

CHAPTER 4

CONCEPTIONS OF ISLAM

In my interviews, the majority of respondents described themselves first and foremost as “Muslim.” At the beginning of each interview, I asked respondents if they saw themselves primarily as French - or Moroccan - as women, as children of immigrants, as professionals or as something else altogether. I did not suggest a religious category. However, women in both samples spontaneously gave similar responses: “I am a Muslim.” Even young, educated, professional, urban women who said they were not particularly religious or did not practice Islam in accordance with the five pillars,¹ believed that Islam was a major aspect of who they were. Individual identity can never be comprehensively or exactly enveloped in general categories. The precise meaning of being a Muslim no doubt varied among respondents. It is nevertheless remarkable that the majority of respondents in both countries chose the same broad category to describe themselves despite their different circumstances. In France, women of Moroccan origin are a religious and ethnic minority, whereas respondents in Morocco are not. In this chapter, I will explore the conceptions of Islam of two samples of young, educated, professional, urban women and how they are incorporating religious and cultural values based on Islam into their lives. This chapter first compares answers to categorical questions about the religion of Islam among both samples in France and Morocco and then explores responses to open-ended questions. The interview schedule included a series of open-ended questions that allowed respondents to expand on issues of importance to them and bring to the fore themes and issues I might not otherwise have considered.

¹ The five pillars of Islam: 1. *Shahada*: profession of faith (There is no God but God and Mohammed is His prophet) 2. *Salat* : daily prayers 3. *Zakat*: giving of alms or charity. 4. *Swam* : fast during the month of *Ramadan* in commemoration of the revelation of the Qu’ran completed with the feast of *Id-al-Fitr* 5. *Hajj*: pilgrimage of every physically and economically able Muslim to Mecca

In developing my interview schedule, I tried to devise questions that were equally relevant to the samples in Morocco and in France. The purpose of the questions was to ascertain the extent of similarities and differences between young, educated, professional, urban women of Moroccan origin in the two countries with regard to their personal understanding and practice of Islam. My interview schedule contained categorical questions about religious practices such as reading of the Qu'ran, being able to recite parts of the Qu'ran by heart, fasting during Ramadan and observance of daily prayers. Not included were questions concerning attendance of a mosque because the emphasis of this study is on individual practice independent of external infrastructure. In Morocco, there is a mosque in every neighborhood or within walking distance for most citizens. Many places of work have a designated room or place for daily prayers. This is not the case in France where it takes considerably more effort to get to a mosque or find an appropriate place for worship. Furthermore, public French routine makes few, if any, provisions for Friday prayers. Attendance of a mosque would therefore not be a very useful measure for a study with a comparative focus.

This study draws for its context on research about Islam in its Western expression as explored, measured and described by French scholars such as Kepel (1984, 2004), Babès (1996, 1997), Etienne (1989, 2003) Wieviorka (2003) and Tribalat (1995, 1996), and on texts that deal with the new *Globalized Islam* (Roy, 2004) as described in Chapter 1. Islam in Arab cultures and countries is a long established field of study whereas Islam in its Western expression is a relatively new area of research. The comparative nature of this study aims at bringing together these two areas of research by adding to the understanding of two particular Muslim samples of the Mediterranean region that are an integral part of the movement of peoples, cultures and ideas in our increasingly interrelated and interconnected world.

In Morocco, practicing Islam is part of everyday normality whereas leading a life in accordance with this religion in France requires considerably more commitment. Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the pillars of Islam and therefore an important part in the life of a Muslim. Adhering to this religious command is much more difficult for Muslims in France than for those in Morocco. In Morocco fasting is a

national event (eating in public during Ramdan is a criminal offense) and the time schedule of all institutions and places of work is altered so as to accommodate a different daily routine during the holy month. There are no lunch breaks; instead work ends so as to allow everyone to gather for *four* (or *iftar*), the festive meal after sunset that breaks the daily fast. The same applies to reading the Qu’ran. In Morocco, almost all respondents were fluent in Arabic and had read sections of the Qu’ran as part of their regular schooling, with the exception of those who attended private French schools. In France, most respondents were not literate in Arabic and therefore could only read the Qu’ran in translation. Also, few had any formal exposure to the scripture during their adolescence. Because the Qu’ran is believed to be the literal spoken word of God, translations are considered interpretations and thus inferior to the original version in classical Arabic.

My first question about conceptions of Islam intended to ascertain the degree to which respondents identified themselves as Muslims. In Islam, everyone born to a Muslim father is considered a lifelong Muslim, regardless of their actual practice or faith. Therefore, I asked young, educated, professional women if they saw themselves as Muslims primarily by birth, by choice, or both.

Table 4.1. Muslim by birth/choice

Do you consider yourself a Muslim by birth or by choice?

Muslim by	Birth	Choice	Both	Other	Total
France	4	0	20	1	25
Morocco	7	0	21	2	30

Table 4.1. shows that the majority of respondents in both samples saw themselves as Muslims not merely by birth but also by choice. This means that these educated, professional women did not discard their sense of self as Muslims upon becoming adults but affirmed their faith and culture voluntarily. Being a Muslim was understood as a

religious and a cultural reference. Respondents in France for example said they held *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*² to be their most festive days. This was the case even among women who described themselves as *laïques* or not practicing. In France, respondents also said that they did not see a contradiction between being a Muslim and celebrating Christmas in some form. Four respondents in France said they were Muslim by birth only, meaning they had ceased to practice the religion they were born into. And yet they did not rule out the possibility of developing an interest in Islam again at some point in their life. In Morocco, most women who said they were born Muslim insisted that being born a Muslim means being a Muslim for life so there was no need for further affirmation. One woman in Morocco said that although she was born a Muslim she was currently in the process of studying other religions in an effort to find a belief system that made most sense to her. This young woman said that in Morocco this was a difficult task as access to literature about religions other than Islam was limited and furthermore only the religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) were considered religions, other faiths such as Buddhism or Hinduism being considered philosophies. Another offered this pragmatic assessment: “I am Muslim by birth and I am Muslim by culture, because of where I was born and where I live. But it was not my choice. There are many other ways to lead a righteous life.”

Women in both samples said that in Islam, culture and religion are so closely intertwined that it was sometimes difficult for them to differentiate between culture and religion even though they felt that some of the traditions and customs passed on to them were clearly not in accordance with their interpretation of the religion of Islam. It is often assumed that for Muslims in France the distinction between culture and religion is more evident as they live in a secular surrounding with a marked Judeo-Catholic heritage. My research however showed that educated Moroccans who live in an Islamic country are equally capable of making that distinction. Indeed, women in my sample frequently said

² *Eid al-Fitr* is the day of celebration that marks the end of Ramadan. Children receive gifts or money from their relatives. *Eid al-Adha* or the Feast of Sacrifice takes place during the traditional time of pilgrimage to Mecca. It is celebrated by pilgrims in Mecca and by those who remain at home. *Eid al-Adha* commemorates Abraham's obedience to God by being willing to sacrifice his son. Each family is supposed to kill a sheep and prepares a feast using the meat.

their conception of Islam was at odds with the prevailing culture, particularly with regards to the status of women.

A distinction between religion and culture can be facilitated by knowledge and understanding of the scripture. I therefore included questions about familiarity with the Qu'ran and frequency of reading the sacred text. Also, as reading the Qu'ran is a voluntary practice and not part of the five pillars and it can serve as a particularly significant indicator of the level of religiosity.

One of the most extensive surveys concerning religious practice among Muslims in France was conducted by sociologist Michèle Tribalat who published her findings in *De l'immigration à l'assimilation. Enquête sur les populations étrangère en France*(1996). Tribalat measured “religious practice” by using criteria such attendance of a mosque, following dietary restrictions (abstaining from pork and alcohol) and fasting during Ramadan. Based on her data, she concluded that second generation Algerians and Moroccans in France are less religious and closer to the values of *laïcité* dominant in French society than to the values of their parents. My approach differs from that of Tribalat in that I also included questions about practices not required by the religion of Islam such as reading the Qu'ran. By whatever means, a life of faith cannot easily be measured but I would contend that studying the scriptures is a stronger indicator than following rituals that have become part of a culture and tradition. Significantly, in the course of my interviews, questions concerning reading or reciting the Qu'ran often led to discussions of more complex issues.

Table 4.2. Number of Respondents who Read the Qu’ran

How often do you read the Qu’ran?³

Read Qu’ran	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never	Total
France	6	2	4	13	25
Morocco	19	5	4	2	30

Table 4.2. shows that comparatively more women in Morocco than in France read the Qu’ran on a weekly basis. The table further shows that the number of women who read the Qu’ran once a year is the same for France as for Morocco while the number of respondents in France who said they never read the Qu’ran is significantly higher than the one for Morocco. The explanations that followed the question were most revealing. When asked if or how often they read the Qu’ran, respondents in Morocco gave quick, straightforward answers. Most respondents said they had established a habit of reading the Qu’ran on a regular basis, weekly, monthly or in the case of yearly reading, this was done during the month of Ramadan. Of the two women who said they never read the Qu’ran, one had attended a private French school in Rabat and her parents were part of the old Moroccan elite that preferred to speak French rather than Arabic even in the home. The other, the daughter of a diplomat, had lived abroad in Europe during her formative years and had not been exposed to reading the Qu’ran as part of her schooling. While some women read the Qu’ran as a type of religious observance, more women said they had studied the holy book in recent years because they wanted to gain a better understanding of their religion based on their own study and independent of their instruction at school or of pronouncements of religious authorities. This individual study confirms what Roy describes as follows: “Le religieux s’est « sécularisé » non pas au

³ Answers of respondents in France categorized as “never” in the table included:

- It is hard to say because I don’t read Arabic and to read the Qu’ran in French is not the same thing.
- I am in the process of studying Arabic now so that I can read the Qu’ran.
- I never read the Qu’ran, but I always carry a copy in my purse.
- I recently bought a Qu’ran but have not started to read it yet.
- I read the Qu’ran out of necessity for example when wanting to find out what the Qu’ran says about the veil or if it says anything about arranged marriage.

sens de « laïcité », mais au sens où le divin est l'affaire de chacun et n'est plus aux mains d'un corps de professionnels qui l'externalise en se l'appropriant. L'articulation du religieux et du social est ainsi modifié" (Roy, 2004 : 100).

In France, the question about reading the Qu'ran generated more lengthy responses. Rather than simply saying "never," as many did, respondents who answered in that way felt compelled to explain the reasons why they did not read the Qu'ran. The first reason given was their lack of mastery of the Arabic language and an apprehension of reading a translation. Others who responded "never" said they did in fact read the Qu'ran in French but felt that this did not qualify as "reading the Qu'ran" because they only read an interpretation of the scripture. Some women in France said they had not acquired the habit of reading the holy book because their parents were barely literate and therefore had not read it themselves. The only copy of the Qu'ran in their parents' homes was an Arabic version that no one in the house could read properly. Several said that they did want to read the Qu'ran at least once in their lifetime. All respondents said they had a copy of the Qu'ran in their house and that they took it off the shelf from time to time to hold or look at. Some even said that although they did not read the Qu'ran, they always carried a miniature copy with them in their purse, which they proceeded to show me. I asked: "How can you call yourself a Muslim by choice, if you have never read the Qu'ran and don't know what it says?" Respondents in France seemed surprised at this question as they felt there was no co-relation between "reading the book and being a believer." Apparently, religiosity is understood as some internal disposition with a great variety of external expressions such as proclaiming the intention of wanting to read the Qu'ran one day or carrying an (unread) copy of the Qu'ran in the purse. This confirms Babès' assertion à propos of her question, "Qui définit le religieux ? Ce n'est pas au sociologue ou à un quelconque chercheur de le faire, ... ce sont des acteurs sociaux qui déterminent la qualité de ce qui est religieux" (Babès, 1996:15). Thus, the new religious understanding which is "en train de se faire" in France does not mean the end of religion but rather a "mutation des croyances" (ibid, 177). More respondents in France than in Morocco said they consulted websites and went to chat rooms⁵ aimed at Muslims for

⁵ The most frequently cited sites were www.oumma.com, www.sezame.info, www.islamfrance.free.fr and www.saphirnet.info.

guidance on religious questions as they found it difficult at times to understand the Qu'ran. However, some in France said they had started to systematically study the Qu'ran. For some this was done in an effort to understand their own religion, while others were prompted by external events to pick up the book and read it to gain some sense as to why there seems such increased hostility towards Muslims in France and Islam in general. Said Nadia in Paris: "Growing up, I never read the Qu'ran. I had no idea what it said about anything. Based on what I heard at home and at school, I thought Jesus is the man for Christians and Mohammed is for Muslims. So I grew up believing that we have nothing in common. I did not even know that the Qu'ran speaks of Jesus or that Mary was a revered figure also for Muslims. I really did not know anything about Islam. I thought Christianity and Islam were two totally different religions and just accepted that. Now that I have studied Arabic for several years and have read the Qu'ran, I wonder why there is such acrimony between us [Muslims and Christians]. I don't know, but maybe the same is true of many Christians. They have no idea that we actually have more in common than they think, or else we would get along better." But, she added: "I have also studied the Bible a little bit and we Muslims certainly do not agree that Jesus is the son of God. God cannot have a son, He sends prophets. Also I don't accept that God is three, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. We believe that God is only one. So there is a genuine difference but I am not sure that this could be the cause for such antagonism."

Table 4.3. Number of Respondents who can Recite the Qu’ran

Can you recite passages of the Qu’ran by heart?

Country	Yes	No	Other	Total
France	12	8	5	25
Morocco	30	0	0	30

Table 4.3. shows that more respondents in Morocco than in France could recite passages of the Qu’ran by heart. In fact, all women in the Moroccan sample said they were able to do so. Even those who never read the Qu’ran on their own nor had done so as part of their French private schooling were able to recite certain passages because of the omnipresence of Islam in Moroccan daily life. It was simply an element of their culture. However, respondents were quick to add that being able to recite a verse was not synonymous with understanding its full meaning. Recitation of the Qu’ran is a required component of the Moroccan school curriculum but questions about meaning are discouraged. Thus, actual comprehension of the text is often limited. This is also due to the fact that the Arabic used in the Qu’ran is of such a sophisticated quality that it requires more than common knowledge of the language to understand the connotation of certain words or expressions. The Arabic of the Qu’ran differs significantly from *dereja*⁶, the spoken Arabic of Morocco. In addition, critical thinking and individual inquisitiveness are not characteristics of the Moroccan educational system which stresses rote memorization and acquisition of established knowledge. Voluntary recitation of the Qu’ran by adults can be compared with reciting the rosary in the Catholic Church. It is a religious practice observed in the spirit of worship and humility and not intended as an exercise in the exploration of meaning. Respondents in Morocco said they invoked the Qu’ran because it offered them some serenity in their otherwise busy lives and because they could do so whenever they felt like it outside of any prescribed prayer ritual.

⁶ Each Arab-speaking country has its own dialect. The Moroccan variety is probably most distant from Classical Arabic as it has incorporated Berber phrases and expressions as well as French words. The phrasing of the Qu’ran can therefore not easily be understood by someone with limited comprehension of classical Arabic.

In France, the situation was again more complex. Those who were able to recite verses or *suras* had learned this on their own as adults. Among those who responded “other”, the most common response was that they could recite nothing but the *fatihah*⁷ but were not sure if this qualified because they took the ability to invoke this most frequently recited verse for granted. This uncertainty about religious practices was a distinguishing feature of my respondents in France. To the question if she was able to recite verses from the Qu’ran, one young woman summed up what several others had expressed: “I often pray with my own words and in French. I know this is not what is commonly done by Muslims, but I have to offer what comes from my heart. Sometimes I include verses in Arabic from the Qu’ran but I am not sure if I recite them properly.”

Externally observable acts are a means to ascertain a degree of religious observance but as respondents emphasized, this is not necessarily an indication of their faith. Women in both samples approached religion from a perspective of personal meaning and belief and did not consider adherence to prescribed rituals as a measure of their faith. Leïla Babès has identified “privatisation et [...] intériorisation” as one of the most profound changes of Islam in its French expression due to the great emphasis on individualism in the Western world (Babès, 1996: 7). Babès argues that this emphasis results in a personalization of faith with diminished adhesion to an institutionalized religion. My research revealed that this approach seems to become increasingly prevalent among young, educated, professional women in Morocco as well, pointing to a trend that has to date rarely been studied in a systematic fashion.

My interviews show that young, educated, professional women in my sample did not see a conflict between public secular values and personal belief. Loyalty to French republican ideas did not diminish their individual faith, but it manifested itself in less conventionally measurable expressions such as fasting or observance of the required five daily prayers.

⁷ *Fatiha*, the opening “*Bismi Allahi alrrahmani alrraheemi*” In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.

No study about Islam is complete without considering Ramadan. Most Muslims take great pride in the fact that they are capable of enduring an entire month without ingesting any food or drink from sunrise to sunset, at the same time abstaining from sex and smoking. It is indeed remarkable to see heavy smokers bring their habit to an abrupt halt in observance of the holy month, yet light up again as soon as the required period of abstinence is over. Whenever I asked a smoker why he (it is mostly men who smoke in Morocco) started smoking again after giving it up during Ramadan, I routinely received a similar response like this one from Ahmed, an accomplished scholar: “I like smoking. By abstaining during Ramadan, I demonstrate that I am not addicted and that the mind is stronger than the body. This sort of self-discipline is the essence of Ramadan and is required of a good Muslim.”

Table 4.4. Number of Respondents who fast during Ramadan

Do you fast during Ramadan?

Fast	Yes	No	Other	Total
France	20	4	1	25
Morocco	26	3	1	30

Table 4.4. shows that the majority of women in both samples fast during the month of Ramadan. Often the questions I thought were the easiest to answer brought forth unexpected responses that allowed for a deeper appreciation of respondents’ understanding of issues relating to religion, culture and society. Their responses shed light on aspects of their respective societies that exceeded the anticipated scope of the interview schedule. The question about fasting during Ramadan was one such question. One might think that people either fast or they do not and say just that. The responses of women in both samples led to an understanding of more complex issues underlying this question.

In Morocco the annual fast is a national affair in which all levels of society participate. The King is said to observe Ramadan as rigorously as a pauper in the streets. The difficulty of not eating and especially not drinking when Ramadan occurs during the summer, when the days are long and hot, is believed to engender national cohesion and unity. Daily work schedules change to accommodate the routine associated with the fast. As mentioned above, there are no lunch breaks. Instead the work or school day ends in time for people to join friends or family for *ftour*, the meal at after sunset that breaks the fast. Restaurants and cafés are closed throughout the country, and mass media routinely show scenes of public intimidation of persons caught eating, drinking or smoking. Female television personalities wear no noticeable make-up during Ramadan, shedding their image of glamorous beauty and instead appearing modest and bland. I asked a prominent TV anchor if she found it difficult to go on the air without her usual heavy make-up, jewelry and fancy clothing. She said, no pun intended: “That is the beauty of being a Muslim. Once each year, we all are equal.”

The different rhythm imposed during Ramadan and the sense of national and religious obligation, makes it near impossible for Moroccans to admit that they are not participating in the fast. In my interviews only three women admitted to not fasting and two said they could not fast because they were exempt due to health issues. However, after the official part of the interview was concluded, several women said that they adhered to the fast only “in public.” Women who had lived abroad (in countries that were not predominantly Muslim) said they did not fast while they lived abroad. Those who did not observe the physical aspect of the fast said that Ramadan was not merely about refraining from food, drink, sex and smoking but was intended for the cleansing of the mind by abstaining from bad thoughts and feelings. This, they felt, required great internal discipline and aided them in being true to the spirit of Islam.

In France, the majority of respondents also claimed they fasted during Ramadan. Several said they had fasted while they still lived with their parents, then stopped upon moving out but had taken up the practice again recently because they felt some personal desire to do so. Some said they fasted some years and not others, while others said they fasted on certain days but not the entire month. Though the fast is one of the five pillars of Islam and therefore not optional, respondents’ perception was that fasting should be a

personal choice and not mandated. As with other questions about their religious practice, young, educated, professional women in this sample saw no conflict between making individual choices on a matter that is a required tenet of the faith and still considering themselves Muslims.

Similar responses were given to questions about another practice required by Islamic dogma, the daily prayers (five for Sunnis, three for Shiites).

Table 4.5. Number of Respondents who observe Daily Prayers

Do you pray daily?

Pray Daily	Yes	No	Other	Total
France	12	10	3	25
Morocco	21	5	4	30

Table 4.5. shows that daily prayers were more rigorously observed in Morocco than in France. In a country where one can see men rolling out little carpets on the side of the road and bowing for prayers in the direction of Mecca, where calls for prayer from the minarets are louder than most church bells in France and - with the help of modern technology - resonate through every corner of every household, it is obvious that praying is an encouraged and accepted practice. In contemporary France, there is no comparable overt encouragement for prayer. Still, several respondents in France said they found a way to pray five times a day, most often unnoticed by their colleagues at work or school. Respondents in France who said they did not pray, or said “other,” clarified this by adding that they did not pray in the prescribed manner but did pray often or occasionally on their own, using their own words. “Prayer has to come from the heart, it is not a matter of following a ritual,” was an explanation frequently offered.

Respondents described prayer as a personal expression that did not at all times have to follow a particular pattern. “In Islam there is too much focus on following the rules, I pray when I need to pray, but sometimes I use my own words,” was how one respondent in France put it. “Praying should not be an obligation, it has to come from the

heart,” said a woman in Morocco. Whenever respondents elaborated on their understanding of prayer, the views of the Moroccan and the French sample were strikingly similar. One woman in Saint Denis, on the outskirts of Paris, who described herself as devout, said: “There are what I call the ‘five-pillar-Moslems,’ that are those who follow the prescribed rituals of Islam, but that is a rather low level of practice. A higher level is *imane*, faith, which requires more effort on the part of the individual because faith is an internal focus on a higher ideal. And the highest level is *ihsane*, perfection, *bienfaisance* or what I think Buddhists call compassion.” She offered this explanation in part as a critique of my question concerning observance of the daily prayers. Assia, who had a graduate degree in bio-chemistry, felt strongly that Western researchers, as some Islamic scholars, were overly preoccupied with dogma and ritual and ignored the essence of a life of faith that should be evident in a person’s behavior towards others and could not easily be captured by conventional research.

Assia’s comments did indeed put the finger on a limitation of some recent findings, namely that Muslims in the Western world are less religious as a result of living in a secular environment with a heavy emphasis on individualism. This individualized approach goes hand in glove with a heightened sense of personal freedom and also responsibility. By taking charge of their lives, pursuing higher education and embarking on professional careers, these women move out of the realm of obedience to conventions and traditions and take charge of their lives and assume responsibility for their decisions, but this does not necessarily mean abandoning Islam. Most studies do not take into consideration that comparable changes occur also in Morocco, a collective society that knows no separation of the religious from the secular. My research points to a trend of an increasingly individualized approach towards Islam among educated, professional young women regardless of their place of residence.

Table 4.6. Evolving Understanding of Islam

Has your understanding of Islam evolved over time?

Evolved	Yes	No	Other	Total
France	22	2	1	25
Morocco	30	0	0	30

Table 4.6 shows that the majority of respondents in both samples affirmed having an evolving understanding of Islam. In France, one woman said her understanding had not changed because she had never thought much about religion. Another said she did not care enough about Islam to deepen or improve her understanding. The woman who responded “other” said she had not invested time to learn about Islam but expected to do so at some point in her future. However, the majority of the women in the French sample stated that their understanding of Islam had indeed evolved over time while all women in the Moroccan sample claimed to have deepened understanding of their religion.

Among Moroccan respondents, the most remarkable difference could be observed between women who had never traveled outside of Morocco or had not otherwise experienced intense interaction with people from a different cultural and religious background and those who had been exposed such contacts. In a developing country, travel or study abroad is generally reserved for the affluent elite. Research that focuses on educated, professional women in Morocco tends to focus on this privileged minority. However, because of the comparative nature of the study and an awareness of the fact that most women in the French sample came from families of modest means, I made conscious effort to seek out young, educated, professional women who came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds in Morocco and thus did include women from families of lower social status.

There is a particular place in Morocco, where one can find bright, young people who have not had an opportunity to travel abroad but who have had extensive interaction with people from various nationalities and cultures. The late King Hassan II founded a university in Morocco that uses the American system of education and uses English as

the language of instruction. His vision for this institution was the strengthening of a home-grown middle-class and also to stem the brain drain of academics and of gifted young people. Al Akhawayn University of Ifrane (AUI) was established in 1995 in the remote, picturesque Middle Atlas town of Ifrane, home of the late King's favorite palace resort. The faculty is a blend of international and local academics and there are extensive student exchange programs with American universities. In the dormitories, local students are intentionally paired with foreign students. The motto of the institution is "tolerance" and "inter-religious and intercultural dialogue." Conferences and extra-curricular programs routinely revolve around aspects of these themes.

My interview schedule at AUI included Moroccan faculty, staff and students. As English is the language used on campus, administrative staff have to have a comparatively high degree of education (at minimum equivalent of a Bachelor's degree) as they must be fluent in English, a language not commonly used in this Arab-francophone country. They also must be capable of adapting to an international environment and an American system of education and management, though all positions from Dean and upwards are held by Moroccans. A reasonable number of staff positions are filled by people who possess the prerequisite qualifications rather than coming to their appointment by "coup de piston" (personal connections) as is often the case in Morocco. The student body hails largely from middle to upper-middle class families, and 50 % of students are female. AUI is the first private university in Morocco and tuition fees are - by Moroccan standards - high. Scholarships and a system of work-study, common in the U.S. but previously unheard of in Morocco, allow for recruitment of bright students from modest backgrounds. For my interviews, I purposely sought out students who benefited from these programs because their background is more similar to those of the women I interviewed in France and therefore permits a more valid comparison. For my interviews with staff members, I also looked for those who managed to secure employment because of their qualifications rather than their family connections.

The campus of AUI is a close-knit international island built on the slopes of a Berber mountain village. Because I had lived and taught at AUI for two years (1999-2001) and had been invited back for summer teaching assignments in subsequent years,

faculty, staff and students knew me and my family well and easily opened up during the interviews.

The international environment at AUI allowed Moroccans close, everyday interaction with a wide variety of foreigners: Americans, Chinese, Pakistanis, South Africans, British, French, German, South American, etc. This experience had a remarkable effect, as became evident in the interviews.

Amal, a young woman from a small town near the Rif Mountains had been the recipient of a scholarship and upon graduation had been employed by AUI. From a devout, religious family, she was the first in her family of four brothers and sisters to attend college. “Before I came to AUI, Islam was all I knew. I had never met a person who was not Muslim. When I came here, I met people from all over the world and I roomed with several American girls. My parents are very proud of me for being able to get this education but they were also a bit worried that I would lose my way.” Amal explained that though she did not wear the *hijab*, she planned to do so after getting married. “Right now, it is just not practical for me to wear a headscarf. I play soccer and here men and women socialize together. With a headscarf, I feel I could not do that.” The way she explained her evolving understanding of Islam was typical of the responses of women in the Moroccan sample who had been exposed to people from different cultures and religions. “Islam is one of the religions in the world. There are other religions too but this happens to be mine. For me Islam is my liberation, my freedom to express myself,” she said. “It is the promise of peace and equality. Islam for me is a way of life, that means it is not just a faith but it informs everything I do and as a woman Islam is the way to pursue women’s rights because that is what the Qu’ran states. We in Morocco have got to get away from the cultural practices which have nothing to do with Islam but are presented as such. I constantly argue with my mother about that. I want to travel abroad and see what people in other countries do and if they are not Muslims, how are they are different? I really liked my American roommates. In the U.S., all kinds of people live side by side. I think you can really be yourself there.” I asked Amal to elaborate on what she meant by being herself. She said she often felt restricted by Moroccan customs and social conventions and said that questioning her own religion was not encouraged. “By exploring Islam and looking critically at it, I feel I have become a better Muslim, but of

course many in my family back home don't agree with that. They feel that I have changed, I have become too 'free', too critical of our customs." Amal emphasized her belief in tolerance. "I think we need to tolerate differences, it is actually not so difficult. But the key is education, we don't know enough about each other." As with most conversations in Morocco, the issue of the Middle East conflict was never far away and Amal too, inserted the Palestinian question into her understanding of Islam. "What about Jews? I am not sure they want to understand or tolerate us. Look at how Israelis treat Palestinians. That is a real problem. But universities are the perfect environment where people of different backgrounds can interact. But apart from one professor, I have never spoken to a Jew." Amal felt that through her studies she came to understand different aspects of Islam. "Education really is the key. The first word the Archangel⁸ told the prophet was '*ikra*' (read or recite). And he did not say that this message was intended for men only. The first order of Islam is the duty to educate but we have not followed this in our country. Otherwise we could not have such high illiteracy rates."

Yousra, who had received a scholarship to pursue graduate studies in the United States and had lived two years in Minnesota, had this to say about her evolving understanding of Islam: "Islam is one of the religions in the world. When I lived in the U.S., I began to question the environment in which I grew up in here in Morocco. Life in the U.S. was so different from what I had been used to at home. While there, I studied other religions and now I am trying to find out which is the best religion for me. I never knew for instance that Buddhism was a real religion. Here, we only consider the religions of the Book⁹ proper religions; the others are considered philosophies because they are not based on direct revelation by God. But I found Buddhism very appealing. I have a hard time fitting back into Moroccan society; there are not many people with whom I can discuss my spiritual search. But now that I am back, I also want to study more about Islam, especially Sufism."

Jamila came to her interest in Islam by way of studying finance. "Because I live in an Islamic society, I have not spent much time thinking about Islam. I have studied finance and sometimes we have to study some particularities of Islamic banking because

⁸ The Qu'ran is believed to have been revealed to Mohammed by the Archangel Gabriel.

⁹ The three Abrahamic religions of the Book are Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Islam does not allow charging interest. But here we studied different international systems of finance and the underlying philosophies that shaped those systems. That made me interested to study Islam more deeply with a view of understanding the social system based on this religion. And without realizing it at first, I became more and more fascinated with Islam and also realized that I actually have a deep belief in God.” Jamila grew increasingly animated as she tried to find the proper words to express her thoughts. “I know that faith can exist independently of a particular religious doctrine, but in my case, Islam made me realize that there is a larger purpose to our existence. I don’t consider myself different from a Christian or a Jew, the spirit behind these religions is the same. It is just that for me, the door to a spiritual life was opened by Islam,” and she added smiling, “by way of studying international finance, not necessarily because I grew up in an Islamic society.”

The views of Amal, Youssra and Jamila on the AUI campus were echoed by women in other parts of the country who had lived abroad. Said Ikram, a medical doctor in Rabat, who had earned her degree in France: “Islam is the religion of the people of Morocco. It is what holds our country together. It keeps people united. Of course, we are in a time of great social upheaval and we have an economic and social crisis in our country. Even though Islam is my personal religion, it is important to recognize that in Morocco it is also an important social force. It is the official religion, it is also the basis of our educational system. It does not matter if one agrees or disagrees.” Ikram paused for a minute before she continued: “In Morocco, Islam is based on instilling a sense of guilt. Here everyone proclaims to be a ‘good Muslim,’ people don’t say what they really think or believe. It is just a part of our social fabric. People tell me that my personal problems stem from the fact that I am not a ‘good Muslim.’ At age 32, I am still not married, and yes, I have had a couple of boyfriends and occasionally I drink alcohol. Does that make me a bad person or a bad Muslim? I don’t think so. I really have been re-thinking my understanding of Islam, because I need to be able to live my life the way I think is best. Anyway, it is not for others to judge if I am a good Muslim or not. There is too much of that going on here.”

Women in the Moroccan sample who had been exposed to people of different cultures and religions, perceived their religion as one faith among others. They also had a

more critical view of the way Islam was practiced in their home country. Though none of the women in the sample had changed her religion or declared herself an atheist, affirmation of their faith was based on aspects of Islam that supported their aspirations of being professional, educated women in a changing world. They also teased out the religion of Islam the way they understood it, from the blend of religion, culture and social circumstances that make up the Moroccan social fabric.

Respondents who had only minimally been exposed to people of a different culture or religion by contrast, focused primarily on aspects that set Islam apart as a superior faith. Karima, a librarian said: “Islam is one of the three monotheistic religions. I don’t know much about the differences between the three but the essence of all three is the promotion of peace. In Morocco, Islam is the basis for our culture, for our political and social life and it is the basis of our values. On a personal level, what I like about Islam is that there is no intermediary between man and God. Each believer can come to God directly. I don’t like the concept of an intermediary when it comes to my relationship with God. We don’t believe in a ‘Son of God’ as Christians do. The Qu’ran says Jesus was a prophet and we revere him as that. But Mohammed was the last prophet. Also, we believe in only one God whereas Christians believe in a trinity that does not make much sense to me. Islam means everything to me.”

Loubna, a university student in Rabat, wearing the *hijab*, and by her own account close to an Islamist¹⁰ position: “Islam is more than a religion, it is a complete way of life. It is not what is taught in the mosques here. The mosques just support the current [political, social and economic] system which is corrupt. I am very proud to be a Muslim, I believe in Islam. We have to show the world that true Muslims are the bearers of peace and social justice.”

The theme of “peace” was frequently raised by respondents. They voiced concern that Islam was perceived in the West as synonymous with terrorism. Morocco has had its own encounter with terrorism in the attacks of May 16, 2003 in Casablanca that killed 43 people. The bombings were carried out by self-proclaimed radical Islamists. Shortly after the attacks, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of Casablanca in a

¹⁰ The Islamist point of view is explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

“March against Terror.”¹¹ My interview schedule purposely did not include questions about terrorism as I had not intended to make this part of my research. However, terrorist attacks had so shocked a nation that felt itself immune to such atrocities that respondents could not resist commenting on this during our interviews. It was common knowledge in this North African country, that Moroccans had been implicated in the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York and also in the bombings on a commuter train that killed 191 people in Madrid on 11 March 2004. At the time of this writing, suspects of Moroccan origin were on trial for the killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands on November 2, 2004. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that respondents felt compelled to address the issue of terrorisms when asked about their understanding of Islam. Without exception, all respondents in the Moroccan sample, no matter where they stood on any other issue that was indeed part of my research, said that Islam, the way they understood it, does not condone violence. “I can’t even describe how terrible it is what the terrorist are doing to our religion,” said Khalida, a school teacher in Azrou, home town of Zacharais Moussaoui’s¹² mother. Several respondents expressed fear that by linking Islam with terrorism, the West might use this connection to destroy Islam. Terrorism carried out by self-proclaimed Islamic fundamentalists certainly was an important factor for emphasizing “peace” as a main aspect of the religion of Islam. “Islam means peace, love and goodness. It guides you through the dark hours which precede the daylight,” said Amina, another school teacher. By dark hours, she referred to the darkness terrorism had thrown over the light of Islam.

By contrast, respondents in France rarely raised the theme of peace - or terrorism for that matter - when speaking about Islam. Only some of the respondents who wore a headscarf made sure to emphasize that their “fundamentalism” was not to be equated with violence perpetuated in the name of Islam by terrorists. For the most part, women in the French sample insisted that Islam, or religion in general, was an intensely personal matter. Karima, an internet web designer in Paris, said: “Islam is something very personal

¹¹ For more information on the bombings and the subsequent “march against terror” see the BBC world news website <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2936918.stm> (last accessed April, 2005)

¹² Zacharias Moussaoui is the only person who to date stood trial in the United States for the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001.

for me. It guides me through this life and prepares me for the next. But I must not speak too much about this in a *laïc* state and I respect that. It is also a bit delicate to discuss religion in my family. I don't want to upset my parents with the questions I have about my religion."

"Parents" was the key word for most respondents in France when discussing Islam. They emphasized that their understanding of Islam was different than that of their parents. "Islam is the religion of my parents," said Aicha, a woman who works for a social service organization in Paris. "But my parents don't know the Qu'ran very well. They did not have any choice with regards to religion. They were born Muslims in an Islamic society and then they moved to France. Their friends are Muslims and they live in a part of town where they are surrounded by other immigrants from North Africa. Even after all their years here in France, they have not learned much about other religions, other than that Christmas is a big event here." Aicha contrasted the experience of her parents with her own: "I grew up here, went to a French school where most of my classmates were not Muslim. My colleagues at work are not Muslim. So, for me to be a true Muslim, not in name only, I would have to study the Qu'ran and understand what it says. I hope to do that one day. Still, I am no less of a Muslim now."

Lila, a legal assistant, offered this perception of Islam: "For me, Islam offers simplicity in a very complicated life. It offers purity of spirit, tolerance and a sense of belonging. That's very important for me here in France." She spoke of the closeness she enjoyed with her friends who were of a similar background to herself. Though they did not discuss religion explicitly, she said simply the fact that they were Muslims too, made the relationship easier. With her Muslim friends, she could discuss the difficulties she had with her parents which were similar to the conflicts they experienced. These conflicts were caused by such mundane issues as clothing - their parents did not approve of their taste in French fashion - but also more serious issues such as dating and marriage (themes explored in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6)

Respondents in France saw religious affiliation as a primarily as a matter of individual choice. Because of the selection criteria of Muslim women, I did not encounter anyone who had changed their religion by converting to another. Thus, choice was limited to affirming - or rejecting - their adherence to the religion of Islam.

Rabha, a graduate student in Paris who had recently decided to wear the *hijab*, said: “Islam means everything to me. It is my way of life, the basis for my everyday behavior and for all the decisions I make. I am actively studying the Qu’ran now and attend Qu’ranic classes on the weekend. I did not learn much about Islam from my parents but now I am beginning to understand what a great religion it is.” I had tried to interview Rabha for several weeks. We had first established contact months before my first research excursion to France. I had found her name on a website of a French Muslim Student organization and we had exchanged e-mails at irregular intervals. Initially, she seemed excited about the prospect of making her views known to a U.S.-based researcher. When I finally tried to meet her in person in Paris, getting together became like a game of cat and mouse. We had agreed to meet no less than four times, yet each time Rabha stood me up. When I called her to arrange for yet another meeting, she apologized profusely and promised to show up the next time around. I pursued this particular woman so vigorously because, as a spokesperson for a Muslim student organization, she could represent and articulate the views of a select group of young, educated women who wore the headscarf. Eventually, I became more intrigued by the reasons for which she kept failing to show up for our rendez-vous. Surely she did not want to convey the message that French Muslims with fundamentalist leanings were undependable or irresponsible. I knew she attended a Qu’ranic schools in the suburbs on the weekends so one Saturday I set out early in the morning to find this center in Seine-Saint Denis to which I had only vague directions. Though this neighborhood is filled with residents of North African origins, few were able or inclined to help me find the way to this Qu’ranic school. Eventually, I approached a bearded young man (*les barbous* are most often Islamists) who agreed to show me the back alley in which this center was located. When I attempted to enter, I was held back by a young man who inquired about my intentions before letting me in. Then the waiting game started anew. During the course of my several hours observing the goings-on at the center, Rabha’s no-show for our appointments became clearer to me. Repeatedly, she came out of a session to assure me that she would talk to me “soon” but did not want to miss out on her lessons. I came to understand that this intense religious instruction made students aware of the lack of their understanding of Islam. Through slightly ajar doors, I could listen in as the teacher, who

spoke French with a heavy Arabic accent, pounded students with dogma, rules and regulations and other expressions of God's will for mankind. When Rabha finally did agree to speak with me, she asked if her (male) teacher could be present. I told her that the focus of my interviews was on women and that I had to ensure confidentiality. Like a new convert, Rabha was exceedingly concerned that her responses did not stray from the official line of her particular group. Though she had been a Muslim all her life, the discovery of Islamism had offered her a new understanding of Islam as a universal religion that, according to her "seeks to eradicate social, national, class and other boundaries in an attempt to establish a truly equitable society under Islamic law." Of the country where her parents were born but with which she felt no particular bond, she said: "One has to recognize first of all that Morocco is in a neo-colonial situation. Though it is an Islamic country, it needs to return to the source of Islam and not look to the West for guidance." Like some respondents in Morocco, she was concerned that an U.S.-based researcher would find an easy link between Islam and terrorism and therefore she kept having second thoughts about meeting with me. Rabha also felt uncertain about her ability to convey properly the essence of her new-found faith. She considered her parents' knowledge and understanding of Islam as insufficient and therefore felt she had to "unlearn" some of what she had been taught at home and replace it with the new understanding she obtained at the Islamist center.

When I asked Rabha what had attracted her to this particular brand of Islam, she replied: "I rediscovered Islam when I was at the university in St. Denis¹³. There I met people who lived to please God. I felt attracted to these people and I began asking myself questions like 'Is Islam really only just another faith as Christians make us want to believe?' I discovered that Islam was a real treasure that one has to discover daily. It is a system for living one's life. It is not just a religion. It needs to govern all aspects of life and the laws of a country should reflect that."

Rabha's views were not those of the majority of respondents in the French sample but they represented a worldview that is often misunderstood or vilified in the West. The sharpness with which Rabha expressed her views differed from that of other veiled women who displayed a more quiet, yet more self-assured understanding of Islam. "The

¹³ a *department* with a large population of Maghrebi origin

more I study Islam,” said Nacira, also university student, “the more open I become towards others. There is no longer a “us” and “them,” there only is a “we together” and how to be kind to one another.” I asked Nacira if she belonged to any particular group of if she attended some kind of Qu’ranic instruction. She said so far she had been studying the Qu’ran and other religious texts on her own, but mostly she consulted websites and logged into chat rooms on the Internet. Her parents had opposed her putting on the *hijab*: “They pushed me to go to university. Many of the young people in our neighborhood don’t have a proper profession or are unemployed. My parents wanted to make sure that I get out of that quagmire and so they felt I should not be so demonstrative about my religion.” In the course of her university studies and her friendship with other young women who were in a similar situation and who had already put on the headscarf, she became interested in exploring Islam. “It is really after I learned more about Islam that I became more serious about my studies. The Qu’ran does not condone the way women are treated chez nous.”

In Morocco and in France, women found support for their personal ambitions through the study of Islam. For them, the realization that strict patriarchic structures were not a God-given system but that divine providence actually endowed them with rights and freedoms of their own, offered them a deep sense of conviction that they were on the right path.

Sadia, an aspiring academic who had just completed her PhD in Rabat when we first met in the summer of 2004 and had started her career as a professor by the time we conducted the formal interview in 2005, summarized her evolving understanding of Islam: “When I was younger, I thought I had to make choice between being ‘modern’ and being a ‘true Muslim.’ Now I understand I can be whatever I want and be a good Muslim at the same time. No one can tell me how to be a ‘good Muslim.’ I do not have to make a radical choice instead I have to achieve a balance within myself.” Clad in fashionable Western clothes and long brown hair, Sadia felt that her studies of Western feminism had led her to better refine her own positions and she now describes herself as an “Islamic feminist.”

Based on my study of the relevant literature, I had not expected to find such similarity in the responses of women in the French and the Moroccan sample. When coding the answers to the open-ended questions, I initially transcribed all responses to the question, “Can you describe a personal experience in which Islam has been important to you?” without identifying the respondent or where the interviews were conducted. I then put these notes aside and moved on to other tasks. Weeks later I picked up the notes again and tried to match responses to the countries in which they were given. The purpose of this exercise was to see if it was immediately apparent if a response came from a woman in Morocco or from a woman in France. I could not distinguish responses by nation of origin.

Following are select examples of some of those responses:

1. “Islam informs my relationship with other people. I know I need to be patient for example and virtuous and need to educate my future children in the in the religion of Islam.”
2. “Every day I have an experience with Islam. I am very shy and solitary, so I don’t talk much with others. But I do pray all the time and ask for guidance. Really, Islam is my source of strength especially in the work place where I have to deal with different people all the time.”
3. “I once had a wonderful boyfriend who was not Muslim. In fact, I don’t even know if he believed in any religion at all. We really liked each other a lot. But then I got very disturbed thinking about our future together and that we may raise children who are completely secular and without religious beliefs. And so I broke off the relationship. Even though I am not at all a devout Muslim, I feel I must not bring up my children without any faith.”
4. “I really don’t want to speak so much about Islam as about faith. I pray during times of difficulty and in trying times and because I grew up in the religion of Islam, I pray the way I know how. If I was brought up in a different religion, I would probably pray differently.”
5. “Islam is part of my daily life. It is how I accept bad things that happen to me

or to my family. Also when you start judging your deeds by yourself, I always feel there is an eye on me - some people say this is moral consciousness. But for me it is this reference that you are never alone at any moment. It also makes me accept my destiny, death, sickness and it gives me hope when all doors seem closed.”

6. “As an individual, God is a refuge for me. Faith is like therapy for me. God controls the universe. I know that from a spiritual perspective on life. And you know that from being a Muslim. And when I am happy, I can be grateful to God. Islam puts everything into a larger perspective for me.”¹⁴

Conclusion

Religion or faith plays an important role in the lives of the young, educated, professional women sampled in Morocco and in France. Being Muslim was a large aspect of their sense of self. Their study of Islam was a liberalizing force and one that allowed them to move forward with their personal and professional ambitions in the deep conviction that God was, so to speak, on their side. Even those women who described themselves as “not practicing” said Islam was part of who they were or the trajectory from where they launched their lives. In Morocco, the majority of respondents had received religious education in their regular schooling and were conversant with the Qu’ran. However, on becoming adults, many had taken it upon themselves to explore Islam with a critical eye. Respondents in France, by contrast, had not received comparable religious instruction and had to expend considerably more effort in learning about Islam. Apart from what some have called a “sentimental attachment” to Islam, most women in the French sample actively sought to gain a better understanding of their religious roots and even those who had turned their back on the religion as practiced by their parents said they had an interest in finding out what Islam was all about. Their explorations led them to similar conclusions as their Moroccan counterparts. Recent

¹⁴ Responses 1,2,3 came from women in Morocco, responses 4,5,6,came from women in France

perceived or real tensions between the West and the Islamic world have contributed greatly to this newly invigorated quest to understand this religion.

My respondents in France and in Morocco differentiated between religion or their personal faith and the cultural practices and traditions of their country or families. They emphasized that some practices, like the unequal treatment of women, were part of the cultural fabric but were not in keeping with the spirit of the scriptures they way they understood it.

Women in both samples had developed a personal understanding of their religion which was in most instances different from established, traditional interpretations. A major aspect of their personal interpretation was their changed perception of the role of women. For both samples this meant gaining confidence in exploring a new role for their personal and public lives. In France respondents situated themselves in contrast to their parents and in Morocco in contrast to prevailing social norms. As outlined in Chapter 1, an individualized approach to religion is a phenomenon associated with Islam in its Western expression. My research indicates that young, educated and professional women in Morocco, particularly those who have had exposure to peoples from other cultures and countries, approach matters of faith in a similarly individualized manner.

The major differences occurred not between the two samples but within each sample. Women who wore the headscarf and had Islamist leanings in Morocco held views similar to those of covered women or those with comparable leanings in France. To varying degrees, they felt that Islam was not only a religion but an all-encompassing way of life, sometimes perceived as superior to other religions. Their analysis of the society in which they lived was that it was corrupt and rife with discrimination and the unequal distribution of wealth, in contradiction to the teachings of the Qu'ran. Some advocated a strict implementation of Islamic law and a return to the true faith which would restore peace and eradicate social differences. Wearing a *hijab* was not synonymous with a conservative outlook on life. Both in Morocco and in France, there was a range of views among covered women and some held decidedly progressive views on certain social matters.

The greatest difference within the Moroccan sample was found between women who had either lived or traveled abroad or who had intense exposure to people from different cultural and religious backgrounds and those whose interactions were limited almost exclusively to fellow Moroccans. Women with extensive international exposure, even when wearing the headscarf, saw Islam as one religion among others and felt that religion was a personal choice and the practice of religion a matter of individual preference. They saw religion primarily as a spiritual path and as one that allowed them to realize their potential as women. A life of faith required societal encouragement but not coercion.

The differences within the French sample were more closely associated to women's personal experiences within their families. They viewed Islam as practiced by their parents as being limited by their lack of exposure to a variety of possible interpretations. They too felt that the practice of Islam could not be determined by adherence to prescribed rituals and that their sense of being Muslims was determined by their own decision to uphold the cultural practices inspired by Islam.