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**“Private is Political”:  
Women and Family in Intellectual Islam**

In 2000, two Egyptian public intellectuals—an avowed secularist and an Islamist—squared off in a textual debate about *al-Mar’a, al-Din, wa al-Akhlāq* (Woman, Religion, and Morals).<sup>1</sup> Both women write extensively on gender issues: Nawal El Saadawi, a prolific novelist and critic, argues that the only path to women’s liberation is through “separation from religion”; Hiba Ra’uf, a young star of the Islamist movement, calls for launching “a new women’s liberation movement—an Islamic one” (El Saadawi and Ra’uf 2000: 97-132; Ra’uf 1994: 27).<sup>2</sup> The book is structured as a diametric opposition between the secular and religious, belying not only how these discourses mutually depend on the each other for definition, but also certain parallels in their perspectives on gender relations, women’s roles, and the family. In this article, I draw on Talal Asad’s (2007) notion that secularism helped produce contemporary religiosity, partly by localizing religion in particular places and sets of relationships. I specifically look at how the Islamic revival has invested the sacred in the sphere of the family and in a specific model of gender relationships. Islamic scholarship grounds this perspective in the foundational texts of Islam, the Qur’an and Sunna, but the particular historical circumstances of secular encroachment on the region—first through colonial administration and then through authoritarian governance—helped generate a vision of Islamic politics and religious leadership, one inordinately invested in the politics of the family. Islamic liberalism, developed in opposition to these forms of illiberal secularism, calls for democracy, freedom, equality, and rights, but all the while maintaining gendered hierarchies in the family. Even though such hierarchies contradict liberalism’s embrace of equal citizenship, feminist criticism sees gender inequality in the sexual contract as one of liberalism’s constitutive elements.

Hiba Ra'uf's recent book *al-Mar'a wa al-'Amal al-Siyasi: Ru'ya Islamiya* (Woman and Political Work: An Islamic Perspective, 1995) elaborates her ideas about an Islamic gender politics touched on in the El Saadawi debate. I focus on her main thesis: the family is the basic political unit of the Islamic community or nation (the Umma). Her thesis is both feminist and Islamist, as she claims that "politics is personal," or, as she says, "private is political" (1994: 27).<sup>3</sup> This political agenda situates her firmly in the contemporary Islamic movement, with roots that can be traced back to the Nahda, the liberal reform movement at the turn of the nineteenth century. By defining the family as the political unit of the Umma, Ra'uf challenges one of liberal secularism's defining precepts: the division between public and private, politics and the family. She criticizes the division of labor in liberalism that equates politics with male agency and the domestic sphere with feminine dependency. But even as she contests liberal secularism with feminist and Islamist critical methods, she subscribes to some of its most basic assumptions. First, she effectively sacralizes the affective bonds of intimate relations, making the family the natural domain of religion. She also appeals to liberal values by claiming that the Islamic family is democratic, a contract entered into through free choice, reflecting the "hegemony that liberalism commands as a political ideal for many contemporary Muslim intellectuals" (Mahmood, 2003: 18). Finally, she describes a division of labor that is both natural and sacred, where men are guardians and women guarded, men leaders and women led, men authorities and women the obedient. She asserts democracy and equality as political ideals, but simultaneously a family structured by gendered hierarchies.

Ra'uf's work is a product of the Islamic revival of the nineties, but her understanding of family and political leadership goes back to the Nahda (Hatem, 2002). Nahda is often translated as the Arab renaissance or enlightenment, but the term actually means

“awakening” or “arising” which connects it to the current Islamic awakening (known as the *sahwa* or *yaqza*). Tariq al-Bishri, one of the leading liberal thinkers associated with the Islamic movement, introduces *Woman and Political Work* by describing Ra’uf as a promising scholar of the “arising” (*nahid*) generation, “stimulants of catalytic change...working to bring about an awakening (*nahda*) of Islamic knowledge” (1995: 16, 29). The historical roots of Ra’uf’s perspective can be found in the liberal thought of Muhammad ‘Abduh, a pioneer of *salafism* and arguably the most important thinker of the Islamic reform movement (Hourani, 2007: 130-160).<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, the intellectual legacy of the Nahda was “revived” by Muhammad ‘Imara, a leading public intellectual connected with the Islamist movement. ‘Imara published the complete works, with detailed analysis and criticism, of a number of key figures of the Nahda.<sup>5</sup> Two of these volumes were: *al-‘Amal al-Kamila li Muhammad ‘Abduh* (The Complete Works of Muahmmad ‘Abduh, 1972) and *al-Mar’a wa al-Islam fi Ra’i al-Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh* (Woman and Islam in the Opinion of the Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh, 1975). In the six volume collected works, ‘Imara makes the case for ‘Abduh’s central role in re-defining gender roles for his generation, claiming that he wrote sections of Qasim Amin’s *Tabrir al-Mar’a* (The Liberation of Woman, 1899). *The Liberation of Woman* was a controversial work that argued for reforms in women’s status, but mainly with the aim of bringing their duties in line with the requirements of a bourgeois household (Cole, 1981; Shakry, 1998). Amin situated his call for women’s liberation within the framework of Islam, arguing with reference to Islamic texts and sources that “the Islamic legal system, the Shari’a, stipulated the equality of women and men before any other legal system. Islam declared women’s freedom and emancipation, and granted women all human rights during a time when women occupied the lowest status in all societies...These advantages have not yet been attained by some contemporary Western women, yet they demonstrate that respect for

women and for their equality with men were basic to the principles of the liberal Shari'a" (2000:7). The claim that 'Abduh helped write the book is unsubstantiated, but the idea has circulated widely in academic circles (Cole, 1981; Zuhur, 1992; Ahmed, 1998). 'Abduh's religious authority has legitimized the liberation of woman for the Islamic awakening. My analysis focuses on 'Abduh and Ra'uf's analogous exegeses of key verses from the Qur'an (mainly 2:228, 4:21, 4:34, 30:21, and 30:30). Both thinkers present a timeless "Islamic perspective" grounded in the Qur'an, but interpret the text through hermeneutics inflected by liberalism and the political context of their time. For 'Abduh, this was British colonial rule; for Ra'uf, President Hosni Mubarak's "authoritarian reversal" of the "partial liberalization" policies of his predecessor Anwar Sadat (Wickham, 2002: 200).

Ra'uf is a celebrated junior member of the Islamist movement, a visible presence in international conferences, public debates, and the Islamic press. She edited the "women's page" of the Muslim Brotherhood newspaper *al-Sha'b* (The People) until it was shut down in 1997, participated in a "youth dialogue" between Islamists and secularists in 1994, and has presented at international conferences, most notably on the subjects of democracy in Egypt and on women's rights and equality in Islam (Ra'uf 1994: 26; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1998; Ra'uf 2002; Ra'uf 2003). Ra'uf is the fruit of a "growing circle of intellectuals who write and comment upon contemporary affairs in the popular press from a self-described Islamic point of view" (Mahmood, 2005: 3).<sup>6</sup> Ra'uf exemplifies a new kind of scholarship that has flourished since Sadat lifted restrictions on Islamic publishing in the early 1970s. Since then, there has been a boom in 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>7</sup> This body of literature has substantially influenced public discourse in Egypt; this world of Islamic letters has helped construct what

might be called an Islamic public sphere in Egypt, through the vast circulation and dissemination of sermons, videos, cassettes, and pamphlets. The issue of gender relations and women's rights in Islam has become a central preoccupation of this literature. *Woman and Political Work* was originally written as Ra'uf's master's thesis at Cairo University, published when she was only 29 and a young mother. It is an astonishingly thorough work, with 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. Her revivalist thesis is supported by the theoretical paradigms of contemporary academic disciplines and scholarly conventions (extensive footnotes, headings and subheadings, literature review, etc.), as well as drawing extensively on the Islamic scriptural tradition. Her work is part of the growing body of literature, both popular and scholarly, that interprets Islam—and specifically gender relations in Islam—for contemporary audiences.

The rise in Islamic publishing was partly a result of Anwar Sadat's relaxing of restraints on Islamic activism in the 1970s. Sadat's campaign of "partial liberalization" reversed some of his predecessor Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's autocratic policies toward Islamic groups (Hatem, 1994; Wickham, 2002; Delacoura, 2007). 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*). Wickham observes that 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” (2002: 34). Wickham’s research analyzes Islamist penetration the institutions of civil society; I am more concerned with Islamic activism’s powers of persuasion, powers that have had a broad impact on public discourse in Egypt. This Islamic public discourse became increasingly concerned with defining gender issues, women’s roles, and the family within the framework of Islam (Hatem 1994, 2002; Abugideiri, 2004).<sup>8</sup> Habermas, discussing the conceptualization of the public sphere in Europe, describes how it relied on a specific definition of intimate relations, a “privateness oriented to an audience” (1991: 43). Charles Taylor, in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, characterizes the intimate domain in a similar way, as “defined through public interchange, both of literary works and of criticism. This is only superficially a paradox...A new definition of human identity, however private, can become generally accepted only through being 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). Through gendered—and religiously inflected—discourses of intimate relations, an Islamic public discourse defined itself both in relation to and against the secular government in Egypt. Ra’uf formulates her argument as a refutation of the secular state in favor of an Islamic caliphate ruling over the Umma, a refutation of secular liberalism’s model of gender relations in favor of an Islamic one. Her section on the family first outlines the Western perspective, Western political theory, and Western feminism, then moves to “The Family in the Islamic View.” In al-Bishri’s introduction, he calls the issue of gender relations the “pinnacle” of “the intellectual battle between Islamists and secularists” (1995: 17). Scholarly work on gender often reinforces these dichotomies between religion and secularism, although more recent work explores convergences and overlaps between Islamist and secular discourses (Abu Lughod, 1998; Hatem, 1994).<sup>9</sup> Both emphasize women’s primary role in the family, as both sacred and natural.

Ra'uf frames her thesis as a refutation of liberal secularism's conceptual separation of the political and personal, public and private. Islam does not know such a separation, she argues. In her first chapter, which defines the terms of her argument, *tawhid* or "unity" is her starting point. *Tawhid* is a core concept in Islam, referring to monotheism or the oneness of God, meaning nothing can be associated with God. It also helps define her subtitle—"an Islamic view"—which presents its own unified vision of Islamic politics, independent of time and place. Her approach, she writes, "proceeds from faith tied to revelation and is distinguished from the framework of positivistic, secular knowledge" (1995: 44). Ra'uf criticizes the liberal, modernist project, emanating from the Enlightenment, arguing that it has taken over all forms of knowledge. She belongs, on the contrary, to the trend criticizing this liberalism, calling for a return to religion as the source of values and the point of departure for knowledge. *Tawhid*, as a foundation for knowledge, rejects the split between religion and science, belief and reason. But it also rejects the dualistic split between religion and state, faith and politics, private and public. 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 and will be discussed in detail below.

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. Citing a wide range of political theory in both English and Arabic, Ra'uf describes how the family lost its

function as a unit of social 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). Drawing Christopher Lasch’s *Haven in a Heartless World*, she discusses how the family’s responsibility for social education was parceled 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; Berger, 1990: 240-42). 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 an “extremist secularism” that has attacked the core institutions of Islamic society, notably the family. Ra’uf’s book is one of general political theory, so she does not address the specific political context of any one state, but more broadly, the “states of the region.” However, her theory points to some of the particular features of the political situation in Egypt at the time of her book’s writing and publication. In the early 1990s, the secular government of Hosni Mubarak was involved

what Asef Bayat describes as a “semi-civil war” not just with Islamic militants, but with the institutions of Egyptian Islamism more generally (2007: 141). This “authoritarian reversal” of Sadat’s policy of “partial liberalization” resulted in the closing down of Islamic publications, barring of Islamist candidates for participation in the elections of professional organizations, incarcerating of militants, policing of mosques, and cracking down on entire neighborhoods (Wickham 2002: 200; Bayat 2007: 143-45). Bayat argues that the Islamic movement in Egypt had become a powerful grassroots social movement through the institutions of what he calls “civil Islam,” the diverse Islamic social institutions, religious welfare and professional associations, neighborhood groups and student organizations (2007: 136-37).<sup>10</sup> For Ra’uf, the family is the most important of these institutions, although she defines them not necessarily as part of civil society, but of political Islam. The government cracked down on these institutions in the 1990s, seeking to stem their growing influence. This political stand off appears to directly inform Ra’uf’s observations about the encroachment of the secular state on the institutions of the umma. 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 group (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.

Ra'uf sees the family as the microcosm of the Umma, a perspective that has a long history in the region, going back to colonial and missionary discourses that saw the position of women as the reason for Egyptian "backwardness (Amin, 1899; Ra'uf 1995: 196, 204; 'Imara, 1975; Shakry, 1998; Abugideiri, 2004). This also became a characteristic of Egyptian national discourse, that called for the reform of women's position to in order to raise up the nation as a whole. This understanding of the connection between the health of the family unit and the larger community of believers likewise became a key idea in the Islamic revival. In 'Imara's collection *Islam and Woman in the Opinion of the Imam Muhammad 'Abdub*, he highlights this in a quotation opening the book. "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 this volume on women to the "Egyptian, Muslim, and Eastern family" (1975: 4). The only way to cure the social ills plaguing the region is by curing the ills plaguing the family. The solution for both, he says, is the Islamic *shari'a*. Ra'uf approximates this argument, about the family, the Umma, Islamic law, government, and leadership in her own thesis. The family in contemporary Islamic thought, one scholar observes, is seen as 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, 2002: 232).

In defining the main characteristics of Islamic politics, Ra'uf models an Islamic form of just and democratic government that stands in contrast to 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>11</sup> *Shura*, or counsel, has been widely interpreted—and widely contested—as an Islamic version of democracy. While *shura* is extremely contested, Ra’uf herself defines it as democracy in an interview with *Middle East Reports*. “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). Her application of *shura* to the family, not just to the larger community of the Umma, the imamate, or the caliphate, is innovative. *Qiwama* is generally interpreted as “guardianship,” but defined by Ra’uf as “leadership” (*riyasa*) that generally refers to the leadership of the head of state. She uses it in 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: 200-01). Based on 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 the authoritarian secular states of the region.

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.

“Men are the guardians of women by what God has preferred some of them over others and by what they spend of their money.”<sup>12</sup> 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.” Different renderings include: “Husbands are the protectors and maintainers of their wives Because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other” (Abdullah Yusuf Ali); “Men are the supporters of the women, by what God has given one more than the other” (Thomas Cleary); “Men are the support of women as God gives some more means than others” (Ahmed Ali); “Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other” (Mawdudi).<sup>13</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 favor 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; Wadud, 1999; Qutb, 2000). Based on 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. The reference to "degree" in the quote above refers to 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, it does not mean that "one is raised over the other," or that men are superior biologically, emotionally, and intellectually. The roots of this kind of interpretation—the simultaneous assertion of equality and hierarchy—can be found in the liberal thought of the Nahda. Ra'uf's interpretations of these key Qur'anic verses (4:34 and 2:228) echoes some of the ideas of Muhammad 'Abduh.<sup>14</sup> I am not arguing that Ra'uf either took from 'Abduh or was influenced by him. By the time Ra'uf published *Woman and Political Work* these concepts had become such an integral part of Islamic scholarship and thought that they are woven into the very intellectual fabric of her thesis. The liberal valorization of equality, yet the assertion of male leadership is a constant motif. 'Abduh combines guardianship (*qiwama* of verse 4:34), leadership (*riyasa*), and men's degree (of verse 2:228), arguing that men's role in the family is one of governance thanks to the "law of nature" (Imara, 1975: 58). The "degree" of the husband over the wife is the degree of leadership (*riyasa*), the same terminology Ra'uf uses.<sup>15</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'á*) 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. Neither use language carelessly; both indicate men's spiritual right to leadership over women. 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.

Paradoxically, Imara groups these texts under a chapter entitled "Equality between Man and Woman." 'Abduh's exegesis of verse 2:228 of the Qur'an epitomizes the equality/hierarchy paradox. ("They have rights like those rights fairly demanded of them, and men have a degree over them.") The first part of the verse indicates equality between a husband and wife, men and women: "It is desirable that the rights between them are mutual and they are equal...they are equivalent in rights and deeds, just as they are equivalent in essence and in the senses, in feelings and intellect. Each of the two of them is a complete human being that has an intellect...and a heart with which to love...It is unjust if one of the two sexes dominates the other, taking the other as a slave that he oppresses and uses for his own interest, especially after the marriage contract and a shared life that cannot be happy except with mutual respect and mutual rights" (Imara, 1975: 56). The second part of the verse refers to a "division of labor" between husband and wife. 'Abduh cites a *hadith* in which the Prophet says that Fatima's work is in the home, whereas 'Ali's work is outside the

home. This is the division of labor between the two spouses: the woman's task is to manage the house and perform the work inside it, and the man's task is to strive and earn outside it. This is the "equivalence" between them (Imara, 1975: 61). The relationship of the ruler to the ruled, of the leader and the led, of guardianship and the guarded, is the "division of labor" between them. The second part of the *hadith* emphasizes women's obedience in stark terms, using religious imagery of the ritual practice of kneeling in prayer to describe women's duty and obedience to men. "If there was any situation in which I commanded a person to prostrate themselves to another, then I would command the woman to prostrate herself to her husband" (Imara, 1975: 61).

The legitimizing claim of equality, and the simultaneous assertion of gendered hierarchies (or "difference") is characteristic of liberal discourse, argues Wendy Brown in an essay on "Liberalism's Family Values." This discourse obscures the "sexual division of labor" that it "presumes to transcend (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: 283-84). 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, 1990; Qutb, 2000). "What is striking about this body of literature,"

observes Hibba Abugideiri in an essay on 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamic thought, “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>16</sup> But Abugideiri demonstrates that women’s primary spiritual and legal rights have been sacrificed to a certain 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 (Shakry, 1998; Abugideiri, 2004). Others have shown the overlaps and similarities between secularist and Islamist discourses on “women’s gendered difference” (Hatem, 1994: 664; also see Abu-Lughod, 1998). 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 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 (divorce, marriage, inheritance, domestic disputes) (Asad, 2003: 211). Secular courts, based on the Napoleonic code, administered all other cases (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 theorist of the laws of personal status observes that the “relegation of *shari’a* law to matters of family 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... The limiting of the *shari’a*’s jurisdiction served to create ‘the family’ both as a private space and one that was central to political order” (Bier, 2006: 149-50). Asad recognizes that this is related to the process of secularization: “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).

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. Brown observes that liberalism “rests upon mechanical foundations’ and therefore appears equally compatible with Chinese post-Confucian post-Maoism and Iranian Islamic fundamentalism” (1995: 136). In liberalism, the family is seen as both natural and divinely ordained, as “outside history” (Brown, 1995: 145, 147). Ra’uf and ‘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 of intuition when referring to the human being’s innate character or natural disposition (Lane, 1955: 2416; Wehr, 1994: 842). “Raise your face truly toward religion the creation of God [*fitrat Allah*] according to which he created [*fatara*] people” (Qur’an 30:30). Both Ra’uf and ‘Abduh 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 tranquility*. This is a trait at the core of human nature [*fitra*] according to God’s creation” (1995: 187). Love, mercy, and tranquility 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 tranquility with them. And he put love and mercy between you” (30:21). ‘Abduh similarly draws on these two verses to refer to the “order of the instinct” (*nizam al-fitra*), he is describing 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).

This is an intuitive contract (*mithaq fitri*) that is among the most sacred of contracts and most intensely binding. Indeed the human being grasps this meaning through the human senses, contemplating this state that God established between man and his woman, finding that the woman is weaker than the man and that she dedicates herself to him and submits to him with the knowledge that he is capable of violating her rights. On what does this dedication and this submission rely? What guarantee does she have, what is the contract that she enters into?...What, beyond desire, settles into her nature? That thing is a divine knowledge and an intuitive knowledge laying down in her the inclination to a special bond she had not promised before, a special trust she did not have with her own family, and a special affection who has no other place but in the husband, the lord (*al-ba’l*). 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... This is centered in the depths of our souls—with God’s utterance that with marriage, women entered into a sacred contract with men (Imara, 1975: 75-6).

Through this contract, this treaty, this pact, this covenant, 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 in the Opinion of the Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh.”

The meaning of *fitra* is expanded in ‘Abduh and Ra’uf’s interpretations, to encompass a range of social roles, including the division of labor 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 (*suman ijtima’iya*). *Suman* 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 *suman* 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, 2008: 874, 878). 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 *suman* 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.<sup>17</sup> The family structured by primal human nature and social mores, by intuition and legal dictates. It is an institution that is simultaneously sacred and immanent. As Abugideiri observes in her analysis of contemporary Islamic texts on gender, “The 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 n92&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: 246-47).<sup>18</sup> 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 defense" 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, 1978: 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).

In her assertion of the political nature of the Islamic family, Ra'uf sets out to undermine the foundations of liberalism. 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 establish 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: that the family is 1. divinely ordained, 2. the sphere proper of religion, 3. structured by a natural (and instinctual) division of labor, 4. women's principal realm of activity, 5. headed by the husband and 6. the "basic unit of political analysis." Even though she sets out to politicize—and hence enhance the value of—the domestic sphere, her argument has the effect of re-inscribing the primacy of women's connection to the family, to the social, and to the sphere of affective relations, even as she claims its political nature. In an interview, Rauf calls for "breaking the dichotomy" between the politics and the home. Doing so "would give housewives more social esteem and would encourage working women to fulfill their psychological need to be good mothers and wives" (1994: 27). Nowhere is there a parallel mention of rewarding men's work within the home or their

psychological need to be good fathers and husbands. “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, first in the form of 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 democratic model of politics in the region, a model of religious government, and a model of male leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> A simplified transliteration style has been used, based on the accepted conventions of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. I retain the conventional rendering of El Saadawi’s name in her work translated into English.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I use “Islamic” to distinguish a religiously oriented framework of Islam, in the way Ra’uf uses it in her writings, rather than the more cultural connotation of “Muslim.” “Islamist” is mainly used to refer to the broader political and social movement associated with the Islamic awakening or the Islamic revival. Two other definitions of Islamism will be explored below, one by Saba Mahmood (2005) and the other by Asef Bayat (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ra’uf draws extensively on Western feminist criticism, mainly Carole Pateman’s “Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy” (1983). For further discussion of the subject in Western feminism, see Linda J. Nicholson’s (1986) “Feminist Practice: The Personal is Political” (1986: 17-66) in *Gender and History* and Susan Moller Okin’s “Challenging the Public/Domestic Dichotomy” in *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (1989: 110-132).

<sup>4</sup> *Salafism* is, in general terms, the call to return to the original texts of Islam, mainly to the Qur’an and sound Sunna (reports on the words and example of the prophet Muhammad).

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Hourani describes ‘Abduh’s perspective: “The early umma, the community of the elders, the salaf was what the umma ought to be.” ‘Abduh uses the term “to refer to the central tradition of Sunni Islam in its period of development” (2007: 149).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Imara published the complete works of Jamal al-Din Afghani (1968), ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1970), Muhammad ‘Abuh (1972), ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (1972), and Qasim Amin (1976). Bayat describes ‘Imara as a “modernist voice” among a “handful of ‘Islamic liberals’...all of whom appeared to speak the language of *tamwir* (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).

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the growth of religious institutions like private mosques and Islamic associations, Bayat describes the flourishing in Islamic books, pamphlets, and religious cassettes. “In 1994, more than a quarter of all books published were religious, a 25 percent increase since 1985, and Islamic books constituted 85 percent of those sold during the 1995 Cairo book fair. Recordings of Islamic figures such as Shaykh Kishk, which numbered over a thousand, sold in the millions. Dozens of Islamic newspapers, weeklies, and monthlies were

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in high circulation. Radio Qur'an, devoted entirely to religious matters, maintained its highest rating during this period" (2007: 33).

<sup>8</sup> See works such as: 'Imara, 1975, 1980, 2004; Banna, 1983; al-Qadi, 1983; al-Qaradawi, 1987; 'Abu Shuqqa, 1990; al-Ghazali, 1990a, 1990b; 'Alwan 2002; Yasin 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Leila Ahmed's classic work *Women and Gender in Islam*, for example, polarizes the secular and the religious as colonial and Western on one hand and indigenous and authentic on the other. Her scholarship epitomizes this approach by presenting women activists in opposing pairs (such as Huda al-Sha'rawi and Malak Hifni Nasif, Zaynab al-Ghazali and Doria Shafiq) (1993: 177-184, 197-207).

<sup>10</sup> Bayat's own definition of "Islamism" complements Mahmood's (2005: 3), although he focuses on "civil Islam" expressed through institutions, while she focuses more on a "religious ethos or sensibility" encoded in bodily practices. Bayat defines Egyptian Islamism at its height in the late 1980s as "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" (2007: 137).

<sup>11</sup> al-Bishri's writings define democracy and leadership, *shura* and *riyasa* as the two main governing principles in Islamic politics (1980: 693-96). See Leonard Binder's discussion of al-Bishri's thought in "Nationalism, Liberalism, and the Islamic Heritage: The Political Thought of Tariq al-Bishri" in *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Discourses* (1988: 243-92).

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<sup>12</sup> The Qur’anic translations here are all mine, based on consultation of a number of different translations. I try to render the most basic meaning of the verse, without (if at all possible) interpolating ideological interpretations.

<sup>13</sup> See Amina Wadud’s discussion of different interpretations of the verse (1999: 69-74).

<sup>14</sup> These were initially presented as a series of lectures in 1900-01. ‘Abduh’s disciple Rashid Rida wrote them up and published them as a Qur’an commentary known as *Tafsir al-Manar*. Many suspect that Rida contributed his own ideas to the work.

<sup>15</sup> 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. The slightly different renderings gives different meanings. “The man is a shepherd of his people and is responsible for his flock. The woman is a shepherd in the house of her husband and is responsible for her flock” (Imara, 1975: 63). “The man is a shepherd of the people of his house and he is responsible for his flock. The woman is a shepherd of the people of the house of her husband and his children and is responsible for them” (Ra’uf, 1995: 201).

<sup>16</sup> “Divine breath” refers to verse 4:1 from the Qur’an: “O people, revere your lord that created you from a single spirit [*nafs* can also mean “breath”] 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.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, in his discussion of the family as a “microcosm” of political relationships, discusses its function upholding, maintaining, and reproducing the law. “The deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit...The deployment of alliance has as one of its chief objectives to reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them...what is pertinent is the link between partners and definite statutes...The deployment of alliance is attuned to a

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homeostasis of the social body, which it has the function of maintaining; whence its privileged link with the law; whence too the fact that the important phase for it is ‘reproduction’” (1978: 107).

<sup>18</sup> Her italics.

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