Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism

Faegheh Shirazi. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.
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Faegheh Shirazi's book tells the story of Muslim women's resistance to the gender-discriminatory practices of Islamic fundamentalism. It successfully conveys to the reader many of the restrictions women face within most Islamic communities today and demonstrates how these restrictions are justified by the use of valid or invalid religious arguments. In six chapters, the book provides examples from a variety of Muslim countries to illustrate cases of gender inequality.

Central to the analysis is how women of Muslim origin, regardless of faith position or practice level, question these inequalities in an effort to bring about a just community where both men and women have the right to fully participate. With better access to information, education, and the Internet, these women have been able to mobilize others who share similar concerns. Shirazi likens this process to the nonviolent Velvet Revolutions of the late 1980s that led to the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, thus calling her book *Velvet Jihad*.

However, despite the book's success in laying out problems of gender inequality, its evaluation of them can be problematic. Indeed, *Velvet Jihad* is often inconsistent in its occasional attempts to justify a reversal of established interpretations that restrict women. This is especially

salient when the book refers to religious sources.

For example, in Chapter 5, Shirazi argues that, although Iranian law makes lesbianism a crime, such a measure cannot be based on Islam, because, although the Qur'an forbids homosexual conduct between males, it does not contain a verse that forbids lesbianism. This argument is not necessarily inconsistent, but Shirazi states in another context that there is no record of women being lashed for any reason during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and asks why the practice should be commonplace today (197). To answer this question, one must turn to the Qur'an as some of its verses appropriate lashing as the punishment for certain crimes. In other words, Shirazi cites the Qur'an and ignores the Hadith when arguing in defense of lesbians and does just the opposite when arguing against lashing. However, the selection of religious sources on an ad hoc basis when providing alternative interpretations may prove to be an unrealistic solution, since most believers may not assume such a high level of liberty in interpreting religious texts.

This question has to do with the extent of reform one aims to bring to Islam—that is, whether reform should involve a mere reinterpretation of primary sources or a complete restructuring of the religion. The choice of reform type also determines how one defines radical (or fundamentalist) Islam. The proponents of reinterpretation aim to return to the basics of Islam, which they consider acceptable and moderate. Those in favor of complete restructuring, however, deem it necessary to change the basics as well. According to the former, radical Islam is the opposite of authentic Islam, and radicalism involves a deviation from the religion's moderate nature. According to the latter, however, it is authentic Islam itself that must be moderated, and therefore radical (or more appropriately, fundamentalist) Islam is the opposite of moderate Islam, which has yet to be created.

In *Velvet Jihad*, it can be difficult to distinguish which one of the two the author is prescribing, if either. This is because Shirazi often directs her criticism toward the conservative narratives that justify gender inequality without acknowledging the kind of change she thinks would help solve the problems. This standpoint would be less problematic if she did not occasionally attempt to refute conventional practices with religious counterarguments. For example, in Chapter 4, Shirazi is critical of gender-segregated beaches (152) as well as of the religious interpreta-

tions that consider dancing a sin for unmarried couples (136). For the former, she writes that fundamentalist Islam has always segregated and marginalized women, which is hard to dispute. For the latter, however, she cites a verse in the Qur'an that refers to the perfection of human beings (154) and argues that, by engaging in artistic and athletic activities, Muslim women, as perfect creatures, are simply using the abilities that God has bestowed upon them.

The book includes additional obscure arguments. In Chapter 5, Shirazi argues that Sisters of Venus, a pro-lesbian group in Turkey, is hindered by "the fundamentalist movement" in the country that "presents a real threat" to its success (172). This argument should give the reader pause for two reasons: First, Sisters of Venus was comprised of a small group of people and, more importantly, was active only for a short period of time in the mid-1990s, more than a decade before the publication of Shirazi's book. The group is forgotten even by many of the lesbian activists in Turkey today. Second, even though Shirazi uses the definite article "the," she does not specify which fundamentalist group threatens this now nonexistent group. This is especially unfortunate at a time when devout Muslims in Turkey are increasingly willing to criticize the hate speech directed at homosexuals in the country.

This lack of attention to detail is present in other sections of the book as well. In Chapter 3, the book refers to the Dome of the Rock in Palestine as *Masjid al-Haram*, which in fact is the Grand Mosque in Mecca that surrounds al-K'aba (111). The book also refers to Jordan, Malaysia, and Turkey as "officially Islamic nations" (170). Although Islam is the official religion in Jordan and Malaysia, Turkey is governed by a secularist regime.

In all, *Velvet Jihad* offers the impression that, although Shirazi sets out to tell the story of women's resistance to "Islamic fundamentalism," she is not always precise about her use of the phrase and seems to treat it as an umbrella term for any religious understanding that endangers gender equality. This imprecision leaves the reader to question whether Islam really is gender-neutral or if one must force the limits of methodology to interpret it in such a way. These are salient questions for a book that focuses on resistance to Islamic fundamentalism. A more rigorous analysis is necessary to answer them.