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Glendale Community College

Presents:

A Quiet Revolution- The Female Imams Taking over an LA Mosque

Tuesday, March 22, 2022

12:15 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. PDT

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[Webinar begins 12:30 p.m.]

>>SPEAKER: Hi everybody good afternoon. It is good to see everyone just a couple of quick housekeeping announcements. So, today we will be talking about imams in Los Angeles. This is in honor of woman's history month. We encourage your participation. I can moderate your questions to our speaker. Thank you for Amel. Thank you to the history department for sponsoring the event and our own GCC consortium. If you are interested you can go to the Glendale EDU home page. You will find not all of our recordings for the last events. The information on how you as a student can be trained as an international reporter.

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Journalism school and a Pulitzer in America. And has a really cute puppy. Just 2 minutes there will be a sign in sheet for those of you online. It will be in the chat thank you for being here.

>>AMEL BRAHMI: It is not showing.

>>SPEAKER: Did I say that out loud?

>>AMEL BRAGMI: I am doing a PhD. At Columbia. I -- the story is about woman imams in America. They story I came across I was -- she found out there were 2 women in Paris. That were leading congregations. When she told me she said they were quite progressive. They do have to meet in secret. Because it is Paris and there has been mention with the Muslim communities. So, because it is such a progressive and radical move to be a woman imam. It is banned by the Muslim communities. So, these woman in Paris were leading mixed congregations. Men and woman together in the same room. It is a new leave. Usually men and woman have to be separated. If you go to a local mosque in Los Angeles. Sometimes they have a room for men and a room for woman. And they hear the imams through the speaker. The woman who started this whole thing was American. And so, that they were imams in America than there is anywhere else in the world. It is connected to my PhD where I will be looking at places where women in Islam are able to create new spaces. Where they can talk freely about issues that are very close to them. So, I met her when I became interested in the story I found out that the woman's mosque of America. There is only one in the world. Actually it is a side topic but there are woman mosque in China. In the rural areas. There has been Muslim woman imams leading congregations in China. But there is very little reporting on it. It is a place that is difficult to access. It is a 2 hundred year tradition. Very interesting. Here in the U.S. and anywhere else in the world these

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mosques are very rare. And there is only one in the U.S. and it is this one at the heart of Koreatown. It is very recently funded. As a journalist you want to go find people as much as you can in one very short time. You go to anniversary events and so, I got there and everybody was there. All the women that were involved in this enterprise. I met everybody I could meet for the book I have been writing. The one in the middle was doing the talk for the day. She was the leading imams. Me myself come from a background I was raised as a Muslim in France. A French Muslim.

So I had never been in a mosque where women led the congregation. And I was very impressed and also impressed by the ways they were leading congregations. A VLA way of talking to people. Allot of meditation. Allot of breathing. And you know not very strict at all. You usually you have to say a very specific prayer. It is a Friday prayer. So it is a very important prayer in itself lam where people have to gather. It is advised at the Friday prior at one o'clock that September you do at the mosque. But this one is very important. That is one that they would do on the regular basis before the pandemic. There is I prayer that are the imams was saying. I was very impressed by the style of leading the prayer. They were sitting Chris cross. It was a very very free. A lot of breathing.

And the language that was she was using was very progressive. Giving allot of freedom to everyone in the room. Because usually those prayers are very very strict. So, she is from Culver City. She is a Muslim born that one day almost 15 years ago. Decide today to dedicate her life to her faith. She didn't know any woman who were leaders. All the leaders around her were men. She got involved in inter faith work. She met a lot of imams men. But opening of the woman's mosque in Korea town in 2015. She was a friend of the founder. She went there and found her place. I met

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her on their fifth anniversary. It is because of the faith and culture are so male dominated. Woman in this community crave for that male leadership.

Quick introduction to traditional imams are like this. This -- so we all this is I-M-A-M-A-T. It is the profession of being an imam. It is a religious leader in a mosque. You see them in the front saying a prayer and people will repeat. This is an association. S-U-N-N-A. Are rules and custom that is were in place during the time of the prophet. They were written in a collection of H-A-D-I-T-H-S. Every story that was told by people that lived during the time of the prophet. It is very accurate. He said something. And this is how it should be done because he said it. It was written down 15 years later after his death. There is a lot of discussion on the accuracy of the quotes and of the meaning of the quotes. So, there are a lot of religious books that are containing this S-U-N-N-A.

So, woman imams this is a picture of the woman's mosque in Koreatown. It is at the Methodist church in Koreatown.

So, when I looked into it I was wondering where this tradition comes from. So I realized that woman's mosque were not the first ones to have done it but someone broke the tradition in 2005. Her name is Amini Wadud also known as Lady Imam. She is a scholar in Islamic studies.

She wrote a book on the cure ran. She was not the first to say that woman in Islam -- as second class citizens. But the first 1 to say that it is not gendered. The Qur'an is not -- which is the voice of god. What god said and written down. She said god was talking to everybody. That is Saint John on university avenue. They hosted the prayer very controversial. Huge backlash. A big mosque issued a rule against her. Saying you cannot do that. When you look you do your basic research as a journal. This

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is what you see. This prayer was huge. It is a mixed prayer. Woman can lead woman. They just cannot lead men. What they told me is that they cannot lead men because of the imams is at the front. The imams is standing. But the woman is in the front they are facing the rear. It is considered not appropriate.

So that is what they told me. That is the main reason. So, in the interview I understood and the scriptures. It is against by one school. The Maliki school. In north Africa. But for 3 schools out of 4. There are 4 schools in Islam. The woman's mosque in LA. It is legit and in line with tradition. I had many questions. Why did it take so long for woman's mosque to woman open? Why is not there more? Like in France a very liberal country. Why was there a controversy when it opened? Like the one in Koreatown. I went back to show argument. It is not an issue that facing the rear.

Woman cannot show their back to men. It is not something that you find in a holy book. I did two things. Investigated the accuracy of the scholars and the institution. What is the origin of the ban? And why is it a taboo. Then I tried to look at the practices. Why if sit allowed people are not doing it. There were many layers in the story. I was really conflicted.

I was seeing what is the true. Maybe it is true. If nobody is doing it.

So, those are the questions that only journalism can ask or want to ask or a passionate with. Also like especially if are you investigating. If you are writing a simple story you may want to interview the Islamic association in North America. Maybe they could of just left it there. But then I just did not understand why woman are not doing it.

I think it is related to that prayer and to the fact that there is an issue about woman leading mixed prayers. That prayer was very very controversial I

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have a you tube link. There is a lot of people protesting outside of the church in New York when it happened.

If you read the stories at the time they are talking about woman imams. But they were caught in the controversy and forgot to mention the basic facts. The problem is that in the media people who talk in the media are in a way controlling the narrative. So, when the journalist like the imams has a mosque in Egypt. He went out and said woman cannot do that. He didn't take the time to make the distinction. The point was not to say woman are allowed to do so. The point was to say this is fore bidden. The journalist gets whatever they are being told. You have to be quick when are you caught in a media cycle. Quick to write your stories and it is a hot event.

So there was not really -- in the story. Why most woman are unaware.

At the woman's mosque there were woman when I went there 2 years ago. Woman were doing extra prayers. The character of the story she led her prayer and woman at the end of the prayer paid more times. Extra prayers like 4 or 5. To make up for that prayer that she led that was not legit according to them. Even the woman that go there still do not understand that woman imams can lead woman.

I tried to investigation and as I tried to -- these are pictures that I found online. Umm Waraqa

You can totally fit.

So them.

She was a widow that with her servants. She was a companion of the prophets. This is part of tradition. It is written down as this story was passed down from one person to another and finally written down. 2 servants. One day she asked

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the prophet mow ham med. I want to go with you to the battlefield and just like -- that is another illustration. That is evidence that woman go to the battlefield at the time woman fighting was a thing.

She said I want to go to the battlefield. She is the first person and woman to memorize the holy word. You should lead prayers and be rewarded by god. There is a huge controversy. Sit in Arabic. People have been saying different things. It was not a request from the prophet she was authorized to do so because he asked her. Diminishing her importance. Other people say so these are the people that said the female imams was about. She was not requested. She was authorized. She must have been pushing for it. And the prophet said yes. That kind of narrative.

The other thing is he -- people say she did it. But it wasn't a mixed congregation. It was just woman. There was just relatives or cousins or aunts. That is what they say. So, had did that says that woman cannot lead men. Because of that story. She was authorized as a very exception.

And very interesting at the end of the story -- it is like these lines in the scriptures. But repeated 2 or 3 times. Different ways. One way she is authorized or requested. She did lead congregations. So, but Umm Waraga. Was killed by her 2 servants. There is no evidence of why they did that. It says that she was killed. And I remember reading something by a scholar. Was it a warning for any other woman that wanted to lead prayer?

It felt more pressing to answer the question. If it existed with the prophet himself. -- the Maliki school denied everything about Umm Waraqa. There is no evidence. That is what most people believer. Other says she didn't lead men. Just woman. So they say woman can only lead.

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The tradition died with her basically. This is why we have very few woman imams. To come back to the present people in the story and trying to find out why there are not more.

So, the people in the story are actually very helpful to understand that. And so, I interviewed scholars for information.

In my interviewed with the characters of the story. She just had a called from god. Women are not imams. It was never in her horizon. That is why -- these women were raised in a patriarchal environment. The information and knowledge never came to them. That is the key to the story and there is a character in the story from Pasadena. She said that you know when she grew up people would say -- she grew up doing belly dancing. But people would say to her if you do this you will go to hell. You must stay conservative in the Muslim community.

At some point she started to believe it.

She was a victim of sexual assault. Having access to counselling and a psychologist and being taken care of from that trauma. Is not available like places like Pakistan. Just very pa tree ore Cal environment. There is very little empowerment for these woman.

Very few of them knew that they would be imams. They didn't know that as woman they could approach a woman imams and get legit advice. Her advice may not be recognized as legitimate. There is a scholar from oxford. Kind of communicating the truth and reinterpret the tradition. That might have impact until the future. Sit probably true. But I am thinking what if right now what if sit going to continue limit the possibilities and empowerment.

Woman can lead woman.

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There are restrictions but that is also possible.

So, what subpoena the truth in all of this. Given the many uncertainties an event that occurred with Umm Waraqa. Woman did not lead prayers. There are no restrictions. That we know of. So it should be possible to do it.

But scholars said it is not a tradition. Butted tradition was changed through an intervention by the scriptures. They give an interpretation of the events. So, Islam is all the tradition. If it is not a tradition you cannot innovate. It is not a tradition. Because there were scholars that came up with this interpretation of the events. Making sure there would not be a tradition.

I understood that in the end -- it is just one of the many instructions. There were many. Especially in Muslim countries. Where my parents come from in Algeria. If a woman divorces her husband and wants to remarry and have children she has to give up her children to her husband. Things like that.

Things are very unfair. The reason many women do not know it is possible to be an imams it was never in the horizon. Hopefully -- at least help attend to woman's needs locally in the community. If not across the world. They talk about in that mosque. They talk about miscarriages. Sexual assault. Things you cannot talk about with a male imams. As freely. So, that is the point of the story so what is a difference of a Teneema. Feeling confident in her religion and being a part of it and that she could belly dance and be a faithful Muslim at the same time. The 2 were not exclusive of each other.

So, thank you for listening any questions? Any questions in the room before we discuss the chat?

>>SPEAKER: We have one.

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>>ATTENDEE: How the woman's mosque is in Koreatown in LA. What makes you think the reason it is here. And what lead to all the woman imams going there. Instead of anywhere else.

>>SPEAKER: The building they are using Methodist church the first Methodist church and it is a symbolic place. It is a symbolic place where I think in the early 19th century when women were fighting for the right to vote. It started here in California. There was a lady very much involved and all the advocacy was happening in that church it is a historical place for woman's rights. Then it became a place for refugees. And a safe haven.

>>SPEAKER: So we have one for you. Do you consider -- to be a primary source?

>>AMEL BRAHMI: Yes. They are primary source. Even though it is recorded speech. It is considered as what was said. It became rule. It is a speech that became rule. It was not just accepted out of the -- it is a field of scholarship. We have a people at Columbia studying the deeds. They were written down by a process of verification. The scholars of the 11th and 12th century. They went around the peninsula. Was this person a person of trust. So, there is a chain of transmission. 5 or 6 people. Every time you read it. A said to B. Who said to C. Who said to D. Who said to E. That the prophet told him or her. Then quote.

And the quote of the profit. Or sometimes there is no quote. But -- it is not a quote. Someone witnessed the prophet do something. Like witnessed them crying. Which is a very important. There is a belief in Islam that woman cannot cry over the body of a departed. Because it might -- there is a -- the tears may turn the

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soul of the departed. Some places women are not allowed to go to the funeral of the departed. So, when my father died in Algeria. I was not able to go to his funeral. It is very important to know about it. It is controversial. Everything that is giving liberty and freedom. Every time there is humanity in the profit it has been instrumentalized. And made into a rule.

I do not want to go into details. People would say you know he cried because maybe because it was his nephew or something. He was something close to him. Or if you will woman you may not be able to cry.

>>SPEAKER: Do Islamic traditions match the times. Is there practicing Muslims that would allow woman to go to a funeral.

>>AMEL BRAHMI: Definitely. Communities do -- Islam is very very diverse. From Asia. Different schools. There are 4 schools. The school in north Africa is very strict on some topics and progressive on others. Not all states have a school. Morocco follows the same school. It is a state sponsored religious school. But it is not the case for every country -- Islamic country. They all have their own practices.

This all Sunni Islam. They have their own practices. There is a sect of the Islam that she said as Ismaili she led congregations at the age of 8. She was very young. Open to anybody. If you volunteer. You can do it. So, for them the imams is something else.

That is another difference. Between Sunni and Shiit Islam.

>>SPEAKER: By years of misinformation. You are talking about a subset. In general woman are not allowed.

>>AMEL BRAHMI: Correct.

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>>SPEAKER: I have been confused on the Qu'ran. Is there any other way -- what we are getting at -- in some places have gone through the changes. All of what are you talking about seems to point some kind of enlightenment movement within Islam. I am a devout Christian. I have to think of how I take an old testament and the stories and this metaphor. The light. My question had to do with your thought on the resistance to change and how much of that is built into the way decisions are made. You have to reject the religion or ways it can change.

>>SPEAKER: So, that is one of the things -- with our prayer it was a very radical act to say we are going to mix and woman. And one would argue that this is the way that you should go. Because you know if you start advocating -- I think it helped for that mosque to open. So, but if she has been restricting herself and confined her advocacy within the rules of Islam maybe that would not have had the same impact. Maybe not talked about. She might have had be -- getting some legitimacy or authorization to get it.

Sometimes it may be the only way that you get change. That you see change.

If you look at the civil rights movement. We want to be equal. Go to school. At the time in the emancipation it was a radical thought. Then even then even after emancipation. You had Jim Crowe it was a response to a radical change.

>>SPEAKER: Pictures are always so bland.

>>AMEL BRAHMI: I think I have seen pictures never heard of a separation of the circling. Is it possible that if you do it with your family. For instance there was an event in LA. Like a celebration. When she first arrived in the U.S. they

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went to the event at the LA Convention Center and woman and men were together they were sticking to their families.

>>SPEAKER: So Melanie thanks for that. She has a question. Can you find them the drawings in museums?

>>AMEL BRAHMI: We talked about the silence. So Umm Waraqa. These are pictures that people did on the internet that are not accurate. I just want them for to envision the person. The black scarf is French. We do not know everything about her. Part of my work is to reconstruct a little of her story.

>>SPEAKER: What inspired personally to do this story.

>>AMAL BRAHMI: Thank you. I was inspired by the story.

>>SPEAKER: Why this story. Why Muslim imams.

>>AMAL BRAHMI: I seen allot of restrictions. It is 2 things. The fact that I grew up in France. Where I was not rejected. You must it is a very radical. I had to fit in. I tried to not express that side of he as much as possible. When I would in the very basic way I would get comments. So I grow up thinking it is not something I should talk about. Since I have been in the U.S. I had an awakening. And you know he made me. Just reconnected with that part of my identity. I just realize that there was nothing more. There was allot of richness in the culture. On the other side in France. Where Islam had not been well received as a religion. Those that were following it were being discriminated. Like many times when you were being rejected. You act more radically. Say the truth about Islam. It is not a religion that also hates woman. It is just instrumentalize by men very early on. I want to investigate the truth. Social scientist have done it before me. I am maybe the fourth generation. So, there is a very famous sociologist. She wrote about a book on feminism in Islam. We talk about investigating

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history. My Hadid is about woman imams. Investigating the origins and who said what. I got that from her. So studied in one of her books. I was told in Pakistan. It is told everywhere. It says never trust woman in your affairs. The story is that it was told in a reaction to the leadership that the youngest wife of the prophet was rising to. She was becoming a leader. Very well respected. There was this man that 25 years after the death. He said but the prophet said never bring woman into your affairs. He said something similar to that but nothing to do with that context in particular. So that is what I am trying to do with this.

>>SPEAKER: Thank you. That leads into Gina's question. It seems like one of your themes is reinterpretation. Filling in of what is not in archives. Looking at the sketch and trying to imagine a source that we do not have.

The Qur'an open to interpretation.

>>AMAL BRAHMI: Yes. It is open to interpretation. There is allot of interpretation. Definitely and you can interpret it in a radical conservative way or a progressive way. You can read it in both says. But there are also very specific verses in the Qur'an that talk about men and woman. There is a thing in the mosque that happen. She was in the back of the mosque. There is a story. It is evidence that woman and men may have been in the same mosque. There is a story art a woman raising her hand and asking. Saying we have been asked not to come. We think we should hear the voice of God through you. There is a verse that says many things that many -- it says all the things that men and woman can do. It is a repetition. Repetition. It is a response to that comment.

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>>SPEAKER: Last question. What do you see as the future for woman in mosque?

>>AMAL BRAHMI: So, that is a good question. I feel like she is the experiment. We will see what she does. If anybody can -- if anybody can do it is her. Because she has a huge influence. Like a religious person. When you hear her talk. It really comes from the heart. She looks like someone -- she looks like a spiritual leader and sounds like one. If anybody can do it it is her. So, we will see what she does. Right now she very conflicted. She is conflicted because he worries about getting in conflict with her communities.

>>SPEAKER: Let's thank Amal. Thank you for being here today. Our next and final lecture series. Will be on Tuesday. May 3. Where we will be talking about lifestyle and amenity migration with Doctor Edward -- from Cal state Northridge. Professor of geography. Check the thank you very being with us and the wonderful questions. Have a great afternoon.