Cont Islam (2010) 4:91–116
DOI 10.1007/s11562-009-0103-1

Performing gender justice: the 2005 woman-led prayer in New York

Juliane Hammer

Published online: 21 November 2009

Abstract On March 18, 2005, a group of American Muslim women and men participated in a Friday prayer led by Dr. Amina Wadud, who also gave the Friday sermon. Widely publicized in various media and debated among Muslims around the world, this event was hailed as a turning point in Muslim gender discourses by the organizers and many media representatives. This article describes the prayer as a performance and argues that the organizers, participants, and media representatives all participated in the production of meaning embodied by the prayer. According to the organizers, the achievement of Qur'anic gender justice required changes in Muslim communities, and various forms of media were of vital importance for the discussion and realization of this goal. As such, the prayer was an act of symbolic significance, which despite its discursive, spatial, and temporal limitations, became much more than an act of Islamic worship.

Keywords Qur'anic interpretation · Woman-led prayer · Media performance · Symbolic act

> I took self-responsibility at that moment to remember *what the prayer represents*: an act of devotion to That which is beyond our eyes' vision, as could be disturbed by the weakness of our hearts. If we settle our hearts back to Allah, then and only then can we complete the worship as intended. That is what I did. The cameras and the media disappeared before my heart and no longer presented a distraction to my eyes.
>
> (Wadud 2006, 253)

J. Hammer (✉)
Department of Religious Studies, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr, MSN 3F1, Fairfax, VA 22030-4444, USA
e-mail: jhammer1@gmu.edu

On March 18, 2005, a group of American Muslim women and men participated in an event of historic proportion. Led by Amina Wadud, then professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, they performed a mixed-gender congregational Friday prayer in New York City. Both aspects, the prayer leadership by a woman and the fact that the congregation was not physically gender segregated, were of symbolic significance for debates over Muslim women's status in their communities, Islamic Law, and global societies.

The event was widely publicized in the global media and caused an equally global debate among Muslims, mediated through newspapers, TV stations, internet sites, and blogs. In the years since the event, several of the participants have published their accounts and reflections on the prayer, its significance, and the controversy surrounding it. The ensuing conversations transcended the original context of the prayer and touched upon issues such as Muslim women's leadership roles, spaces in mosques and communities, re-interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic Law, scholarship and activism, and last but not least, the continuing significance and power of media representations.

While all these different aspects of the debate are worth analyzing in further detail,[1] this essay will focus on one particular dimension of the event, namely, the ways in which the organizers, participants, and media representatives all participated in the production of meaning embodied by the prayer. I will argue that the prayer can meaningfully be described as a performance, and as such, as an embodiment of American Muslim women's (and men's) discourses on Qur'anic notions of justice as gender justice. According to the organizers, the achievement of such gender justice required changes in Muslim communities and societies, and various forms of media were of vital importance for the discussion and realization of this goal. As such, the prayer was an act of symbolic significance, which despite its discursive, spatial, and temporal limitations, became much more than an act of Islamic worship.

After briefly describing the event itself as a performance and media event, I will proceed to address two claims: (a) that the performance of the prayer was a reflection of the organizers' intent to challenge and change prevailing media representations of Muslim women as oppressed, submissive, and silent; and (b) that the organizers intended to use media attention as a tool for starting or furthering internal Muslim community debates on issues of gender justice and women's rights. This approach blurs the line commonly found in analyses of Muslims and media representation, in that it sees Muslims, here specifically American Muslims, not as passive objects of media production and representation, but rather as active participants, even if they are not always successful or fully in control of changing negative stereotypes and images of Islam and Muslims.

The prayer as performance

Once every week, on Friday around noon, Muslims across the globe come together in mosques and prayer spaces to perform congregational prayers, known as Friday

[1] I am currently working on a book manuscript analyzing many of the other dimensions of the prayer, tentatively titled *More Than a Prayer: American Muslim Women Write on Faith, Gender, and Knowledge.*

prayers. The ritual requirements, including ablution, size of congregation, number of prayer units, and other details, are regulated by Islamic Law. Traditionally, only men are required to attend Friday prayers, but women have, in some geographic locations at least, also participated in such prayers. Unlike the five daily prayers, Friday prayers cannot be performed individually. In addition to the ritual prayer itself, a Friday prayer ceremony includes a sermon called *khutbah* offered to the congregation by the prayer leader or *imam* of the prayer. The requirements and legal regulations associated with the prayer are, like many other aspects of Muslim worship, modeled after the practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Friday prayer on March 18, 2005 differed from established Muslim practices in several ways: the *imam* of the prayer was a woman, Amina Wadud, who also delivered the *khutbah*; the congregation she addressed and led in prayer was not separated by gender; and the *adhan* (call to prayer) was pronounced by a woman as well.[2] It is precisely in these three differences from established ritual practice that the March 18 prayer became an embodied performance of gender justice in the eyes of the organizers and participants. They symbolically challenged exclusively male privileges of leading Muslims in ritual prayers, and they blurred lines of gender segregation in ritual prayers at the same time.

The March 18 prayer took place in the Synod House of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the mother church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York. The organizers had tried to find a mosque in New York City for the prayer but were unsuccessful. The second choice of venue was an art gallery, but threats moved the organizers to seek an alternative space which they found at St. John's, despite prevailing security concerns. Police presence and security checks at the entrance attested to the fact that the organizers and the police took such threats seriously.[3]

The following description by Andrea Elliott in her *New York Times* article on the prayer evokes many of the performance dimensions:

> a woman, Dr. Amina Wadud, led the Muslim service after another woman sounded the call to prayer wearing no headscarf. More than a hundred men and women knelt in adjacent rows, with no curtain to divide them. They were surrounded by a bustling group of newspaper reporters, photographers and television cameras. And outside the service, which was held at the Synod House of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, protesters held signs and cried out in disgust. (Elliott 2005b)

The prayer ceremony itself was preceded by a press conference in which several of the organizers including Asra Nomani, Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, Ahmed Naseef,

[2] While there are different segregation practices, they usually involve physically separating men and women from each other. This can mean that women pray in separate rows behind the men, or that women pray in a physically separate space, such as behind a curtain, screen, or wall.

[3] This information was provided in an article posted on MuslimWakeUp (www.muslimwakeup.com), a website associated with the Progressive Muslim Union and run by Ahmed Nassef, one of the organizers of the prayer. The article in question is no longer available on the site, which has been hacked and only partially restored. Michael Muhammad Knight alludes to the security checks at the entrance in his article on MuslimWakeUp titled "Huggable Islam," posted on March 19, 2005 at www.muslimwakeup.com.

Sarah Eltantawi, and Amina Wadud spoke to the significance of the prayer.[4] Their short comments highlighted the fact that they may have had very different agendas for the prayer but were brought together by the symbolic potential of such an event.

Sarah Eltantawi, who acted as host of the press conference, began by introducing herself and the Progressive Muslim Union, an American Muslim organization (now defunct) which acted as a co-sponsor for the prayer event. She then proceeded to describe the prayer as a historic event, namely, the first time on historical record that a woman would lead a Friday prayer and give a *khutbah*. Asra Nomani explained the significance of the event as one that would take American Muslim women to the front of the mosque and symbolically at least into leadership positions in Muslim communities, not just in America, but globally. She described the event as a victory for women, for Islam, and for world peace and included a sharp critique of the status of women in the Muslim world which, if successful, the prayer would begin to rectify.

Eltantawi then introduced Ahmed Nassef by pointing out that the prayer initiative had been supported by many Muslim men as well. Nassef emphasized the fact that it had taken Muslims 1,400 years to come to this point where such a prayer was possible and introduced the idea of equal space in the mosque and the Muslim community for men and women. Later, in contradiction to his earlier argument, he proceeded to cite evidence from prophetic practice and the opinions of al-Tabari (838–923 AD), a classical Islamic scholar, as support for the prayer by claiming that the Prophet Muhammad had allowed a woman to lead a mixed congregation in prayer. He pointed to the inspiring nature of the prayer for those Muslims in America who have not attended communal prayers and have avoided their communities because they do not identify with gender practices in those communities.

Nassef's comments were followed by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, editor of *Living Islam Out Loud* (Abdul-Ghafur 2005), and a participant in Nomani's "Muslim Women Freedom Tour," and by Suhayla El-Attar, the young woman who would later offer the *adhan*. Abdul-Ghafur argued that "reclaiming the egalitarian roots of Islam" would improve the perilous and unacceptable conditions of many Muslim women in the world.

The last to speak at the press conference was Amina Wadud, who described the prayer as an act of Muslim women "reclaiming their full human dignity" and emphasized its grounding in the Qur'an. She also emphatically described herself as a lonely academic, much more comfortable with writing books than with standing in front of journalists or her Muslim congregation. She pointed out that "advertizing this event raises the stake several notches higher" than holding it in a private setting and that she did not want to be contacted, photographed, or interviewed after the event. For her, the prayer performance would be "an act of devotion to Allah," performed in the same form of Friday prayers as practiced by Muslims for many centuries.

[4] I am indebted to Brittany Huckabee and Asra Nomani for sharing with me several hours of unedited video footage of the event. I am quoting her from my transcription of parts these video files. Watching the footage has allowed me to gain a significantly different perspective and much deeper understanding of the prayer event, and I am grateful for Brittany's and Asra's generosity.

Before performing the prayer, the congregation, lead by Abdul-Ghafur, offered a *du'ah* (supplication) asking God to support their spiritual endeavor and accept their worship service. Describing it as *dhikr* (invocation), Abdul-Ghafur called on congregants to forget the distractions of their surroundings, to close their eyes, and to participate audibly in the recitation, whether male or female. She recited the *fatihah* (opening chapter of the Qur'an) seven times and repeated a passage from the Qur'an 33 times and one of the beautiful names of God 100 times. Worshippers were sitting on the carpeting indicating the ritual prayer space, not visually separated along gender lines, but surrounded by journalists, who, at that point, had been asked to retreat away from the front of the congregation.

After the *adhan*, Amina Wadud proceeded to the front of the congregation and started the *khutbah* with a recitation from the Qur'an, offered in Arabic, and then translated into English. She shared her thoughts on the nature of God and His relationship with his creation, interlaced with extensive recitations of Qur'anic passages. She delivered the *khutbah* partly in Arabic and translated into English, in addition to her own thoughts, offered in English. It focused on the generosity of God, the imperfections, as well as thinking faculties of human beings, and culminated in Wadud's reflection on her "tawhidic paradigm" which emphasizes the "horizontal reciprocity between any two humans, especially emphasizing between male and female humans" (Wadud 2006, 251[5]), and the absolute but only Divine hierarchy between humans and their creator. The paradigm is based on the assumption that there cannot be any vertical or hierarchical distinction between man and woman in human society and that their status in society needs to be interchangeable to make God's superiority and supreme position absolute. Wadud had selected Qur'anic passages that mentioned men and women specifically. The *khutbah* was about gender issues and women's status but had a timeless and universal dimension to it, in that it only subtly referred to particular American Muslim or other community circumstances or activist agendas. She said, "too many Muslims believe that Allah is male…," and continued that to reduce Allah to human similitude, i.e. in need of being He or She, would compare Allah to humanity. Wadud reiterated her conviction that to not allow women participation in the interpretation of the Qur'an and the formulation of Islamic Law had violated the primordial human mandate to grant women full dignity and participation in society as intended by God.

Delivered in a slow and careful voice, and at least partially read from a script in her hand, the *khutbah* was intended, like the prayer following it, to follow traditional ritual protocol except for the fact that both were offered by a woman. During the *khutbah*, journalists to the right and left of Wadud were moving about, taking pictures, and recording the speech, while clearly being more interested in the symbolic performance by a woman than the actual content. The footage shows Abdul-Ghafur (in a purple headscarf) and Nomani (without headscarf) sitting in the front row, attentively looking up and listing to Wadud. Towards the end of the *khutbah*, which lasted almost 1 hour, Wadud sat in front of the congregation on a prayer rug, facing towards the *qibla* (direction of Mecca), and engaged in a silent

[5] Wadud has published excerpts of the *khutbah* in her *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Wadud 2006, 249–252).

supplication or invocation, using her prayer beads and bowing her head. Members of the congregation followed her lead. Wadud then delivered the last part of the *khutbah* and ended with another recitation of the *fatihah*, joined by the congregation.

Immediately following, the second call to prayer was sounded, the sign for the congregation to rise and follow Wadud in the ritual prayer movements and words. Participants moved to straighten and fill the rows of worshippers in the prayer area, as is customary practice for Muslim congregational prayers. Wadud performed the two required *rak'ah* (prayer units) followed by a congregation of women and men in one prayer area, many of the rows consisting of half women and half men, and a few really intermixing during the prayer.

Despite repeated calls by the organizers and by Wadud to focus on the spiritual dimensions of their act of worship, the presence of journalists and onlookers, as well as the security concerns, and the presence of rather outspoken critics of the prayer outside the premises must have made the participants in the prayer aware of the symbolic significance and importance of their performance beyond the worship dimension itself. The press conference brought the agenda and goals of the organizers into view, and the very fact that there was a press conference indicated the mediated dimensions of the event. Before, during, and after the prayer event, the Muslim organizers and participants in the woman-led prayer were simultaneously objects and producers of media representations and thus at a complex intersection of self-representation, performance, and assigned representation by others.

Changing media representations

Muslims have long decried the mostly negative nature of media representations of their religion and their communities. The image of the oppressed and silenced Muslim woman is only second to the even more pervasive image of the violent Muslim extremist and its association with terrorism. In analyzing the writings of American Muslim women (which was the departure point of my research), it has become clear that many of the authors take the challenge to question and change such misrepresentations through their writings as the departure point of their works. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (Said 1979) and *Covering Islam* (Said 1997) has provided us with the analytical tools to understanding the power of representation by others, through a discussion of both the colonial discourses the stereotypes of Muslims originate from and the more contemporary representations in various forms of media. Stereotypes and false representations do not only do injustice to the perception of others but also have the power to impact the realities of those stereotyped.[6]

In contemporary media representations of Muslim women, American and otherwise, the realities are somewhat more complicated. On one hand, American Muslims have often been portrayed relatively positively in the American media (see Nacos 2006), and the coverage of the prayer will support this impression. On the other hand, Muslims, among them many women, are increasingly not objects of but

[6] Much work has been done on the various uses of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype, see Ahmed (1992), Kahf (1999), and Abu-Lughod (2002).

participants in the production of various forms of media. Thus, the line between media production and representation may become increasingly difficult to draw, much less see. The binary distinction between Muslims and media has ceased to function as a useful analytical tool, a development that has the potential to blunt the sharp edge of the aforementioned Saidian critique of colonial discourses on Muslims as others. However, one could also argue that in taking the existing stereotypes as their starting point, Muslim writers inevitably reinforce the binary between 'us' and 'them' and legitimize the very misrepresentations they are battling in their work. Despite much of the work done in challenging stereotypes and advancing more nuanced representations, many Americans continue to hold unfavorable of Islam as a religion and of Muslims.[7]

Speaking for ourselves

American Muslim women have since the late 1980s written and published in various venues, increasingly claiming the right to "speak for themselves."[8] Especially, personal narratives and memoirs have enjoyed the attention of publishers and readers for quite some time. Naturally, the politics of publishing such narratives is not uncontroversial, and the most popular stories have certainly been those depicting the struggles of Muslim women for independence, liberation (often from the 'veil'), and escape from oppressive families and societies.[9] American Muslim women, through these writings, have joined the existing tradition of religious American women sharing their stories. These memoirs are typically stories of questioning patriarchal forms of religion, as well as journeys of liberation and faith struggles.[10] This could be and often is a sign of inclusion into the larger American religious landscape and narrative, but it comes with a price. While many of the works are written by women who have made a choice to be Muslim and American at the same time, negotiating overlapping as well as conflicting identities, most of those published within the American mainstream are the writings of liberal and progressive[11] Muslim women. Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, one of the organizers of the prayer, writes in the introduction to *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak*: "Very rarely do we encounter empowering images of American Muslim women." (Abdul-Ghafur 2005, 3)…"We are Muslim women who have cleared our own paths and created ourselves both because and in spite of Islam and other Muslims. Our American Muslim identity is not linear nor can it be shed or separated. It just is." (6).

The prayer was announced to the public several weeks before it took place on March 18, which created media interest as well as room for internal Muslim debates

[7] In a poll released in April 5, 2009, 48% of Americans polled indicated a non-favorable opinion of Islam, the highest number since September 11. While the numbers have shifted between different population segments, the overall percentage of unfavorable opinions remains in place. See http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/story?id=7248471.

[8] Examples include Ahmed (1999), Manji (2005), Abdul-Ghafur (2005), Nomani (2005a, b), and Hasan (1999, 2004).

[9] See Mahmood (2007) for a poignant critique of the politics of such works.

[10] See for example Keller and Ruether (1995).

[11] I am aware of the contentious nature of these terms and their application to others, but for lack of space and time, I will use them without quotation marks here.

about its intention, nature, permissibility, and politics. While the intent to change media images and public perceptions of Muslims, especially Muslim women, is not always clearly stated in the writings of the organizers before or after the prayer, it becomes apparent from the setup and organization that media attention was of vital importance for the organizers. The "Statement from the Organizers of the March 18th Woman-led Jum'ah Prayer," published on MuslimWakeUp on March 13, 2005, states "we are looking to make arrangements for an Internet broadcast of the historic event, and more information will be published on the details of the broadcast as soon as we have them." This broadcast never materialized, and despite the massive media presence, it was rather difficult to obtain footage of the event. In any case, media representatives were invited, and a press conference was held before the prayer took place. The *New York Times* ran two articles, one on March 18, the day of the prayer, and another (both by Andrea Elliott) after the event on March 19 (Elliott 2005a, b).

Several of the organizers and participants of the prayer have published accounts and opinion pieces about the prayer and its impact. I will focus here on the work of Asra Nomani, the chief organizer, and Amina Wadud, the prayer leader, because both of them were at the center of media coverage of the event. My focus here will be on the connection between each woman's agency in self-representation on one hand and her representations in media coverage of the prayer on the other.

At the front of the mosque: Asra Nomani

Nomani has extensively written about herself, most notably, in her book *Standing Alone in Mecca*, which details her journey and transformation as a Muslim woman, from the murder of her friend Daniel Pearl and her discovery that she is pregnant with her Pakistani boyfriend's child, through her pilgrimage to Mecca with her family and baby, to her reasserted Muslim identity, and subsequent activism to allow American Muslim women equal access to their mosques. Nomani is vocal about her perspectives on the world and engaged in professional media production. The initiative to organize a woman-led prayer—a significant step beyond her earlier demand for women to have equal access to prayer spaces in American mosques—in her own story forms the last logical step in her activist agenda. She writes, "While we challenge the status quo, we are busy creating a new reality. At Harvard University in March 2005, Muslim thinkers and activists planned to hold the first convention of the Progressive Muslim Union. A possibility for the Muslim conference at Harvard: a Friday prayer led by a Muslim woman religious leader, who would also deliver the week's sermon. The woman: scholar Amina Wadud, who had been such an inspiration to me." (Nomani 2006, 290)

On March 20, 2005, she wrote in the *Daily News* (as reposted on her website):

> Friday, March 18, 2005 will be remembered as the day when about 130 Muslim women and men stood shoulder-to-shoulder behind a woman on Manhattan's upper West Side and took their faith back from the extremists who had tried to define Islam on Sept. 11, 2001. - I was proud to be in the front row. - New York City has been a beacon to the world for its courage after 9/11. Our prayer makes New York a city of light to the Muslim world. As Wadud said her final

> blessings, I turned to Abdul-Ghafur, an Atlanta writer and activist who helped me organize the prayer, along with the sponsorship of MuslimWakeUp.com, and I exclaimed: "We did it!" - I haven't been able to stop smiling ever since.[12]

The article also describes the beauty of men and women greeting each other with respect, the fact that a woman "freely" nursed her baby during the prayer and that angry protesters outside threatened the women and men inside with eternal hellfire. Here, as in most of Nomani's writings, we see at work an aesthetic of moral righteousness in which Nomani's position is verbally associated with beautiful, light, and positive, while the 'others,' those disagreeing with her, come across as wrong and unreasonable.

Nomani represents herself as liberated, thoroughly American, and thus modern, and religious in a very comfortable, American way. Her approach to scripture and tradition, her drawing on post-enlightenment ideals of individual rights, equality, and justice, all reinforce the impression of her as familiar and only mildly exotic. She is exotic only in ways that are appreciated within the American mainstream as a 'spicy' addition to the melting pot of American society and culture. In presenting this image of herself—one that is not void of religiosity—she challenges the stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed and veiled. Nomani's agenda involves, consciously or not, to shatter the monolithic perception of all Muslim women as similar, voiceless, and silent. Her book thus taps into the existing genre of American literature authored by religious women.

Contrary to the title of her book, which points to her lone struggle for women's rights, her project of gender reform has included various forms of alliance and community building as well. She early on enlisted the support of her family, especially her father, for her demands to her hometown's Muslim community. Before her march on the Morgantown mosque to demand access for women to the main hall of the mosque in June 2004, she founded a group called "Daughters of Hajar" evoking the courage and endurance of this Qur'anic figure as an example for contemporary Muslim women to follow (Nomani 2006, 308), and the prayer itself was an act of community building, the creation of a network of like-minded activists, however temporary.

Nomani knows of the power of the media in communicating ideas and demands. As a journalist and writer, she has seen firsthand the impact media coverage can have on the real lives of real people. Thus, her writings, books, articles, and op-ed pieces, taken together, speak of a consciously planned act of performance, meant to further her activist agenda. As we will see below, Nomani is also prominently featured in media products conceived by mainstream journalists, as in Paul Barrett's book on American Muslims (Barret 2007) and the 2009 documentary *The Mosque in Morgantown* directed by Brittany Huckabee.

The woman-led prayer is important for Nomani's trajectory of activism and media representation but by no means an end to it. It follows her pilgrimage adventure with her son and family in 2003; her praying in the main hall of the Morgantown mosque in 2004; and the posting of her *99 Precepts for Opening Hearts, Minds and Doors in the Muslim World* on the door of the mosque in Morgantown in early 2005. She

[12] http://www.asranomani.com/Writings.aspx.

describes in the afterword of her book that all these events were part of her *Muslim Women's Freedom Tour*, which took her to mosques around the country. In her visits to other mosques (often on camera or accompanied by a journalist or friend to witness), she encountered hostility and rejection, sometimes threats, and occasionally support from other Muslim women and men (Watanabe 2005). Later in 2005, Nomani decided to lead a prayer herself. She performed an afternoon prayer (not a Friday prayer) on the campus of Brandeis University, leading both men and another woman in prayer.[13]

As a journalist and thus active participant in media production, Nomani has developed a mutually dependent and fruitful relationship with media outlets. In an interview right before the prayer, she said:

> Basically, like most journalists, I got into the field to make the world a better place. I can't think of any way to better use the skills that I've gotten as a truth-teller than to bring about some sort of fairness and equity and inclusion in the world. I think when I really reflect on it, I became a solid journalist, I think, because of the principles that my parents taught me as a Muslim; integrity and ethics are vital to being a journalist. So I simply want the same principles to be practiced in my Muslim world, because I've seen the alternative. (Karnasiewicz 2005)

She has agency in this production process but is also—inadvertently or not—used for the representational purposes of others. In a *Slate* article titled "Veiled Babes," Nomani relates results of her research on veiled cover models for book covers and her discussions with her own publisher about the cover of her book, which in the hardcover edition showed her wearing a white headscarf, while the paperback edition, with a slightly modified title,[14] features a glamour shot of Nomani with open hair in a pink blazer (Nomani 2006). In her article, she argues that the second picture of her represents her and her ideas much better than the veiled picture. The article also reveals some of the politics of marketing books on Muslim women and demonstrates that Nomani is aware of such dynamics in media production. Overall, while Nomani has been celebrated in media outlets as an alternative voice to stereotypes, her story serves as a revelation of the hidden lives of Muslim women and as a liberal trope. She has participated in the production of Muslims (especially those in the Muslim world) as 'other' in media representations, thereby supporting a tendency that Mahmood Mamdani has described as the "good Muslim, bad Muslim" dynamic in media representations and political circles (Mamdani 2005).

Gender justice in a prayer: Amina Wadud

While Amina Wadud is no stranger to the media, her presence as a scholar and spokeswoman for women's rights differs in many ways from that of Nomani. Wadud, who has been carrying out research related to new hermeneutical strategies

[13] See pictures and descriptions at http://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/events/AsraNomanifullpage.html.
[14] The paperback edition is titled *Standing Alone* rather than *Standing Alone in Mecca*.

for the Qur'an, with a focus on the gender-just nature of the revelation, has spend much more of her time being an academic and an activist. Wadud is occasionally mentioned in media coverage for her exegetical work on the Qur'an, as in a 1996 *New York Times* article on the Malaysian women's advocacy group "Sisters in Islam," which Wadud joined while teaching in Kuala Lumpur in the early 1990s. There, Wadud is quoted as saying: "For 14 centuries the Koran has been interpreted almost exclusively by men … it is only in the past two decades that women have begun to say, let's look at this text and come up with our own conclusions… and voila, some of them are not the same as the men came up with" (Mydans 1996). Wadud was interviewed as one of several Islamic studies scholars for the PBS Frontline documentary *Muslims* in 2001, and her interview appears on the PBS website as permanent teaching material. Here, she is not reduced to someone who can speak about women's issues and Qur'an interpretation. Rather, the interview covers a range of questions from Islamic resurgence, *hudud* laws in Muslim countries, to, of course, women's issues. Wadud, in the interview, is most vocal about her exegetical work and the (at the time) emerging group of progressive Muslims addressing these and many other issues of reform and change in the Muslim world. The interview transcript features a headshot of Wadud wearing Hijab.[15]

Wadud has written in her book *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Wadud 2006) about her participation in the prayer but has for the most part been reluctant to comment on it. In the book, she dedicates a section in the last chapter aptly titled "Stories from the Trenches" to her perspective of the prayer (Wadud 2006, 217–253). In a preceding section, dedicated to a speaking event at a mosque in Toronto, Wadud in passing complains of the sensationalism surrounding that event. She writes:

> How any issue is treated in the public frenzy that the media might help to enflame is not a reflection of the actual context, commitment, complexities, or intentions of those who were participants in the forum out of which the media frenzy grew. Public access to information is a much better goal of all aspects of free press and publicity than the role that the media now seems to play in the lives of people seeking information. The media shapes those issues, which are being presented in accordance to the currency of their sensationalism with complete disregard for the actual events being reported and the extent to which the events are located within the trajectories of Islamic history and experience for over fourteen hundred years. (Wadud 2006, 246)

It becomes clear that Wadud defines media broadly, but also that she has an expectation of impartiality and objectivity that seems unrealistic. Her frustration with the aftermath of the controversy may explain her later reluctance to be interviewed and thus again and again represented and shaped by someone else's perspective and agenda. Regarding the prayer, there is one notable exception, an article based on an interview with her, written by Thomas Bartlett for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The fact that the Chronicle is not a news media outlet, but rather a weekly paper, primarily read by people in academia, may have persuaded her to agree to this interview (Bartlett 2005). Wadud is also at the center of a 2006

[15] Interview Amina Wadud, Muslims (Frontline/PBS) http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims/interviews/wadud.html.

documentary titled *The Noble Struggle* and directed by Elli Safari.[16] Both Bartlett's and Safari's representations of Wadud and the prayer will be discussed below.

Wadud's agreement to serve as the leader of the prayer and to give the *khutbah* was in many ways a logical culmination of her work as a scholar and activist. Nomani tells us that Wadud accepted the invitation without hesitation. Wadud reportedly had reservations and concerns for her safety, and she anticipated controversy and debate. In Wadud's account, we are taken from her affiliation with the Progressive Muslim Union in 2004 (and her subsequent disagreement with them), through the planned conference at Harvard (that never took place) to a renewed invitation to lead a prayer and give the *khutbah* in New York. Wadud points to the central role of Asra Nomani, who according to Wadud "was on a tour for her recent book publication, and was able to secure needed funds from her publishers, in order to actually assist the plan to come to fruition" (Wadud 2006, 248). Later, we find an acknowledgement of Ahmed Nassef, Asra Nomani, and Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur as those of the organizers that communicated with Wadud in preparation for the event (Wadud 2006, 253).

Wadud goes on to explain that because of the controversy a decade earlier, she focused all her energy on preparing the substance of the *khutbah* and had thought carefully about her intentions for the prayer.

> "I was especially keen that I concentrate on the nature of public ritual as performance directed toward Allah, rather than an act of defiance against those who have created the necessity for a gender jihad by simply denying women the full human dignity with which Allah has created us. My conclusion was to keep the prayer service as close to the normative male privileged procedure, while contributing from my own female perspective, and encouraging greater gender parity in public ritual leadership." (Wadud 2006, 248)

Wadud, consistent with her scholarly work, focuses here on women's participation and contribution and the possibility of equal access to leadership beyond the confines of gender. She does not invoke directly western ideas of equality. Rather unlike Nomani's, her discourse focuses on the Qur'an and its potential for empowering women from within the Islamic context. As in a passage quoted earlier, Wadud often refers to the 1,400 years of the Islamic tradition, and while she rejects large parts of the interpretive tradition as male dominated, she negotiates change from within a value system that overtly avoids recourse to western ideas and values.

In the last paragraph of her prayer story, Wadud also points to the fact that the media presence and attention were to her a disturbance and invasion of sacred space and that it took all her energy to concentrate on leading the prayer. "I was not facing the media, they were inappropriately located in the direction of the prayer, as the organizers later told me, because they could not be controlled" (Wadud 2006, 253). In the passage quoted in the beginning of this essay, Wadud has described how she managed to turn her attention away from the media representatives present and back to the ritual at hand.

[16] *The Noble Struggle*, a film by Elli Safari, The Netherlands/US, 2007, 29 min, Color, VHS/DVD (Women Make Movies, http://www.wmm.com/filmCatalog/pages/c699.shtml).

The prayer in the media

The woman-led prayer was widely covered by media outlets and heavily attended by representatives from many media organizations, both domestic and international. A Google News search performed in 2007 found hundreds of articles from newspapers and online news sites around the globe. Stories in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Arab News*, on *National Public Radio*, and in the *Washington Post*, as well the *Pakistan Times*, described the event and reflected different perspectives and responses to the prayer in the mediated debate before and after the event.[17] In those stories, Wadud and Nomani appear as central figures for the prayer, one having provided the scriptural and interpretational justification, and the other as having been the driving force in its organization. New stories describe the positions and motivations of Wadud, Nomani, and other organizers and participants on one hand, and the various rejections and arguments against the prayer on the other. Many articles also contain quotes from scholarly experts on Muslims in America. For the most part, news reporters stayed away from engaged or celebratory representations of the event.

More engagement and representational agency is evident in some later pieces on Nomani and Wadud, including a book chapter and documentary on Nomani and a feature article and documentary on Wadud.

Feminist Rosa Parks style: Asra Nomani in the media

In addition to her own writings on the prayer and her activist agenda, Nomani has been widely featured in various forms of media. The prayer was covered by a variety of newspapers and other media outlets, and Nomani's role in this event, as well as her march on the mosque and Muslim Women's Freedom Tour[18] were the subject of several articles, as well as a book chapter in journalist Paul Barrett's *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, published in 2007 (Barrett 2007). Aside from the similarity in title (Nomani's is *A Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam*), the book features Nomani's story under the chapter heading "The Feminist" (Barrett 2007, 134–178). Barrett explains that he has known Nomani since they worked for the *Wall Street Journal* in the early 1990s. The chapter provides a wealth of personal information about Nomani's family, upbringing, and her hometown. Her story is one of empowerment and struggle, adversity posed by those who refuse to support her and her important and legitimate campaign, and ultimately of redemption, even if a lonely one. The last line of the chapter reads, "Nomani took a step back, straightened her posture, and prepared to pray in a line of her own" (Barrett 2007, 178).

Throughout the story, Nomani is described as standing up to her adversaries and braving the threats and insults. Barrett finds it necessary to physically describe her as

[17] For examples see "Woman-Led Friday Prayer Sparks Controversy in the US," *Pakistan Times*, March 20, 2005; Lite (2005), Ferguson (2005), and Elliott (2005a, b).

[18] Nomani is featured in numerous newspaper articles, see for example (Salmon 2003), Goodstein (2004a, b), and Wiltz (2005).

a petite woman with charcoal hair (Barrett 2007, 137). He also points on several occasions to the fact that she only wears scarves (in various colors) while praying. Muslim women disagreeing with her wear a headscarf or even a face veil, reinforcing the picture of women who are not only oppressed and veiled but also limited in their intellectual discernment by the 'veil.' Her male Muslim adversaries are heavy or strong built, emphasizing the David and Goliath picture in the mind of the reader.

Barrett is acutely aware of the representational dimension of Nomani's agenda when he writes:

> The collision of these expectations turned out-of- the- way Morgantown into a battlefield over women's status in Islam. Nomani, determined to praise God in the same room as men, outraged male worshippers by conducting a defiant pray-in. Rather than retreat to a special women's balcony, she simply stood behind the men. The offended worshippers … condemned her as insolent, and they made an issue of another transgression, one that would have scandalized orthodox believers of most faiths: Nomani has borne a son out of wedlock after a brief relationship with a Pakistani Muslim. …Nomani fought back, branding her antagonists fundamentalists, men who viewed modern women with contempt. As the confrontation escalated – in part because of her deft publicity skills – she became the catalyst for a broader national debate over the future of Islam in America. (Barrett 2007, 135)

In Barrett's writing, Nomani is not flawless, and he takes pain to present other peoples' opinions about her, including accusations that she is only interested in publicity. One of her critics accuses her of exposing the Morgantown mosque (and by default American Muslims) to the ridicule of non-Muslims (Barrett 2007, 158). Barrett's work is based on interviews and encounters with Nomani, as well as with others around her, but he also quotes from email communication between Nomani and others. Overall, the emerging picture of Nomani is one of a tireless fighter for the rights of women, willing to stand up for her ideas and standing strong in the face of rejection and adversity. She is American and Muslim proudly and shows no hesitation in taking on the traditions and mistakes of her religion. Barrett's representation of Nomani reinforces the picture Nomani has developed of herself in her own writings.

In the writings of other journalists, Nomani has been hailed as struggling "Rosa Parks style,"[19] as the "Muslim Sojourner Truth," and as following the traditions of Martin Luther in Germany and Martin Luther King Jr. in the USA (Berger 2005). There is a strong emphasis on Nomani's status as a lonely fighter, eager and willing to build alliances, but ultimately the only one who can carry out the struggle. This image is perpetuated in the 2009 documentary "*The Mosque in Morgantown*," directed by Brittany Huckabee, which follows Nomani from the early attempts at reform in her Morgantown mosque, through the New York prayer, and into Nomani's national and tireless work to give women equal access to their mosques. In the *Washington Post* online segment "Georgetown/On Faith," posted on May 20, 2009,

[19] According to her website, in her biography, no source was cited. The reference to Rosa Parks appears in Goldstein (2004a, b).

Jacques D. Berlinerblau, professor at Georgetown University, describes Nomani as follows: "In person, Ms. Nomani is every bit as intelligent, intense and witty as she is on film. Having spent the first half of my scholarly career writing about heretics, let me assure you that she is the real deal!" The segment with and about Nomani is titled "Asra Nomani: Bad Girl of Islam."[20] Here, we detect another shift, this time from the lone heroine for women's rights to an emphasis on Nomani as an anti-hero, admirable, but heretical, while still capable of speaking on behalf of Muslim women worldwide.

The quiet heretic: Amina Wadud in the media

Compared to Nomani, Wadud and her role as the leader of her prayer only received brief news media attention, while international and domestic debates among Muslims continued for quite some time.[21] A brief analysis of two articles in the *New York Times* (Elliott 2005a, b) and a longer feature in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* will complement my analysis (Bartlett 2005). The *New York Times* articles, one in anticipation of the prayer and one the day after, both mention Wadud and Nomani as central to the prayer. Nomani comes across as the organizer, while Wadud is both cited in her position as a professor at an American University. In the first article, Wadud is presented as Ms. Wadud, while on the second day, she becomes Dr. Amina Wadud. Confusing prayer leadership and Friday *khutbah*, Elliott writes: "It was not the first time Dr. Wadud, an Islamic studies professor at Virginia Commonwealth University had led a mixed-gender prayer, she said: she gave a sermon at a Friday prayer in South Africa in 1994. Yesterday, her sermon centered on the idea that men and women should treat each other as equals, and not presume Allah to be male" (Elliott 2005b).

The *Chronicle* feature is more elaborate and proudly declares that Wadud had previously rejected most interview requests. Bartlett shares with the reader Wadud's conversion story and feels the need to mention that she is African-American, her age, and the fact that she wore "a lime-green head scarf and pink slippers" when he interviewed her at her house, surrounded by piles of paper from chapters of her new book *Inside the Gender Jihad*. In this academy-orientated publication, he insists on calling her Ms. Wadud instead of Dr. Wadud. He takes her scholarly work seriously but also spends significant space on threats and safety concerns after the prayer and incorporates opinions from scholars and Wadud's daughter on the prayer.

The article stays clear of generalized statements about Muslim women and does not allow itself to participate in the reproduction of stereotypes. Statements are specific, attributed to interviewees, and contextualized. The title, however, evokes the same imagery we find in media depictions of Nomani, as a lone heroine and as in the title of the piece, a heretic. This glorification of heresy may be more telling of the

[20] Jaques Berlinerblau, Georgetown/On Faith, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/georgetown/2009/05/welcome_to_faith_complex.html?hpid=talkbox1, last accessed May 21, 2009.

[21] For primarily positive responses and reflections on the prayer, the special page of the Progressive Muslim Union at http://www.pmuna.org/archives/pmu_prayer_initiative/index.php was very helpful. Unfortunately, this site no longer exists.

ongoing debates about the role of religion(s) in the American public sphere and an expression of a frontier mentality.

More generally, one wonders if both the fact that Wadud is a scholar and that she is American-born and African-American make it difficult for the media to allude to many of the common stereotypes about Muslim women. Wadud is not exotic and foreign, certainly not silent and oppressed, and in her language of resistance, there are notes of an older struggle for civil rights and racial justice. In applying a social justice discourse to gender issues in Islam and in her attempt to resolve the 'issues' from within the Islamic tradition, she defies simplistic representations. Except for the fact that she, at least at the time, wore Hijab (the Muslim headscarf), journalists were hard pressed for ways to make her the Muslim other in conventional ways.

Wadud's suspicion of and reluctance to participate in media representation is obvious from many of her statements. Nevertheless, Wadud has been an active participant in the ongoing negotiation between American Muslim women and the media. In publishing a memoir, however, interlaced with scholarship, and in sharing personal experiences and reflections, she has made herself available for reading and for multiple readings at that. Her book has received more scholarly than public attention, but this may be related to the complexity of her writing. Wadud also agreed to be filmed for a documentary specifically about her.[22] The film's description in somewhat sensational language exclaims:

> On March 18, 2005, Amina Wadud shocked the Islamic world by leading a mixed-gender Friday prayer congregation in New York. THE NOBLE STRUGGLE OF AMINA WADUD is a fascinating and powerful portrait of this African-American Muslim woman who soon found herself the subject of much debate and Muslim juristic discourse. In defying 1400 years of Islamic tradition, her action caused global awareness of the struggle for women's rights within Islam but also brought violence and death threats against her.
>
> Filmmaker Safari follows this women's rights activist and scholar around the world as she quietly but with utter conviction explains her analysis of Islam in the classroom, at conferences, in her home, and in the hair dresser's shop. Wadud explains how Islam, with its promise of justice, appeals to the African-American community. And she links the struggle for racial justice with the need for gender equality in Islam. Deeply engaging, this film offers rare insights into the powerful connections between Islam, women's rights, and racial justice.[23]

The description is sensational because it plays on established expectations: Wadud defies 1,400 years of Islamic tradition, singlehandedly and alone, like Asra Nomani in her struggle for the soul of Islam. Speaking of "rare insight" might just allude to Wadud's reclusive attitude, but it simultaneously evokes images of hidden and veiled Muslim women and their secluded societies.

The film is powerful and well edited and reflects a deep appreciation for Wadud's ideas and struggles. Safari portrays Wadud as standing alone as well but visually challenges some of the earlier representations of her in the media. One example is Wadud's choice to be filmed at home and at her hairdresser, without Hijab, a choice

[22] Elli Safari, *The Noble Struggle*, 2007.
[23] http://www.wmm.com/filmCatalog/pages/c699.shtml.

consistent with a passage in her book in which she explains that she has come to the conclusion that Hijab is not mandatory, and that she consequently only wears it for official occasions (Wadud 2006, 219–224).

American Muslim women are represented in various forms of media in a variety of ways. Acutely aware of the widespread perceptions of Muslim women as oppressed and silent, some have chosen to actively participate in media production in order to challenge what they see as misrepresentations and stereotypes. The organizers and participants of the woman-led prayer participated in the execution of the prayer as a ritual performance but also as a media performance. As has become clear from examples of their own writing, and their representation by others, Nomani and Wadud in particular are simultaneously constructed as media personalities by others and attempt to construct themselves as such. Their agency in defining media representations of themselves as American Muslim women is limited by the existing representational models such as the lonely fighter and the liberated and progressive American Muslim as the antidote to other Muslims. The debate over representation and perception is nowhere as clear as in the continuing fascination of the American media (and American Muslims) with the issue of Hijab.

Interlude: Hijab or no Hijab

Discussions of the symbolic meanings, historical and scriptural origins, and colonial signification of the Hijab are widely covered in academic literature (Ahmed 1992, 2005; Bullock 2002; El-Guindi 2003; Abu-Lughod 2002; Hoodfar et al. 2003) and a favorite focus of media attention on Muslim women. The visual signification of Hijab or any form of clothing covering hair and body is prevalent in American mainstream media representations of Muslim women. In looking at the prayer as a visual performance it becomes clear, that here, too, Hijab is invested with meaning and used as a tool. In this article, I want to use the various appearances of the Hijab in the prayer as a bridge between my thesis on the significance of the prayer as a media event and its intended purpose of creating intra-Muslim debates about woman's leadership, ritual practice, and spiritual equality.

An important distinction has to be made between the wearing of Hijab for ritual purposes and the covering of hair and body in public and in the presence of men. In the modern period, the Hijab has been invested with a range of meanings from piety to social mobility and political protest, and while Muslim women have insisted in many places on their right to choose if they want to cover or not, few challenges have been expressed to the necessity of covering for the performance of ritual prayers and prayer spaces in mosques. The woman-led prayer departed from this established practice as well. Suheyla El-Attar, the woman who sounded the call for prayer, not only challenged the established role of men as *muezzin* (the person calling Muslims to prayer) but also performed the recitation of the call without wearing Hijab. Similarly, several of the organizers, including Abdul-Ghafur, Nomani, and Eltantawi did not wear Hijab for the press conference but some covered their hair during the prayer. Some women did not wear Hijab during the *khutbah* and prayer itself either including Nomani, while others only symbolically and partially covered their hair. Wadud on the other hand, entered the premises,

attended the press conference, and performed the prayer while wearing a long, loose-fitting robe and headscarf.

Several readings are possible. The range of choices regarding Hijab before and during the prayer could be read as pointing to the fact that Muslim women indeed have choices to cover or not to cover, even in this ritual and public context. This reading would challenge the prevalent interpretation of Hijab as forced on Muslim women by Muslim men and Islamic norms. It could also be interpreted as demonstrating that American Muslim women have indeed challenged the forced nature of Hijab wearing and thus draw a picture of American Muslim women as struggling with their traditions, communities, and men. And lastly, the decision to accept the choices made by the women in attendance could also be understood as a challenge to Muslim communities to take up the debate about the importance and significance of Hijab. It is in this last dimension that the discussion of the visual presence or significant absence of Hijab during the prayer connects with the second thesis of this article, namely, that the main purpose of the prayer was to initiate debates within Muslim communities in the USA and abroad, and that the ensuing debates were only possible because of the use of diverse forms of media including newspapers, TV and radio stations, and most importantly, the internet.

Gender justice and equality: a call to Muslims

The internal Muslim debate about the permissibility, value, and significance of the woman-led prayer started before the prayer took place on March 18. After the announcement had been made, the organizers faced rejection, threat, and ridicule on one hand, and support, participation, and celebration of their project on the other. Opinion pieces, articles, and discussion threads appeared on websites; supporters, rejecters, and academic experts were quoted in many newspaper articles and news items, and somewhat later, the debate also found its way into other forms of media, such as documentary films and books. In assembling and analyzing many of the contributions to the debate, the prayer emerges as an historical event that triggered a significant amount of controversy and has left its imprint on Muslim communities and discourses. This imprint is reflected on several levels in the ways in which, through various forms of media, Muslims in the USA and elsewhere debated not just the acceptability of a woman leading congregational prayers, but beyond that, questions of women's leadership, mosque participation, and textual interpretation. The organizers of the event announced the prayer through different media, participated in interviews, a press conference before the prayer, and continued to argue in different forums with those critical of the project. It is possible, through the available media products, to trace mediated aspects of the emerging debates within Muslim communities.[24] As I had argued at the outset, using the media for the purpose of advancing internal Muslim debates was one of the main purposes of the prayer performance on March 18. In what follows, I want to highlight a selection of media examples to support this thesis, including contributions to MuslimWakeUp, a mediated exchange of ideas and

[24] It is of course almost impossible to trace those aspects of the debate that took place in personal conversations, mosques, and other real life venues, unless witnessed in 2005.

opinions between several American Muslim personalities, and the 2009 documentary "*The Mosque in Morgantown*" directed by Brittany Huckabee.

MuslimWakeUp and the woman-led prayer initiative

On March 13, 2005, five days before the prayer event, the organizers issued "A Statement from the Organizers of the March 18th Woman-led Jum'ah Prayer," on the MuslimWakeUp website.[25] The statement reiterated the plan to hold the prayer and indicated that as word had gotten around in Muslim communities, debates were taking place, and threats had been voiced to the degree that the organizers felt it necessary to change the venue and make it mandatory for interested individuals to sign up online in order to receive further information about venue and security details. The statement asserted that the prayer was not about a specific person or hidden purpose, but rather "about Muslim women reclaiming their rightful place in Islam." It continued: "Those who will gather for the prayer later this week will do so as a result of deeply held convictions that are rooted in our faith. … We love and care deeply for our community, and we understand that good people will arrive at varying conclusions regarding the Islamic basis for female-led prayer. This is not an attempt to 'change' Islam, nor to condemn others who interpret our religion differently than we do."

With Ahmed Nassef, co-founder of MuslimWakeUp, as a co-sponsor of the prayer event, the website, together with the related site of the Progressive Muslim Union (www.pmuna.org) quickly turned into one of the main communication forums for the debate about the prayer. At the time, the site carried numerous articles—almost all supporting the prayer—and each post triggered a large number of comments. The site of the Progressive Muslim Union for at least a year after the event had a special section titled "The Woman-Led Prayer Initiative" which published reflections and responses, pro and con, and encouraged Muslims to inform the internet community of other prayers led by women since March 2005. Even though both sites are now defunct and only remnants of MuslimWakeUp are available online (without active content, search function, or internal links), the remaining contributions still offer some insight into the parameters and tone of the debate and its participants.

On March 18, 2005, renowned American Muslim poet Mohja Kahf expressed her support for the prayer in a poem, posted on MuslimWakeUp, and poetically teased those who could not decide if they were for or against the event.

Dedicated to the hesitators who care about the issue but won't declare their support for today's Jum'ah.
By Mohja Kahf

The Waiting Room

Dare? Go? Act? No,
let's wait. Maybe

[25] March 13, 2005 "A Statement from the Organizers of the March 18th Woman-led Jum'ah Prayer" www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed May 20, 2009.

this valiant, embattled task
has integrity. In theory,
we're with you, but.
We're waiting for the perfect time
We're waiting for the leaders without flaw
Maybe it is the revolution, but.
Where's the guarantee?
We shall risk nothing.
Should it prove true,
we'll call it ours and say,
We believed with the believers!
Here in the Waiting Room.[26]

In a similar vein, Sarah Eltantawi published a spirited argument for the prayer and against its detractors on MuslimWakeUp.[27] She also called on American Muslim organizations to take a stand on the issue of the prayer. So did journalist Mona Eltahawy, in an article published in the *Washington Post*, and on MuslimWakeUp, titled "A Prayer Toward Equality," where she also wrote: "It will be women who change Islam and bring it into the 21st century, because we have nothing to lose. But many men support our efforts, because our fight is their fight" (Eltahawy 2005).

Other contributors to the MuslimWakeUp discussion included author and novelist Michael Muhammad Knight,[28] Hussein Ibish, then vice-chair of the Progressive Muslim Union, and other members of American Muslim communities. On March 18, Ahmed Nassef published a short piece titled "Thank You Sheikh Gum'a,"[29] in which he referred to the reported opinion expressed by one of the leading Islamic scholars in Egypt, 'Ali Jum'a, who was quoted in a news report on the satellite news channel Al-Arabiyya as having stated that woman-led prayers are permissible if the community agrees to it.[30] Jum'a later issued a formal fatwa (legal opinion) to the contrary, in which he declared it against all existing schools of Islamic Law for a woman to lead men in prayer or give a *khutbah* to any congregation.[31]

Mediated debates

The conflicting information and perspectives regarding Jum'a's legal opinion on the issue points us to the larger issue of the mediated nature of the ensuing debates between Muslim individuals, institutions, and organizations about the prayer event. While this is not the place to discuss in detail the various levels of this debate or

[26] Mojha Kahf (2005) "The Waiting Room," www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed 8/29/2008.
[27] Sarah Eltantawi (2005) "No, we don't have more important issues: in support of women-led prayers," www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed 8/29/2008.
[28] Michael Muhammad Knight (2005) "Huggable Islam," www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed 8/29/2008. Knight is known for his novels including *The Taqwacores* (Knight 2005) and *Blue-Eyed Devil* (Knight 2007).
[29] Ahmed Nassef (2005) "Thank you Sheikh Gum'a," www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed 8/29/2008.
[30] This report was then quoted in an online article on Arab News reporting on the woman-led prayer. See Ferguson 2005.
[31] Published by Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah, March 22, 2005.

even the legal or scriptural dimensions of it, two examples of mediated exchanges will give us a glimpse of the complexity involved.

On March 10, 2005, Nevin Reda, a student at the University of Toronto and member of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women published a lengthy document on MuslimWakeUp detailing the historical and textual evidence she had found in support of the permissibility of woman-led prayers, based on the historical precedent of a woman at the time of the Prophet Muhammad being commanded to lead a congregation.[32] The text cites a variety of Muslim scholars and opinions and responds in detail to many of the objections to taking this historical precedent seriously. It ends with a general appeal to contemporary Muslims to use their critical thinking skills and follow the most important Divine command to only follow one God and not take the authority of scholars past and present more seriously than that command.

In response to Reda's document, Hina Azam, professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Texas, Austin, and specialist in Islamic Law, published an article on another American Muslim site, www.altmuslim.com, on March 18, 2005, in which she explained that while she supported the idea of women leading prayers as a contemporary principle, Reda's argumentation and methodology in working with the traditional sources was flawed, and thus there was no traditional legal support for the prayer event.[33]

In another direct response to Reda's article, Zaid Shakir, one of the central figures of Zaytuna Institute in California, formulated a similarly clear rejection of the scriptural and legal basis of the prayer as within the parameters of Islamic traditional interpretations. Shakir, too, emphasized the importance of women in Muslim communities but rejected the necessity of women leading prayers as a symbolic act as well. The text of his response first appeared on the Zaytuna Institute website and was subsequently published in a collection of his essays titled *Scattered Pictures* (Shakir 2007).

On March 25, 2005, Hussein Ibish offered a scathing critique of Hina Azam's perspective in which he accused her of legal dogmatism and impeding the social and spiritual development of the Muslim community as well as claiming that she did not believe in her own conclusions.[34] Laury Silvers, then professor of religious studies at Skidmore College in upstate New York and an activist in the progressive Muslim scene in the USA, offered a more nuanced contribution to this mediated debate by arguing in response to Azam and Shakir, that while the existing legal interpretations may seem to indicate that woman-led prayers are not permissible according to Islamic Law and historical practice, both also formulate room for doubt, and more importantly, open the door for a reassessment of the central question of justice in Muslim societies and communities as gender justice. She also called Muslims to participate in women-led prayers as an act of "civil disobedience," i.e., a symbolic

[32] Nevin Reda (2005) "What would the Prophet do? The Islamic basis for female-led prayer," www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed 8/29/2008.
[33] Hina Azam (2005) "A critique of the argument for woman-led Friday prayers," www.altmuslim.com, last accessed 8/29/2008.
[34] Hussein Ibish (2005) "Erudition as dead-end: Hina Azam and the perils of legal dogmatism," www.muslimwakeup.com, last accessed 8/29/2008.

act to further discussions in Muslim communities about leadership, authority, justice, and gender roles (Silvers 2008).[35]

In an attempt to carry the debate beyond and possibly away from the question of women leading mixed-gender congregations in prayer, Ingrid Mattson, professor of Islamic studies at Hartford Seminary,[36] offered a lengthy essay, published on the Hartford Seminary website, titled "Can a Woman Be an Imam?" (Mattson 2008). In the essay, she discussed various aspects of Islamic religious leadership, its basis in sacred sources and legal interpretations, and for her, more importantly, the implications of prayer leadership for other forms of women's leadership in American Muslim communities. The essay critiqued the situation of women in American mosques and the lack of female leadership and acceptance for it but also cautioned Muslims to not extend too much authority to individual scholars and their opinions.

Since 2005, discussions of the prayer have appeared in several print publications, most prominently books, a fact that has contributed to making the prayer an historical event, preserved in print and picture memory. Reflections by Asra Nomani in the paperback edition of *Standing Alone* (Nomani 2006) and by Amina Wadud in *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Wadud 2006), as well Paul Barrett's chapter on Nomani and the prayer have already been mentioned. Lawyer and author Sumbul Ali-Karamali has dedicated a little more than a page to the question of women's prayer leadership in a chapter on "Religious Hierarchy" in her 2008 book *The Muslim Next Door* (Ali-Karamali 2008, 102–104), which joins a number of other first person accounts written by American Muslim women (Bullock 2005; Abdul-Ghafur 2005; Afzal-Khan 2005; Moezzi 2007).

The visual dimensions of the debate about the prayer are powerfully reflected in the 2009 documentary *The Mosque in Morgantown*, directed by Brittany Huckabee,[37] which follows Asra Nomani from the early stages of her campaign for prayer space and rights of women in American mosques through the prayer and beyond. The film contains many examples of newspaper articles and Nomani's TV appearances and thus does not only make visually accessible the debates in and around the mosque in Morgantown but also the importance of various media for carrying out the debate. Here, again, it becomes clear that Nomani and with her the other organizers of the prayer intended to advance community debates through as many forms of media as possible. The preceding paragraphs also indicate that for a more thorough analysis of media debates and representations, it is very important to distinguish and understand the dynamics of media production in its many forms and variations. Print publications,

[35] Because the website of the Progressive Muslim Union does not exist in its 2005 form anymore, the author only had access to a partial reprint of the text in Curtis 2008, 246–252.

[36] Mattson was also the director of the only Muslim chaplaincy training program, and future (2006) first elected woman-president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), one of the largest American Muslim community organizations. The essay was first published on the Hartford Seminary website where it is still available (http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/muslimwomensleadership.pdf). It is partially reprinted in E. Curtis (ed.) *Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (2008). Curtis dedicated a portion of the section on "Women, Gender and Sexuality in American Islam." Also containing excerpts from the texts by Zaid Shakir and Laury Silvers.

[37] Brittany Huckabee (2009) *The Mosque in Morgantown*. The documentary first aired on PBD on June 15, 2009 and was accompanied by an elaborate website featuring additional information, articles by Muslim personalities and scholars, and room for comments and discussions of the issues raised in the film, see www.themosqueinmorgantown.com, last accessed June 24, 2009.

internet discussion forums, news media, documentaries, and websites cater to very different consumers of media products and are produced by a large variety of individuals and organizations involved. Thus, their production, distribution, and consumption patterns need to be considered carefully to understand their impact on American Muslim communities and their non-Muslim surroundings.

Conclusion

American Muslims are uniquely positioned to recognize the power and pervasiveness of popular stereotypes of Islam as a religion of violence and oppression of women, and of Muslims as anti-modern, archaic, and other. They are equally uniquely positioned to recognize their own power and potential to challenge and to possible change such misrepresentations. In order for such challenges to be successful, it is important to understand the historical legacies and political utility of such representations, not only where they pertain to Islam and Muslims but where they relate to the experiences of marginalization, misrepresentation, and othering of ethnic, religious, and other minorities within the context but also beyond the domestic confines of the USA.

In this essay, I have offered an analysis of the 2005 woman-led prayer as a media performance with two important implications, both intended by the organizers, namely, to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women and to catalyze intra-Muslim discussions of women's leadership, equality, and rights beyond the question of ritual acts such as prayer. It has become clear that the presence of media representatives and the participation of organizers and congregants in media production were at the center of the organizers' agenda for the event. The analysis of selected media coverage also points to the fact that nuances matter. Newspaper articles, book chapters, and documentary films and the many dimensions of representation and self-representation involved in reporting on the prayer indicate that neither Nomani, nor Wadud, nor any of the other organizers were in control of media representations and that an important part of the equation would be the awareness of and possibility to control not only the "writing" of representations but also the multiple readings of each text. Thus, I would contend that rather than positioning Muslims against the media, we need to carefully rethink the many positions to be taken in representations and their possible readings. American Muslim women may claim the right to represent themselves and define how they should be perceived, but this intent does not protect them from being interpreted and defined by others on one hand or from misrepresenting other Muslim women (or men) in the process. Similarly, media coverage of Muslim communities, events, and performances by non-Muslims, however ill- or well-intentioned, or intended to be non-partisan, can be read in a variety of ways by those who consume media products whether they be Muslims or non-Muslims. With these nuances in mind, it is hard to declare the organizers successful in their intention to challenge or change media representations of Muslim women. The media coverage demonstrates the need to perceive such challenges as an ongoing effort.

It is somewhat easier to declare the organizers successful in their intent to create debate about women's issues through the performance of the prayer. The selected

examples of mediated community debate just in the North American context indicate that the announcement of the prayer, and the subsequent performance of it, did indeed create a variety of debates and responses from Muslim individuals, communities, and organizations domestically and internationally. Even those who rejected the permissibility of woman-led prayers on legal, traditional, or principal grounds were forced to formulate their position, which effectively made them participants in the event. Several American Muslim organizations felt compelled to issue formal statements, including the Muslim Women's League of North America (MWLUSA) and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR). The MWLUSA issued a statement on March 17, 2005, indicating that after internal discussions, the organization had taken the position that woman-led prayers were permissible; however, ritual leadership of Muslim women did not seem the most pressing issue to address, and thus the valuable efforts of the organizers could more meaningfully have been placed elsewhere in improving the status and lives of Muslim women.[38]

In a more subtle, but clearly, response to the prayer event, CAIR in cooperation with ISNA and other American Muslim organizations issued a 12-page booklet titled "*Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Working Together to Reclaim Our Heritage*" (CAIR 2005) that advocated more leadership positions and inclusion of American Muslim women but clearly not ritual leadership along the lines of the prayer. Finalized in November 2005 and distributed to many mosques in North America, this booklet, too, is a result of the discussions initiated by the prayer event.

Even though the prayer created a temporary network of committed Muslim men and women determined to change the situation of Muslim women, the prayer as an historical event did not produce a long-term movement, and since 2005, the Progressive Muslims Union and MuslimWakeUp have disintegrated as American Muslim networks and in their internet representation. Meanwhile, other woman-led and mixed-gender congregational prayers have taken place since 2005, notable one by Asra Nomani at Brandeis University later in 2005, and two by Amina Wadud (October 2005 in Barcelona and October 2008 in Oxford[39]), but this, too, is not a sustained movement. The significance of the 2005 prayers lies in the ripple effects it has created in Muslim discourses on gender issue and women's rights on one hand, and the small effects it may have had on a more nuanced and less stereotyped representation of Muslim women as monolithically oppressed, silent, and in need of saving, on the other.

Acknowledgements I want to thank Cemil Aydin, my co-organizer of the "Muslims and Media" workshop at Princeton University (May 2008) and co-editor of the special issue of *Contemporary Islam* under the same title for his support, encouragement, and enthusiasm. I am grateful for helpful feedback and discussion offered by workshop participants and colleagues at Princeton. The two anonymous reviewers deserve thanks for their thoughtful comments which helped me rethink and rewrite much of the original argument.

[38] See the statement titled "Woman-led Friday Prayer," http://www.mwlusa.org/topics/rights/womanledprayer.htm, last accessed June 11, 2009.

[39] The October 2008 event was briefly covered in the media, see a report on www.islamonline.net titled "UK Women Protest Woman-Prayer" from October 17, 2008 that reports protests of British Muslims against the first ever woman-led Friday prayer in the UK.

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist, 103*(3), 783–790.

Abdul-Ghafur, S. (ed). (2005). *Living Islam out loud: American Muslim women speak*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Afzal-Khan, F. (ed). (2005). *Shattering the stereotypes: Muslim women speak out*. Northampton: Olive Branch Press.

Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ahmed, L. (1999). *A border passage: from Cairo to America—a woman's journey*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ahmed, L. (2005). The veil debate—again. In F. Nouraie-Simone (Ed.), *On shifting ground: Muslim women in the global era* (pp. 153–171). New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY.

Ali-Karamali, S. (2008). *The Muslim next door: The Qur'an, the media, and that veil thing*. Ashland: White Cloud Press.

Barrett, P. (2007). *American Islam: The struggle for the soul of a religion*. New York: Picador.

Bartlett, T. (2005). The quiet heretic. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 51*(49), A101–A112.

Berger, R. (2005). The hungry spirit. Sojourners magazine, June 2005 (online edition, www.sojo.net)

Bullock, K. (2002). *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging historical & modern stereotypes*. Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought.

Bullock, K. (ed). (2005). *Muslim women activists in North America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Curtis, E. (ed). (2008). *The Columbia sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press.

El-Guindi, F. (2003). *Veil: Modesty, privacy, and resistance*. London: Berg.

Elliott, A. (2005a). Muslim group is urging women to lead prayers. *New York Times*, March 18, 2005.

Elliott, A. (2005b). Woman leads muslim prayer service in New York. *New York Times*, March 19, 2005.

Eltahawy, M. (2005). A prayer toward equality. The *Washington Post*, March 18, 2005, A23.

Ferguson, B. (2005). Woman imam, raises mixed emotions. *Arab News*, March 20, 2005.

Goodstein, L. (2004a). Woman's mosque protest brings furor in the U.S. *New York Times*, July 22, 2004.

Goodstein, L. (2004b). Muslim women seeking a place in the mosque. *New York Times*, July 22, 2004.

Hasan, A. (1999). *American Muslims: The new generation*. New York: Continuum.

Hasan, A. (2004). *Why I am a Muslim: An American odyssey*. London: Element.

Hoodfar, H., Alvi, S., & McDonough, S. (eds). (2003). *The Muslim veil in North America: Issues and debates*. Toronto: Women's Press.

Kahf, M. (1999). *Western representations of the Muslim woman: From termagant to odalisque*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Karnasiewicz, S. (2005). A woman's battle for the soul of Islam. *Salon Magazine*, March 16, 2005. http://archive.salon.com/books/int/2005/03/16/nomani/index.html.

Skinner Keller, R., & Radford Ruether, R. (eds). (1995). *In our own voices: Four centuries of American women's religious writing*. New York: Westminster John Knox Press.

Knight, M. (2005). *The Taqwacores*. New York: Autonomedia.

Knight, M. (2007). *Blue-eyed devil*. New York: Autonomedia.

Lite, J. (2005). Imam rips woman-led prayer. *Daily News*, March 23, 2005.

Mahmood, S. (2007). Feminism, democracy, and empire: Islam and the war of terror. In J. Wallach Scott & E. M. Hammonds (Eds.), *Women's studies on the edge* (pp. 81–114). Durham: Duke University Press.

Mamdani, M. (2005). *Good Muslim, bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the roots of terror*. New York: Three Leaves.

Manji, I. (2005). *The trouble with Islam today: A Muslim's call for reform in her faith*. London: St. Martin's Griffin.

Mattson, I. (2008). Can a woman be an imam? Debating form and function in Muslim women's leadership. In E. Curtis (Ed.), *The Columbia sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (pp. 252–263). New York: Columbia University Press.

Moezzi, M. (2007). *War on error: Real stories of American Muslims*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press.

Mydans, S. (1996). Blame men not Allah, Islamic feminists say. *New York Times*, October 10, 1996.

Nacos, B. (2006). *Fueling our fears: Stereotyping, media coverage, and public opinion of Muslim Americans*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Nomani, A. (2005a). Being the leader I want to see in the world. In S. Abdul-Ghafur (Ed.), *Living Islam out loud: American Muslim women speak* (pp. 139–156). Boston: Beacon Press.
Nomani, A. (2005b). *Standing alone in Mecca: A woman's struggle for the soul of Islam*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
Nomani, A. (2006). *Standing alone: An American woman's struggle for the soul of Islam*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
Said, E. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Vintage.
Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
Salmon, J. (2003). A widow but spare the pity. *New York Times*, October 6, 2003.
Shakir, Z. (2007). An examination of the issue of female prayer leadership. In Z. Shakir (Ed.), *Scattered pictures: Reflections of an American Muslim* (pp. 167–179). Berkeley: New Islamic Directions Publishers.
Silvers, L. (2008). Islamic jurisprudence, 'Civil Disobedience', and woman-led prayer. In E. Curtis (Ed.), *The Columbia sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (pp. 246–252). New York: Columbia University Press.
Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the gender jihad: Women's reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld.
Watanabe, T. (2005). Breaching the wall at prayer. *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 2005.
Wiltz, T. (2005). The woman who went to the front of the mosque: Feminist faces ostracism—or worse—for praying among men. *Washington Post*, June 5, 2005, D01.