

Faith and Feminism

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by Zohra Moosa

I am often probed about how I reconcile my faith with my feminism. Sometimes it comes as an explicit question, as happened when I was interviewed earlier this year for a book on Islam and feminism. I was asked directly whether I found it difficult to reconcile the two, whether there were inherent tensions I had to navigate and how did I square my religion and my belief (the two were conflated in the question) with my feminist convictions.

More often, it is an implied critique, a suggestion that I suffer from some combination of any of: false consciousness, limited agency/choice (where my family, 'community' and/or 'culture' is presumed to be oppressing me), insufficiently robust or analytical intellectual capacities (no one has actually called me 'stupid' yet though), political defensiveness about being Muslim (i.e. refusing to engage in critiques of Islam within the current political/security climate), political or social naiveté, opportunism (some people think it's a good time to peddle being a 'Muslim woman feminist'), and/or a misreading of feminism and/or Islam.

Having grown up with both faith and feminism and never really not had either, I continue to find the suggestion that they are anything other than complementary in my life a bit alien. Intellectually I understand the confusion that prompts the question; I've had enough people quote parts of the Qu'ran at me to have received the message that they would like to tell me: 'your primary text is sexist don't you know'. But to equate a spiritual practice with some people's literal, and historically and politically vacuous, interpretations of a text is to miss the point in a pretty profound way.

My feminism is informed by my faith and vice-versa because of how I live both. Just as my feminism is more than the job I do at the Fawcett Society, so too is my faith more than the prayers I say.

I came to the feminist movement from religious teachings about empathy, peace, social justice, and the need to work for the betterment of others and the world. I was schooled, in religious contexts, to have a healthy intolerance of exploitation, abuse, marginalization, and dis-empowerment. In addition, there were particular religiously-sourced stories about the importance of respecting women, the righteousness of treating women with dignity and fairness, the value in educating girl children over boy children that reinforced feminist principles for me from an early age.

Over time, feminism has become the natural extension of the moral framework that I was inculcated into from birth. There need not have been anything particularly 'Muslim' about my feminist awakenings, but the reality is that in my case there was. In turn, I come to my faith, every day, with a sense of purpose and direction because of my feminist ethics. My spiritual journey is intimately connected with my ideas about humanity and life. As these ideas evolve over time, so too does my spiritual path change, which then affects my politics.

My life is richer for having both faith and feminism in it. So that's how I reconcile the two.

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