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The chastity society: disciplining Muslim men

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Picture:

Place it in the section entitled, "A Shared Language of Contention around Gender"

The image of the pamphlets was composed and edited by the author

The Chastity Society: Disciplining Muslim Men

At a time when Western humanitarian rescue discourses seek to save Muslim women from irrational and violent Islamic masculinities, the Jordanian Islamist charity “the Chastity Society” seeks to train young men to restrain their excessive masculine passions to ensure that Muslim women are spared the fate of the benighted and oppressed Western woman. This article traces parallel emphases on gender essentialism, rationality, cultural pathology, and abjection to argue that a shared language of contention unites both Islamists and those who advocate for Western humanitarian interventions. I explore how several kinds of social control are legitimized through these symmetrical polemics about gender, order, and civilization.

In recent years, a number of scholars have investigated how the ‘Muslim woman’ has emerged in Western media imaginaries as a figure of abject victimhood while the normative ‘Muslim man’ has become a figure of threat and danger. Many analysts have challenged this caricature, showing how gendered ‘civilizational discourses’ (Massad 2007) have been constructed historically and whom they serve. Geopolitics coincides with a diverse range of factors to produce an intense fixation on (putatively) Islamic gender roles, forming a symbiotic relationship with anti-immigration advocacy, the publishing industry’s demand for lurid content, and the contemporary political economy of NGO fundraising.

Yet amidst failed military campaigns, well-publicized massacres and terror attacks, and lurid revelations like those that emerged from the Abu Ghraib prison, there is growing discomfort with what Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar describe as, “the use of women’s liberation as justification for US military misadventures in Muslim-majority societies” (2012: 544). Jasbir Puar (2007) writes extensively about the sexual pathologization of Muslims in

Western popular culture and NGO activism. Miriam Cooke (2007) argues that Western discourses about the Muslim community erase its diversity and complexity, replacing it with a single metonymic figure, simultaneously vulnerable and unsettlingly inscrutable, that she sardonically labels “the muslimwoman.” In her analysis of the Arab Human Development Report, Frances Hasso contends that the report is concerned with “empowering governmentalities rather than women” (2005). Lila Abu Lughod (2002, 2014) asks, “do Muslim women need saving?” She is especially wary of those who would use arguments about the status of women as a rationale for military intervention. Paul Amar (2011a; 2011b) goes even further, contextualizing these discourses as a subset of a broader, transnational “humanitarian rescue discourse.” Perhaps the deepest ethnographic engagement with this dynamic has been Katherine Ewing’s *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin*, which argues that German Muslims are systematically dehumanized by Western humanitarian discourses that position them in a “zone of uninhabitability” (Butler 1993), “in a transnational imaginary in which the ‘modern’ is constituted in opposition to the ‘traditional’ as abjected other” (Ewing 2012: 3). In all of these cases, imaginative geographies of gender privilege and subjugation serve the emotional needs of mass-mediated publics—and they do so in ways easily portrayed as orientalist (Said 1978: 48-72).

Perhaps as a necessary corollary of this intellectual trend, relatively little attention is given to how Muslim reformers use a similar (and similarly gendered) civilizational discourse to justify their own role in saving Muslim

women. Drawing on fieldwork conducted among Jordanian Islamists¹ from 2010-2012, I will try to correct this analytical imbalance. I will show how the contemporary Islamist movement works to tame specific forms of excessive masculinity that are associated, by Muslim activists themselves, with the cultural pathology of tradition and its concomitant irrationality. I argue that Islamists and their Western detractors share a common “language of contention” (Roseberry 1994), with a similar set of beliefs about the relationship between gender, human nature, violence, and reason. As Western critics seek to discipline Muslim men, they are likely to find that Islamist groups are busily engaged in the same efforts, co-opting novel discourses of ‘humanitarian rescue’ in order to save women from men in their own specifically Islamist terms.

This article is based on my research with an Islamist organization in Jordan called “The Chastity Society” (*jama‘iyyat al-‘afāf al-khayriyya*), one of many such “Chastity Societies” associated with the Muslim Brotherhood that form a network of organizations stretching from Algeria to Tunisia, from Syria to Yemen, disseminating educational materials about Islam and the family, offering training courses, and organizing mass weddings². My conclusions are based on interviews with members and beneficiaries of the Chastity Society, its publications, and participant observation conducted at its mass weddings, training courses, and fundraisers. My analysis is enhanced at points through

¹ While the term Islamist is sometimes used pejoratively, I use it here simply to specify those Muslims who see their faith as part of a broader political, often explicitly anti-imperialist project.

² The Chastity Society’s 2015 mass wedding can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeTCToiNAKg>

insights gleaned from almost four years spent living, working, and doing research among precisely the kinds of Jordanian working-class men who are the primary target of the society's gender and family programming. After setting the scene, I will provide a brief overview of the Chastity Society's ideology as depicted in its own pamphlets before turning to the sexual education module it uses in its marriage training courses. These materials highlight the extent to which the organization is aware of and actively engaged with contemporary global discourses around gender and sexuality. In the second half of the article, I turn to the Chastity Society's pedagogical treatments of Sharia, which, for many of its members, are the necessary and sufficient impetus for their activism. In the conclusion, I suggest that the symmetry between Islamist and Western interventionist approaches to gender and the centrality of abjection to their shared language of contention should make us skeptical of persistent attempts to differentiate these discourses. Perhaps more can be gained by exploring the hidden and often sublimated assumptions that constitute their shared ground.

Setting the Scene: Saturday Morning in the Auditorium

In the summer of 2012, I attended a training course for soon-to-be-married couples hosted by the Chastity Society. It took place in the offices of the Jordanian Engineers Association in downtown Amman³, in an imposing high-modernist building that had aged well. The facilities were ample for such

³ As one of the many Jordanian unions and professional associations whose memberships regularly elect a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated leadership, the Jordanian Engineers Association is ideologically predisposed to offer their facilities in support of the Society's charitable efforts.

an event, complete with auditoria, classrooms, and catering. Two of the intellectuals who had organized the course were Dr. ‘Adl Latfi and Dr. Mufid Sarhan, both sporting closely cropped beards and clad in suits. They thanked me for coming and told me what to expect. Emphasizing the prefigurative role of the training course I was about to witness, Dr. ‘Adl told me, “There’s training for every institution: the bank, teachers, of course the army. The army has lots of training. So there has to be training for marriage as well since marriage is the most important institution. It should be as important as the medical test [required for marriage in Jordan]. One day, people will go to the courthouse and they will bring a medical test and a certificate from a course like this.” While training courses had long been part of the charity’s annual mass weddings, I was told that what I was seeing was a compressed version of a two-day course that had been given to various groups of couples across the Muslim world for years. They led me to the auditorium.

Most of the forty-five attendees appeared to be in their early twenties. The women mostly wore colorful headscarves, although a few wore black and veiled their faces. Some wore floor-length skirts while others opted for the *jilbāb* (a coat which runs from the neck to the floor and down to the wrists). The young men wore the latest in working-class youth fashion: tight jeans, dress shoes, and the kind of button-up shirts made to be worn un-tucked. I took my seat and waited. The men’s side of the room was largely silent, while a number of women on the other side of the room chatted quietly, producing a good deal of subtle laughter.

As I learned from talking to the male beneficiaries as they smoked during the breaks between sessions⁴, there was a fairly common narrative of having been introduced to the Chastity Society by members of the charity who were active in their neighborhoods or kin networks⁵. Everyone I talked to told me that they were drawn to participate in the organization's activities due to the financial constraints that often left young men and women unable to marry. Most said that it was the only way they could afford to marry. One man (a college student and clear outlier) said it was "cheaper and easier." Another confided to me that his was a case of "forbidden love" and that his parents were refusing all assistance. He claimed that most of the men were in the same position, although they might not be as forthcoming.

Whatever their individual circumstances, they all implied that they had come to the course under some degree of duress. Attendance was a precondition for participation in the next week's free mass wedding. Thus, early on in the training, there was some hostility towards the Society's agenda, especially its attacks on certain male prerogatives. After the introductory portion of the course on the Sharia was over and the men were clamoring at the door to go out for a cigarette, one man exclaimed, "Damn this course—it's not

⁴ Despite my attempts to enlist a female Arabic-speaking social scientist to help me interview female beneficiaries in a respectful and sensitive manner, I was never able to arrange it.

⁵ When I noted to Dr. Mufid that many of the beneficiaries came from a particular Palestinian refugee camp, he emphasized that the beneficiaries were drawn from every governorate in the kingdom and included Syrian refugees. Some people I knew who were hostile to the Islamic movement told me the charity's beneficiaries would be, in a word, "shameless". As far as I could tell, however, beneficiaries were not overly Islamist in orientation—nor did they all fit prevailing stereotypes of the movement as overwhelmingly urban, Palestinian, and poor.

teaching anyone but my ass,” which provoked roars of laughter. However, by the end of the day when the participants were divided by gender for the sexual education module, the combination of Islamic discourses, biomedical discourses, and practical representations of gender in working-class Jordanian communities had largely won the audience over.

A Shared Language of Contention Around Gender

Founded in 1993 to promote marriage and discourage extramarital sex, the Chastity Society is well known across Jordan primarily for its mass weddings, but also for its research and publishing about the family and the millions of dollars in interest-free loans it has distributed to newlyweds in cooperation with the Jordan Islamic Bank. Led by ‘Abdul-Latif Arabiyyat, former head of the Islamic Action Front (the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood’s political party), the Society is one of the best-funded and most important institutions within the broader Jordanian Islamist movement. While there is a growing number of women’s groups in the Muslim world that seek to harmonize Western notions of gender rights and Islam (cf. Abu Lughod 2014), the Chastity Society is not one of them. It is certainly a trenchant critic of Jordanian society at large, which it sees as ignorant, backward, mired in blind tradition, and crying out for social uplift initiatives. But its leading intellectuals also dismiss Western approaches to gender as a confused reaction to the abject condition of women in the West itself.

The cover of one of the Society’s internationally distributed pamphlets, *Al-Jindir* (Gender), shows a snake (emblazoned with the word “GENDER” written in English) destroying a family’s home. The authors, Mithna Amīn Al-Kurdistani and Kāmīlīa Hilmī Muhammed, argue that fixating on the term

“gender” is a culturally specific Western phenomenon. They recount a familiar intellectual history in which a concept (gender) once reserved for denoting the grammatical categories of masculine and feminine came to stand for the social construction, and possible artifice, of masculinity and femininity in general. Such polemics are evidence of what William Roseberry calls a shared “language of contention”, not merely because they adopt a similar vocabulary, but because they represent “a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination” (1994: 361). For example, throughout the pamphlet, the authors reject the term “gender” as a “Western” concept while reproducing in their polemic the tendency to reify an ontological divide between nature and culture. They also assume that humans can be corrupted or uplifted through cultural particularity and the more or less judicious use of language. These ideas function as sources of legitimacy for conflicting political forces that hope to convince others of their ability to enjoin the correct forms of culturally-prescribed behaviors. Thus surface-level ideological disagreements help to disguise the extent to which groups like the Chastity Society nonetheless freely engage with and borrow from opposing discourses, technologies, and organizational forms—even as they simultaneously maintain their own peculiar ideological coherence.

Al-Kurdistani and Muhammed argue that certain Westerners have completely exaggerated the significance of rather trivial realizations about the artifice of grammatical gender and now ignore the importance of biological sex entirely. They argue that a notion of complete equality between the biological sexes leaves women vulnerable and is therefore not equality at all since it fails

to respect women's biological particularities. Whenever the general thrust of the women's liberation movement is in line with the authors' essentialist interpretation of gender roles in Islam, the authors treat the correspondence as validation of Islamic precepts. Whenever there is divergence, the authors depict it as the deleterious product of a "radical" or "extremist" Western civilization. As the Chastity Society's President Dr. Abdul-Latif Arabiyyat cautions in the forward, "with America at its head, the West seeks the spread of its decadent social values, its model of globalization, and on every level the imposition of its system of values as universal human values, despite causing destruction, dissolution, and perversion for these communities" (Al-Kurdistani and Muhammed 2004: 6). Yet for all the organization's concerns about the abject state of gender relations in the West, the day-to-day activities of the Chastity Society are largely dedicated to reducing the threats that Muslim men might pose to the social order of their own communities—the "disciplining" project with which this article will primarily concern itself.

My use of the term "discipline" to describe the Chastity Society's attempts to control the passions of Muslim men cannot help but evoke Foucault. This is deliberate. Quoting Foucault as saying things like "pleasure is its own end" and "whoever has the authority has the language," Al-Kurdistani and Muhammed assert that Foucault and his followers are engaged in what they term (in English) "the reconstruction of language" (*i'ādat aṣ-ṣiyaghat al-lughā*), resurrecting the Epicurean "hedonism" of ancient Greece "until the biological nature of the woman repudiates it" (2004: 19-26). While these quotations of Foucault may be inaccurate or oddly interpreted, his prominent place in the pamphlet provides its conservative, Arabic-speaking, Muslim

readers a taste of the intellectual ferment surrounding post-Foucauldian approaches to gender and sexuality. The Foucauldian “reconstruction of language” is put forward as the blueprint for Western feminist activism in general. The authors use it to make sense of the “emergence of the term gender” (9) its place in “UN documents” (45), the “effects of the feminist movement on the Arab world and the transmission of the term gender for application in the Arab world” (53), “the globalization of the idea of the new femininity” (77), “summary readings on some international documents on women” (91) and then conclude their argument with a section entitled, “the fruits of the woman” (115), in which they chronicle the oppressed state of women in the contemporary West. Despite their portrait of the ‘reconstruction of language’ as a terrifying release of nihilistic passions that have brought about the widespread victimization of women, Al-Kurdistani and Muhammed show a striking appreciation for its efficacy as a framework for thinking about and acting upon the social order.

It would be easy to dismiss this sort of rhetoric as appropriative, opportunistic, insincere, or perhaps as merely a well-intentioned response to a Western incitement to discourse around gender and sexuality. However, closer attention to the charitable efforts and hermeneutic sensibilities of the Chastity Society makes clear that their work is in fact quite sincere and that it is strongly rooted in an Islamic discursive tradition that pre-dates Western feminism. Here, I draw methodological inspiration from Amar’s ethnography, *The Security Archipelago* (2011b), which employs a networked, multi-polar framework to understand the circulation of “humanitarian rescue” discourses amidst the development of new security regimes in Brazil and Egypt. This

study is a welcome corrective to Eurocentric imperial historiographies in which ideas are always assumed to emerge from the imperial center on a hub-and-spoke model. Amar's focus on long-term intercultural exchanges outside of the imperial metropole avoids simplistic pronouncements about the diffusion or independent invention of humanitarian rescue discourses by showing how globally situated actors have long been deeply enmeshed in each other's ideological projects. However, I trace out a very different genealogy than Amar here by exploring the strong connections between the Chastity Society's contemporary efforts to reform gender relations and the broader Islamic "discursive tradition" (cf. Asad 1986). Where Amar offers a timely intervention by focusing on emerging contradictions within neoliberal societies of the global South, I emphasize the *longue durée*. Islamic conceptions of human nature, tradition, and reason are sophisticated and complex. Those who are committed to them have little need for the innovations of outside moral crusaders—although such innovations can be readily adapted to an Islamic discursive tradition.

"You're all so Educated": Medicalizing Islamic Ethics

The best indication of the primacy of Quranic authority over biomedical authority in the Society's educational efforts was the order of the presentations themselves—the first of which was given by the Sharia Court Judge, Dr. Samir Al-Qabah. His talk, entitled "The rights of the woman and the rights of the man," was followed by two workshops on marital *adab* (manners, propriety, politesse). The first workshop was led by a tall, slim man in his thirties with an immaculate beige suit with burgundy accents on the cuffs. The second was led by a woman, also in her thirties, who was a dentist and had

studied psychology. For the final portion of the course, participants were divided up by gender for frank discussions led by medical professionals about what they could expect on their wedding nights. After his presentation, Dr. Nidal⁶, who led the sexual education session for the men, underlined the consciousness of the choice of structure for the training when he explained my research project to the young men. “What’s interesting about Geoffrey’s project,” he said, “is that he’s doing it in the Western way. The Westerners start with the material and the economic and move to the social and the ethical and then the spiritual. We begin with religion and move to ethics.” Key to this notion that the Society was starting from religion and moving towards ethics was the sincere belief on the part of participants that they were being faithful to their textual tradition in their efforts to cultivate proper gender roles. This belief is contested by multiple parties, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, and taking a position is expected of anyone who engages with the tradition or the disputes that define it. As an ethnographer, I will be referring to the secondary literature on gender and Islamic law prior to colonialism not to valorize or debunk The Chastity Society’s assertions, but rather to do justice to the hermeneutical depth of my interlocutors’ claims about gender.

At the end of the day, we were divided by gender for the sex education portion of the course. The men were sent to a room with a large conference table. Dr. Nidal entered with a poster of the male and female reproductive systems and a plastic model of the female reproductive system. He was a jovial, rotund man with a white beard and a light grey suit. He set up his visual aids and began by saying, “There are the days of marriage and the days after.

⁶ This is a pseudonym.

You're all so educated, young men," he said with a knowing intonation. "Mashallah⁷!" You have the internet. You have the satellite. You have Facebook." He smiled deviously and the men began to laugh. "All of you are educated." He turned a bit more serious and said, "But you should take information from respectful places." He explained to them that, of all the religions, "Our religion is the only religion that gives the woman her rights." He continued, "And marriage is worship (*'abada*) in our religion. Marriage is very important for Muslims. It's not like Europe. Now they have marriage between a man and a man—a man and an animal!" He continued, "A lot of youths think marriage is just for looking at her like a game. No. Marriage is worship." With his oblique references to dating tools like Facebook and the ubiquity of Western pornography on the internet and satellite television, Dr. Nidal framed the final portion of the course as a scientifically informed Islamic corrective to the perverse gender roles promulgated by the Western media. He said, "Our women, God be pleased, are shy. They're not like European women you see [on television and in pornography]. Some of them are afraid. Slowly, slowly."

Islamist concerns about the malign effects of Western pornography have become sufficiently common that they have begun to attract the attention of the Western media, most notably through the work of Wedad Lootah. Lootah, an Emirati marriage counselor who wrote a book entitled *Top Secret: Marital Intimacy... Roots and Etiquette*, has received bemused coverage in venues like *The New York Times*. The Times quoted the Mufti of Dubai (who cleared the book for publication) as warning that, despite its doctrinal

⁷ Meaning, 'What God wills' or 'God be pleased'

soundness, “Arab readers might not be ready for such a book” (Worth 2009). Yet as Lootah herself makes clear, the implication that Arab publics (unlike Western ones) might be too chaste, naïve, or easily shocked for such a book is quite disingenuous. In fact, Arab publics are constantly exposed to the whole range of Western sexual practices, from Hollywood films to commercially produced erotica to the iconic images of sexual torture from Abu Ghraib. This is why Lootah characterizes her society’s stance on sexual propriety as stuck “between ignorance and false modesty,” with ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) here implying as much a boorish lack of restraint as a lack of knowledge. Lootah defends her choice of topic vociferously, insisting that “God wanted me to choose this subject to try to uncover some hidden aspects of [marital happiness] for my chaste sisters.” In fact, she attacks the very implication that her contribution to the discourse of sexual and marital health could be a scandal. Such an insinuation is as *itself* evidence of the hypocrisy around sex that she is denouncing: “practices that God has forbidden are spreading in our houses and on every level in this domain, from pornographic films to forbidden practices” (Lootah 2009: 11). Like the Chastity Society, Lootah is concerned that delayed marriage leads to sexual and marital dysfunction. She is particularly concerned that men will be conditioned to prefer pornography, sex with men, or anal sex to lawful sex with their wives.

For his part, Dr. Nidal began his presentation by turning to his poster and listing off the various parts of the male anatomy using proper medical terms: prostate (*muwatha*), testicles (*khiṣīṭīn*), and so on. He explained how the testicles contained *ḥīywān minawī* (sperm), which were released from the penis. The penis, he explained, is “like a sponge” that collects blood—growing

“from five or six centimeters to fifteen or sixteen centimeters.” He attempted to explain the female anatomy for the men as well—skipping rapidly upwards toward the birth canal (*qanāt al-wilāda*) and womb (*raḥam*). Dr. Nidal’s presentation echoed the concerns of activists like Lootah. It also represented a more general continuation of the Society’s attempt to inculcate restraint as a masculine virtue while reifying distinctly essentialized masculine and feminine gender roles. Throughout the day, these roles were justified with reference to a relatively simplified and conservative biomedical model of human sexual dimorphism that began with normative sex organs, moved on to note gendered differences in average size and strength, and concluded with *hormōnāt* (hormones), which might influence anything from one’s affect to one’s suitability for certain occupations.

However, this biomedical vocabulary for talking about essentialized gender roles was sutured to critiques of male behavior with deep histories not only in Jordan, but throughout the Muslim world. As Michael Peletz (1994) has argued in his work on Malaysian Sharia practitioners, Islamic masculinities often portray men as quintessentially rational (as possessors of *‘aql*) in an “official” sense, while simultaneously acknowledging their nearly universal shortcomings in that regard at another, more practical level as rational actors in everyday life. According to Peletz, rationality here is not simply “about” gender. Rationality helps define all sorts of socially salient contrasts. It is what separates humans from animals. Children, non-Muslims, and the weak-minded all lack restraint and thus remain vulnerable to manipulation by the forces of evil: bad people, *jinn*, and the devil himself. Religious practice, in a vital sense, is about developing one’s reason to avoid such snares, regardless of gender.

Still, “practical representations of gender portray men as less reasonable (i.e., having less ‘reason’), and less responsible than women both with regard to managing money and other household resources, and in terms of honoring basic social obligations associated with marriage, parenting and kinship generally” (Peletz 1994: 152). Likewise, the Chastity society highlighted the dangers of masculine selfishness, aggression, and entitlement⁸.

The refrain, “slowly, slowly,” was also reminiscent of nuptial advice I had heard many times before. It was evidence that the Chastity Society was drawing on a deep reservoir of “practical representations” of masculinity. The appeal to slowness, delicacy, and care was emphasized so extensively that at a certain point I stopped writing it down in my notes. Dr. Nidal warned his students, “There was a man down in the [Jordan] valley who tried and tried to enter the girl, and finally he tried violently and the girl died. Think about the girl the night of consummation. You haven’t slept the night of the wedding or the night before—and a man can bear more. Some people forget nice words, ‘Enough! Cut his head (get it over with)!’” The room erupted with laughter, the men displaying a visible sense of relief from the tension of the subject matter. A young man raised his hand and said, “Pray two *rakāt* (bows) and then enter slowly, slowly—calmly.” The doctor nodded. Returning to his cautionary tale, he said, “It was all because he hurried. And it was worst in the old days. People would be looking from the windows; they came early in the

⁸ Recent scholarship on Arab masculinity demonstrates that these ‘practical representations’ continue to circulate and inform local anxieties about manhood (cf. Ghannam 2013, Inhorn 2012)

morning [to visit the couple after the defloration]. It was bad. But now they go to a hotel by themselves. This is a better way.”

The relentless attack on tradition and local custom continued throughout the day. Yet the Society’s polemic, however contemporary it sounded, rested on much older Islamic critiques. The idea of “nature” that lay beneath the Society’s biomedical accounts of the gendered and sexed human body were ultimately grounded in the Islamic concept of *fiṭra*, the divinely endowed potential of all living organisms. The problem for the activists, though, was that humans, uniquely capable of being led astray, are always at the mercy of *‘adāt wa taqālīd*: customs and traditions—or habits and blind repetition. As we were taught, this constitutes a sort of *second* nature. It is not supposed to be opposed to one’s first nature, instinct, or *fiṭra*, but it is only through Islamic instruction that one’s second nature can be used to perfect one’s first nature—with the aid of God’s grace.

Saba Mahmood, writing about this strain of thought within the Islamic Movement, identified it with Aristotelian virtue ethics. She argues that, unlike the Kantian ethics that have tended to displace virtue ethics in the Western academy, morality for contemporary Muslims is “both realized through and manifest in outward behavioral forms” (Mahmood 2005: 25) without Kant’s “telescoping of moral action down to the movements of the will” (Mahmood 2005: 26). Mahmood’s point is not necessarily that anyone involved in a Chastity Society training course would invoke the works of Aristotle. Dr. Nidal would certainly be familiar with them; the young man who suggests that one disciplining one’s body on the wedding night through prayer likely would not. Yet the desire for an embodied (and engendered) ethics and the cultivation

of highly disciplined outward behavioral forms has long been a crucial part of the intellectual milieu of Islam, its religious precursors, and its ideological competitors as well. Hussein Agrama calls this widespread concern, following Foucault, “the care of the self” (2010: 13). In fact, we know this precisely because so much energy has been expended by Islamic scholars in both reading Aristotle and trying to stem his influence⁹. Within this broad, under-defined “tradition,” which we might identify with a sort of Eurasian scholasticism, certain good habits have historically been associated with virtue, ethics, and the spiritual elite while bad traditions are “often linked with laypeople, ‘practices that gain their authority from simple iteration’” (cf. Sparrow and Hutchinson 2013: 92). Tradition in this reading is the constant tormenter of society’s most abject members. This assumption is reflected in the Islamic Movement’s concern with purifying and authenticating the Islamic tradition, an agenda amply documented in the work of Mahmood and other ethnographers (e.g., Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2006). The result in places like Jordan has been a continual struggle to save *Islam*, as a purified discursive tradition, from *‘adāt wa taqālid* (lowbrow customs and blind repetition).

As Dr. Nidal excoriated the backwardness of local traditions around the wedding night and consummation, he turned to another long-running point of contention between Islamic law and local custom: the relevance of female *bukāra* (virginity) to marriage. “There are,” he said, “some women who don’t

⁹ Despite being eminently useful, medicine (especially Galenic medicine) has long been identified by the Islamic scholarly elite as a major vector of heterodox philosophical ideas, including Aristotelianism and Platonism (Al-Ghazali 2002; D’Ancona 2005; Wisnovsky 2005).

have a hymen. Maybe 10% of women don't have one. Remember: it is a very small hole, but it can grow to 12 or 14 centimeters in childbirth because of the head of the baby. But there isn't always blood [after first sexual intercourse]. My first daughter didn't have blood. This is very serious. This could affect the other daughters too." The men were hushed and concerned and nodded. The doctor continued, "and my daughter is an absolutely lawful girl. Luckily, we went to the doctor and brought a report and the other family accepted it." Campaigning against virginity tests is a long-running concern of Islamic leaders in the region. Judith Tucker notes in her study of three seventeenth century Ottoman muftis in Syria and Palestine that they were "unanimous... in their condemnation of the practice," basing their reasoning on the same medical arguments as Dr. Nidal about how the hymen can be "damaged or destroyed in a number of ways, including by accident or illness" (Tucker 1998: 67-68).

At this point, Dr. Nidal began running out of things to say, returning to his mantra: slowly, slowly. "Try one or two times only. "If no blood comes out, don't try five times! If there's a lot of blood coming out, go to a doctor. It's getting better now... but people used to die. Are there any questions?" The director, Dr. Mufid, also asked, "Are there any questions?" The room was quiet. Dr. Mufid said, "And if any of you have questions later..." One of the men blurted out, "Give me your phone number!" Immediately, every man pulled out his phone and saved Dr. Nidal's number. They begged for a cigarette break, but Dr. Mufid asked them to wait for the women to finish so they could distribute the certificates. A man joked, "So we can hang it on the wall?" Another said, "Theoretical and, next week, practical!" The women's

discussion dragged on and on. Dr. Nidal tried to return to important points: “Take [information] from cultured and religious sources.” He also emphasized, “Give her her right. She is your partner in all things—even sexual matters. One way or the other it’s important she’s happy. She can go to the judge [and ask for divorce on these grounds]... And if she doesn’t have religion she will [commit adultery] because of the tension.” Here, the ideal of the wholly rational male head of household confronted an alternative figure: the self-centered fool who brings his own cuckolding upon himself.

Dr. Nidal spoke about how he had gotten involved with the organization in the 1990s when he saw young men putting off marriage and the government’s unwillingness to address the problem. “A lot of people damage their daughters,” he said. “Now with the phones and Internet and Facebook, the men and women can meet. Thank God! In every house there’s a spinster.” He talked about his own family history: studying medicine in Germany in the 1970s and living cheaply. He met a “lawful girl” and her father “thank god” said, “It is enough that you are a good Muslim.” He described their wedding: “We made [chicken and rice] for maybe ten or fifteen people and got an apartment.” Imagining a greater governmental role in solving the country’s marriage crisis, he suggested the creation of a national marriage fund, which he said had been successful in Malaysia: “When a young man turns 18, he gets a thousand or two to marry.”

The doctor’s presentation, despite carrying with it an elaborate and sustained critique of traditional Arab patriarchal gender roles, was far less dependent on his medical expertise and Western education than one might initially think. To the contrary, this belief in the perfectibility of human nature

through Islamic discipline and the dangers of practices that gain authority through sheer repetition is quite old and widespread. The same holds for the “practical representations” of men as selfish, profligate, potentially violent, and neglectful of their kin duties. Such representations even have a somewhat “official” basis: the frequently-invoked specter of ignorance embedded in the term *jāhiliyya*. Now commonly glossed as “ignorance,” William Shepherd reminds us that it also means, “a tendency to go to extremes of behavior, whether in violence, revenge, boasting, drinking, or even generosity, and was sometimes even considered a virtue” (2013: 269-270). Within the Chastity Society’s etiology of ignorance, however, the causes of *jāhiliyya* are not the frailties of human nature, but rather the community’s excessive and unnatural attempts to restrain youth sexuality. Perversely, these forms of vulgar custom grow out of excessive passions and also foster them, ‘damaging’ daughters while driving men to pornography, homosexuality, and marital dysfunction, potentially leaving all in a state of moral abjection. In response, the Chastity Society envisions itself, possibly aided in the future by the state, as working to restrain the excessive masculine passions of the youth to save their humanity.

“The Rights and Duties of the Spouses”: Islamic Antecedents

Dr. Samir’s talk, entitled “the rights and duties of the spouses,” would attempt to correct these forms of excessive masculinity by drawing on a rich discourse within Islamic jurisprudence related to proper gender roles and how blind tradition can undermine them. Dr. Samir, a conscientious representative of Jordan’s religious judiciary, tried to banter with the crowd—unsuccessfully—as he readied the first substantial PowerPoint slide: a wall of yellow text on a black background. Rather than read from it, he said, “in all

things you have to prepare yourself. When you want to pray, you must do your ablutions. A soldier going into battle must train, have a plan, have supplies. A teacher before going to the classroom needs a plan. Marriage is like that. In order that you do not oppress.” In trying to connect with his audience, the judge attempted to explain his vision of ethical self-fashioning not just with reference to Islamic precedents (the ritual requirements surrounding prayer) but also to the ubiquitous, predominantly male institutional contexts of modern and pre-modern states (schools and the military). The imagery makes sense because the Islamic discursive tradition can both embed itself in and be generative of these sorts of state institutions. The Chastity Society’s gender discourse, precisely because it is Islamic, is associated with much older ways of ‘living through, talking about and acting on social orders characterized by domination’ (Roseberry 1994: 361).

Turning to the first slide, the sheikh said, “The first material right (*ḥaq māḍī*) of the woman is the *mahr*,” using a word that can either be translated as bridewealth (a payment for the bride’s family) or alimony (a payment for the bride herself in case of divorce). Again, the topic was not exactly new. Tucker, writing of Ottoman Syria and Palestine in the seventeenth century, reports that the mufti of Ramla, Imad Khayr al-Din, “waged a campaign of sorts against the manifold ways in which family interests worked to erode a woman’s right to her *mahr*” (1998: 54). In the same spirit, Dr. Samir continued, “Sometimes, maybe the man gives the woman 1000 dinar in front of people, and she returns it to him on Sunday?” The audience nodded along. “You know this is *ḥarām* (forbidden). The *mahr* is her right (*ḥaq*). If she returns it, this is what?” The women’s side of the room replied in unison, “*ḥarām!*” “That’s right,” Dr.

Samir continued, “it is what? Unrighteous (*āthim*).” “The *mahr* is the entrance fee (*rasūm al-dakhūl*) paid to the woman. Her person remains autonomous. Many young men don’t understand this.” Here, Dr. Samir was playing on the dual meanings of *haq* as right and price—as well as the longstanding conflict over what *mahr* is and who it is for. The idea of the woman’s person remaining autonomous also has Islamic and pre-Islamic precedent—but one which flies in the face of Christian notions of a bride who “gives her body” and her “self” to her husband through marriage (cf. Sonbol 2008: 109).

Dr. Samir moved on to the next slide, which was headed by a saying of the Prophet about *mahr* being “to enrich the friendship of his wife” and not to create “enmity.” “Does it do to request a high *mahr*?” Dr. Samir asked. The room was quiet. “Young men?” Again, silence. He tried another tack: “How many of you have *mahr*?” Dr. Mufid replied that they all did. Attempting a joke, he asked, “How many grooms think their *mahr* is too much?” A number of people glowered. “How many women think their *mahr* is too little?” There was a bit of fidgeting. Dr. Samir went on to say that it was important that the woman be respected but that the *mahr* not be more than the man could afford such that he might come to hate his wife. These dynamics too are longstanding and familiar: Tucker notes a lively jurisprudential discourse on what constituted “proper” *mahr* as a means of ensuring the *kafā’a* (suitability) of grooms. *Kafā’a* was a “one way street” (Tucker 2008: 45) concerned with determining whether a prospective husband had the financial means to support a woman. As such, it provides a fascinating window into changing legal conceptions of social and economic status.

Dr. Samir moved onto the second material right: *nafaqa* (allowance). He asked, “How many of the men don’t work?” One man raised his hand a bit but thought better of it. No one else raised a hand. Dr. Samir continued, “Anything you eat, give some to your wife to satisfy her. As you dress, dress her. Not in pants and shirt!” The room laughed at this. Pleased with himself, Dr. Samir smiled and continued, “I mean from the same class. The husband is the one who brings the wealth and the wife is the one who preserves it.” He switched the slide to the next one: “obedience” (*al-ṭa‘a*). “If a man goes out every day and eats barbequed lamb while his wife buys her own bread, is this right?” he asked. The room replied, “NO!” He continued, “And if the wife eats barbequed lamb and the husband eats bread?” The room replied, less enthusiastically, “No.” Dr. Samir corrected them. “Actually that’s fine. As long as he’s satisfied: it’s his choice.” Next, he asked, “If a woman’s father gives her 100 dinar, can the husband take it and hide it or spend it? No. It’s her autonomous (*mustaqila*) wealth.” All of this was, of course, the stuff of village gossip and Peletz’s “practical representations.” Everyone knew that excessive feasting and “borrowing” money from one’s wife constituted forbidden forms of oppression that were, sadly, all too common. Amira Sonbol’s study of Islamic and pre-Islamic marriage contracts provides evidence that these conflicts are incredibly longstanding: “Words like *kafā‘a*, *nafaqa*, *ṭā‘a*, the description of marriage as *mawadda wa-rahma* (companionship and mercy), the husband’s responsibility for clothing his wife and housing her as expected of her class or *mathīlatihā*, all have resonance in pre-Islamic contracts” (2008: 93)¹⁰.

¹⁰ As Frances Hasso notes, these rights are at odds with the gender norms enshrined in

Tucker describes the rights and duties of marriage in Islamic Law as a confluence of the “twin doctrines” of *nafaqa* (maintenance) and *nashūz* (disobedience). She argues that jurists, “constructed the wife as her husband’s dependent, but as a dependent with definite entitlements” (Tucker 2008: 50-52). Dr. Samir’s presentation approached this most patriarchal aspect of Islamic jurisprudence through two slides, entitled “The woman leaving the house” and “The right of discipline.” Of interest here is not the Chastity Society’s wholesale acceptance of this patriarchal ideal, but rather how the patriarchal ideal itself is predicated on the presumed ability of the Islamic discursive tradition to discipline excessive masculine passions. The first slide, in framing the issue of the woman’s right to leave, shifted the focus away from an earlier debate among jurists about what Tucker calls, “the tricky issue of the parameters of a husband’s rights to wifely obedience versus his wife’s religious and broader familial duties” (2008: 53). Instead, he asked, “Can the woman leave the house without permission?” The room loudly responded, “No.” Dr. Samir continued, “Will you young men give permission?” The room

contemporary international treaties, which are based on “total gender equality with regard to housing provision, economic maintenance of the marital home and children, and child support.” Yet Hasso argues that, “this ‘traditional’ logic may explain why poverty and economic wellbeing in Arab countries are not necessarily feminized and masculinized” (2009:67). Of course, as Abu Lughod has noted, the tendency is to ignore such areas where Arab and Muslim women fare better than women elsewhere, which include “sweatshop exploitation, HIV/AIDS, eating disorders, substance abuse, famine, the feminization of poverty, and violence, both domestic and genocidal” (2005:86). However, as both Hasso and Abu Lughod argue, it would be difficult to interest Muslim audiences in a broader global feminist project without first exploring how challenging such women’s prerogatives might burden Muslim women with new vulnerabilities.

was quiet, but one man said, “According to the request.” Dr. Samir then directly contradicted him by listing the reasons why women could leave the house with or without permission:

- To request their right
- To request their allowance (*nafaqa*)
- To ask questions of scholars
- Because of emergencies in the spousal residence
- To receive permission for divorce
- For familial visits

Dr. Samir said that it was important to ask permission anyway and to do so nicely since, “*ibn an-nās* (a decent young man) would never say ‘Don’t visit your family.’” He added that a woman has a right to visit her parents every week and her aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters once a year. Summing up, he said, “There is mercy in the Sharia.” The women let out a long and spirited note of assent.

Dr. Samir switched the slide forward and yet another block of yellow text on black background appeared. At the top, it read, “The right of discipline.” Once again, Dr. Samir managed to emphasize the need for male restraint. His model here was a much-remarked upon verse of the Quran that has been taken by some jurists as “justification for beating disobedient wives”: “And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them” (4:34, Quoted in Tucker 2008: 55). In Dr. Samir’s hands, however, the verse became a set of stringent ritual demands. He explained to the men: “First, talk with excellent words. Say that the house is dirty and that you would like it to be clean.” He supplied a number of ways a man could register his displeasure while showing the proper degree of respect. “Second, turn your face away from her (*tiba ‘id wijihak minha*). Let’s say you return and the house is dirtier than ever. Keep away from her so that she knows the reason

and knows that you want the house to be clean.” This was his euphemistic way of emphasizing that a man may not simply hit his wife in anger: he must make a conscious decision to cease sexual relations with her after attempts at dialogue have failed. The implication of Dr. Samir’s counsel was that losing control and acting out violently while in a state of ritual impurity would delegitimize a man’s pretensions to rationality and leadership over the household—that the husband would be disgraced rather than the disobedient wife. He trailed off and paused before continuing, “Third, a justifiable blow. Not with a stick or something hard.” A man from the audience chimed in, “A hose!” Dr. Samir retorted, “This is supposed to be light. Just so she knows that you are angry.”

Silence settled over the room. “How many of you read the Quran daily?” Dr. Samir asked. No one raised their hand. “Yearly?” A few hands went up. “Who doesn’t pray?” One person raised his hand. He repeated his questions for the women: some read the Quran every day. Most read it every year. They all prayed. He said, “It’s important to read the Quran to know about your creation.” Dr. Samir then said, “There are hormones. Do you know what hormones are? Sometimes she’s angry without reason when she’s pregnant, after she gives birth, before she gives birth. She says, ‘I’m mad. Why are you wearing black?’ Just say you’re sorry and go along with her.” This invocation of hormones to excuse—and naturalize—female irrationality is in keeping with Peletz’s observations that rationality and its absence are qualities of both genders. Yet if female passions were dismissed as manifestations of *hormonāt*, they were not seen as in need of transformation in the way male passions were.

Dr. Samir concluded his presentation by saying, “Marriage is a religious duty for us. Prayer is the first duty, but marriage is very important.” He solicited questions and, not receiving any, he began to quiz the audience. He asked, “What are the rights? I want to hear from the men.” There was more silence. A few people shouted out: “obedience, respect.” Then a woman said, “Being able to leave the home.” Dr. Samir asked, “When can the woman leave the home?” Unlike the men, a number of the women had taken careful notes, especially on key points like reasons for leaving the house and the protocol for striking a wife. They gave verbatim accounts of what had been said on these topics. Dr. Mufid responded, “See, young men? These women have been taking notes on the paper we gave them. I will give them prizes after this is over.” A man said, “Thank you for your presentation. But you didn’t talk about one important point. Sometimes women bring bad guests to the house. Their female friends cause problems. Is this not allowed?”

The question reflected the respectful yet visibly cool reception Dr. Samir that the sheikh was receiving from the men. In contrast to the women, who were eagerly taking notes and engaging in call-and-response, the men mostly sat stiffly and humorlessly in their chairs throughout. As if to counter Dr. Samir’s presentation, the man’s question shifted the onus for marital harmony away from the husband and onto the wife. Dr. Samir assented, “Yes. The man can forbid any woman ... or man! ... from coming to the house if he isn’t satisfied with them.” With that, Dr. Samir said “Congratulations, God willing” and the men responded in unison with a spirited, “God bless you, too.” The women left first to get their refreshments. Once they had finished

and gone into the designated women's break room, the men burst forth to smoke.

What was surprising was the degree to which the young men had been won over by the end of the day despite their initial awkwardness and their mockery of Dr. Samir. By the end, they eagerly took the speakers' phone numbers and seemed keen to avail themselves of their advice and admonition in the future. The seductiveness of the Chastity Society's discourse seemed to flow from its ability to simultaneously criticize and reify patriarchal gender roles. This meant extensively codifying the support and protection that men are expected to provide for women, but doing so in ways that ultimately equip men to discipline women better and more responsibly. The resulting marital climate might be improved, but is it new? Is it even exclusively Muslim? As Sonbol's research shows, the Islamic technical vocabulary of *kafā'a* (suitability), *nafaqa* (financial support), and *ṭā'a* (obedience) that undergirds the gender paradigm endorsed by the Chastity Society has deep pre-Islamic antecedents.

The persistence of such terms within the Islamic discursive tradition suggests that they may be crucial inflection points through which Muslim reformers, engaging with gendered and generational conflicts, have penetrated otherwise disinterested or hostile communities. The Indian legal scholar Flavia Agnes has gone so far as to argue that these Islamic legal concepts have in fact actively shaped *Western* family law since the colonial period. She quotes an 1867 ruling of the Privy Council upholding the ruling of a court in colonial India, which remarked, "Distinction must be drawn between the rights of a Mohammedan and a Hindu woman. In all that concerns her power over her property, the former is, by law, far more independent, in fact even more

independent than an English woman.” She argues that such rulings, by recognizing “a wide range of rights based on women’s active agency” under Islamic law, “not only safeguarded the rights of Muslim women, but also served to expand the boundaries of matrimonial law in general” (Agnes 2011: 4). Of course, as Agnes herself is well aware, such attempts to “lend credence to the claims of the weak against the *status-quo*-ist institutions” (2011: 13) constitute a highly fraught and contradictory project that is bound to remain on the margins of those institutions. Yet this might not make such a project any less contagious. In fact, such projects might emerge precisely where competing discursive traditions begin to bump up against one another, inexorably drawing otherwise distinct traditions into a shared language of contention.

The Chastity Society’s training course was a discursive collision of precisely this kind. Its moral integrity was expressed in terms understood to be quintessentially Muslim, and explicit contrast to non-Muslim ideas and practices only intensified this sense of a distinctive religious tradition. Even the relentless appeal to rights (*huqūq*) could not be confused with Western liberalism, though Western liberalism was its obvious foil, and the status of women was its ideological test. The Chastity Society’s agenda was as much comparative as it was critical, and it could be so only if a certain amount of overlap with its objects of critique—tradition and the West—could be held in place.

This overlap has both geographic and historical dimensions, and this gives ‘tradition’ a centrality to these ideological encounters that anthropologists cannot easily ignore. Arguably, it is when the incitement to discourse around gender and Islam is strongest that we should be most

skeptical about the ‘inventedness’ of those discourses. The risk is that, in the rush to explain a sudden spike in (for example) Western interest in saving Muslim women and disciplining Muslim men, we will ignore the degree to which protective impulses, manifest in diverse forms, are also present in Muslim societies, where they have been active and continually reinforced by broader social structures over time. “Framing women’s problems” by “opposing allegedly universal standards and local religio-cultural norms” is not just a post-9/11 fad or even a “classic liberal feminist formulation” (cf. Abu Lughod 2009: 94). It is far older than liberalism, the idea of “the West,” or Islam itself¹¹. Male Islamic authority has always rested to a degree on the notion that women must be protected from excessive masculine passions borne of a surrender to unthinking tradition. It follows that no matter how insincere Western attempts at humanitarian rescue may be, no matter how tone-deaf their particulars, they can never be morally unintelligible to a Muslim audience. On the other hand, these humanitarian motifs are unlikely to win praise for breaking new ground—especially if they fail to consider the terms in which Muslim women already articulate and contest their place in their communities.

Conclusion

One of the most obvious effects of such disciplinary projects is their ability to create a sense of inside and outside, self and other—and to break it down. Ewing writes that, “abjection is thus the process of maintaining a sense

¹¹ Kraemer’s (1992) work on women’s religions in the ancient world offers a skeptical review of debates on the relative role of universal standards and particularistic local norms in mediating women’s religious experiences in the Hellenic, pre-Islamic world.

of wholeness of identity by casting out that which is felt to be improper or dangerous to the integrity of the self” (2008:3). There was an uncomfortable interplay in the training course between this sense of disciplining an other and the more familiar *self*-disciplining that Agrama (2010), Mahmood (2005), Asad (1986), and Hirschkind (2006) attribute to the Islamic revival. One might note here the important distinction in Islamic teachings between the greater and lesser *jihads*: the greater (internal) struggle being superior to the lesser (external) struggle. Ultimately, for the Chastity Society, the bridging of differences in class, values, and educational attainment between activists and beneficiaries proved to be a difficult, but surmountable task. By the end of the day, the activists had successfully mobilized a combination of official and practical representations to make arguments about how best to discipline one’s self in harmony with the order of things—up to and including paying for people’s weddings when parents were unable or unwilling to help. This was one of a whole host of conflicts intrinsic to widespread kinship patterns in Jordan that the Chastity Society could use to *act upon* a nominally Muslim community of which it was already part.

Clearly, this is also the putative aspiration of the forms of Western humanitarian rescue discourse targeting the abjected figures of the Muslim woman and the Muslim man. Driven by a negative urge to de-identify with certain models of gender, both Islamist and Western participants in this shared language of contention grapple with contradictory claims to universality and particularity, seeking the broadest range of action and the narrowest range of ethical self-compromise. Ironically, however, as they seek to stigmatize their rivals, these actors contribute to a widespread and increasingly coherent set of

assumptions about men and women. Whether we adopt Roseberry's Gramscian terminology of "hegemonic" and "subaltern" or Peletz' more Bourdieuan language of "official" and "practical" representations of kinship, we can begin to see how certain governing forms can emerge not by conscious design but rather from the agonistic and polemical clashes of forces who do not yet understand that they are working in tandem—in service of projects that they may not even fully comprehend.

Even the purest of intentions need not lead to a situation wherein disciplining Muslim men destabilizes the long-running alliance between patriarchy and the repressive powers of the state¹². In fact, both the Western and Islamic versions of this disciplinary project seem to share a tendency to reify and naturalize a set of problematic gender roles defined by male aggression and female vulnerability—the very things they seek to overcome. The power imbalance and conflict between the genders constitutes a means through which social actors can hope to act by claiming to fully comprehend the natural or divine order of things from a position of detached, reflexive exteriority. These are the makings of a language of contention around the humanitarian rescue of women that, paradoxically, ensures that its speakers will generate vivid perceptions of difference and mutual incomprehension as they act out their underlying agreement on what, in the shared worlds of men and women, is most worthy of dispute.

¹² Mounira Charrad (2001) offers a broadly comparative primer on the workings of this alliance between religious reformers, the state, and the patriarchal household in contemporary North Africa.

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