 1995: 175). As secularism began to dominate, the family 'as a value and an ideal' should have resisted this 'vicious attack . . . Secularism can be summarized as a "stripping of sacredness." In the West, this coincided with a call to revive the institution of the family . . . with the tendency to return to religion in the West after realizing the disadvantages of an extremist

secularism . . . The linking of family and religion was the only way to save both' (1995: 175, 178).

Ra'uf argues that the regional states of the Arab and Islamic world experienced analogous processes of secularization. Since these regional states are 'constructed with the tools of the Western state', they have been similarly subjected to what she calls an 'extremist secularism' that has attacked the core institutions of Islamic society, notably the family. She describes 'the enormous apparatus of the secular state extending its power and the corresponding shrinkage of the functions of family, mosque, and community group (*jama'a*) . . . that are independent of the control of the state and its power' (1995: 190). Ra'uf describes a specific constellation of institutions: the family as the preserve of Islamic law, the mosque as sacred space, and the Islamic community groups (the *jama'at islamiya*) that form the basis of the grassroots social movement. These are the 'natural nurseries for confronting the expansion of the power of the state, representing lines of defense of the umma and its individuals. We must invest in them in order to protect the *shari'a*, which is to protect religion' (1995: 191). Islamic institutions must be strengthened against the authoritarian secularism of the Mubarak government. The family, as the political unit of the umma, is at the heart of this struggle.

### Just government, family leadership

In defining the main characteristics of Islamic politics, Ra'uf models an Islamic form of just and democratic government that stands in contrast to what she calls 'extremist secularism', 'autocratic leadership', and 'totalitarianism' (1994: 27; 1995: 192, 200). The family in this sense becomes a microcosm of good Islamic governance, but also fosters, as a 'natural nursery', good Islamic governance on a larger social and political scale. The two main principles of Islamic government are: democracy and leadership, *shura* and *qiwama* (1995: 196, 204).<sup>9</sup> *Shura*, or consultation or counsel, has been widely interpreted – and widely contested – as an Islamic version of democracy. In an interview with *Middle East Report*, Ra'uf herself defines *shura* as democracy.

We have *shura* like the West has democracy. The same value is dominant in family relations. You can't have a totalitarian patriarchal system in Islam. The family should be run by *shura*. The same values and laws count in the public and the private arenas. Marriage is like voting for or choosing the caliph. We do have a family head, but he is like the caliph and should be chosen freely. (1994: 27)

Ra'uf is referring to the two different levels of *shura*, the microcosmic and macrocosmic, as consultation within the family and within the political community. These are the two main senses in which it occurs in the Qur'an: consultation between two spouses about when to wean a child (2:233) and consultation between a leader and his followers (3:159). *Shura* in verse 42:38 contrasts with tyranny, injustice, and oppression in subsequent verses. In *Woman and Political Work*,

she initially defines *shura* as a political idea. ‘The umma’, she says, ‘is in its totality “a people of consultation” . . . and a means of administrating society’ (1995: 146). Only later in her argument does she strengthen the sense of *shura* in the family, as consultation between husband and wife over family affairs. It also informs the core of her approach in *Women, Religion, and Morality*, as she focuses her argument on the nature of relations in the family, seeming to pre-empt El Saadawi’s argument about the family as an oppressive, patriarchal construct.

*Qiwama* is generally interpreted as guardianship, but defined by Ra’uf as leadership (*riyasa*) and as leadership of the head of state. She uses it in Thomas Hobbes’s sense of the father as sovereign in the home. This leadership, which she defines as ‘administration of the house’ must be 1) consultative (*shuri*) and 2) just:

The administration is consultative (*shuri*) within this small social structure. It is not desirable that one part autocratically rules the whole by command, but that it takes the opinions of all parts in respect for the limits of the *shari’a* . . . For the leadership (*riyasa*) of the family is a consultative, not autocratic, form of leadership; this resembles to a great extent the imamate or the caliphate at the level of the state. (1995: 200–1)<sup>10</sup>

On the basis of two verses from the Qur’an referring to believers as ‘guardians of justice’, she argues for this leadership, or guardianship, to be inherently just (Qur’an 4: 135, 5: 8; Ra’uf, 1995: 197). In this way, Ra’uf argues against unjust, undemocratic, and accordingly, un-Islamic forms of government, a nuanced argument against authoritarianism. This leadership within the family depends on a gendered hierarchy. Ra’uf’s understanding of guardianship, and hence leadership, derives from verse 4: 34 of the Qur’an. Because of its assertion of God’s preference of some over others, the verse has a long exegetical history (Stowasser, 1998). Translations of the verse into English reflect the contested nature of the words for ‘guardians’ and ‘preferred’.<sup>11</sup> The debate has revolved around whether guardianship and God’s preference are signs of men’s absolute superiority over women, or whether these are restricted to the particular conditions set down by the verse, namely by what men provide of their means, their wealth, or their property in the material support of women. Most contemporary feminist exegeses favour the latter interpretation, arguing that if men do not provide for women, the conditions of their guardianship (and their preference) are null and void (‘Abd al-Rahman, 1967; Qutb, 2000; Wadud, 1999). On the basis of another Qur’anic verse, Ra’uf, like others, argues that piety ‘is the only gauge of preference’ (1995: 199). But she ultimately concludes by arguing for an intrinsic hierarchy in men’s guardianship over women. The degree men have over women is ‘the degree of guardianship. This is not based on an essential lack in woman . . . What is intended by preference is the greater amount of competence of the man over the competence of the woman with respect to leadership of the family. She is competent, but he is more competent’ (1995: 199). The word Ra’uf uses for competence (*salah*) is actually closer in

meaning to piety, goodness, righteousness, suggesting an inherent superiority on the part of men that is both spiritual and material.

Even in the face of this assertion of the superiority of male competence and leadership, Ra'uf continues to argue for a certain equality between men and women, referencing another Qur'anic verse: 'Women have rights like the rights against them according to what is fair, but men have a degree over them' (2:228). Ra'uf argues that this degree is not absolute and that men are not superior biologically, emotionally, and intellectually. The liberal valorization of equality, yet the assertion of male leadership has become a consistent motif in modernist Islam and one of the staples of the Islamic awakening. In the 1970s and 1980s, Muhammad 'Imara revived the intellectual legacy of the Nahda (often translated as the Arab renaissance but actually meaning 'awakening') by publishing the works of a number of its most important thinkers, including *Al-Mar'a wa al-Islam fi Ra'i al-Imam Muhammad 'Abduh* (1975), or *Woman and Islam in the Opinion of the Imam Muhammad 'Abduh*. These texts act as historical, intellectual, and institutional validation for more recent interpretations. 'Imara used them to legitimize revivalist understandings of Islamic gender relations. Ra'uf's interpretations of these key Qur'anic verses (4:34 and 2:228) echo Muhammad 'Abduh's. He also combines guardianship (*qiwama* of verse 4:34), leadership (*riyasa*), and men's degree (of verse 2:228) and concludes that the 'degree' of the husband over the wife is the degree of leadership (*riyasa*): this is the same terminology Ra'uf uses.<sup>12</sup> This means the man's right to force obedience in the case of rebellion, 'like a leader of the army and the president of a nation in the interest of the whole' ('Imara, 1975: 63). This execution of authority is like the leadership of society:

Marital life is like social life and every society needs a leader . . . The man is more entitled to leadership (*riyasa*) because he is more knowledgeable about what is beneficial (*maslaha*: authority, administration), and more capable of executing it with his strength and his wealth . . . She is accountable for obedience (*ta'a*) to him in all fairness. If she rebels from obedience to him, then he must discipline her with a warning, a separation, and a painless hit, if she deserves disciplining. This is appropriate for the leader of a household, working in the interest of the welfare of the extended family and the wellbeing of the couple, just as it is appropriate for an army commander or the president of a nation for the sake of the wellbeing of the whole. ('Imara, 1975: 62–3)

Ra'uf's understanding of men as more competent with respect to leadership in the family echoes 'Abduh's understanding of men as 'more knowledgeable about what is beneficial' for the family (Ra'uf, 1995: 199). They use analogous words of *salah* and *maslaha*, indicating men's fitness or rightness to the job of this leadership. But both words have added denotation: Ra'uf's *salah* as a moral righteousness and 'Abduh's *maslaha* as government authority. Both indicate men's spiritual right to leadership over women and, in doing so, they assert not only the political nature of

the husband's power in the home, but also the gendered nature of political power in government.

The legitimizing claim of equality, and the simultaneous assertion of gendered hierarchies is characteristic of liberal discourse. This discourse obscures the 'sexual division of labor' that it 'presumes to transcend' (Brown, 1995: 143). Brown, like Ra'uf, draws on Carole Pateman to support her case about liberalism's contradictory claims. On the one hand, the social contract of the public sphere is depicted as premised on equality between (male) citizens; on the other, the sexual contract of the private sphere is based on 'natural relationships existing in the family where a woman's submission to her husband is natural because he is stronger' (Ra'uf, 1995: 180; Pateman, 1983: 283-4). Ra'uf's argument aims to break down the dichotomy between the public and private spheres, the political and the familial. But even as she makes the radical move toward declaring the private as political, she reproduces what Brown calls the 'constitutive dualisms of liberalism' – theoretical equality coupled with gendered hierarchies (1995: 140, 152). This dualism has become a hallmark of contemporary theologies of gender relations in Islam ('Abd al-Rahman, 1967; Abu Shuqqah, 1990; al-Ghazali, 1990a, 1990b; Qutb, 2000). 'What is striking about this body of literature', observes Hibba Abugideiri, 'is that it premises its interpretive view of gender and the family on the notion of spiritual equality. Man and woman are created from the same "divine breath", invested with inherent dignity . . . and endowed with the same moral duties and responsibilities as God's appointed vicegerents' (2004: 232).<sup>13</sup> But Abugideiri demonstrates that women's primary spiritual and legal rights have been sacrificed to a certain way of thinking about women's roles in the family, an 'Islamic view of gender based on biological difference that ultimately institutionalizes a gender hierarchy within the family' (2004: 253). While these appear as eternal and everlasting Islamic dictates, they are actually 'interpretive acts that are necessarily subjective and context-specific' (2004: 253). A particular hermeneutics of the Qur'an has been harnessed to legitimize the sacredness of the family and assert divine sanction of male leadership. This has come to be seen as an authentic and indigenous expression of true Islam. On the other hand, some Western analyses see gender relations in Islam as the cause of everything from Islamic societies' incompatibility with modernity to their illiberalism (Berman, 2004; Delacoura, 2007). Yet feminist critiques of liberalism, whether Western or Islamic, demonstrate analogous, not antithetical, visions of gender relations.

My aim is not to depict liberal Islam's view of gender relations as merely a derivative discourse, but to contextualize its relationship to liberalism and secularism. Egypt has developed a form of liberal Islam in the face of an illiberal (largely authoritarian) secularism. Liberal discourse, of freedom, equality, rights, and democracy has been garnered in service of Islamist political aims in the quest for equal representation, for free speech, for a robust civil society (of religious institutions), for freedom of political participation, etc. Women's rights within Islam have become a major motif of this discourse, as has the critical importance of the family and family relations. While some see this as a centuries-old discourse, recent

analyses of the Islamic family have argued that this perspective, justified as eternal, sacred, and divine, is partly a product of colonial modernity and imperialist hegemony (Abugideiri, 2004; Shakry, 1998). Others have shown the overlaps and similarities between secularist and Islamist discourses on 'women's gendered difference' (Hatem, 1994: 664). Mervat Hatem (1994) specifically argues that both secular and religious discourses in Egypt portray the family as the sphere of religion, the sphere of women's work, and the sphere of male leadership.

### The sexual contract and the sacred

Brown sees the family as the basic unit of political analysis in liberalism, echoing, in some ways, Ra'uf's understanding of the family as the basic political unit of the Islamic umma. In liberalism, the family is seen as both natural and divinely ordained, as outside history (Brown, 1995: 145, 147). Ra'uf and 'Imara (relying on 'Abduh) draw on the Qur'anic concept of *fitra* to assert both the 'natural' and 'divinely ordered' aspects of the Islamic family. *Fitra* connotes both the creation of God and human nature, but also can mean instinct or intuition when referring to the human being's innate character or natural disposition (Lane, 1968: 2416). Both texts use *fitra* to express the relationship between husband and wife. Ra'uf draws on Qur'anic language nearly verbatim (rendered in italics):

The foundation of the family is connected *to the creation of God according to which he created people*, from the desire of each of the sexes for the other. And this drive is what makes the family one of the social models (*sunan*). The importance of legislation is in its preservation of *love, mercy, and tranquillity*. This is a trait at the core of human nature [*fitra*] according to God's creation. (1995: 187; emphasis added)

'Love, mercy, and tranquillity' refers to another, earlier verse from the same chapter: 'Among his signs is that he created for you mates from among yourselves so that you may live in tranquillity with them. And he put love and mercy between you' (30:21). 'Abduh's text similarly draws on these two verses to refer to the 'order of the instinct' (*nizam al-fitra*). He describes the organization of the family as a system along the lines of both human instinct and divine creation. This instinctual order is structured by male authority, leadership, and guardianship; if the wife steps outside of this order, through rebellion (*nushuz*), she is trying to be 'above her master, but she also tries to raise herself above her own nature and what the order of creation (*nizam al-fitra*) requires of mutual cooperation' ('Imara, 1975: 67). But a woman does not have any power of discipline over the male. The 'order of the instinct' is a 'gentle reminder of women's place' ('Imara, 1975: 68). This order becomes the basis of the Islamic sexual contract described by 'Abduh, the 'inviolable covenant' or 'sacred contract' (*mithaq ghalayd*) between man and a woman mentioned in verse 4:21 in the Qur'an. This intimacy, or desire, or appetite, or 'closing of space', is both divine (*al-fitra al-ilahiya*) and instinctual ('Imara, 1975: 74).

For 'Imara, woman dedicates herself to man and submits to him with an intuitive understanding or guarantee that she will be protected:

What guarantee does she have, what is the contract that she enters into? . . . That thing is a divine knowledge and an intuitive knowledge laying down in her the inclination to a special bond . . . All of that is the sacred contract that she enters into with the man in accordance with the order of creation that closely binds what the contract does not bind with words, promises, or belief. ('Imara, 1975: 75–6)

Through this contract, women and men are bound, by desire, mercy, and affection, but also by a hierarchy of gender rooted in both human nature and divine creation. What is this contract? It is one freely entered into, but not of equal status. The man is the lord, *al-ba'l*; he is stronger; she submits to him. Ironically, this exegesis, like the sections on guardianship and leadership, is included in 'Imara's section on 'Equality between Men and Women'.

The meaning of *fitra* is expanded in both texts, to encompass a range of social roles, including the division of labour between the head of the family and its body, the ruler and the ruled. They interpret these relations through a reformist hermeneutic model and draw conclusions about the nature of the family as a social and a political institution. Ra'uf extensively develops the connection between divine creation, human instinct, and social laws, mainly through her concept of religious social models (*sunan ijtima'iyā*). *Sunan* is the plural of *sunna*, which is the model of the Prophet Muhammad, articulated through his sayings (*hadith*) and reports about his example. Ra'uf does not use *sunan* in its conventional sense of a collection of traditions and legal pronouncements, but in a novel way to refer to a kind of ontological model, path, or understanding of how to behave (Juynboll, 2008a, 2008b). She uses the words *sunna*, *shari'a*, and *fiqh* that mean model, path, and understanding, but also have more technical (and popular) meanings related to Islamic law. Ra'uf defines *sunan* as the 'group of laws prescribed by God in the soul and throughout the world', connecting it to *fitra* (1995: 67). Ra'uf describes levels of *sunna*: the first is cosmic; the second, the *sunna* of *fitra*, has two levels, the existential and the social; and the last is the *sunna* of legal obligation (1995: 66). The *sunna* of *fitra* is clearly the most important to her argument, as the connective tissue holding together the hidden and the manifest, the mystical and the practical, belief and practice, the cosmic and the law, the individual and the group. *Fitra* is the basis of this, and Ra'uf defines human intuition about the 'right path' as ultimately leading to the realization and safeguarding of political society. The greater *shari'a* is the 'divine *shari'a* in harmony with the nature of *fitra*', in contradistinction to the legal positivism of secularism that is divorced from these ontological sources, from belief, and from ethics (1995: 67). Weaving a tight scriptural argument around the figure of the family, Ra'uf connects divine creation to human nature to the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad to the *shari'a*, the path of Islamic law. The family structured by primal human nature and social mores, by intuition and legal dictates, is an institution that is simultaneously sacred and immanent.

As Hibba Abugideiri observes in her analysis of contemporary Islamic texts on gender, '[t]he family in Islam is believed to be a divinely-inspired and ordained institution, characterized by a necessary sexual division of labor . . . The self-identifying Islamic framework employed essentially constructs an impermeable template of the Muslim family that renders the Islamic values of family commensurate with traditional gender roles' (2004: 232). Abugideiri attributes the reification and consolidation of this thinking of the Islamic family – 'paradoxically', she says – to social and global change (2004: 224). The family has become a discourse of cultural authenticity resisting foreign influence in political discourses in the Muslim world (2004: 246, nn. 92, 93). This has led to a 'stubborn adherence to this longstanding paradigm of the Muslim family, *as a form of active resistance to such change* . . . In sum, modernity, postcoloniality, globalization and Western cultural hegemony have all served as pretexts for the reinscribing of traditional notions of the family, and thus women's roles, within Islamic thought' (2004: 246–7; emphasis in original). The explanation of resistance to change is a common paradigm in interpreting the rise of 'traditional' values, especially with respect to the persistence of particular gender roles within the family. Yet scholarship in Middle Eastern studies shows how the normative bourgeois family structure is a product of recent historical processes – of the encroachment of colonial modernity, of eugenics discourses of imperial nationalism, of capitalist modes of production, and of the influence of the discourses of liberal secularism (Najmabadi, 1998; Shakry, 1998; Tucker, 2002). This is not a reversion to traditional values, but their re-invention within the sphere of Islamic thought. Abugideiri theorizes that the discourse of cultural authenticity around the family developed in reaction to the encroachment of globalization and the pressures of Western secularism. Ra'uf argues as much, observing that the family as a bastion of Islamic values is the umma's 'line of defence' against the encroachment of Western secularism, whether in the form of statecraft, knowledge production, or social institutions. Resistance, in this sense, is not outside power, but produced by it and exists in reference to it (Foucault, 1990: 100). The insistence on the threat to the traditional family, and the need for its reinforcement, has resulted in a proliferation of discourses on this subject. Islamic politics works 'within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power it seeks to repudiate' (Chatterjee, 1993: 38).

## Conclusion

In her assertion of the political nature of the Islamic family, Ra'uf sets out to undermine the foundations of secularism in general, and the secular state in particular. She does this by asserting one of feminism's principal axioms: that the personal is political, and political personal. In this way, she also strives to assert political agency for women within the framework of the family and private relations. She accomplishes this, but simultaneously reinforces the most basic assumptions of liberalism. Even though she sets out to politicize – and hence enhance the

value of – the domestic sphere, her argument has the effect of reinscribing the primacy of women’s connection to the family and to the sphere of affective relations. Ra’uf’s analysis is attuned to the power of the family, the power of the social, and the power of a religious ethos and sensibilities. Even so, the secular state partly created the conditions for Islam as a social movement, by banning Islamic activists from political participation and defining the family as the sphere proper of religious law. The secular state in Egypt and elsewhere enshrined religious law in the family, making it the site of reproduction of spiritual, affective, and juridical-political relations, critical to regulating the social body as a whole and to maintaining this governing law. Part of this is in the act of commanding the good and forbidding the wrong (*amr bil ma’ruf wal-nahi ‘an al-munkar*), creating an Islamic ethics that appears antithetical to the soulless, secular state. Even while taking religious knowledge as her point of departure, Ra’uf’s arguments are framed by secular governmentality that disbursts ethical burdens and responsibilities on to the affective realm of private relations. Islamic liberalism appears as a contradiction in terms, jarring with one of liberalism’s most fundamental tenets by associating religion with politics. A history of illiberal secularism in Egypt, in the form of first colonial domination and then authoritarian government, made Islamic liberalism a real possibility. Articulated within the parameters of the Islamic discursive tradition, this liberalism uses the family as a model of democratic politics, a model of religious government, and a model of male leadership.

## Notes

1. A simplified transliteration style has been used. The ‘ayn is represented by ‘(as in ‘Abduh) and the hamza by ’ (as in Ra’uf). All translations, including those from the Qur’an, are mine.
2. Based on interviews with women in the mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood defines secularization (*‘almana* or *‘almaniyya*) as having ‘reduced Islamic knowledge (both as a mode of conduct and as a set of principles) to the status of “custom and folklore” . . . Most employed the term more loosely to describe a transformative force beyond their control that was corrosive of the sensibilities and habits of a certain kind of religious life’ (2005: 44). Also see Nadjé Al-Ali’s intelligent discussion of secularism as a continuum (2000: 128–48), as well as Talal Asad’s etymological history of the neologism *‘almaniyya* in Arabic (2003: 206–7).
3. In her book on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood defines the Islamic revival as a ‘term that refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies. This sensibility has a palpable public presence in Egypt, manifest in the vast proliferation of neighborhood mosques and other institutions of Islamic learning and social welfare . . . a brisk consumption and production of religious media and literature, and a growing circle of intellectuals who write and comment upon contemporary affairs in the popular press from a self-described Islamic point of view’ (2005: 3).
4. In addition to the growth of religious institutions like private mosques and Islamic associations, Bayat describes the flourishing of Islamic books, pamphlets, and religious cassettes (2007: 33).

5. The Islamic public sphere, however, differs from Taylor's understanding of the modern public sphere, namely in its relationship to religion.
6. Jürgen Habermas argues that the public sphere defines itself in relation to the sphere of intimate relations, what he calls 'privateness oriented to an audience' (1991: 43). For Taylor, this intimate domain was 'defined and affirmed in public space. And this critical exchange itself came to constitute a public sphere. We might say it came to constitute an axis of the public sphere' (2004: 106).
7. Bayat describes 'Imara as a 'modernist voice' (2007: 178).
8. I use 'presumed' here because recent work has debunked the notion of a clear split between religion and politics in the modern secular state (Al-Ali, 2000; Asad, 2003).
9. al-Bishri's writings define democracy and leadership, *shura* and *riyasa*, as the two main governing principles in Islamic politics (1980: 693–6).
10. In 1932, Rashid Rida made the same argument in his *Nida lil-Jins al-Latif*, or *Call to the Gentle Sex*. This has been reissued by Islamic publishing houses a number of times since 1975 under the title *Huquq al-Nisa'a fi al-Islam*, or *Women's Rights in Islam*. Rida asserts that men's leadership in the family is consultative (*shuri*), rather than dictatorial (*istibidadi*).
11. See Amina Wadud (1999: 69–74) for a discussion of different interpretations of this verse.
12. Ra'uf also uses a *hadith* on the idea of shepherding to support her argument about male leadership, just as 'Abduh does in the same context but the slightly different renderings produce different meanings ('Imara, 1975: 63; Ra'uf, 1995: 201).
13. 'Divine breath' refers to verse 4:1 from the Qur'an: 'O people, revere your lord that created you from a single spirit and created from her her mate'. The word *nafs* (spirit, soul, self) is feminine, despite lacking a feminine ending, so the original soul is syntactically referred to with the feminine pronoun in the Qur'an.

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