

Gender Didactics: A Comparison of American Muslim and Chassidic Website Discourse

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In this article, I compare depictions of the spiritual significance of gender in materials produced by the yaqeeninstitute.org and by chabad.org. I address points of contention that both religious institutions have with contemporary trends in gender identity and feminism through an analytic survey of the websites. In the first section I compare the mission, approach, and influence of each institution. Next, I analyze and compare their respective perspectives on “feminism.” I then briefly survey their treatments of themes related to masculinity and fatherhood. Finally, I conclude by outlining strong similarities in their respective affirmations of distinct feminine and masculine traits, and their differences as to visions for the future.

Keywords: Chabad, feminine, feminism, gender, kabbalah, masculine, masculinity, Sufism, websites, Yaqeen Institute

Introduction:

Both yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org discuss gender extensively. They explore both the messages about gender contained in sacred texts and traditions and the testimony/reflections of individuals concerning their lived experiences within a religious community. Following researcher Faatima Knight’s argument, I focus on the spiritual significance of gender, as presented in the two sites.¹ This essay has three parts. The first part compares the mission and approach of yaqeeninstitute.org versus chabad.org. The second part explores their varying perspectives as to the concept of feminism. The third part briefly examines themes related to masculinity and fatherhood as articulated on the two sites. My focus throughout is on the nodes of similarity in conceptual approaches between the two institutions, rather than the qualitative differences that clearly differentiate Muslim and Jewish (and more specifically Chassidic) religious traditions. Furthermore, I reveal points of contention with contemporary trends in gender identity common to both religious institutions.²

Why did I choose to write about these websites rather than about books by several of the authors whose contributions I discuss? Both sites choose authors whose writings share their institutional mission and core values. Although the writers may express views that are not homogeneous (yaqeeninstitute.org seems even to seek this out), the sites maintain their cohesiveness.³ These websites, thus, are not simply places for interested writers to post their thoughts; they constitute the output of two institutions. Because of the large readership of both

¹ Faatimah Knight, “‘And We Created You in Pairs’: Islam and the Gender Question,” <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/faatimah-knight/and-we-created-you-in-pairs-islam-and-the-gender-question>. The author is a research fellow at the Yaqeen Institute, community editor for *Renovatio*—the Journal of Zaytuna College, and co-founder of the *Enaya* channel on Islam, faith, and culture.

² The exploration of gender on both sites is primarily as a binary system, although yaqeeninstitute.org has one article on LGBTQ issues. Regarding gender fluidity, a relatively new term coined in the 1980’s (Candice Bradley, “Gender-Fluid,” <https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/gender-fluid/>), neither yaqeeninstitute.org nor chabad.org writes very much about it. Both differentiate between desire and its acting out.

³ [Yaqeen Institute](http://yaqeeninstitute.org) claims a neutral approach: “Yaqeen will not take sides on any research topic. We believe our neutrality is the optimum way to foster dialog on the important topics of the day.” <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/about-us/our-mission>.

sites, the institutions may have strong potential influence on segments of American society.⁴ It is consequently important to analyze first the messages about certain topics on their sites, and second, the nature of the influence of these sites. In this paper I limit my discussion to the topic of gender on the two sites, thus opening a dialogue between them on this subject. I leave the analysis of influence for future research.

The Yaqeen Institute

The Yaqeen Institute was founded in 2016 by Imam Omar Suleiman—adjunct professor of Islamic Studies at Southern Methodist University, co-founder of the East Jefferson Interfaith Clergy Association, and son of Palestinian refugees.⁵ (His mother was a poet for the Palestinian cause.)⁶ The Yaqeen Institute and its ventures reflect and bring to fruition the myriad foci of this scholar-activist and prolific author. In his monographs, *Allah Loves* and *Repentance: Breaking the Habit of Sin*, he explores how to develop a personal relationship with G-d from within the framework of Islamic ethics.⁷ Always basing his text directly on Qur’anic verses or hadiths (records of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet), he encourages the reader to develop along a devotional path. Suleiman writes, “Allah loves to be asked. So putting our trust in Him means that we are expressing our love for Him and we are expressing our desire to be nourished and

⁴ In its 2019–2020 Report, yaqeeninstitute.org claims 192K Facebook followers, 28K Twitter followers, 236,000 Youtube followers, 166K Instagram followers, and 18.3M Youtube video views. See <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Yaqeen-Institute-Annual-Report-2019-2020.pdf>. [Chabad.org](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2346206/jewish/Facts-and-Statistics.htm) reports 52 million visitors (https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2346206/jewish/Facts-and-Statistics.htm). I cannot ascertain exactly how the size of the readerships compare, as the two sites do not publish comparable statistics.

⁵ Born in New Orleans, Suleiman holds a doctorate in Islamic thought and civilization from the International Islamic University of Malaysia. See <https://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebritytalentbios/Imam+Omar+Suleiman/422908>). See also, “Faith Community Supports Omar Suleiman in Wake of Attacks,” in *About Islam* (May 12, 2019), <https://aboutislam.net/muslim-issues/n-america/faith-community-supports-omar-suleiman-in-wake-of-attacks/>.

⁶ The poetry of May Hashem Suleiman, handwritten in Arabic, has not yet been published; but Omar Suleiman put one of her poems on Facebook. This is his translation:

Jerusalem is where the stone cried out!
Let whoever carries me proceed! For I am a rebel!
Within me, eternal conscious lives on;
The buried secrets of the young and the old
The secrets of a people unable to find fighters other than me,
They unjustly questioned my ability to resist,
They unjustly accused me of being a silent stone,
But I feel, I hurt, I beat, and I struggle!
So may Allah bless the courageous stone,
And may Allah bless the displaced child,
For I was rooted in the land of Palestine
And I have flourished throughout its territory
And it is only for the greatness of Allah that I bow my head.

<https://m.facebook.com/imamomarsuleiman/photos/a.261700930516622/1732346753452025/?type=3&tn=C-R>.

⁷ Omar Suleiman, *Allah Loves* (Leicestershire, UK: Kube Publishing, 2020) and *Repentance: Breaking the Habit of Sin* (Selangor, Malaysia: Tertib Publishing, 2020). Note that, in this article, I follow the Jewish tradition of writing the name of the Creator with a hyphen. This gesture of respect stems from the prohibition of erasing G-d’s name, should the paper on which it is written be discarded (Talmud, Shavuot 35A). See Yehuda Sharpen, “Why Write ‘g-d’ Instead of ‘G-O-D’?—Questions & Answers,” https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/486809/jewish/Why-Write-Gd-Instead-of-G-o-d.htm.

sustained by Him.”⁸ In his *Prayers of the Pious*, he advises keeping a *dua*’ journal (a record of one’s prayers of request) in which to write personal prayers—following in the footsteps of pious predecessors.⁹ Suleiman leads yaqeeninstitute.org with a deeply traditional, but modern approach. It is one of engaged conservatism: modern orthodox in dialogue with other trends in contemporary Islam. Suleiman is a public figure who has led prayers for the U.S. Congress; his views have also generated controversy. For example, he has been critical, on Twitter and Facebook, of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians.¹⁰

For the name of the institute, Suleiman chose the word *yaqeen*, which means certainty, or conviction; or, “to be settled so that no circumstances can break you.”¹¹ The term is found in the Qur’anic verse: “Upon the earth are signs for those possessing certainty” (Q 51:20).¹² As interpreted by Hatem Elhaj, a pediatrician who holds a doctorate in comparative *fiqh* (Islamic law), certainty is what gives the power to carry you on your path toward Allah.¹³ The Yaqeen Institute uses the term “certainty” in two ways: they aim to be a “trusted source” for all about Islam;¹⁴ and they aim to help Muslims overcome doubts about their faith, thus to progress on the path toward connection with Allah.¹⁵

Yaqeeninstitute.org joins an already extant dialogue between the West and the Muslim world and enriches it in new ways, and in so doing seeks to combat misperceptions of Islam.¹⁶ Yaqeeninstitute.org is especially compelling because their materials engage with the historical debate about Islam, which hereto has been dominated by Western voices. Collectively, yaqeeninstitute.org authors put forth a response to the Orientalist critiques of Islam with clear analytic tools and based on textual sources. In order to do so, they engage directly not only with Islamic texts and traditions, but also with the history of secular ones. This approach allows them to address issues that are relevant in the contemporary world through a traditional Islamic worldview.

⁸ Suleiman, *Allah Loves*, 42.

⁹ Omar Suleiman, *Prayers of the Pious* (Leicestershire, United Kingdom: Kube Publishing Limited, 2019). See also, “Omar Suleiman: Hateful Attacks Cannot Silence Voices of Unity and Love,” in *The Dallas Morning News* (August 23, 2019), <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2019/05/12/omar-suleiman-hateful-attacks-cannot-silence-voices-of-unity-and-love/>.

¹⁰ Petra Marquardt-Bigman and JTA, “Rising Star Imam Omar Suleiman Has an Antisemitic Past. Has He Moved on?,” in *The Jerusalem Post* (May 21, 2019), <https://www.jpost.com/american-politics/rising-star-imam-omar-suleiman-has-an-antisemitic-past-has-he-moved-on-590248>.

¹¹ For the definition, see <https://ejtaal.net/>. Mohammad Elshinawy, “Cultivating Conviction (Yaqeen),” (March 1, 2017), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/mohammad-elshinawy/cultivating-conviction-yaqeen-mohammad-elshinawy>.

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E.B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 1275.

¹³ Hatem Elhaj, “Station of Certainty,” (August 8, 2018), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/hatem-al-haj/station-of-certainty-lecture>.

¹⁴ As a whole, Yaqeen Institute situates itself within a “compassionate Orthodox Islam.” Authors write from within traditional Sunni Islam, and seem open to authoritative views from the four major schools of Islamic law (*madhabs*)—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali—as well as early juristic views: e.g., from the companions and succeeding generations. See Emad Hamdeh, “What Is a Madhhab? Exploring the Role of Islamic Schools of Law,” (December 31, 2020), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/what-is-a-madhhab-exploring-the-role-of-islamic-schools-of-law>.

¹⁵ “Our Mission,” https://yaqeeninstitute.org/about-us/our-mission#about_us.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Yaqeeninstitute.org, located in Irving, Texas, is expanding its reach by going global. With offices already in Canada, it will soon be opening in Malaysia. Its articles can be read in English, Arabic, Malay and Turkish; but its videos are in English. Accessible to all with internet, it has a strong presence on social networks. There is a growing interest in the Yaqeen Institute, as evidenced in an increase of 89 percent in website traffic between May 2019 and May 2020.¹⁷ As yaqeen.org is a very young organization, much remains to be studied about it. In particular, we do not yet know who is reading yaqeeninstitute.org or the extent of its impact on its readership. Are the readers mainly Muslim, or are non-Muslims also reading its articles? How deeply is it influencing its readers' beliefs and practices? And is yaqeeninstitute.org succeeding in combatting Islamophobia? Once this information emerges, it could form the basis for further studies.

Yaqeeninstitute.org devotes particular attention to gender and Islam, and includes a series of videos on "Reframing the Gender Question." The presentations take on controversial issues including how women's agency can be embedded within religion, and clarify topics of Islamic law in areas such as divorce and giving testimony. The articles are based not only on textual and historic sources, but include material based on interviews revealing the lived experiences of contemporary American Muslim women. In designing this series, yaqeeninstitute.org has taken on an issue that, for at least two reasons, is thorny. First, Islam is expressed differently in various countries—some of which are more conservative, others more liberal, some Shia, others Sunni—and even within the same country, by different communities. Not to mention changes which have taken place across the centuries. So, there is no single "Muslim conception of women." Second, in responding to an already existing critique, put forth in large part by Orientalist literature, they have to overcome being put in a defensive position. The Yaqeen Institute clearly addresses this problem in their mission statement: "Constant negative portrayals of Islam have put Muslims in a defensive position in which they constantly have to justify their convictions, while fighting off the natural doubts and insecurities that arise in such a climate." Thus, they are trying to create a "counter-narrative" to the Orientalist discourse on gender in Islam.

Chabad.org

Although there has been significant analysis of the success of Chabad, a Chassidic organization founded in 1775 by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, so far, very little has been written about its online site, chabad.org, launched in 1993.¹⁸

In a certain sense, the chabad.org and yaqeeninstitute.org websites have similar missions: outreach to members of the faith, both those who have doubts or who even feel estranged from their heritage, and those who want to learn more. [Yaqeeninstitute.org](http://yaqeeninstitute.org) also reaches out to non-Muslims who want to better understand Islam. It should be noted that Chabad Chassidism as a movement of centuries—as its own sub-school within Judaism—cannot be considered a parallel

¹⁷ <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Yaqeen-Institute-Annual-Report-2019-2020.pdf>.

¹⁸ The reach and influence of Chabad are strong—so much so, that a recent book analyzes its success: David Eliezrie, *The Secret of Chabad: inside the World's Most Successful Jewish Movement* (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2016). The hundredth country to get a Chabad emissary was Uganda. In February 2020, an outpost was created in Iceland. See Ron Csillag, "The Secrets of Chabad's Global Expansion," *The Canadian Jewish News* (May 23, 2018), <https://www.cjnews.com/living-jewish/the-secrets-of-chabads-global-expansion>.

of the Yaqeen Institute, a recently founded source for online information. But, Yaqeen itself has roots that go back to the origin of Sunni Islam, some fourteen centuries ago.

Chabad is an acronym for *chochma*, *bina* and *da’at* (wisdom, comprehension, and knowledge). These three terms can be defined more precisely: *chochma* is the flash of insight, *bina* is the investigation and understanding of the flash, and *da’at* is the ability to effect a permanent change based on the flash—in other words, the development of character.¹⁹ In the selection of this name, Rabbi Zalman sought to emphasize the role of the intellect in Jewish mystical practice.²⁰ There is also a kabbalistic significance to these terms, as they are the names of the first three sephirot (phases and levels of G-d’s revealing Himself to humanity).²¹

Islam has an approach that invites comparison. In the yaqeeninstitute.org article, “The Lost Art of Contemplation,” Zohair Abdul-Rahman—a medical doctor who has received *ijazas* (certificates) in *aqeedah* (creed; belief system) and Hadith—describes the stages of the emergence of consciousness in the following terms: a sequence leads from a “fleeting thought that is quick to enter into consciousness and quick to exit” (*al-haqjis*), to “an internal conversation, where a thought is deliberated in depth” (*hadith an-Nafs*), to a motivation which results in “a firm resolve to execute an action” (*al-azm*).²² I note the resonances between the Kabbalistic system and the Islamic system in terms of their understanding of psychological processes.

Both systems also emphasize contemplation of G-d’s essence and attributes. *Kabbalah maasit*, practical kabbalah, includes techniques such as the incantation of divine names.²³ In a similar vein, Jinan Yousef asserts in an article for Yaqeen Institute that “understanding His names and the manifestations of His names in our lives” is one way to cultivate a relationship with G-d.²⁴ Furthermore, Zohair Abdul-Rahman writes, “The Names and Attributes of G-d represent the solutions to all of our problems.”²⁵

¹⁹ Moshe Miller has authored explanations of the first two terms for chabad.org. The explanation of the third term is unsigned. See “Chochma: Wisdom and the Potential to Be,”

https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380785/jewish/Chochma.htm; “Bina: Expanding Our Understanding,” https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380790/jewish/Bina.htm and “Daat (Knowledge; Awareness; Connection),” https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/3025/jewish/Daat-Knowledge-Awareness-Connection.htm.

²⁰ Jeff Zaleski, “The Soul of Cyberspace,” [chabad.org](https://www.chabad.org), 2009,

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/335578/jewish/The-Soul-of-Cyberspace.htm.

²¹ Moshe Miller, “Worlds and Emanations,”

https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380376/jewish/Worlds-and-Emanations.htm. The *sephirot* may be understood as divine essence, as divine tools, or as divine names, according to the Tzemah Tzedek—Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1789–1866), the third rebbe of the Chabad Lubavitch Hasidic movement. See Israel Sandman, “Three Understandings of the Sefirot,”

https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/3300053/jewish/Three-Understandings-of-the-Sefirot.htm.

²² Zohair Abdul-Rahman, “The Lost Art of Contemplation,” <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-lost-art-of-contemplation>.

²³ Moshe Miller, “Contemplative and Practical Kabbalah,”

https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380714/jewish/Contemplative-and-Practical-Kabbalah.htm.

²⁴ Jinan Yousef, “Seeking the Source of Peace: Allah’s Name as-Salām,”

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/seeking-the-source-of-peace-allahs-name-as-salam>. See also, Jinan Yousef, *Reflecting on the Names of Allah* (London: Al Buruj Press, 2021).

²⁵ Zohair Abdul-Rahman, “Islamic Spirituality and Mental Well-Being,”

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/islamic-spirituality-and-mental-well-being>.

Two sections of chabad.org are particularly devoted to addressing topics of concern to women and the question of gender itself. One is “The Jewish Woman,” and the other is “The Rosh Chodesh Society.” The Rosh Chodesh Society is a division of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI), which is a subsidiary of Merkos L’Inyanei Chinuch—the educational arm of Chabad Lubavitch. The Rosh Chodesh Society is a global initiative, created and run by women scholars and intended to “inform and inspire” women worldwide.²⁶ A recent addition to chabad.org, it is now entering its eleventh year. Rosh Chodesh means “the new month” and refers to the lunar Jewish calendar, as well as to the sanctification of the start of each month. According to the website, Rosh Chodesh bears particular meaning for the Jewish woman, whose natural cycles are “in rhythm with” the moon’s waxing and waning. The image of the birth of the new moon is a continued metaphor of hope, and rebirth as it is connected with the feminine. The source that brings Rosh Chodesh as a day of celebration for women can be found in the Rashi and Tosaphot, on the Talmudic passage in Megillah 22B.²⁷ Rashi quotes the midrash that the women were rewarded with this celebration for their refusal to surrender their jewelry to create the golden calf.²⁸ Rosh Chodesh observance has been revived by Jewish feminists in the last three decades.²⁹ As there are almost no records of how women celebrated Rosh Chodesh from Talmudic times till the renewal of the celebration, we don’t know whether the practice

²⁶ Rosh Chodesh Society, <http://www.myrcsociety.com/>.

²⁷ “Rashi” is an acronym based on the Hebrew initials of Solomon ben Isaac / Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), a medieval French rabbi and author of a comprehensive commentary on the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and Babylonian Talmud. See <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-was-rashi/>. *Tosaphot* (literally, “additions”) are commentaries on the Talmud written by Jewish scholars of Germany and France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The commentaries take the form of explanatory glosses, printed on the outer margins and opposite Rashi’s notes. <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14457-tosafot>. See also, Chana Weisberg, “How Does a Jewish Woman Celebrate Rosh Chodesh?” https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/607803/jewish/How-does-a-Jewish-woman-celebrate-Rosh-Chodesh.htm.

²⁸ The reference can be found in “Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 45,” https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.45?lang=bi. In Exodus 32 (Parshat Ki Tissa), the Jewish people, on escaping from Egypt, asked Aaron, the brother of Moses, to make them a god as they despaired of Moses’ return during his long absence on Mt. Sinai. As Moses came down from the mountain and saw the people dancing before the idol, he broke the tablets of the Law. Then he ground the calf up and made the people drink it. According to chabad.org, the people intended either for the calf to replace Moses as a mediator with G-d, or to serve as the pedestal or mount on which G-d would be invisibly present (Jeffrey Tigay, “The Golden Calf,” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-golden-calf/>). Even if this is the case, the episode demonstrates a shocking “scandal,” taking place as it does, just after G-d frees the Jewish people from Egypt.

²⁹ Some of the earliest works by feminist scholars reviving the practice of women’s celebration of Rosh Chodesh include several essays by Susannah Heschel. See Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1983). Penina Adelman encouraged a revival of this tradition with her *Miriam’s Well: Rituals for Women Around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1996). See also Leora Tanenbaum, “Why Rosh Chodesh Is Linked to Women,” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/women-and-rosh-chodesh/>. This was soon followed by Susan Berrin’s *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006). Marcia Falk developed a feminist liturgy in *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for the Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). See also, Leora Tanenbaum et al., *Moonbeams: A Hadassah Rosh Chodesh Guide* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000). More recently, Sarah Waxman has started a movement called “At the Well,” supporting women around the world who come together to celebrate Rosh Chodesh. It provides resources for coaching women to use the Hebrew calendar as a basis for personal reflection (<https://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/episode-241-sarah-waxman>). Women of the Wall chose Rosh Chodesh to gather and celebrate through prayer and reading the special portion from Rosh Chodesh from the torah scroll (<https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/rosh-hodesh/>).

lapsed or how it was observed.³⁰ So, this has been an area for creative ritual building. Thus, the image of Rosh Chodesh has a strong impact on the site, in the places where discussion is centered on the female.

The Place of Mysticism on Both Sites

Sufism is present only in a limited way on the yaqeeninstitute.org site.³¹ There is some historic information on Sufism and Sufi philosophy. Sufi practices and the Sufi view of gender are not included on this site at the time of this writing.³² On the other hand, the chabad.org website is replete with teachings about kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), including kabbalistic interpretations of gender.

The difference between the role of mysticism on the two sites may be related to the difference in mission of the two institutions. [Yaqeeninstitute.org](http://yaqeeninstitute.org) presents their views to other Muslims to strengthen their faith, and to non-Muslims to present their own narrative: “We believe that telling our own story is the only way to counter the narrative that has been forced upon our community.”³³ To accomplish this goal, it is necessary to make clear arguments from within a rationalist tradition. Chabad.org’s mission statement instead focuses on reaching Jews. Their goal: “Utilize internet technology, to unite Jews worldwide, empower them with knowledge of their 3,300-year-old tradition, and foster within them a deeper connection to Judaism’s rituals and faith.”³⁴ This includes mysticism. A letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe further explains: “One of the aspects of Chabad is to reveal and expound the esoteric aspects of the Torah and Mitzvot.”³⁵

There is also a difference historically between the place of Sufism in Islam and the place of Kabbalah in Judaism. According to William Dickson (University of Winnipeg), by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Sufism’s status was solid within Islam and “Sufi orders were integral to the structure of Muslim society.”³⁶ Paul Heck (Georgetown University) explains that

³⁰ “At The Well,” in *Judaism Unbound* (September 25, 2020).

³¹ See these two articles: Amira Ayad, “Reframing the Suffering Narrative: Can Affliction Direct Us to Our Calling?,” <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/reframing-the-suffering-narrative-can-affliction-direct-us-to-our-calling>; Hassam Munir, “How Islam Spread throughout the World” (December 14, 2018), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/how-islam-spread-throughout-the-world>. Two figures from Sufism, Al-Ghazzali and Rabiya al Adawiyya, appear in multiple articles or videos.

³² By referring in this section to Sufism, I do not mean to imply that it is the sole expression of Islamic mysticism. Other traditions in Islam, such as the Shiite doctrine of knowledge of the hidden, as well as some elements of African-American Islamic traditions, among others, contain esoteric traditions. See Simon Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected: Sufism as ‘Islamic Esotericism’?” in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29, no. 2 (February 19, 2018): 145–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2018.1437945>. I focus on Sufism here as it is included on the yaqeeninstitute.org website, albeit only briefly.

³³ See <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/about-us/our-mission>.

³⁴ See https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/32812/jewish/Our-Mission.htm.

³⁵ Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, “A Letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361871/jewish/A-Letter-from-the-Lubavitcher-Rebbe.htm.

Mitzvot are any of the 613 commandments found in the Hebrew Bible. See “Mitzvah: A Commandment,” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mitzvot-a-mitzvah-is-a-commandment/>.

³⁶ William Rory Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America: Between Tradition and Transformation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015). See also, <https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/class/researchers/rory-dickson.html>.

Sufism became contested going into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁷ This shift occurred with the start of Islamic reform and revival movements (particularly with the call for a “return to the original sources of revelation” of the Salafi-Wahhabi Islam from Saudi Arabia) and with the beginning of colonialism, with Sufis sometimes leading resistance to colonial advances.³⁸

The Yaqeen Institute does not currently take a position on these historic controversies about Sufism. Instead, it turns to Sufism in a few articles, notable among them the search for an explanation of suffering (the problem of theodicy).³⁹ Here, it sees in the Sufi explanation a source of succor. In the Sufi view, suffering can be an impetus to awakening, meant to purify believers’ hearts. Yaqeeninstitute.org presents this explanation as an alternate to those of the four major Islamic Schools of law, without any commentary on the relative weight of any of these views. They do not take advantage of this mention of Sufism to expound further on its role in Islam, nor do they comment on the Orientalist trope that characterizes Sufism as either separate from Islam or marginal within it.⁴⁰ However, on other themes they write extensively against Orientalist stereotypes. Put simply, it is possible that this de-emphasis of Sufism may be a reflection of its limited presence in the Western Muslim experience (with some exceptions) in comparison with its strong role in other parts of the world—including, in particular, North and West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Kabbalah, on the other hand, has been consistently recognized as a part of Judaism. According to Joseph Telushkin, between 1500–1800, almost no one attacked it.⁴¹ While Sufism was considered dangerous because of the political implications of finding truth through contemplative practices, and centering authority within the master-disciple relationship, kabbalah was considered to have dangerous potential because its study could lead to mental illness.⁴² Because of this danger, its teaching was limited to select disciples in past centuries. With the onset of modernity, it was considered less important, but it has attracted a resurgence of interest in contemporary society. Writing for chabad.org, Mark and Yedidah Cohen cite the work of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag (1884–1954)—author of *Perush HaSulam* (Commentary of the Ladder on the Zohar)—who argues that “the time has come for more widespread teaching of kabbalah.”⁴³

³⁷ See <https://gufaculty360.georgetown.edu/s/contact/00336000014RXMvAAO/paul-heck>. See also Paul L. Heck, ed., *Sufism and Politics: The Power of Spirituality* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner, 2007).

³⁸ Paul L. Heck, “Sufism—What Is It Exactly?,” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 1 (2006): 148–64. Noteworthy here is Shahab Ahmed’s comment that while many scholars see Sufism as a “contested entity,” there are examples where the law is the contested entity under “interrogation” by Sufism. See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁹ Ayad, “Reframing the Suffering Narrative.”

⁴⁰ Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America*.

⁴¹ Here, Telushkin quotes Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), professor of kabbalistic literature at Hebrew University and author of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, Schocken Books, 1941). Joseph Telushkin, “Kabbalah: An Overview,” <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/kabbalah-an-overview>.

⁴² See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Chagiga 14b. There was also some concern that study of kabbalah could lead to heresy. See Matt Goldish, “Halakhah, Kabbalah, and Heresy: A Controversy in Early Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2/3 (1993): 153–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1455351>.

⁴³ Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ashlag, “The Time Has Come,” https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380308/jewish/The-Time-Has-Come.htm.

Through a kabbalistic lens, gender takes on a metaphoric sense. [Chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) thus interprets the male-female dynamic as the “existential underpinning of all reality.” The understanding of the macroscopic relationship between G-d and creation is described as the basis for understanding the microscopic relationship between male and female. “Male” is viewed as having an orientation toward “abstract perfection,” while “female” represents “concretizing and manifesting perfection in reality.” The female is seen as representing “infusing divinity into reality,” “a unifying and harmonizing force.”⁴⁴ As mentioned above, woman is seen as a “catalyst” for redemption on a mystical level.⁴⁵ Because the concept of male and female is viewed as built into creation, an erasure of gender is not possible.

Consistent with Jungian psychology, both Muslim and Jewish traditions contain writers who describe a feminine and masculine aspect in every human being.⁴⁶ The feminine part is dominant in women, while the masculine part is dominant in men. Jewish tradition as elucidated by kabbalah and *chassidut* contains the premise that there is a feminine and masculine polarity to the divine. The masculine divine energy is related to giving, while the feminine is related to receiving.

According to some Muslim thinkers, G-d’s names of majesty are considered masculine, and names of beauty are considered feminine.⁴⁷ Similarly, in Judaism too, G-d has diverse names through which the worshipper calls on Him. Through the name of Shechina, Jewish tradition emphasizes the feminine aspect of the Divine. Rochel Holzkenner, a contributor to the Rosh Chodesh Society site, explains that the object of all mitzvot or Jewish commandments is to combine the feminine and masculine energies of G-d.⁴⁸ We will return later to this subject when discussing feminism.

Views on Modesty and Feminism

Both [yaqeeninstitute.org](http://www.yaqeeninstitute.org) and [chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) emphasize the importance of inner beauty and critique the contemporary secular world’s focus on physicality: the objectification and sexualization of the female body. They both emphasize the importance of modesty, [yaqeeninstitute.org](http://www.yaqeeninstitute.org) using the Arabic word, *huya*, and [chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) employing the Hebrew *tzniut*.⁴⁹ They connect the concept of

⁴⁴ Moshe-Yaakov Wisnefsky, “Mystical Aspects of Femininity,”

https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380360/jewish/Mystical-ASpects-of#utm_source=domain&utm_medium=domain&utm_campaign=chabad.org;0%20https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380390/jewish/Malchut-and-the-Feminine-Part-1.htm.

⁴⁵ Shulamit Tilles, “Kabbala, Redemption and Femininity,”

https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380541/jewish/Kabbala-Redemption-and-Femininity.htm.

⁴⁶ Hanna Perlberger, “It’s a Balancing Act: The Masculine and Feminine in Each of Us,”

https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/4619031/jewish/Its-a-Balancing-Act-The-Masculine-and-Feminine-in-Each-of-Us.htm. Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ See Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*; also, Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Rochel Holzkenner is co-director of Chabad of Las Olas, Florida. She teaches in the Rohr Bais Chaya Academy High School and contributes frequently to [chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org). She is also the co-author of *Discovering Order in the Seder: The Haggadah Companion* (2017). She lectures on Kabbalah and feminism. (TorahCafe, https://www.torahcafe.com/scholar/mrs-rochel-holzkenner_0000000735.html).

⁴⁹ [chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) further defines *tzniut* as “dignity and self-respect, an understanding of one’s intrinsic worth” (https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/626355/jewish/Why-is-it-important-to-dress-modesty.htm).

modesty with women's acts of head covering. Many Muslim women and many married Orthodox Jewish women, as well as other Jewish women, cover their hair. Below I explore the motivations and spiritual meaning several speakers from yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org provide for this practice.

In yaqeen.org's webinar, *Behind the Veil: The Intersection of Religion, Politics and Culture*, four speakers analyze various aspects of their decision to wear the hijab.⁵⁰ The speakers are experts in their fields and also relate their personal experiences. The webinar speakers on the Yaqeen Institute site explain that wearing the hijab affects the woman's inner state of mind. According to Amina Darwich (Muslim chaplain at the University of Cincinnati), hijab reminds women that they are "more important inside than they are outside." Further, Dalia Mogahed—co-author of *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (2010)—argues that the woman who wears hijab has chosen "conscience over conformity."

The Yaqeen webinar directly confronts the secular and feminist critique of those who describe hijab as a symbol of oppression. Ieasha Prime, speaking on the intersection of hijab, race and social justice, argues that we have to be careful when we place our conception of oppression on another person. Prime argues that in choosing to wear hijab, she is making an "intelligent, informed, decision," one "not to be defined by your definition" of beauty, race, or femininity. And that by wearing hijab she is "taking control of her own narrative."⁵¹ Prime comments on the difficulty of keeping up this religious practice in a society where it is challenging to be a person of faith. To her, wearing hijab sends a message that may be counter-cultural: "I choose to not be defined by your definition of beauty, by your definition of race, by your cultural definition and by your definition of femininity."

In discussing women's hair covering and modesty on the chabad.org site, Goldie Plotkin (co-director of Chabad in Markham in Thornhill in Ontario, Canada) emphasizes the counter-cultural impact of valuing modesty.⁵² Plotkin says, "We are an *am kadosh* (a holy nation). We don't have to follow all the garbage that is out there that is breaking down society." She goes on to critique how the media dictates to women how they need to look and how many women get "sucked in." To the question why so many more books and articles discuss the virtue of *tzniut* (modesty) for women than for men, she explains that women were given an extra dose of intuitiveness (*bina yetera*). Like the Torah scroll, which has so much holiness within, and remains wrapped up, the woman also covers up the external, so that we can see the internal. By using this metaphor, she urges each woman to see herself as sacred and precious to the community. She further removes the discussion about modesty from its common connection with the man's gaze.

⁵⁰ Here *hijab* refers to the covering of the head and neck, but not the face. Faatimah Knight explains that within Islam both men's and women's dress is desexualized within public space. She critiques modern women's dress as "crudely overemphasizing gender in a way that takes choices away from those who wear it in their desire to be stylish" (<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/faatimah-knight/and-we-created-you-in-pairs-islam-and-the-gender-question>). See also Elizabeth Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁵¹ *Behind the Veil: The Intersection of Religion, Politics, and Culture* (Yaqeen Institute, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igY2fLwdiRE&feature=youtu.be>.

⁵² Goldie Plotkin, "Modesty and Borders, Women and Wisdom, Lesson 1" Chabad.org (Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center), accessed February 24, 2021, https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/1695175/jewish/Modesty-and-Borders.htm.

She instead connects modest dress and hair covering with the woman’s setting up boundaries around her own choices as to how she values her inner essence.⁵³

It seems that Plotkin’s question as to why there are so few books on *tzniut* for men is a legitimate one. She justifies this dearth of literature by suggesting that *tzniut* is perhaps more important for women. As *tzniut* should not be reduced to only *kisui rosh* (Jewish head covering) but, as the Rebbe has written, includes also matters of conduct, dress, and even speech, it is beginning to be understood that such attributes of refinement of character should not be withheld from men.⁵⁴ (Interestingly, both yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org strongly relate, in very similar terms, religious practice to refinement of character.)⁵⁵ In fact, one finds references of *tzniut* as applied to men in a number of instances outside of chabad.org. The podcast “*Tznius: So What About the Men??*” (June 23, 2021), asserts the shared obligation of *tzniut* and presents, in particular, the importance of “*shmirat enayim*” or watching what one’s eyes see as an expression of *tzniut* particularly important for men. In “Modesty in the Age of Abuse,” Rabbi Eliyahu Safran puts *tzniut* in dialogue with the “#MeToo” movement. Safran writes: “But the goal of *tzniut* must be shared by all. Its goal, to desexualize everyday encounters, must be embraced by both men and women. Addressing one side of the sexual equation without the other increases power imbalances and invites rather than diminishes abuse.”⁵⁶

Plotkin asserts that Chabad women cover their hair out of modesty and a sense of their own sanctity. Can the listener accept that these are the sole and unique motivations? Is it possible that the male gaze is a factor in the rationale for religious societies to encourage women’s modesty more than men’s? Taking an even more critical perspective, Susan Weiss writes from a sociological stance.⁵⁷ She analyzes the reasons given by some Jewish women for covering their hair: sexual modesty, wanting to acquire the merit of women described in tradition, adherence to G-d’s will as expressed through *halacha* (Jewish law), expressing a condition of holiness, and expressing identification and acceptance within her community. Weiss suspects those reasons as not being entirely transparent. She believes the women are not aware of the deeper meaning of head covering in Jewish tradition. According to her, it evokes the husband’s property rights over his wife’s sexuality.⁵⁸

⁵³ See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, Ch 75.

⁵⁴ Lubavitcher Rebbe, “Chapter 1: The Concept of Tznius,” Chabad.org (Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center), accessed February 24, 2021, https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/72871/jewish/The-Concept-Of-Tznius-and-Its-Rewards.htm.

⁵⁵ Justin Parrott, “Can a ‘Good Muslim’ Be a ‘Bad Person’? Aligning Faith and Character,” (July 3, 2019), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/can-a-good-muslim-be-a-bad-person-aligning-faith-and-character>. Yehuda Leib Schapiro, “The Differing Approach of Chassidus and Musar,” https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/2818768/jewish/The-Differing-Approach-of-Chassidus-and-Musar.htm.

⁵⁶ <https://outorah.org/p/38937>.

⁵⁷ Susan Weiss, “Under Cover: Demystification of Women’s Head Covering in Jewish Law” in *Nashim*, no. 17 (2009). Weiss, an attorney who holds a PhD in sociology and anthropology, is the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Women’s Justice and author of *Marriage and Divorce in the Jewish State: Israel’s Civil War* (2012). See <https://www.cwj.org.il/en/team/susan-weiss>.

⁵⁸ But she sees a connection between head-covering and the problem of the *agunah* and the *mamzer*, as though all three relate to systemic rules that are patriarchal. The *agunah* is referred to as a “chained woman,” because her husband has refused to give her a *get* (a Jewish divorce), and she consequently cannot remarry according to Orthodox Jewish law (Dr. Robert Gordis, “Agunot: A Different Kind of Hostage,” My Jewish Learning, May 11, 2017, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/agunot-a-different-kind-of-hostage/>.) A *mamzer* refers to a

Weiss argues that “the goal of feminism is to raise the consciousness of women in such a manner as to ensure that any deference to customs like head-covering. . . is fully informed.”⁵⁹ Plotkin makes it clear in her talk that she does not feel constricted by the dictates of modest dress and actions, instead she celebrates them. Chabad is expanding, just as many synagogues are seeing their numbers dwindling.⁶⁰ Plotkin describes clear boundaries as “healthy.” And it may be that the kind of clarity and certainty that her understanding of modesty provides is something for which some women are yearning.

Several areas of comparison between the yaqeeninstitute.org webinar’s treatment of the subject and Plotkin’s discussion stand out. Both emphatically critique the “mainstream” standards of beauty that emphasize external appearance. Both yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org women explain that covering their hair is an expression of modesty that cultivates their inner sense of spirituality. Similarly, the webinar speakers on the Yaqeen site explain that wearing the hijab affects the woman’s inner state of mind. Dalia Mogahed explains that in putting on hijab she is making the decision to put pleasing G-d over fitting in. Having made this decision, she explains, “smaller decisions that use require the same muscle are easier.” And so, she finds herself feeling brave about decisions such as speaking up in a class. According to Plotkin’s article, as the Chabad woman has several options as to how to cover her hair (a headscarf or a wig), the onlooker might not even realize her hair is covered. But Plotkin makes the point that it does not matter if the onlooker knows, the point is that the woman herself knows that she has made this choice.

As we can see, the overall feeling of covering with the purpose of changing one’s inner sense of self is nuanced variously. The speakers on this Yaqeen webinar primarily relate the choice to wear hijab to a woman’s wanting to express her direct relationship with G-d. They explain that wearing the hijab unites them with a higher purpose. Plotkin explains the decision to cover one’s hair as related primarily to family relations and the desire to create boundaries around sexuality. This distinction between Yaqeen and Chabad women in the personal experience and meaning given is consistent with a distinction in the religious practice of the groups: Muslim women who cover their hair usually begin as girls, in a practice that is often associated with piety, while Chabad women cover their hair after marriage, relating the practice to creating a boundary.⁶¹

Jewish person born as a result of a forbidden sexual union, who according to traditional Jewish law is not allowed to marry most fellow Jews. It is of note that both Conservative and Reform Judaism render this category inoperative. See, “What Is a Mamzer?” (February 13, 2020), <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mamzer-problem/>.

⁵⁹ Weiss, 106.

⁶⁰ Ron Csillag, “The Secrets of Chabad’s Global Expansion,” cited above. See also, Bart Jones, “Chabad Movement Growing on Long Island,” *Newsday* (October 18, 2014), <https://www.newsday.com/long-island/chabad-movement-growing-on-long-island-1.9520175>.

⁶¹A caveat follows. Traditionally, the obligation of head-covering for observant Jewish men was based on the principle of displaying *yir’at shamayim*—fear of G-d. As seen above, the obligation for Jewish women to cover their hair stems from a different principle, that of modesty. It should be noted that the Shulchan Aruch sets forth no distinction between married and single women in terms of head covering (even *haezer* 21:2). Ashkenazic commentaries limit this by excluding never-married women. There is, however, a different tradition within Mizrahi (Middle Eastern, North African or Mediterranean) Jewish communities, where unmarried girls, especially during prayer and torah study, cover their hair because of the principle of *yir’at shamayim*. This practice is referred to in the

Another major difference between the descriptions of their experience of living with hijab or *kisui rosh* is the question of visibility to others. Ieasha Prime feels that by wearing hijab her personal choice to be a woman of faith will be recognized and she will take her place amongst those who are honored as believing women. So, she concerns herself with external gaze, though not in the sense of placing the responsibility for men’s sexuality on women’s modesty. She further points out her hope that whether or not a woman chooses to wear hijab does not become a “wedge” or point of contention between Muslim women.⁶²

The women from yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org who explain their personal intention and experience with these practices, express an awareness of the arguments against which they are raising their voices. Rather than assuming these women lack agency, it may be more accurate to define their sense of agency. According to Saba Mahmood, agency does not imply uniquely a resistance to norms, but also the multiple ways in which norms are “performed, inhabited and experienced.”⁶³ The questions which remain are: Is there a way to cultivate sanctity/piety/modesty without evoking a subjugation to patriarchy? And is it possible that contemporary women who make this choice are authentically re-inscribing it with personal meaning? As there is significant literature analyzing the symbolism of head-covering, in no way does this article seek to summarize the breadth of research on this topic.⁶⁴ Instead, the point here is to compare the religious women’s personal experience with this practice and the meaning they derive from it. What is most of note is the areas of consensus between the Yaqeen and Chabad women. In this light is the point well taken by scholar Raquel Ukeles.⁶⁵ In her article, “Modest Dress in Contemporary Judaism and Islam,” she describes Muslim and Jewish women who choose to cover their hair as “natural allies.”⁶⁶

This discussion brings us directly to the question of how the feminist project is viewed on yaqeeninstitute.org and on chabad.org. In the article, “Re-orienting Women’s Values:

Yabia omer of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013), the Iraqi born Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, the *Yaskil avdi* of Rabbi Ovadia Hedaya (1890–1969), a Sephardi rabbi in Jerusalem, and in the writings of Rabbi Matzliach Mazuz (1912–1971), a Tunisian rabbi from Djerba. Fuchs in his article in *Nashim*, speculates that although the sources for this tradition come from Jewish texts, there may have been influence from the practices of the surrounding Muslim community. See Ilan Fuchs, “Hair Coverings for Single Women: A New Reading of Mizrahi Halakhic Rulings,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 23 (April 1, 2012): 35–59, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2979/nashim.23.35>.

⁶²executive director of Barakah Inc., an organization which connects Muslims and non-Muslims to “live a better life according to quran and sunna” (<http://www.barakahinc.com/index.html>).

⁶³ Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.

⁶⁴ For a historical analysis, see, for example, Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) and Fatema Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society* (London: Saqi Books, 1975). See also Karen E. H. Skinazi, “Are Head Coverings the New Black? Sheitls and the Religious-Secular Culture Wars in Twenty-First Century America and its Literature,” in *Open Library of Humanities* 3 no. 2 (2017), DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/olh.138>.

⁶⁵ Ukeles holds a doctorate from Harvard with a concentration in Jewish and Islamic Studies and serves as Israel’s curator of the Islam and Middle East Collection.

⁶⁶ Raquel Ukeles, “Modest Dress in Contemporary Judaism and Islam,” (April 3, 2015), <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/modest-dress-in-contemporary-judaism-and-islam/>.

Reframing the Gender Question,”⁶⁷ Dr. Zara Khan, senior fellow at Yaqeen Institute, explores the history of feminism, laying out specifically which aspects of feminism she sees to be consistent with an Islamic approach. She affirms Muslims should support, “social, political and economic equality across genders” as well as opposing “violence against women and sexually non-conformist people.” She explains that feminism (although it is not monolithic), over time has taken on certain values which she feels to be incompatible with Islam: including “sexual freedom bounded only by consent.” She particularly takes a distance from underlying assumptions in feminism which she describes as secular in nature. Khan says, “What I believe, upon researching the philosophical foundations as well as the diversity of manifestations of both feminism and human rights, is that both are too secular and too secularizing to be beneficial for Muslims to organize our thinking and acting pertaining to rights and justice, whether that’s gender based or otherwise.” Khan criticizes not only the course that feminism has developed along historically, but also its association with some principles of modernity. She defines feminism as: “Modern woman’s demand for parity with the gains of Modern man.” She further critiques modernity as a project at odds in its principles—among them, moral autonomy and secularism—with Islam. Interestingly, although Khan clearly does not see herself as feminist, she is open to Muslims using tools from feminism if judgment is used to re-orient values. Khan specifies that in saying this she is not speaking for yaqeeninstitute.org; rather, she is giving her personal opinion. In a co-written essay, Teaneem Alkiek (a doctoral student at Georgetown University and Director of Expanded Learning at Yaqeen) and Nour Soubani (a contributor to yaqeeninstitute.org and a community organizer) similarly argue that an ideology that opposes any fixed gender roles would be incompatible with Islam.⁶⁸

Yaqeeninstitute.org’s work engages with a critical approach and supports providing spaces for discussion: “[f]or this reason, we need to focus our efforts on training imams and community leaders to provide spaces where those struggling with their religion can be critical and ask questions.” Alkiek and Soubani note that a large-scale critique of feminism within the Muslim community could derail listening to women’s voices and concerns: “Waging war against feminism may unintentionally enable those in our communities who seek to discredit and silence women by labeling every complaint they raise as due to feminism.”⁶⁹

A Rosh Chodesh Society class on “The Essence of the Feminine Role” opens discussion by asking, “What is the greatest impediment to women achieving full equality, and is there a way to overcome it?” This question implies a certain alignment with the feminist project, in that it recognizes legitimate grievances which have not yet been fully addressed. The Rosh Chodesh materials stick to Jewish sources, while posing questions which situate these sources in a historical and particularly contemporary context.

⁶⁷ Zara Khan, “Reorienting Women’s Values” (September 20, 2019), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zarakhan/reorienting-womens-values>.

⁶⁸ Nour Soubani and Tesneem Alkiek, “Is Feminism the Problem? Why Ideological Bandwagons Fail Islam,” (November 1, 2017), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nour-soubani/is-feminism-the-problem-why-ideological-bandwagons-fail-islam>. For an excellent explanation of gender complementarity, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Male and Female in the Islamic Perspective,” in *Studies in Comparative Religion* (14): 1980. Nasr explains that Islam embraces a division of social and family duties and the hiding of women’s beauty from strangers. According to him, these practices need not prevent women from participating in public life, from ruling countries to owning major businesses.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

In her article for TheJewishWoman.org entitled, “Yes, I am a Chassidic feminist,” Chava Green questions the normativity of masculine-centered values. Here, Green, developing in her own words the vision of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902–1994), describes a form of feminism that has not yet come into being, and that would be deeply consistent with Jewish values. She imagines a world where the traits of intuitiveness and insight, traits inherently feminine in her understanding, but which can exist also within males, would be “recognized, respected and embraced.” She sees the traditional masculine as marked by “rugged individualism, aggression and the desire to conquer others.” The characteristics of femaleness and maleness as she sees them are not opposites. Her writing calls for comparison with that of Carol Gilligan who famously worked on ethics in girls’ development.⁷⁰ Gilligan argues that the feminine path of ethical development differs from that of the masculine, in that it places more emphasis on the protection of interpersonal relationships and taking care of other people than on masculine-oriented tropes of justice. Gilligan’s argument concerns the development of the individual towards becoming an ethical being, while Green writes about the arc of development towards an ethical society. Her view explains the Rebbe’s position, as quoted above, that arguing for women to take on masculine traits is a movement in the wrong direction, but instead that our society’s values need to shift. Furthermore, that it is the strictures of what our society sees as acceptable within masculinity that are to be softened: the masculine can be inclusive of more compassion and more caring, in order for us, as a society, to move forward. For it is the valuing of the feminine, in this trope, that is associated with redemption and with the advent of the messianic era.

Thus, while several writers for yaqeeninstitute.org situate their work as primarily outside of feminism, or as using feminist tools only with great caution, many writers for chabad.org see their work as expanding feminism. How could it be that yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org come to different conclusions about their relationship with feminism while presumably, as religious institutions, one would expect they would both oppose the secular roots that Khan so clearly critiques? The source of the divergence may be the variance in the relationship of the writers with modernity. While Khan takes an analytic approach, objecting to certain principles of modernity from a Muslim perspective, chabad.org takes a more metaphorical one. Writing for chabad.org, Eli Rubin acknowledges that many see modernity as at odds with religious faith. For some, the response is a capitulation which yields to assimilation, and for others, the response is a resistance to modernity which leads to “self-segregation.” Rubin explains that the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe refused to acknowledge a conflict. He based his position on a mystical text, the Zohar. The Zohar says that when G-d wanted to create the world, He looked into the Torah for a blueprint.⁷¹ Thus, while modernity is a product of history, history itself, according to this interpretation, is the result of a sacred plan, a product of Torah. And so, it was the Rebbe’s view that: “G-d’s vision for humanity transcends each of the political ideologies of the modern era and is the source of all of them.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁷¹ Zohar 2:161. Written in Aramaic, the Zohar is a comprehensive mystical commentary on the Torah and forms the basis of *kabbalah*. See Moshe Miller, tran., “What is the Zohar?” https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380596/jewish/What-Is-the-Zohar.htm.

⁷² Eli Rubin, “Divine Zeitgeist” (2015), https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2973252/jewish/Divine-Zeitgeist-The-Rebbs-Appreciative-Critique-of-Modernity.htm.

In her article for yaqeeninstitute.org, “And We Created You in Pairs,” Faatimah Knight enters the theoretical dialogue about gender by engaging with the writing of Judith Butler through her article, “Performance Acts of Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.”⁷³ Knight pushes back, from a Muslim perspective, against some of Butler’s ideas. She accuses Butler of wanting us to “liberate ourselves from gender” and further defends the reality of gender seeing it as fundamental to Muslim cosmology. But she does not explain what gender consists of in this cosmology, instead simply referring the reader to Sachiko Murata’s *The Tao of Islam*.⁷⁴ Knight raises questions about the prevailing narrative in Western culture that is seen as authoritative and she asks who might have the authority to restructure conceptions of gender. Although, in the above-mentioned article, Butler does not mention religion, Knight writes against the widely made critique that religion has sclerotized our view of gender: “Religion is viewed as a culprit in perpetuating gender distinctions to an oppressive extent.” Knight argues that this critique stems in part from a lack of understanding of the feminine and masculine symbolism in Islam, a macrocosmic polarity mirrored in the individual’s microcosm.⁷⁵ This view of the world sees a correspondence between the microcosm of the individual in his or her spiritual and physical aspects and the macrocosm universe, a topic elaborated on by Murata.

Knight argues that Judith Butler “erases gender, femaleness included and commonly understood, in pursuit of a feminist aim.” Knight does not define the “feminist aim” that would be reached by an erasure of femaleness. She maintains that there is a polarity of gender. In a similar vein, chabad.org writes against the “erasure of gender.” Its Rosh Chodesh Society quotes the Rebbe: “Genuine equality is undermined by the effort to have women mimic men and the demand that they receive the duties that G-d gave to men. Doing so actively creates social inequality, for the female pursuit of male responsibilities highlights the erroneous view that women are inherently beneath the status of men”.⁷⁶ Here, the Rebbe reflects on the difference between equality and identity. Thus, both sites define women's agency as taking place within a religious structure and carefully critique Western feminism for the limitations it has in their eyes.

Views on Masculinity and Fatherhood

In his article, “Keeping Masculinity from Trending Toxic,” Jonathan Brown (Georgetown University) describes the Western conception of masculinity as bifurcated along political lines. He describes the ideal conservative masculine as the male expecting to be dominant and to be served, a “toxic” model, according to him. He sketches the ideal progressive masculine as so feminine that in this role, there is almost an erasure of gender lines. Neither of these competing ideals is consistent with the ideal male role model within Islam, as Brown explains it. Clearly,

⁷³ Faatimah Knight, “And We Created You in Pairs” (July 12, 2019). See also, Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

⁷⁴ Sachiko Murata’s *The Tao of Islam* (1992) is a ground-breaking and widely respected anthology of mystical and philosophical wisdom exploring the roots of Islamic thought and emphasizing the spiritual role of the feminine. It includes translations of several hundred pages of sources from authors such as Avicenna and Ibn Arabi.

⁷⁵ Supporting this macrocosmic/microcosmic parallel she cites: “Allah created Adam in His image [*ala suratihī*],” a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra and included in both Bukhari and Muslim. The concept that humankind is created in *tzelem elokim*, G-d’s image, also occurs in Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 9:6.

⁷⁶ The Rosh Chodesh Society, 126–27.

Brown is pushing these descriptions to the point of caricature.⁷⁷ The Western construction of masculinity is not based solely on these conservative/liberal models, nor on television characters.⁷⁸ Yet Brown’s point is noteworthy: according to him, the absence of a consistent masculine role model that is not seriously flawed contributes to social fragmentation in the West.

In contrast, where does Islam situate the ideal masculine? Brown asks: how is the relationship between the Prophet Muhammed and his family described? He was in the service of his family: washed and mended his own clothes and took care of his own needs. When asked, Brown could not think of an example where the Prophet Muhammed used his power to force his family to do what he asked. Brown thus sees clarity within the Islamic model and finds the difficulty in the non-alignment of the Islamic and Western models, a phenomenon which produces some discomfort for young Muslim men trying to find their place in the world.

Yaqeen and Chabad examine masculinity, fatherhood, and the frequent discomfort that surrounds these themes on the part of young men seeking to find their place in society, and on the part of children seeking stronger relationships with fathers. Yaqeen takes a largely sociological approach, while Chabad often responds through memoir. For example, in “Gender Uniqueness in Islam and the Significance of Fatherhood,” Mohammad Elshinaway (instructor of Islamic Studies at Mishkeh University and translator of Islamic texts) and Tahir Khwaja, MD (a practicing psychiatrist and a student at the Seminary program in Islamic Sciences at Qalam Institute) examine the correlation between growing up in a fatherless household and decreased academic performance, the risk of drug and alcohol abuse, and the risk of incarceration. The Rosh Chodesh site does not deal with the role models derived from the American political models and the discomfort one might derive from them. But, on chabad.org, there are several articles treating fatherhood. In a mini-memoir, one Chabad story (consistent with the studies Yaqeen cites), presents feelings of hopelessness, grief, and betrayal that arise when the father leaves the family.⁷⁹ Another story looks at the discomfort a young woman felt from a father who was distant and uninvolved with her life, and the value she derived from coming to him in forgiveness later in life, when his social worker reached out to her.

Relatedly, TheJewishwoman.org offers a poem dealing with the disappointment of a woman in her relationship with her father, who similarly to the prior story, had so broken a childhood that he was unable to connect with his own daughter in love. And in yet another, a woman asks how to interact with her elderly father who has never told her he loves her. Another looks at the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, walking to the Akeda (the binding of Isaac) and describes the ideal father as in Abraham’s archetype, being present for his son.⁸⁰ The author

⁷⁷ Jonathan Brown, “Keeping Masculinity from Trending Toxic” (September 13, 2019), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/keeping-masculinity-from-trending-toxic-reframing-the-gender-question>. Brown is the author of several books including *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting The Prophet’s Legacy* (2014). Brown holds the Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

⁷⁸ Tahir Khwaja and Mohammad Elshinawy, “Gender Uniqueness in Islam and the Significance of Fatherhood,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, September 24, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/mohammad-elshinawy/gender-uniqueness-in-islam-and-the-significance-of-fatherhood>.

⁷⁹ “An Angel in the Supermarket,” https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1508904/jewish/An-Angel-in-the-Supermarket.htm.

⁸⁰ Tzvi Freeman, “How to Be a Father,” https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/762533/jewish/How-to-Be-a-Father.htm.

derives this trait from Abraham's reply to his son, "I am here." As if to mean, here for you, here "fully." But the article does not go further to explore the discomfort of the situation, or the fact that after this episode the father and son are never again seen speaking together.

Why is the trope of fatherhood so often connected with missing the mark? With disconnection? If both yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org treat with concern the erasure of gender, is there a need for more writing on the discomfort around masculinity and fatherhood?

As I have shown, strong similarity lies in the affirmation of distinct feminine and masculine traits. Both yaqeeninstitute.org and chabad.org also convey their vision for how positive masculine character traits can be cultivated. From a yaqeeninstitute.org perspective, the goal is to return to gender roles as described by ideal Qur'anic models: Mohammed and his family, and other men depicted as ideal fathers (Jacob, Abraham).⁸¹ It seems that the chabad.org approach, moving forward, is for men to take on purposefully, and consciously, more traits such as intuition and caring about relationships, that have traditionally been seen as inherently feminine. These two visions seem not to negate each other, and it may be that the descriptions of the ideal masculine overlap.

Conclusion

Throughout my analysis, I have tried to point out distinctions between multiple writers on various topics within the same site, and to compare voices across the websites. It should be noted that no one writer speaks for yaqeeninstitute.org or for chabad.org. Yet, there is common ground within the sites, and even, perhaps surprisingly, between them. This, in the sense that they critique the underlying normative assumptions in American society that secularism is beneficial for women (in particular, in terms of equality and sexual emancipation). Each in his or her own way tackles the spiritual aspect of gender and issues of gender equality. Each writer describes his or her experience of being religious in a society that may prioritize the value of the secular. I have examined how these writers construct a spiritual dimension of gender. The writers then look at secular notions of gender, and its discrepancy with their own conception of it. They justify their arguments with exegesis and hermeneutics, as well as their own subjective experience.

By examining the writings and lectures on the two sites, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of how religious women take roles of leadership, embrace agency and develop their personal religious practices, and what struggles they face in this process. My study points towards further research, which might include interviewing the writers to probe more deeply into the issues discussed, as well as the readers to see how these sites influence them. Overall, this study constitutes a first step towards understanding the religious conception of gender as it is articulated on these two websites: one Muslim; one Jewish; both influential.

⁸¹ The tension between the exemplary and the exceptional in the life of the Prophet Mohammed is discussed in Kecia Ali's excellent article: "'A Beautiful Example' The Prophet Muhammad as a Model for Muslim Husbands" *Islamic Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004), 273–91.



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