Poster Presentation Paper: Gender Identity in Islam

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James Cox has outlined the World’s Religion Paradigm as a Christian narrative in which westerners base their preconceived ideological beliefs onto other religions against the Christian framework (Robertson 2013). Through this context, it can be argued that the world’s religion paradigm is actually a religious description, or even perhaps a sociological perspective, that defines how people and their belief systems can interrelate to, or be oppositional from, one another. However, it appears that theories can be interchangeable, particularly in regards to women, because the theories tend to have similarities. The parallels may even go unnoticed to some because it does not fit their personal narrative of who they are and what their religion means to them. My intention is to guide the reader through the World’s Religion Paradigm with gender identity within Islam as the point of reference. Additionally, I would like to establish the ways in which gender identity is fluid within religion itself because using differing theoretical frameworks from dissimilar religious traditions can still illustrate the same narrative. I plan to introduce an interview with the Imam of the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, as well as a booklet provided on the Islamic Center’s website, to further establish how women within that specific community have expectations of behavior placed upon them and a prescribed way of dress that reinforces societal roles through religious acculturation.

Augustine, Book VI, states, “Unless we believe what we are told, we would do nothing in this life” (96). Excerpts from the Quran that are placed within the booklet, *Men and Women Dress in Islam*, illustrate what will occur if one does not abide by the accepted expectations of modest dress by suggesting that one will be condemned and set aflame for not dressing appropriately (Badawi 2016, 9). Women are seemingly being guided through the rhetoric of the Quran to dress in a very modest way in order to establish the consequences that will occur if one does not closely follow the religious text to seemingly establish the authority of the religious community (Bell 2008, 25). Further, the Imam stated that women prayed in the back of the Mosque in order to guard their modesty as they did not want to be looked at in a sexual manner while performing their prayers. However, it can be argued that by placing women in the back of the religious service suggests this notion in which the men are typifying the women as not being visible or suggesting that they are “all the same” in a way that the “immaterial [actions] could produce material effects” (Baron 2009, 52; Whitehead 2015, 106). The Imam further stated that women were not required to go to the Friday services if they are in a delicate state such as menstruation or pregnancy which seems to suggest that men are somehow defining their own masculinity by a woman’s femininity (Baron 2009, 47; Barth 1969, 10). Through these actions and expectations of behavior it appears that gender roles are being set through physical placement during the religious service as well as the expected dress.

The suggested gender roles within the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro occur due to social and religious acculturation. Communities learn how to behave through experiences and “derive the significance of a person from her/his duties and actions” (Bender 2012, 282; Jerryson 2013, 78). Through this framework, both girls and boys learn from a young age where they are to be placed in a physical and societal context due to their separation within the mosque; boys are to pray with their fathers in the front, while girls pray in the back with their mothers. The separation of gender seemingly reinforces how one perceives their expected gender roles and expected behaviors as it seems as if the physical placement seemingly suggests that woman should be submissive. S. Brent Plate states, “When spoken … in particular settings by particular persons…words become sacred” (Plate 2015, 280). Through Plate’s analysis of the property of words and what they can achieve in regards to societal roles, it seems appropriate to note a similarly related documentary, Koran by Heart, in which a father states that while a man is a single person, a woman is a nation and he feels that it is important for his daughter to be educated but she shall above all else be a housewife (2011). The father’s words appear to reinforce a typified behavior for girls at a young age due to an “ideological order” in which women should be modest and subservient to their husbands as her father has set the tone of her expected behavior within her religious community (Boyarin 1998, 108). Whether a woman is required to cover her body or her physical placement is within the back of a mosque, she is somehow being situated within a religious and societal community as being submissive, subservient, and is reaffirming her gender roles that are prescribed to her from a male dominated authority.

Through the excerpts of the Quran, an interview with the Imam, or even the documentary that are specifically having to do with an Islamic narrative, it can be suggested to the reader that gender is playing a very specific role to and for women within the Islamic tradition. However, as most of the references provided are actually from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism units that the Comparative Religion class has been working through all semester it seems more apparent that there is not an Islamic view for women, but instead a world’s view. The World’s Religion Paradigm noted by Cox can be viewed not only through a western lens but also through a societal lens as the paradigm theory stands as a point of reference for marginalization in some groups that are not regarded as the majority. As the theories of marginalization are interchangeable within each tradition, it appears that religious communities are creating expectations for women and men at a very young age to determine how one should behave and dress as a way for religious acculturation to take hold and become second nature as it becomes both normal and natural as a way of being.

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