

Working Towards Gender Equality: Resistance in Progressive Muslim Movements in North America

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Abstract

Contemporary movements of progressive Islam strive to realise gender justice and social equality through a critical engagement with Islamic sources and a re-examination of contemporary Islamic practices. An important feature of most progressive Islamic movements in North America is the focus on social equality and achieving gender parity. Progressive Muslims deal with gender inequality in a variety of ways. For example, they do so through retaining a Muslim identity and seeking to change the discourse from within; by identifying new ways of contextualising religious texts; through challenging dominant religious practices with social action; and by reformulating Islamic authority structures. This paper seeks to outline and analyse the methods through which gender justice is pursued in target progressive Muslim communities and organisations with a specific focus on religious social activism. This paper focuses on two organisations: Muslims for Progressive Values and the El-Tawhid Jumma Circle. Data will be drawn from observations and qualitative interviews gathered during fieldwork in the United States in 2013. The findings from this paper will be used to evaluate the resistance techniques employed by progressive Muslims that aim to work toward gender justice and combat inequality.

Introduction: Defining Progressive Islam

Progressive Islam strives to realise a plural and just society through a critical engagement with Islam and the ideals of social and gender justice (Safi 2003a). One of the most distinctive characteristics of many progressive Muslim movements is the strong emphasis on gender equality. Progressive Muslims begin with the stance that the Muslim community cannot collectively strive for justice unless the equal rights of Muslim women are first guaranteed (Safi 2003a). Omid Safi, who is acknowledged by some as the chief organiser of the “Progressive Muslim” movement (Jones 2008: 224) asserts that, “...there can be no progressive interpretation of Islam without gender justice” (2003a: 1). Furthermore it is noted by Safi (2003a) that any future interpretations of Islam would be judged by the extent to which they were able to affect gender justice in a wider community sense.

Progressive Islam has frequently been associated with figures such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Omid Safi, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas Abdullahi an-Na’im, Farid Esack and Khaled Abou El-Fadl to name a few. The majority of those associated with the movement tend towards an academic tone in their work that restricts their readership to only the most highly educated. However, it can be argued that these writers are “representative - not generative” of ideas and groups that already permeate Muslim communities in a semi non-organised fashion. By diverging from popular notions of Muslim culture, evidence suggests that pragmatism and globalisation have led many Muslims to engage in a critical reformulation of their faith (Mandaville 2003).

Farid Esack defines the objectives of progressive Muslims as connected “to global structures of oppression whether economic, gender, sexual etc., and ensuring that the

oppressed are once again active agents of history” (Esack 2006: 126). He sees their activism as directly linked to the centrality of God and also an appreciation of Islam as a “liberatory discourse” (Esack 2006: 126) in which the Qur’an is seen as having solutions to social justice issues rather than being the cause of inequality.

To date there is no sociological research that investigates the social implications of progressive Islamic thought, much less its implications on gender roles and equality in Muslim societies and communities. Although there is considerable literature on progressive Islamic theology not much is known about its social manifestations and the implications of these materials. Much of the disagreement towards progressive Islamic discourse seems to stem from the inability to understand how it is practiced and what its level of social impact is if any.

In practice we see that a search for gender equality is taken up passionately in writing by many progressive Muslim scholars and is often attached to the term Islamic feminism or the practice of “gender *jihad*”. The term Islamic feminism carries several meanings and connects - what are often considered by some - as oppositional words or terms. As such it often connotes little or no meaning in daily practice and can confound the struggle for gender equality. The concept is said by Amina Wadud (2006) to encompass the simple idea that women are full human beings. The term is often elucidated as a movement that strives for the complete equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, in both public and private life (Badran 2011).

It is apparent that there is a body of literature that outlines progressive Muslim ideals however not much is known about how the progressive Muslim discourse translates into practice. The concept of progressive Islam itself presents us with some questions. This paper reports on a sociological study I undertook of the lived gender experiences of self-identified progressive Muslims. The paper will identify and give examples of ways that these progressive Muslim movements deal with inequality and how and why they promote women's leadership and gender equality through a cosmopolitan reading of Islam. In this paper cosmopolitanism refers to a community in which diverse individuals enter into respectful relationships despite their divergent cultures and beliefs.

Methodology

This research was conducted via fieldwork in the United States (US) and worldwide via Skype, face-to-face interviews and participant observations in 2013. The US was chosen as the most suitable fieldwork location as it contains particularly visible groupings of progressive Muslims. Participants were sourced through contact with progressive Muslim organisations such as Muslims for Progressive Values in New York and Washington D.C., the Qur'an Discussion Group in New York, El-Tawhid Juma Circle in Canada and also via online Skype interviews. Participants were also recruited online via discussion boards and Facebook groups due to the high volume of Internet networking and community building by members. Twenty interviews as well as observations were undertaken during two months of fieldwork in the United States (New York and Washington D.C.).

Pseudonyms have been used in this paper to protect the anonymity of participants and identifying markers have been removed. After collection, the data was coded to themes and analysed using Nvivo software. Where text from participants' responses is included in this paper they are coded in the following manner: age the participant turned in 2013y/sex/organisation. So, a thirty-year old female who is a member for Muslims for Progressive Values would be coded as: (30y/F/MPV)¹.

Target Organisations

Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV)

Muslims for Progressive Values is a progressive Islamic organisation based in the United States. It operates communities and mosques in Washington D.C., Atlanta, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Columbus and Ottawa. Their worship spaces are referred to as “unity mosques” and are intended to be inclusive spaces where no party is excluded from participation. The *athan* (call to prayer) and *khutbah* (sermon) can be performed by men or women and the congregation is seated and performs prayer without physical gender segregation (Muslims for Progressive Values 2015). Muslims who identify as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual or Queer) and those in mixed-faith relationships are welcomed and the mosques offer a marriage celebrant service. MPV makes for a particularly interesting case study due to its model of unity mosques. Making international headlines after the opening of one of their mosques in Washington D.C. (Kaleem 2012) it appears to be the first of its kind in the world.

Qur'an Discussion Group Manhattan (QDG)

QDG is an activity of the Muslim Reform Movement Organisation (MRMO) held weekly in both Manhattan and Long Island. The Qur'an is read and discussed in an open-minded fashion. MRMO seeks to revitalise Islam as a dynamic and viable religion (Muslim Reform Movement Organisation 2015). They plan to do this by extrapolating the "universal truths" of the Qur'an and studying the Qur'anic principles in a contemporary context. The group utilises a book called *The Qur'an and the Life of Excellence* to ponder on the lessons the Qur'an can teach readers about life in the postmodern world.

El-Tawhid Juma Circle (ETJC)

El-Tawhid Juma Circle mosques identify themselves as being "human positive". They begin with the understanding that men and women are equal in all aspects of religious life and ritual practice regardless of their age, class, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, HIV status or on any other grounds. ETJC was started in Toronto in 2009 in the form of a Toronto Unity Mosque with the intention of creating an "inclusive *tawhidic*" (doctrine of oneness) worship space where diversity would be celebrated (El-Tawhid Juma Circle 2015). The service format embodies the notion of "shared authority" and congregation members take turns in giving the *adhan* (call to prayer), delivering the sermon and leading the prayer. The service is accessible worldwide via Skype. ETJC now has locations in Vancouver, Montreal, London and Toronto in Canada, as well as Boston in the US.

Progressive Islam

Progressive Islam owes many of its core ideas and frameworks to the work of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) and Sayyid Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani (1838-97). The term progressive Islam was popularised in 1983 by Suroosh Irfani with his work *Revolutionary Islam in Iran: Popular Liberation or Dictatorship?* The work of Iranian sociologist Ali Shari'arti (1981) is also foundational within the discourse of progressive Islam. His ideas have been compared to those of the Catholic Liberation Theology espoused by South Americans Leonardo Boff (1978) and Gustavo Gutierrez (1998 and 2014). More recently Omid Safi edited a volume on social issues facing progressive Muslims (2003a).

This paper draws on many of the themes present in Omid Safi's edited volume *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (2003a). The main thrust of Safi's argument involves ensuring social justice and by extension human rights through an Islamic framework. Safi expounds that gender equality plays an important role in this process, as full social justice cannot be achieved without equality being extended to all. The volume not only campaigns for gender equality but also points to the need for an inclusive Islam devoid of both racism and other types of discrimination. Special attention is also paid to the status of LGBTQ identifying people within Islam. Safi's book is an excellent example of progressive Muslim scholarship and discourse that in turn may produce social change and effect social practices.

Generally, progressive Muslims employ hermeneutic methods of interpretation when studying their primary texts. Qur'anic hermeneutics are the study of the theories of

the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an and progressive interpretation focuses strongly on understanding the Qur'an holistically and in context (Fazlur Rahman 2009). Unlike the lack of literature on social implications, there is ample literature on progressive Islamic theology. The most universal is the concept of "contextual hermeneutics" (Esack 1997). This technique outlines general attitudes present in the Qur'an and tests all other religious statements against these criteria. It also takes into consideration the overall historical contexts at the time of revelation. They see the Qur'an as inclusive and universal; however, they do not believe there is any conclusive Qur'anic perspective. They also see pluralism as intrinsic to the Qur'anic worldview (Duderija 2011). Furthermore Abdulaziz Sachedina argues that the Qur'an directly promotes human rights and equality:

The Qur'anic idea that all human beings are unconditionally equal in dignity through God's act of creation, in my opinion, is sufficient to convince any Muslim that all human beings, regardless of their race, sex and creed, are entitled to certain rights as part of their inviolable personhood (Sachedina 2009: 2).

Adis Duderija succinctly outlines the specific features of progressive Muslim thought in his book *Constructing a Religiously Ideal Believer* (2011). According to Duderija progressive Muslims take the overall historical context of the Qur'an into consideration while undertaking interpretation and as such for them the Qur'an presents a constant wedding of ideas of social justice and issues of dogma. In this sense they attempt to take a thematic or holistic approach to the Qur'an. Interestingly progressives state that some hadith contradict the spirit of the *sunna* (way of life prescribed by Muslim teachings) as a whole and often do not consult the hadith or are very selective about those they rely upon. Thus, Duderija argues that progressive

Muslims approach history and historical inquiry from a Foucaultian genealogical perspective according to which:

Ideas institutions and practices are regarded as unique products of specific historical confluences, perfect in and of themselves without reference to extra-historical values or ideals in relation to which they either succeed or fail to conform (Azam 2007: 12 cited in Duderija 2008: 412).

To date there have not been any significant studies that specifically focus on progressive Muslim communities and gender. The closest and most recent is Julianne Hammer's book *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (2012). Centered on the controversial woman-led prayer by Amina Wadud in 2005, her research employs the event and reactions to it as an example to address themes of religious communities, and public opinion. Hammer surveys the work of an impressive list of American authors, including Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Mohja Kahf, Azizah al-Hibri, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Asra Normani, and Asma Gull Hasan in order to understand the current state of gender relations in American Islam.

Similarly Meena Sharify-Funk and Munira Kassam Haddad (2012) discuss the dramatically divergent responses to the woman led prayer. They ask, "Can Islamic texts and communities accommodate female religious leaders? Is it in the interest of Muslim women to seek empowerment within a domain of communal life in which male authority has traditionally been dominant?" (Sharify-Funk and Kassam Haddad 2012: 45). Progressive Muslims attempt to grapple with these questions through their religious practices and social activism.

Cosmopolitanism

In the period after September 11 and the London bombings there arose what Peter Mandaville describes as “new imperatives” for progressive Islam (2003). Regrettably, popular discourse has come to focus on issues of fanaticism and violence within Islam. Consequently the need to present examples of a moderate or liberal Islam emerged. Although the progressive Islamic movement has not set out to create an Islamic revolution it does seek to create a wider sense of social justice through inclusion and the attempted abolition of divisive structures like class, nationalism, racism and sexism. It could be argued that progressive Islam is developing into a cosmopolitan Islam. The plural and equality based ideals of progressive Islam lend themselves well to the cosmopolitan idea of a shared morality as will be demonstrated in this paper.

Cosmopolitanism is an ideology that sees all humans as belonging to one community, regardless of their nationality or faith, based on a shared morality (Appiah 2006). Appiah defines cosmopolitans as “moral universalists they believe that all humans, and not merely compatriots or fellow-citizens, come under the same moral standards” (Appiah 2006: 21). The divisions between nations, cultures or societies are therefore seen as ethically immaterial. This links with the progressive ideals of pluralism and especially of inclusivity as the racial and gender divides are dismantled within progressive Islamic discourse and practice.

Contrary to cosmopolitan ideals the study of Muslim societies and communities has long been subject to division by designated oppositional groupings, particularly those of East and West and also of tradition versus modernity. In 1995 David Hollinger

connected cosmopolitanism to religion, making it a significant term for analysing the limits of pluralism and multiculturalism (Lawrence 2001). Muslim cosmopolitanism usually follows along the same line as “everyday” or “ordinary” cosmopolitanism. Vertovec and Cohen (2003) argue that increased travel and immigration have led to a greater acceptance of multiculturalism and general diversity, and for the existence of a type of “everyday” or “ordinary” cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism now includes a wider range of issues such as justice, social responsibility, ethics, and cultural affiliations, “all considered within social conditions of complex globality (Ossewaarde 2007 and Roudometof 2005 cited in Inglis 2012: 100). Many aspects of progressive Muslim practice can be considered to be cosmopolitan in nature. Progressive Muslims show social responsibility by providing a safe inclusive space for women, the disabled, and LGBTQ people. Their guiding principles revolve around strong themes of inclusivity including having no ethnic barriers in their congregations, an emphasis on maintaining cultural affiliations, freedom of religious identity, and a strong focus on social and gender justice. Stemming from the theme of inclusivity progressive Muslim groups have online pages and groups in different languages and also endeavor to have an international reach and influence. Their intra and inter-religious pluralism also echoes the cosmopolitan vision. Cosmopolitanism will be used in this paper as a collective marker of inclusivity, pluralism and equality.

Results: How Do Progressive Muslims Deal with Inequality?

The results section will be grouped into five themes. Each of these themes emerged during data analysis as common processes that progressive Muslims undertake to deal with inequality.

Theme 1: Retaining a Muslim Identity and Changing the Discourse From Within.

Progressive Muslims maintain their Muslim identity through a self-identified stance. This means that anyone who identifies himself or herself as Muslim is accepted as a Muslim. They also seek to enact change from within a Muslim framework using Islamic texts and concepts. This means that instead of using secular language and ideas, they employ Islamic terms and precedents to legitimise their points of view. By using the language of Islam to call for social change Joyah believes that progressive Muslims are more likely to be successful in inspiring change:

Joyah: The only way for Muslim women's rights to be achieved is through Islam because that's a language that Muslims understand. The thing about it – I have this conversation with secularists, feminists, human rights organisations all the time – They spend millions of dollars trying to improve Muslim women's rights in the Muslim world and they are talking the most secular language there is. You're not talking the language of Islam. Why would they even bother [to] listen to them? So you need people like us to speak that language to help you speak the language that they will listen to [52y/F/MPV].

Ali expands on this idea of Muslim identity and reveals that many agnostics and atheists cannot understand why he would choose to remain a Muslim. This illustrates the double bind that some progressive Muslims find themselves in; some are not accepted by normative Muslims, or by some non-Muslims and Islamophobes who question their commitment to Islam. He saw an opportunity to try to dismantle some of the power structures constructed around religious interpretation and authority and take defining Islam into his own hands:

Ali: I often have these discussions with Iranians who have a very ambivalent notion of Islam and even some of the Arabs that I know that are Agnostics or Atheists that come from Muslim backgrounds. They say to me, “How can you be Muslim, how can you be religious?”... I’m like you know dude, it ain’t going to go away. You can hate religion you can hate Islam all you want, it’s not going to go away. You gotta go in there and you gotta sorta open it up. You gotta soften it up. Otherwise if we all leave, who are we leaving it to? [50y/M/ETJC].

Progressive Muslims recognise the importance of their Muslim identity in trying to make positive social changes in Muslim communities and societies. Participants also chose to retain their Muslim identity so that they would still have an input into the way Islam is represented. As mentioned by Joyah, non-Muslims are often unable to enact change in Muslim communities and societies. Cosmopolitanism encourages a sense of globality and the co-existence of diverse identities meaning that those who are Muslim and also progressive are able to use their diverse identities to enact social change.

After claiming a Muslim identity and using Muslim terms and precedents to engage other Muslims about social issues, participants then work on ways to contextualise and understand religious texts in a new way that fits in with their diverse intersectional identities.

Theme 2: Identifying New Ways of Contextualizing and Reading Religious Texts.

Progressive Muslims use a hermeneutical framework to contextualise Islamic sources and in doing so set out to interpret Islam in a liberal way as pro-human rights and pro-social justice. In doing so they study Qur'anic verses in their historical context and also consider if they fit in with the main themes of the Qur'an. Furthermore they conduct *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) individually without consulting a religious scholar. Emma rationalised that with the diversity of people and societies that there could not possibly be only one correct interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith:

Emma: When people read the Qur'an they see different things. I think people should be free to do that. Just as I don't want somebody telling me what to believe, I don't want to do that to others. I think that there is a way for us to be accepting of each other and I'm not saying different sects because I think we are all one but to have more liberal type avenues to work with [42y/F/MPV].

According to Madeline progressive Islam is pro-social justice and pro-human rights and it is not there to create division in the wider Muslim community but to prompt conversations about important issues of equality and by extension espouse cosmopolitan values:

Madeline: It's just another expression of Islam but we interpret Islam to be pro-social justice and pro-human rights and people being able to live within as themselves whatever that means. Those are the types of things that we are going to be pro and sometimes that is seen as anti-Islam because for so long a specific group has been in charge so now we're challenging that. So that's important [35y/F/MPV].

Progressive Muslims use a hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an and set about reading the Qur'an and hadith from a cosmopolitan worldview. They believe that the Qur'an can be interpreted as being intrinsically equal and inclined towards social justice and human rights and set out to read the Qur'an from a cosmopolitan worldview. They then use their readings as a method to support their social activism.

Progressive interpreters read into the Qur'an what they want, meaning they see what suits their cosmopolitan worldview. They then move to put these ideas into practice by creating and maintaining plural worship spaces.

Theme 3: Creating Plural Worship Spaces.

Progressive congregations place a strong emphasis on inclusivity and as such are made up of a mixture of Shia, Sunni, Sufi, and Ismaili members. Often people from other faiths also join the services and social gatherings. Attendees are invited to pray where and how they feel most comfortable. In order for all congregants to feel safe and included, many congregations have a no talkback rule on theology. Subsequent to this MPV is developing a curriculum for a Muslim Sunday school that doesn't

privilege Islam as the only true religion, which they see as particularly important for children from inter-religious marriages:

Joyah: The curriculum that we are developing we feel that if you're a kid that's of mixed heritage and you have a parent that is not Muslim and you have families who are non-Muslims what kind of a school environment would you send your children to? That's not going to belittle other faith traditions that are going to treat other faith traditions as equal. The curriculum - the outline of it - as such that it treats all religions equally and that is embedded in the language and the wording it uses. That's really important [52y/F/MPV].

Ali explained that his unity mosque encouraged both intra and inter-faith pluralism.

Their notion of inclusivity encompasses both Muslims and non-Muslims:

Ali: It is an intra-faith mosque as well so if you are Shia and you are leading prayer and you lead prayer in your way and everybody follows along. If you are Sunni from a particular school of law that prays a particular way we follow you regardless of what you might be familiar with and so on. There are people that come to the mosque regularly. One guy is Jewish, is not Muslim, but he comes every Friday and he gives sermons. He identifies as an Arab Jew as his family is from North Africa. He is a gay man. His sermons are awesome, he not only uses Qur'an and the Hadith but he also uses Old Testament and Torah and so on. One of the women who comes identifies as a universalist Sufi. She doesn't identify with being Muslim *per se*. She comes on Fridays and she leads part of the *dhikr* (remembrance) [50y/M/ETJC].

Having an inclusive and equal space was important to Michelle and the other organisers at ETJC. It was also integral to them that members were allowed to form their own religious opinions:

Michelle: We don't want to disenfranchise somebody or make somebody feel like they have to listen to us. It's very disturbing that somebody feels they have to listen to us. We want people to make their own judgments, their own interpretations, and their own understandings. ETJC has a no talk back rule for theology [51y/F/ETJC].

Creating a plural worship space allows progressive Muslims to practice in an inclusive and equitable environment. This results in both intra and inter-religious pluralism with non-Muslims invited to offer the sermon. It also allows individuals to develop their own religious opinions without fear of exclusion if their beliefs do not match those espoused at the mosque they attend.

After creating plural worship spaces progressive Muslims turn to social activism to challenge dominant religious practices that do not fit with their worldview.

Theme 4: Challenging Dominant Religious Practices With Social Activism.

Progressive Muslims challenged dominant Islamic religious practices in a number of ways. Many of these actions are associated with gender or sexual equality. Firstly they do this by conducting woman-led prayer at their mosques and also by encouraging women and LGBTQ identifying people to give the call to prayer or the sermon. Also, they hold mixed gendered congregational prayers, in which

congregants pray side-by-side in a mixed setting. They also encourage freedom of dress in worship spaces and do not expect women to dress in a certain way or cover their hair. All the communities in my study also pride themselves on being LGBTQ affirming, not just welcoming. They feel that this sets them apart from other liberal² Muslim organisations. Finally, two participants reported that they acted as female marriage celebrants and also married LGBTQ couples, and inter-faith couples, which is unusual in the majority of Muslim communities. Their gender activism also reaches outside their own communities to protesting women's conditions in normative mosques. Zaynab spoke about the protests she and others had conducted at a Washington D.C. mosque:

Zaynab: We call it [the women's section] the penalty box. We did something bad so we need to go back to this little dark corner. I told my friend, you know what, we need to protest this and not just at this mosque but at every mosque. As bad as the conditions were there, there are places where the conditions are worse, where women are relegated to a utility or storage room. I don't believe that that was intended by the Prophet and that was not present within his community. We started [protesting] just by getting in a line behind the men [47y/F/Online].

Some described the experience of worshiping at an inclusive mosque to be a powerful one, particularly for women who may not have had the opportunity to pray in the main congregation, give the sermon, or lead the prayer before:

Trent: It's powerful. Women don't leave our space feeling bad about themselves. When I have a daughter she can come and sit beside me... I like a space like that. I like that my mother can sit anywhere, my mother

doesn't have to cover if she doesn't want to - you know what I mean?
People can have their kids with them. They can sit beside their husband.
These kinds of things I think are powerful and amazing. It should be
celebrated. I never understood why you would go into a religious space
where you couldn't sit with your family [44y/M/ETJC].

Progressive Muslims see inclusivity as part of their universal social responsibility. They are particularly concerned with the treatment of women in normative Islam and work to change this through social activism in their worship spaces and also by protests at normative mosques. For many unity mosques are places of healing. By taking a cosmopolitan worldview and using social action to challenge entrenched religious practices progressive Muslims from this research were able to enact their cosmopolitan ideals.

As a culmination of the previous four steps progressive Muslims then go on to rethink and reformulate religious authority structures to allow total equality in their unity mosques. This step allows for female leadership.

Theme 5: Rethinking Islamic Authority Structures

Progressive Muslims introduced the concept of *shared authority* in order to challenge existing authority structures. This means that the leadership responsibilities were shared among the congregation and religious leadership positions are open to all (including women). In order to extend pluralism to all, non-Muslims can also offer the sermon at many unity mosques. As an extension to the deconstruction of existing religious authority structures progressive Muslims described following the principle

of “fatwa of the heart”. Each person makes his or her own decision depending on his or her own moral reasoning and feeling about what is right.

The leadership structure in their unity mosques varies greatly from those observed at most normative mosques. ETJC welcomes anyone from the congregation to give the call to prayer, lead the prayer, or give the sermon. Ali felt that Islamic authority had been misused by some religious leaders for political reasons:

Ali: On some level when you study Islam and Islamic history you see how in Islam authority has been used or usurped by the *ulama* (scholars) and the *mulahs* (Muslim clergy) and the *shiekhs* (honourific title for Muslim leaders) and the rulers and so on and so forth and how *fatwas* (legal opinions) have been bought and *tafsir* (exegesis) were created to meet particular political goals or social goals or whatever. So this notion of usurped authority and that some people like you and like me will never be in authority, in that particular paradigm. We need to rewrite the paradigm. Because we can't work within that system so you have to, on some level, thrash that system down, so the notion that anybody, that anybody can come and lead the prayer, that anybody can come and lead the sermon... It breaks down the elitism of authority and makes us as a community responsible for living a social Islam [50y/M/ETJC].

The concept of shared authority was coined at ETJC to allow for a more inclusive worship space. This allowed congregation members to share the religious duties of giving the call to prayer, giving the sermon, or leading the prayer. The mosque organisers simply referred to themselves as “coordinating *imams*” (religious leaders)

and shared the majority of leadership duties with anyone in the congregation that wanted to participate:

Trent: So if you were to come to our mosque space and wanted to give the *khutbah* (sermon) we would say that is great, we would give you a format - we want it to be done in a traditional format. Anybody can give the call to prayer, anybody can join in, and any type of function in the mosque space is open to anyone. It was really important for us to break down that hierarchy, the pastor, the *imam*, the reverence to the *imam* because after all, the *imam* is just a person like you and me [44y/M/ETJC].

Linking to a cosmopolitan sense of social responsibility progressive Muslims deconstructed and reformulated much of the existing normative Islamic authority structure in order to create a more equal inclusive worship space; this new structure created space for women and for those who identify as LGBTQ to be able to become leaders and to feel more included within the congregation. This change brings progressive Muslims in line with what they understand to be the ethics of justice.

Progressive Muslims deal with inequality in a number of ways.

- Firstly, by retaining a Muslim identity and attempting to change the discourse from within.
- Secondly, through identifying new ways of contextualizing and reading religious texts (hermeneutics).
- Thirdly, by challenging dominant religious practices with social action and by creating and maintaining plurality of belief in worship spaces.

- Finally, by rethinking and reformulating Islamic authority structures. Progressive Muslims value diversity and this manifests through the creation of multiple plural and inclusive worship spaces and their emphasis on individual understanding and interpretation of Islam.

A cosmopolitan vision encourages the mixing of diverse cultures and religious understandings. This also links with a cosmopolitan sense of social responsibility and social justice.

Women's Religious Leadership

From each of these five themes the common factor of challenging inequality through women's religious leadership emerges. This can take the form of religious leadership such as woman-led prayer, women giving the call to prayer, women giving the sermon and women providing pastoral care. This also results in non-gender segregated prayer spaces, protests against inequality in non-progressive spaces, and the subversion of traditional religious authority. These practices also endeavor to challenge and dismantle existing power hierarchies and traditional forms of authority. In modifying these practices progressive Muslims are adding liberal principles of equality to Islam. By doing this they aim to subvert extreme interpretations of Islam and also to promote a more cosmopolitan version of Islam. Progressive Islam is primarily a response to discourses of modernity and seeks to distance itself from both acts of terror and illiberal ways of thinking. Omid Safi explains that there are both positive and negative aspects to the influence of modernity:

There is no doubt that the encounter with Western institutions and thought has had a profound impact on Islamic modernism both positively (emphasis on human rights, constitutional forms of government, adoption of science, and so on) and negatively (colonialism, support for autocratic regimes) (2007: xviii).

In terms of entertaining more liberal ways of thinking the presence of gender equality among Muslims is often considered one of the most important indicators of a more modernised Islam. Women's religious leadership is seen as an important factor in achieving equality. Although woman led prayer is often talked about it is not practiced widely. Zaynab reminded me that woman led prayer was not widespread but occurred only in controlled settings:

Zaynab: It's [woman led prayer] a little daunting, but it's really great also, it's very liberating as well. It can be done and it does get received well. Also I had to recognise that the people that are there participating, that they already have their mindset open enough to accept it, so it's not like I walked into your average mosque and led prayer and wow people actually accepted it – no. It was under special conditions that we arranged for and the people that attended that had somehow wrapped their head around woman-led prayer [47y/f/MPV].

Although it was understood that progressives preferred gender equality in religious leadership supporting the choices of others was also important reflecting a cosmopolitan view of diversity:

Emma: With the moral compass thing women should stand up for people's choices. I don't think that every woman should believe that women should lead prayers and I think it should be that women are standing up so that other women can have their choice. I would love to see more mosques that maybe you don't want to pray side-by-side and that's okay. You know, allow the women the option to be in the same room - to be in the back if that's as far as they can go [42y/f/MPV].

Madeline identified as a feminist but also felt that her mission as an activist reached further than just working for women's rights issues but also applied to working for transgender and queer rights and for equality for all:

Madeline: I mean not just because I call myself one [a feminist] but I work pretty regularly to ensure that people have the ability to be who they are. We often consider feminism to be human rights for me it's not just focused on women but focused on all genders and gender expressions I want a man and a transgender person or inter-sexed or me or whatever [to lead prayer], I want everybody to have the ability to share space and be interactive together [35y/F/MPV].

Woman led prayer takes a westernised view of gender roles, taps into feminist ideals, and applies them to an Islamic context. Women's leadership is important to progressive Muslims as it seeks to remedy gender inequality and to create inclusivity. It aims to symbolically demonstrate women's equality with men through woman led prayer and other religious rituals. Furthermore it attempts to dismantle the power structure within the worship space and presents women as active and valued members of the Muslim community. According to Nira Yuval-Davis women's religious leadership is made possible by globalization, "...women are allowed entry to roles and arenas of society to which they were previously not allowed in many societies, and thus lessen the distance between the ways masculinity and femininity are constructed in the society" (Yuval-Davis 2009: 1).

Conclusion

This paper argued that progressive Muslims use a variety of methods to combat inequality and to create inclusive and equal worship spaces. They retain a Muslim identity and try to change the religious discourse from within. They also seek to contextualise and reexamine religious texts and challenge dominant religious practices with social action. This leads to the examination and then reformulation of religious authority structures and to the creation of plural, inclusive worship spaces. Many of these processes link with a cosmopolitan vision of how Islam could be understood and practiced. This is evident through progressive Muslims' guiding principles which centre around strong themes of inclusivity including intra and inter-religious pluralism, a strong focus on creating social and gender justice, removing ethnic and religious barriers in their congregations, placing an importance on maintaining cultural and religious affiliations, and also upholding freedom of religious identity.

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Endnotes

¹ This study has received formal ethics clearance from the human ethics committees at Western Sydney University and The City University of New York. Participants have formally consented to participate in interviews and to have parts of these interviews included in publications.

² Some see progressive and liberal Islam as the same movement and they do share some of the same tenets. However, liberal Islam largely ignores considerations of orientalism when applying Western liberal ideas to Islam. For example, progressive Muslims are more likely to be critical of U.S. foreign policy.