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Religious Freedoms versus Gender Equality: Faith-Based Organizations, Muslim Minorities, and Islamic Headscarves in the New Europe

Abstract

The intersections of gender and civil society in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe have been examined primarily through the lens of Western Aid to support feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). What has received less scholarly attention is the growing number of NGOs advocating for a return to more conservative gender roles and more restricted public roles for women. Many of these organizations are so-called “faith-based” organizations (FBOs), and are bound to particular religious denominations. In this article, I will examine the presence of Islamic FBOs in Bulgaria and how they mobilize a liberal “rights” discourse to justify practices that could be locally interpreted as being oppressive to women. Their insistence on guaranteeing women’s “right to choose” certain religious practices puts feminists and women’s NGOs in an increasingly difficult position.

The intersections of gender and civil society in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe have been examined primarily through the lens of Western Aid to support feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As the articles in this special issue attest, the relationship between Western “aid givers” and Eastern “aid receivers” is highly contested, and many have examined the efficacy of women’s NGOs entirely dependent on foreign funding (Helms 2003; Hemment 2004, 2007; Ishkanian 2004; Kay 2000; Sperling 1999). Accountable to their donors rather than their constituents, these NGOs often focus on feminist issues imported from the United States or Western Europe instead of on the immediate needs of women in their own countries (Ghodsee 2004a; Hemment 2004, 2007). Despite these tensions over the “means,” women activists in both East and West NGOs largely agree on the “ends”: reducing gender inequality, increasing civic participation, and raising the living standards of vulnerable populations of women (single mothers, widows, ethnic minorities, etc.).

What has received less scholarly attention is the growing number of NGOs advocating for a return to more conservative gender relations and more limited public roles for women. Many of these organizations are so-called “faith-based” organizations (FBOs), and are bound to particular religious denominations (Vidal 2001). “Faith-based” organizations operate under the same legal framework and employ the same methods as most NGOs: social service provision, publishing, sponsoring workshops, etc. The goals of some of these organizations, however, are socially conservative, and their recent proliferation within Eastern European civil society sectors may bode well for democratic pluralism, but could undermine legal and social commitments to gender equality by creating pockets in society where “religious freedoms” justify the marginalization of women. In this article, I will examine the presence of orthodox¹ Islamic FBOs in Bulgaria [the EU (European Union) country with the largest Muslim minority] and how they mobilize a liberal “rights” discourse to justify practices that could be locally interpreted as detrimental to women. Their insistence on guaranteeing women’s “right to choose” certain religious practices puts feminists and women’s NGOs in an increasingly difficult position.

Although there are many Christian FBOs from the West, I will examine what I have called “Eastern Aid” (2005), aid from Middle Eastern countries to Muslim populations in Eastern Europe. I will focus on the activities of a certain subset of Islamic FBOs in Bulgaria and their effects on local gender relations in the rural Muslim communities of the central Rhodopi Mountains. Although there have

been a wide variety of Islamic FBOs operating in Bulgaria since the early 1990s and promoting different Muslim beliefs and practices,² this article focuses specifically on organizations that advocate an orthodox interpretation of the Koran, one in which women and their sexuality must be controlled by masculine authorities for the common good of the Muslim society. Research for this project is based on nine months of fieldwork in Bulgaria, and formal interviews with politicians, civil society activists and Muslim religious leaders.³ Western-led efforts to ease state regulation of civil society organizations combined with schisms within the Bulgarian Muslim community have paved the way for a dramatic increase in the number of orthodox Islamic FBOs that are promoting this type of agenda compared with Muslim organizations supporting a reinvigoration of the “traditional”⁴ Hanafi Sunnism historically practiced by Muslim communities in Bulgaria. The rise of organizations supporting women to embrace conservative gender roles in Eastern Europe may create new challenges for western-oriented women’s NGOs by pitting “women’s rights” against “religious rights.”

A critical issue is the deployment of the concept of “choice” by both sides of the debate. For progressive women’s groups, the assumed patriarchal traditions of certain religions supposedly limits the freedom of women to demand equity with men in their society, and they fear that tolerance for cultural relativism will trap certain groups of women in a system of perpetually unequal gender relations. This point of view is embodied by a 2005 EU resolution, #1464, in which the European Parliament declares: “It is the duty of the member states of the Council of Europe to protect women against violations of their rights in the name of religion and to promote and fully implement gender equality. States must not accept any religious or cultural relativism of women’s human rights. They must not agree to justify discrimination and inequality affecting women on grounds such as physical or biological differentiation based on or attributed to religion.”⁵ On the other hand, those who promote religious rights want to guarantee women the right to choose religious affiliations even if their expressions of piety entail the acceptance of practices or beliefs that are considered to be oppressive to women in the larger society. Both of these perspectives were present in Bulgaria in the summer of 2006, when a controversial case regarding the permissibility of Islamic headscarves in public schools pit gender equality against religious freedoms for the first time in the country’s relatively short postcommunist history.

Christian Missionaries, International Charities, and Islamic Aid

Before investigating the ways in which orthodox Islamic FBOs have been operating in Bulgaria and the effects they have had on local gender relations, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the history of faith-based aid, and some of the Christian and western antecedents of these orthodox Islamic charities. Providing social services to poor, powerless and/or displaced populations is a common strategy for winning converts to imported ideologies, whether they are religious or political ones. Christian missionaries have a long history of combining charity, humanitarian activities and community development projects (schools, health clinics, etc.) with their efforts to spread the word of Christ among non-Christian peoples. There are many scholarly debates on whether Christian missions provided theological justification for European imperialism in the non-West (Copeland 2006; Porter 2003; Porter 2004; Stanley 2001; Stanley 2003), but there is ample evidence that missionaries were a kind of forward guard for nations with colonial ambitions (Studdert-Kennedy 1998), although there are certainly many distinctions to be made among the different Christian denominations.⁶ In general, however, Christianity was always loaded with the civilizational baggage of Europe, and accepting the European religion often meant accepting European political and economic superiority.

In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx (1843) frowned upon both religion and charity. He viewed them as allies of the bourgeois classes in their efforts to stave off the proletarian revolution. As early as 1904, Max Weber (1976) explicitly linked Protestantism with the “spirit of capitalism.” As communism spread in the twentieth century, Christianity was increasingly seen as a bulwark against Bolshevism. In a 1934 article for *The Christian Century* called “End Missions Imperialism Now!” Hugh Vernon White (1934) recognized the ideological coziness of capitalism and Christianity and argued passionately against the conflation of religion and political and economic systems.

But after World War II, religious missionaries of all denominations were recruited to serve as Cold Warriors in the battle against Soviet communism and atheism as it threatened to spread throughout the now increasingly postcolonial world (Dreyfuss 2005). With the notable exception of Catholic Churches associated with Liberation Theology in Latin America, Christianity and varied denominations largely supported the western (i.e., capitalist and “democratic”) project for the political and economic development of the so-called “Third World.” The collapse of Soviet communism and the free market triumphalism of the United States (Fukuyama 1993) ushered

in a new era of FBOs that spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and supported a neoliberal economic agenda that encouraged “decentralization,” “self-help” and “community development” in order to justify the dismantling of generous welfare states (Bornstein 2003; Hardt and Negri 2000).

The historically assertive nature of American Christian missionaries has not gone unnoticed (Herbst 2005; Neill 1966; Sharkey 2004, 2005), and today entire websites such as www.christianaggression.org and www.crusadewatch.org track the uncouth tactics missionaries often use to seduce potential converts: “charitable allurement; deception, lies, and deceit; educational indoctrination; and medical care” (Christianaggression.org 2007). In the countries transitioning from communism, American evangelicals were particularly virulent in their efforts to save the souls of the godless without regard for the religious history in these states prior to the communist period (Caldwell, in press). Growing persecutions of American religious workers in Russia, China, and Eastern European countries in the early 1990s prompted the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedoms Act by a Republican-controlled congress. At the time, the legislation was a top priority of religious groups like the “Christian Coalition” who felt that the U.S. government had a responsibility to protect Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses working in Eastern Europe. For the Americans, Christianity (or “religious freedom”) was inextricably linked to creating democracy and free markets (Asad 2003).⁷

The Christian missionaries were also the forerunners of the international aid edifice that dramatically expanded after World War II, led by large international charities such as the Red Cross and Oxfam. Because these charities were seen as supranational and apolitical, the United Nations named them “nongovernmental organizations” (NGOs), and gave them nonvoting status on UN committees dealing with humanitarian concerns.⁸ For the first two decades after World War II, the United States and its allies dominated international humanitarian aid, with most NGOs based in the West. As the Cold War began to heat up, however, the Soviet Union also became a generous supplier of humanitarian and development aid to “Third World” countries that chose the socialist path to modernization, even though hard-line communists did not believe in charitable work. In their scramble for ideological empires, the two superpowers used their wealth and influence to “help” the developing countries find the “right” path to modernization. Even though the NGOs were supposed to be apolitical, many of them were implicitly based on western religious values (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003) and a commitment to freedom and “political

rights” (Helsinki Watch, Amnesty International, etc.), or on the socialist project and its “economic rights” (World Federation of Trade Unions, World Peace Council, etc).

The international charities, humanitarian organizations, and their local NGO counterparts have also been criticized for their role in supporting western hegemony (de Waal 1998; Maren 1997; Minear 2002; Petras 1997, 1999). Given that there is such a robust body of criticism on the activities of Christian missionaries, Western Aid agencies, and international charities, it is striking that there is so little written about funds originating from the nonwestern world, particularly those from the Middle East. Although there are international organizations supporting work among Muslim populations that are based in Iran, Turkey, or Western Europe, the oldest, wealthiest, and arguably the most influential Islamic charities and foundations are based in the Arab Gulf states. The relative lack of critical scholarship on nonwestern charities is especially interesting because the Islamic development banks and the international Islamic charities modeled themselves on their western and Christian counterparts and have been operating for more than three decades (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003). Furthermore, there is almost no discussion of their activities in the former socialist world, although they have been active in the Balkans, Central Asia, and southern Russia since the early 1990s. There are important continuities between the various tactics employed by evangelical Christian and orthodox Islamic charities as well as between Western and “Eastern Aid.” In both cases, aid and humanitarian assistance are often tied to the spiritual and political goals of the givers, and both viewed Eastern Europe after 1989 as a new territory to be explored.

Although there has been a long tradition of alms giving in the Muslim world, and *zakat* (tithing) is one of the five pillars of Islam (Warde 2000, 2006), the Islamic world did not enter the international aid and charity business until the 1960s. It was in the context of Christian missionary “aggression” and the western and Soviet dominance of foreign assistance that the Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) was founded in 1961, the first aid agency outside of the industrialized countries. When the KFAED was set up, its focus was to channel aid to fellow Arab Muslim countries. In 1974, it broadened its scope to include Muslim countries in Asia and Africa (Mallet 1989). Following the windfall profits realized during the first oil-boom in the early 1970s, other Gulf Arab governments began to set up their own agencies and NGOs to provide development assistance and humanitarian aid to the world’s impoverished Muslim nations, particularly those in nearby Africa.

But official aid to often corrupt African governments in the 1960s and 1970s did not always reach the people. Thus, concomitant with the establishment of the Arab development banks was the foundation of a new crop of international charities, many of which were directly linked to the government of Saudi Arabia, and its specific brand of orthodox Islam, one that rejects the heterodoxies of Hanafi Sunnism, Sufism, and other forms of “folk” Islam practiced in the peripheries of the Muslim world. These new charities focused primarily on alleviating poverty, famine and drought in Africa, because they did not want to leave relief work among Muslims to Christian missionaries, fearing that even secular western relief workers used natural disasters as opportunities to undermine Islamic values (Bellion-Jourdan 2000). It is important to point out that there is a continuum of religious NGOs and that there are many moderate groups both Muslim and Christian that do not use charity as an opportunity to convert nonbelievers. From the outset, however, the activities of many of the large Gulf Arab charities were openly connected to *da’wa* work (proselytizing).

Many Islamic charities were founded in part to resist the West and its Christian values, including its liberal attitudes toward women. The largest and most important of these charities was the Muslim World League (MWL), founded in 1962. The MWL and its many subsidiaries were explicitly committed to stemming the influence of western secularism in the Muslim world and spreading the Saudi version of orthodox Islam (Burr and Collins 2006). Similarly, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) was founded in 1972 to stymie the corrupting influence of western culture on young Muslims through the propagation of orthodox beliefs and practices. In 1975, the MWL created the International Islamic Relief Organization, which became one of the most influential branches of the Saudi charity in the later Afghan and Bosnian conflicts. There were also many smaller NGOs that focused on specific issues, as well as organizations based in other Arab countries (Benthal and Bellion-Jourdan 2003).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of communism in Eastern Europe marked the beginning of a new era for Gulf Arab development organizations and international charities. In the early 1990s, charities such as the MWL were calling for all-out commitments for *da’wa* work in the former communist world (Ibrahim 1992). Within the span of a few short years, there were new “Muslim” states springing up in Europe and Central Asia that were in dire need of financial assistance and humanitarian aid. These countries had all experienced various degrees of state oppression toward religion, and were eager to reach back to reclaim their faith.

Because the state had been so heavy handed (Khalid 2007; Neuburger 2004), there were many populations that had gone decades without religious education and training independent of the communist state. It was therefore quite easy for the orthodox Islamic charities to intervene in these states by claiming they were providing access to the lost traditions of Islam (Al-Nofal 1994). In reality, these organizations were promoting their own version of Islam, one that had never existed in these nations before the 1990s, and one that imagined far more restrictive roles for women than customary in the host cultures. At the same time, they also began employing liberal western discourses regarding “religious freedoms” to justify their position on women’s rights.

Eastern Aid in Eastern Europe

After the outbreak of the Bosnian War in 1992, the Islamic development banks and charities set up operations in Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia and eventually Kosovo. There is no question that the charities provided much-needed humanitarian assistance during the crises, but some of them conditioned the receipt of aid on whether or not individual Bosnians were “proper” Muslims. Aid recipients had to forego pork, cigarettes and alcohol. Additionally, men were required to attend Friday prayers, and women had to wear proper Islamic dress. In one example, women who wore miniskirts or revealing clothing were refused assistance until they dressed more modestly (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003). “Being Muslim the Bosnian way” (Bringa 1995) was seen as an aberration from the true Islam, and the orthodox Islamic charities that established themselves during the war continued in their efforts to “correct” the traditional Bosnian, Hanafi Sunni preferences for Islamic practice after the fighting ended. These practices included the celebration of the Prophet’s⁹ birthday, the making and carrying of amulets, the veneration of Muslim saints at local shrines and a general laxity regarding dietary restrictions or the regulation of the behavior and dress of women. This “Arab Cultural Imperialism” (Blumi 2002) similarly informed charitable activities in Kosovo and Macedonia where ethnic conflicts also erupted during the 1990s.

In all three countries, reforming the dress and behavior of women was a strident goal of these Islamic charities. In fact, the gender politics of organizations such as WAMY and the MWL were starkly at odds with the communist project of women’s emancipation and the legal (although theoretical) equality of the sexes that had defined discourses of gender relations in these Balkan states. For example, in an open letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations Fourth

World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Secretary General of the MWL, Makkah Al Mukarramah, wrote:

Equality of economic participation will strain the role of women as mother raising her children and minimizing her nurturing function and making her reproductive function an unbearable personal burden. Motherhood is an inherent and inalienable right of women. Neglecting the natural biological function, the innate skills and the acquired roles of women and pushing them out into the open labor market is a clear lack of respect of womanhood and motherhood (Ahmad-Ali 1996).

Such a position contradicted the predominant culture of most socialist states, which had the highest rates of women's labor participation in the world, where women had dominated key postsocialist sectors such as medicine, law, education and finance, and where the legal equality of men and women was constitutionally enshrined (Einhorn 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000; Ghodsee 2004b). Communism never completely eradicated local patriarchies, but in practice, women were active participants in the polity, society and economy of Balkan countries. Guaranteed employment and generous social supports for mothers ensured that women could combine work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, women were expected to engage in formal employment: rather than being discursively constructed only as mothers, they were celebrated as full members of the working class and cobuilders of communism. In some Eastern European countries, it was the Christian nationalist parties that promoted more traditional roles for women by trying to limit access to abortion and to the labor market. In Bulgaria, however, nationalists had almost no influence on politics until 2005 and women remained relatively "emancipated" after 1989 in terms of access to abortion, women's labor force participation rate, and political participation (Ghodsee 2005).

The orthodox Islamic charities targeted Balkan Muslim women in their reform efforts. A 2002 investigation by a prominent Bosnian journalist found that at least 10,000 Bosnian war widows and orphaned children had received letters from Saudi charities in the late 1990s. These letters offered widow's pensions on the condition that women wear headscarves and send their children to local, Saudi-funded religious schools. The charities targeted rural women with little education and few job prospects; many of them accepted these offers of help out of desperation (Prothero 2002). In the same year, the Bosnian Deputy Foreign Minister alleged that poor Bosnian women were being paid to wear *burqas*¹⁰ like the women in Afghanistan under the Taliban (Jovanovic 2002). Earlier in the

1990s, WAMY had handed out more than 14,000 Islamic cassettes and over 6,000 veils to Muslim women in Albania (Hashim 1994).

Despite differences in opinion with the local population on appropriate Islamic practices, specifically regarding the role of women, many of these charities and organizations continued to operate in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia, hoping to spread their orthodox version of Islam to Europe. By the end of the 1990s, their success in achieving this goal was still quite limited—Bosnia did not become an Islamic state, and most Albanians rejected the foreign doctrines. The charities continued their work, expanding their *da'wa* efforts to include the Muslim populations in Bulgaria, the only country with a significant Muslim minority slated to become a member of the EU before 2010. Because there was no conflict or humanitarian crisis to be solved, and the political leadership of Bulgaria's Muslim community was decidedly secular, these organizations did not establish themselves openly in the country. Instead, they took advantage of the schisms in the Bulgarian Muslim community and began funding local NGOs that, among other projects, called for more conservative gender relations between men and women, and justified their social rearrangements using the language of “choice” and “religious rights.”

Eastern Aid in Bulgaria

Under communism, there was limited contact between international Islamic organizations and Bulgaria's Muslim minority. Although the country had good political and economic relations with many countries in the Muslim world, these strategic relations seldom extended into the realm of religion, largely because of Communist ideology's hostility towards all religious doctrine. In 1949, Bulgaria's communist government had passed a Law on Religious Denominations, which gave the state complete control over all spiritual affairs in the country. In accordance with this law and Marxist belief that religion was “the opiate of the masses” (Marx 1843), the Bulgarian government closed down all religious educational establishments and confiscated Church and Islamic charitable trust properties (Neuburger 2004). International organizations for Muslims, Catholics and Jews were banned from opening missions or charity institutions in Bulgaria, and foreigners were forbidden to lead services in Bulgarian mosques, synagogues and churches. The 1949 law saw the creation of a Department of Religious Denominations, with the power to supervise and regulate almost all religious activity in Bulgaria, including censoring any religious literature or newspapers published in the country (Kanev

1998). This hostile climate to religion and religious organizations lasted until 1989.

After 1989, however, when international Islamic organizations and Muslim states became more active in forging ties with Muslim communities in the Balkans, Bulgaria quickly moved onto these organizations' radar, even though its Christian population was much larger than those found in Bosnia, Albania or Macedonia. During the economic transition that began in 1989, the Bulgarian Muslim leadership reached out for aid and assistance. As early as 1990, the Chief Mufti of Bulgarian Muslims, Nedim Gendzhev, made official trips to Jordan and Saudi Arabia where he met with the Secretary General of the MWL (Bulgarian Telegraph Agency 1990). Representatives from Saudi Arabia also came to Bulgaria to attend the National Muslim conference to elect a new Chief Mufti in September 1992 (Bulgarian Telegraph Agency 1992), and by 1993, Saudi aid had begun funding the construction and restoration of scores of mosques throughout Bulgaria through the Saudi/Dutch Islamic foundation Al-Waqf Al-Islami (Burr and Collins 2006).

These "Eastern Aid" organizations were part of a wave of civil society organizations that washed into Bulgaria after the collapse of the communist state. Under communism, there were no "nongovernmental" organizations, since all associations were controlled by the state. But after 1989, as Western Aid to Eastern Europe sought to dismantle the centralized political and economic power of the socialist state in favor of free markets, the creation of civil society was an important part of the agenda promoting democratic transition (Wedel 2001; World Bank 1996). This translated into generous financial support for the founding of NGOs to deal with social issues such as minority rights, women's rights, human rights, environmental rights, etc. (Creed and Wedel 1997; Cellarius and Straddon 2002; Snaveley and Desai 1994).

Concomitant with this proliferation of NGOs, most of the countries of Eastern Europe were targeted by religious missionaries, particularly from the United States. Part of the strategy for diluting the ideological power that communist ideals still held on the imagination of many Bulgarians (who democratically re-elected the communists back into power in the first post-1989 elections) included American support for the freedom of religion and the protection of foreign religious workers. Bulgaria's 1991 constitution enshrined the freedom of religion, and in the early 1990s the country was visited by Mormons, Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Salafis, Ahmadis, Sufis, Ba'hais, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Scientologists and evangelical Protestants of every kind (U.S. Department of State 1999, 2000, 2001; Zhelev 2006).

It was in this context that local orthodox Islamic charities established themselves in Bulgaria, benefiting from the constitutional protection intended primarily for western Christian and secular organizations. But the growth and dissemination of “Eastern Aid” in Bulgaria also became possible through the 1990s into the first decade of the 2000s thanks to legislative reforms (sponsored in large part by secular NGOs) regulating the activities of both secular and religious aid organizations.

By the late 1990s, communist-era laws that governed civil society organizations were considered unnecessarily strict for the new democratic era. After many drafts, the new Law for Not-For-Profit Activities was promulgated in 2000 (State Gazette 2000), dramatically changing the legal climate for NGOs in Bulgaria, and reducing the state’s ability to interfere with and oversee their activities. Prior to the new law, a wide variety of associations—from small chess clubs to large branch offices of international charities—were lumped into one legal category. The idea behind the law was to reduce administrative barriers for smaller groups and to formally recognize the diversity of postcommunist civil society organizations. The law eased the process of registering an NGO with local courts, and created four categories of organization with different requirements for each, and differing levels of state oversight. All NGOs were to be either “associations” (with a membership) or “foundations” (without a membership). These two categories were further divided into “public benefit organizations” and “mutual benefit organizations.” Public benefit organizations could receive governmental funds, and had to be registered in a database with the Ministry of Justice. They had annual reporting requirements, and had to demonstrate that they were indeed serving the public good. “Mutual Benefit Organizations,” (a category established so that western grant-giving foundations could operate in Bulgaria with minimal interference) had no reporting requirements and their activities were unregulated by the state. The new law, therefore, created a category of NGOs, the “mutual benefit foundation” (MBF), which could operate legally within Bulgaria with almost no government or constituent oversight whatsoever, both with regard to their activities and their sources of funding. In principle, NGO independence from the state was an improvement over the previous over-regulation, but the new atmosphere also created challenges as a wide variety of groups began registering as MBFs.

In particular, religious groups began registering as MBFs until a 2002 amendment to the Law on Non-Profit Activities (State Gazette 2002a) further stipulated that foundations and associations were not allowed to engage in activities that were considered to be “religious”

in nature. In practice, this meant that they were not allowed to officiate at weddings or funerals, lead prayers or operate houses of worship. “Faith-based” organizations that promoted education, cultural preservation or youth activities could register as nonprofit organizations. They were required only to have some formal affiliation with an established and registered religious denomination in Bulgaria. Despite these amendments, many FBOs registered as MBFs without explicitly stating their religious goals, and operated as ordinary NGOs. As MBFs, they were legally allowed to accept unlimited amounts of funding from “known sources” which included established international NGOs and charities. Thus, through this new stipulation, organizations in Bulgaria were able to tap into money from international Islamic charities, which started becoming much more significant forces in the country.

The government did, however, have some other checks on religious organizations. The new Law on Religious Denominations of 2002 (State Gazette 2002b) required that religions be officially registered with the Sofia City Court instead of the Council of Minister’s Directorate of Religious Denominations (established by the 1949 law). The Directorate [pejoratively called the “religious police” (Kanev 2006)] shifted into a purely advisory role, giving opinions, if asked by the court, on whether certain denominations should be allowed to register. Without official registration, religious groups could not operate houses of worship or conduct any religious activities in public. Furthermore, they were not allowed to bring in foreign religious workers. The new law maintained the state’s authority to regulate religious activity in the country, particularly in cases where religious groups were seen as a threat to “national security.” In a few cases, the state refused to register a religious group if it believed that the group was a dangerous or undesirable “sect” or “cult.” The Directorate of Denominations offered a negative opinion to the Sofia City Court of the Ahmadi Muslim religious group, and they were eventually refused registration. The Scientologists, assuming that they would have trouble with the Bulgarian government, did not even attempt to register as an official denomination. In both cases, the organizations registered as nonprofit organizations and unofficially promoted their theology while doing social work (Zhelev 2006).

In other cases the law forced the state to arbitrate on whether a denomination was legitimate and who its leaders should be. In theory, new denominations could not be registered if they shared the same belief system as already registered faiths, but multiple schisms within existing religious communities and the proliferation of “Baptist” (evangelical protestant) groups from the United States

meant that there were multiple registrations for similar denominations, particularly when the passage of the 2002 law forced all denominations to reregister with the courts. This put the Bulgarian state in the awkward position of having to determine which faction within a denomination was the legitimate one. In the case of the heterogeneous Bulgaria Muslim community,¹¹ which accounted for between 12–15% of the Bulgarian population in 2005, a major split among Muslim leaders resulted in three different Muslim denominations being registered despite the fact that they all claimed to be the legitimate representatives of Bulgarian Muslims.¹²

In addition to the three registered groups at the national level, there were also regional Muftis who did not agree with the Sofia leadership and sought to establish their own Muftiships to work independently from the Chief Mufti, the elected spiritual leader of all Bulgarian Muslims (Ahmed 2006). The problem with these multiple schisms and overlapping registrations was that whoever was chosen as Chief Mufti had access to the vast resources of the Chief Mufti's *vakif* (charitable trust) funds to pay for the activities of the Muslim denomination: the upkeep of the schools and mosques, the salaries of the Muftis and *Imams* (congregational leaders), stipends for religious students, costs for religious publications, etc. The skirmishes over the Muslim leadership were essentially for money, and there were multiple court cases of different factions trying to establish their legitimacy as the “true” leaders. Leadership bounced back and forth between rival groups from the early 1990s to 2006 (Yordanov 2004). Those groups that were shut out of access to the official resources of the *vakif* had to look elsewhere for funding, and large international orthodox Islamic charities stepped in to meet the financial needs of rival factions.

The schism in the Muslim community broke down along political lines, with the socialists supporting Nedim Gendzhev, the last Chief Mufti under communism, and the free market “democrats” supporting his adversaries. Having lost his post as Chief Mufti in 1992, Nedim Gendzhev organized a political party to run in the 1994 parliamentary elections. He campaigned on a religious platform, emphasizing spiritual connections with the “Arab Islamic” world in order to take Muslim votes away from the ethnic Turkish party led by his secular rival: Ahmed Dogan. Although Gendzhev did not receive enough votes to make it into parliament, orthodox Islamic charities set up through the new structures of civil society, such as “Irshad” and “Maulana Dzhalauddin Rumi,” were as involved in local Muslim politics as they were in building mosques. Gulf Arab Islamic representatives—from the MWL and the International Islamic Charitable Organization (a Kuwaiti organization with strong

links to many Saudi charities)¹³—were at the national Muslim conference in August 1996 when Gendzhev was once again elected to the post of Chief Mufti (Bulgarian Telegraph Agency 1996a). A few months later, he orchestrated an official state visit of Saudi dignitaries to the Socialist Bulgarian government. On October 16, the then deputy Prime Minister, Svetoslav Shivarov, received a delegation from the MWL in order to discuss Christian-Muslim relations and the “cultural and spiritual development of Bulgarian Muslims” (Bulgarian Telegraph Agency 1996b).

This sort of Islamic “revivalism” created by the end of communism and ensuing legislative changes remained a quiet though growing presence in Bulgaria until the immediate aftermath of the attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Until that point, the schisms in the Muslim community remained somewhat understated, but shortly after 9/11, former Chief Mufti Gendzhev began to accuse his rivals in the Chief Mufti’s office of being part of a “fortress of fundamentalism in Bulgaria” (*Maritza Dnes* 2001). Gendzhev was particularly attacking the WAMY, which had been operating in Bulgaria since the early 1990s. He claimed that WAMY was among a number of “radical” organizations registered in Bulgaria between 1995 and 1999, and that these organizations had sponsored “fundamentalist” seminars throughout southern Bulgaria between 1995 and 1998. Gendzhev claimed that these seminars were promoting a form of Islam foreign to Bulgaria with the intention of dividing the fragile postcommunist Muslim community. A 2005 letter published by a concerned Muslim woman (Gaigadzhovala 2005) in the Islamic magazine *Myusyulmani* echoed Gendzhev’s concern that the Muslim community was being unnecessarily divided by differences in their interpretation of Islam. She writes: “We are compartmentalized and it is enmity and intolerance that prevent our communication . . . those who have graduated in Saudi Arabia sit in one compartment; those who have graduated in Jordan sit in another compartment; those who have graduated in Turkey sit in a third compartment. None of the compartments will be open to people whose views are different from those of the men already in them. Each compartment has its philosophy and objectives, and as a result different Muslim organizations are created and each seeks to demonstrate excellence in rivalry with the others. . . The adversaries of Islam will be only too happy to watch us engulf each other, for this ‘cannibalism’ will spare them the effort that they will have to make to annihilate us!”

For all his accusations, however, Gendzhev also accepted funds from organizations linked to the Gulf Arab states. During the mid-1990s, Gendzhev accepted money from the Third World Relief

Agency [an organization that had illegally channeled money and weapons to the Bosnian army during the embargo, advocating Bosnia to become an Islamic state in Europe (Burr and Collins 2006)] in order to publish and distribute a beautifully bound bilingual (Bulgarian and Arabic) translation of the Koran. He was personally involved as a “manager” with the “International Charitable Islamic Organization ‘Hayatel Igasa’ of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” (registered in 2002) and with the Kuwaiti International Islamic Charitable Organization (registered in 2003).

Below these large-scale international organizations, there were new local foundations and associations engaged in supporting certain Muslim communities in a spiritual quest to discover a new form of their traditional religion. Along with other nonprofit activities such as fueling local economic development, youth initiatives, or cultural preservation, these FBOs advocated for more orthodox forms of Islamic practice, forms that challenged local Muslim traditions and advocated for explicit male authority over women. One organization, the Union for Islamic Development and Culture (UIDC), was particularly active in the Smolyan *oblast* (state) region in southern Bulgaria where the majority of Muslims are Pomaks (or Bulgarian-speaking Muslims) rather than ethnic Turks (who make up the majority of the Muslim community in Bulgaria). In 2005–2006, the Smolyan region saw the construction of new mosques and a growth in what Saba Mahmood (2005) has called “religious sociability”—a proliferation of Islamic publications and religious activities accompanied by the public performance of Islamic practices, especially with regard to the behavior and dress of women. The UIDC was largely responsible for this, and exemplified the challenges that FBOs can pose for secular women’s NGOs advocating for gender equality. Not only do these types of FBOs engage in the same types of activities as women’s NGOs, but they also mobilize liberal western “rights” discourses to further their own often socially conservative goals, a phenomenon which will be discussed further below.

Following the “True Path”

The UIDC was founded in 2004, its five key leaders all young Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) who were given scholarships by Islamic charities to study their religion abroad in the 1990s. The director, Arif Abdullah (born 1974), received his Master’s degree in Koranic interpretation after living and studying for ten years in Jordan. The deputy director, Selvi Shakirov (born 1976), and the head secretary of the organization, Ismet Rashidov (born 1977),

received their bachelor's degrees in "The Fundamentals of Religion" in the Faculty of Shari'a at the Zarqua Private University, as did the director and deputy director of the UIDC's women's section, Neda Abdullah (born 1974) and Fatme Hairradin-Rashidova (born 1980). Their university, the Zarqua Private University, was established in 1994 to promote "a strong belief in the unity and integration of our Arab Islamic *Ummah* [global religious community]". The faculty of Shari'a was its first faculty, and these young Bulgarians were among the first students to learn "the basics of true belief in order to defend the Islamic doctrine before false doctrines." (Zarqua Private University 2007)

When the young graduates returned to Bulgaria and founded their conservative faith-based organization, they initiated the process of reeducating the Pomaks in the Smolyan region. Networked into an international orthodox Muslim community, Abdullah and Shakirov attended international conferences in the U.K., Turkey, Jordan, and made regular visits to Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ Within just two years, the organization had its own office in the center of Smolyan where it published and distributed orthodox Islamic literature in Bulgarian.

The organization's well developed website (www.oirk.org) and bimonthly glossy color magazine, *Myusyulmansko Obshtestvo* (Muslim Society) regularly ran articles on the correct behavior for Muslims that challenged local Muslim customs. In this region of Bulgaria, the Muslims traditionally ate pork, drank homemade *rakiya* (brandy), and did not fast for Ramadan. Furthermore, they often erected head—and footstones to mark the graves of their deceased, and preferred to read the Koran in Bulgarian rather than Arabic. Most Bulgarian Muslims did not pray five times a day, and workingmen rarely attended Friday prayers. If there was extra money in the household budget after 1989, a trip to Greece or Germany almost always took precedent over a pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslim women no longer felt the need to cover themselves, had long since joined the formal workforce, and enjoyed autonomy from their fathers and husbands. Bulgarian Muslims also carried amulets and made pilgrimages to the graves of local Muslim "saints," such as the grave of Yenihan Baba in Smolyan. The Pomaks also held prayer sessions (*mevlid*) where informal preachers (*hodzhas*) were paid to read from the Koran for special occasions such as the birth of a new child or moving into a new house. The young men and women of the UIDC considered many of these local practices to be corruptions of the "true" Islam, and they aimed to rectify incorrect Bulgarian Islamic practices; "to show the *true essence* of the Islamic religion [my emphasis]" (UIDC 2007).

The UIDC had a separate women's section which organized lectures and "women's parties" promoting new Islamic dress codes and more conservative Islamic gender roles. The stated activities of the women's section of the UIDC were to "present the true face of the Muslim woman" by issuing literature that supported the intellectual development of women while at the same time preserving "the morality and identity of the Muslim woman" (UIDC 2007). Throughout 2005 and 2006, the women's section was active in organizing events on the role of women in Islam. In July 2006, it held a forum entitled: "The Islamic Family between the Influence of Society and the Principles of Islam," where the UIDC women argued that Bulgarian culture was often incompatible with true Islamic practices. Other lectures such as "The place of the woman—wife and mother—in Islam" held in the southern city of Smolyan, or the women's program at the UIDC national conference in November 2005 encouraged women to accept the authority of men and to wear the headscarf as a symbol of obedience to their husbands and to Allah.

These particular interpretations of the dictates of the Koran had begun to reshape local gender relations in the Smolyan region in 2005–2006. During communism, Pomak femininity could be expressed in the workplace, but by 2006, the rise of new orthodox Islamic discourses had started to create an ideal of femininity defined by the home and subordinate to men. Based on my own fieldwork in this region and analysis of Muslim publications, it was clear that some men and women, mostly of the younger generation, were beginning to believe that "true" Islam *requires* a "good" woman to stay home and obey her husband. One young woman from the village of Mitovska confided that it was very hard for her to be a "good" Muslim. As a secondary school graduate, she had many friends and enjoyed the company of both men and women. But after she married and had a child, she believed that it was her duty to stay at home and wear the *hijab*. Although she would have liked to go to university to become a schoolteacher, she felt she would be punished if she disobeyed the will of Allah.

Another young woman from the city of Rudozem told me that women are the moral leaders (*vodachi*) of their families. Their responsibility is to raise their children to be proper Muslims. She felt that formal employment was incompatible with her ability to be a good Muslim, as she would not be able to pray five times a day if she had a job. She also believed that it was a Muslims man's responsibility to look after his family. She was one of a group of young women in Rudozem that included two girls who had studied Islam in Saudi Arabia and who covered their faces with the *niqab* (a veil

that covers the entire face) so that only their eyes were visible in public. When I asked her why these women would dress in a way so foreign to Bulgaria, she replied simply, “To please Allah.”

In fact, in 2006 many young women wore their Islamic clothing in a nontraditional fashion for Bulgarian Muslim women. Older Pomak women typically wore a long colorful printed dress (*fustan*) with an apron (*mendil*) and a colorful headscarf (*kurpa*) tied loosely under the hair or beneath the chin, leaving some hair visible above the forehead (like the scarves worn by the stereotypical “*babushka*”). The younger women and some older women embracing the new interpretations of Islam tended to wear a monochrome gown, long over-dress (*manto* or *shamia*), or simply modest “regular clothing” with a single-colored, larger headscarf (*zabradka*) that completely covered the hair and neck. This new way of Muslim dressing was often called the “Arab style” (*arabski stil*) by women who preferred traditional Pomak clothing.

But Bulgarian women have not been passive victims of these changes. In many ways, they actively embraced them. When I asked why women wore the “Arab” style of *hijab*, there were a wide variety of explanations. The women themselves said it was because the full headscarf (*zabradka*) was mandatory for Muslim women, and that the *kurpa* did not fully cover the head and shoulders. Secular Pomaks or older women who wore their headscarves (*kurpa*) in the old style offered other reasons. The reason I heard most often was that the Arab-style women were paid by the imams to wear the full headscarf.¹⁵ It was rumored that some women received as much as \$100 a month for wearing the headscarf and attending religious lectures, a very large sum for this region. Another common reason given for the behavior of who the more secular Muslims called “fanatics” was that they were trying to attract *sheikove* (rich Arab men) as husbands, and indeed several younger women had left their country to marry men from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait. Local opinions were more sympathetic towards older married women, who were said to have accepted the new forms of Islam to deal with unemployed or alcoholic husbands.¹⁶ Similarly, if a man embraced orthodox Islam and stopped drinking, this was generally looked upon as a good thing for the wife, and the other women in the community accepted her decision to wear the headscarf despite their distaste for the foreign “new ways.”

A Muslim magazine published by the Islamic NGO *Ikra* also demonstrated changing gender roles under the influence of a more orthodox interpretation of Islam. In a December 2005 issue, an article (Hodzhova 2005, 21–2) entitled, “Code of Conduct for the Muslim Woman” written by a Pomak woman, gave some examples

of “women’s conduct that lead[s] to sin,” including “leaving the house without permission from the husband.” If a woman must work to support her family, the new form of Islam insists that she be fully covered, showing nothing but her face and hands. Another article (Ali 2006, 32), “The Veil: an Imperative,” lays out a strict Islamic dress code for Muslim women and claims that there will be divine punishment for those who do not obey: “The over-garment averts bad rumor and consequence in this world and will protect against the Fire in the World Beyond. It should be known that when the Almighty asks the question, ‘Why didn’t you cover your body in your earthly existence?’ it will be very difficult for a woman to give an answer.” These articles also disparaged and threatened punishments for those Muslims and non-Muslims who resisted these new interpretations. “We are eyewitnesses of the decadence of society and of the corruption of moral values... In order to protect the Muslim woman, Allah commanded that she should stay at home earnestly and with dignity and that she should not go out uncovered like the women in the pre-Islamic time of ignorance and that she should not expose her beauties... Hopefully you understand the situation that a woman would face if she shuts her eyes and plugs her ears before these words. Let both men and women know that there is a path to follow and those who go astray shall be punished accordingly” (Hodzhova 2005, 21–2).

Among the larger, more secular Muslim community the issue of whether or not Muslim women should wear the full headscarf segued into a debate about the status of women in Islam and instigated a national conversation in Bulgaria about the ability to respect religious freedom and gender egalitarianism at the same time. The UIDC was at the center of this debate and became the focus of national attention in the summer of 2006, when it lodged a complaint on behalf of two students who had not been allowed to wear their headscarves in addition to their school uniforms (Cholokova 2006; Otvuk 2006). Rather than allowing the girls to come forward with the complaint themselves, the UIDC challenged the Ministry of Education, claiming that headscarves were mandatory for all Muslim women and that the human rights of the two students had been violated (Marinov 2006). The Minister of Education replied that Bulgarian schools were secular and that religious “symbols” had no place in the classroom (Hadzhiev 2006a). The UIDC then filed a complaint with the national antidiscrimination commission (Petrova 2006; Politika 2006a) claiming that the right of religious freedom had been violated. At around the same time, Bulgaria’s nationalist party, Vestnik Ataka, seized upon the issue and whipped up media frenzy about “radical” Islam in Bulgaria

(Borisov 2006; Buchakova 2006; Hadzhiev 2006b; Tonchev 2006; Vestnik Ataka 2006).

One of the results of the UIDC's complaint to the antidiscrimination commission was that it forced the Chief Mufti to reply to a commission inquiry and publicly issue a statement that covering the head is mandatory for Muslim woman, which had never been made explicit by religious authorities in Bulgaria before the summer of 2006. Many of the moderate Muslim women I interviewed in Smolyan after the Mufti's announcement were angered by his statement, claiming that their Muslim identity had nothing to do with how they dressed, but only with what they believed.¹⁷ They agreed that organizations such as the UIDC were instrumental in the redefinition of local gender roles, leading to an ideal of family, radically different from the communist ideal, which included a working husband who supported a pious stay-at-home wife.¹⁸

Gender Equality versus Religious Freedoms

If certain international charities and FBOs like the UIDC have used the legal structures instituted by western-funded NGOs, they have also embraced the language of liberalism to realize their conservative agendas by pitting concerns over gender equality and the oppression of women against calls for religious freedom and individual liberties. A closer examination of the debates about the Islamic headscarf in Bulgaria in 2006 demonstrates some of the challenges faced by those interested in protecting women and safeguarding their right to "choose."

The following is an excerpt from the transcript of the June 17, 2006 hearings before the Bulgarian antidiscrimination commission (KZD) regarding the right of girls to wear headscarves in public schools. Selvi Shakirov is the Deputy Director of the UIDC representing the two students from Smolyan. Irina Muleshkova, a law professor and women's rights activist who worked for over fourteen years with women's NGOs in Bulgaria, is a member of the KZD and the Chairperson of the committee hearing the case.

Selvi Shakirov: ...The headscarf for the woman in Islam is not a religious symbol; it is a religious dogma. And when a girl, a woman is convinced of the essence of the Islamic religion, she makes the decision to put on such clothing with desire and conviction. And this right should not be denied to this individual whoever she is. This right should exist, and she should be allowed to have it, I am saying again, so that we don't hurt her dignity, feelings, convictions, religion, etc.

Irina Muleshkova: I would like to ask you: Is there special clothing for men, which is also worn by inner conviction?

Shakirov: No.

Muleshkova: There isn't. A second question: Are men and women equal?

Shakirov: Yes.

Muleshkova: In what sense?

Shakirov: That everyone is "equal in front of the law," as they say.

Muleshkova: Are they only equal in front of the law?

Shakirov: Yes.

Muleshkova: There is no equality in front of God? Is this how I should understand you?

Shakirov: Of course there is. But in Islam, the difference between man and woman—there is a physiological, there is also psychological difference, and Islam defines norms for both men and women. There is such a norm in clothing, which is subjected to the voluntary choice and conviction of the specific woman or girl—she herself can make a choice. When she is convinced. . . That is it. And I believe that right now we are not somewhere where we are judging the Islamic religion. These are things that are very deep and those who want to get to know this religion can do it. And I am saying again, the personal freedom of the individual to choose for himself, to decide what is good, and when he is convinced [of what is good], to be given this freedom.¹⁹

In this brief exchange, Shakirov both claims that wearing a headscarf is necessary for Islamic women and that they should have the right to choose to wear it once they have the "conviction" to live their lives in accordance with the precepts of the Koran. When questioned about whether or not men and women are equal in Islam, he becomes defensive and argues that the purpose of the commission is not to judge Islam, but to guarantee the individual rights of the girls in question, because religious freedoms are guaranteed under the Bulgarian constitution. Thus, if a "religious dogma" imposes a form of gender inequality, this inequality cannot be challenged because it is part of a theological doctrine freely chosen by individual women who have an inalienable right to decide whether or not they want to participate in a spiritually necessary inequality.

The focus on individual “rights” and “choice” in Shakirov’s arguments is very similar to language commonly employed by governments and activists that oppose headscarf bans. Guaranteeing women their “rights” to “choose” certainly sounds like feminist language, and it is a difficult position to refute. Shakirov’s mobilization of this “rights” discourse in the Bulgarian context demonstrates that he was well informed of the strategies used in similar cases by other pro-headscarf activists. For instance, in a 2004 speech at the European Social Forum entitled, “Hijab: A Women’s Right to Choose,” Salma Yaqoob (2004) emphasized the importance of free will and choice with regard to the French ban on headscarves, but then carefully condemned the Saudi and Iranian policies of making the *hijab* mandatory: “In both cases the woman herself is no longer free to make a choice. In both cases her dignity is violated.” The reification of choice implies that women are always independent and autonomous agents, and their decisions are a private matter not to be interfered with by the state. The motto of the British-based Assembly for the Protection of the Hijab (Pro-Hijab— www.prohijab.net) also focuses on individual liberty: “Hijab: Our Freedom. Our Choice. Our Right.” The website includes an informational leaflet called “Hijab: Know Your Rights” which quotes the relevant passages from the European Convention on Human Rights and instructs women that “It is important to know your rights in order to be able to uphold them.” American NGOs such as Human Rights Watch (a corporate sponsor of Pro-Hijab), also stated publicly that the French law banning the hijab in public schools (Bowen 2006; Scott 2007) violated “the rights to freedom of religion and expression,” further explaining that the law is based on the false premise that Muslim women cannot choose what is in their best interests (Human Rights Watch 2004). The local Bulgarian affiliate of Human Rights Watch, The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, also claimed that banning Muslim women from wearing the headscarf was a violation of their constitutional rights (Kanev 2006).

Interestingly, the U.S. government also mobilized the language of “rights” and “free will” with regard to the headscarf. The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, John V. Hanford III, stated in November 2006 that Washington supported religious freedoms and opposed the hijab bans in Turkey and France. Indeed, compared with the continental European states, Britain and the United States have been relatively lax in their regulation of Islamic clothing for women. In the United States, religious freedom became the “rights” discourse of choice after the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, which tasked the U.S. State Department with compiling yearly International Religious

Freedom Reports for 194 countries, a law that was specifically targeted at the “new democracies” of Eastern Europe (U.S. Senate 1998).

Alternatively, Irina Muleshkova—the Chairperson of the Bulgarian Anti-Discrimination Commission committee, a specialist in international law, and a strident advocate for women’s rights—was no doubt also well informed of the international precedents regarding the banning of headscarves. By asking Shakirov if Muslim men had special dress requirements and whether men and women were equal in Islam, Muleshkova was drawing attention away from the question of individual rights and toward the broader societal goal of “gender equality,” which various courts around Europe as well as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) had mobilized to uphold by the headscarf ban. In the case of *Sahin v. Turkey* (ECHR 2004) the ECHR in Strasbourg upheld the Turkish headscarf ban partially because “gender equality” was “recognised by the European Court as one of the key principles underlying the [European] Convention [on Human Rights] and a goal to be achieved by member States of the Council of Europe” (paragraph 107). The court also invoked the *Dahlab v. Switzerland* case (ECHR 2001) and asserted that the headscarf “appeared to be imposed on women by a precept in the Koran that was hard to reconcile with the principle of gender equality” (ECHR 2004). Similarly, the Constitutional Court of the German State of Bavaria would uphold a headscarf ban that had been challenged on the grounds that it allowed Jewish and Christian symbols in schools and was therefore discriminatory (Shulman 2007). The court argued that unlike other religious symbols, the headscarf was only worn by women and was therefore in conflict with the state’s commitment to gender equality as guaranteed in its constitution. In France, the headscarf ban was also justified in part because it promoted gender equality (Bowen 2006; Scott 2007).

Over the course of the last five years, religious freedoms and gender equality have increasingly found themselves on opposite sides of issues such as the headscarf ban, pitting conservative Islamic FBOs and human rights NGOs against women’s NGOs who both claim to be helping Muslim women. Americans and many Muslim groups in Europe champion a liberal democratic tradition of individual rights, whereas European states and some feminist organizations promote a more social democratic impulse to protect and legislate on gender equality. These opposing view points were even further complicated in Bulgaria, throwing into sharp relief the country’s still uncomfortable position between its communist past and its incomplete implementation of the full liberal democratic program.

For many Bulgarians, gender equality was heavily associated with communism. Dismantling the formal equality between men and women, and the command economic mechanisms that supported it was a necessary part of the political project of disassembling the communist state. The communists had made women's emancipation one of their core goals, and promoted these aims by implementing specific policies that would support women's dual roles as both workers and mothers. The 1947 Georgi Dimitrov constitution of the new People's Republic of Bulgaria had been exceptionally progressive:

Women are equal with men in all spheres of public, private, economic, social, cultural and political life... Equality of women is realized by guaranteeing equal right to work, equal pay, right of annual holidays, right of social security, old age pensions and [the] right to education... Women-mothers enjoy a special protection in terms of conditions of work. The state takes special care of mothers and children by [the] setting up of maternity hospitals, day care centers and dispensaries, women are guaranteed paid leaves from work both before and after giving birth, and free obstetrical and medical service...²⁰

Of course, at the same time that the communists were supporting women, they were clamping down on religion (Neuburger 2004).

When communism collapsed in 1989, Bulgaria was in need of a new constitution. The American government passed the Support for East European Democracies (SEED) Act that provided millions of dollars in support for the promotion of democratic transitions, including legislative assistance in drafting a new constitution (U.S. Senate 1999). One of the core goals of SEED was to promote the "effective recognition of fundamental liberties and individual freedoms, including freedom of speech, religion, and association." The 1991 constitution incorporated a very liberal stance on individual rights, especially regarding religious freedoms, a clear triumph for liberal democratic ideals (Atanassova 2006), and a foreshadowing of the influence that the American government later had on the legislation regarding nonprofit organizations in 1999 and 2000.

Gender equality, on the other hand, fared poorly in 1991, and all of the specific language guaranteeing equal pay and paid maternity leaves for women came out of the final draft because they contradicted the free market ideologies which sought to roll back the state and cut state spending on social programs. In general, the concrete provisions that supported gender equality were taken out of the constitution along with all of the other economic and social rights, replaced by the political freedoms that had been so fundamentally

lacking under communism: freedom of speech, freedom to travel, freedom of conscience, etc. These rights came to symbolize the new liberal democratic path of Bulgaria toward an enlightened modern political future. But these trade-offs did not sit comfortably with many Bulgarians, and the harsh economic conditions of the 1990s made some men and women more than a bit nostalgic for parts of the old communist state (Ghodsee 2004b). As economic transition progressed, and liberal democracy brought poverty, unemployment, high-level corruption and organized crime into the lives of most ordinary citizens, the liberal rights discourse lost much of its initial luster.

The debates unleashed by the headscarf affair of 2006 uncovered this political minefield, giving many Bulgarians a chance to rethink the choice between otherwise desirable policies and programs tainted by Bulgaria's communist past (such as gender equality) and the unfulfilled promise of liberal democracy they were so eager to embrace in the early 1990s. Indeed, the relatively restrictive 2002 Denominations Act and the antidiscrimination commission's decision to allow the ban on headscarves in schools may signal a retreat in the Bulgarian government's commitment to focusing on individual rights through a return to legislating for broader social concerns.

Although the Bulgarian antidiscrimination commission eventually ruled against the two girls, and the UIDC did not appeal, the larger debate over the freedom of religion raged through the summer, particularly after the nationalist party, Ataka, began demonstrating in front of the central Sofia mosque, organizing petitions against the call to prayer in cities around Bulgaria. Their openly anti-Muslim rhetoric disturbed many Bulgarians, but the pictures of young women in headscarves struck a sensitive nerve in a nation with a five-hundred-year history of Ottoman domination. Public opinion was firmly behind the decision to ban the headscarves. While this certainly reflected the latent Islamophobia lurking beneath Bulgarian society in 2006, it may also have represented a rejection of American influence in shaping the contours of Bulgarian democracy as the country prepared to become a member of the EU in January 2007. Throughout the 1990s, the Bulgarian government had been heavily influenced by the United States through its various "Democracy Network" programs overseen by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). By the early 2000s it became increasingly clear that Bulgaria would join the EU and USAID announced that it would be "graduating" the country by 2007 and closing its mission, slowing scaling back its direct foreign aid and expertise. The Bulgarian headscarf case in the summer of 2006 juxtaposed American concerns with religious rights with the

European emphasis on gender equality, and the ultimate decision of the Turkish-led Commission could be interpreted as the Bulgarians putting themselves squarely in the European camp on this issue.

The rise of orthodox Islamic FBOs and their agendas for women, as demonstrated by the headscarf case, has put women's NGOs in Bulgaria in a very difficult position. On the one hand, women's groups do not want to oppose the freedom of choice for individual women, nor do they want to undermine the notion that adult women can make rational decisions about how they wish to live their own lives. Women's organizations are also not inclined to oppose the progressive agendas of Human Rights organizations that protect minority and religious rights. On the other hand, the new interpretations of Islam coming into Bulgaria through certain Islamic charities and their local counterpart organizations promote a system of gender relations wherein women's sexuality must be controlled and women's freedoms are limited. Many women's activists view the headscarf as a symbol of these new gender ideals, and are wary that the headscarf is just the first step on a slippery slope that will lead to an ultimate erosion of women's rights. Exceptions to constitutional gender equality cannot be allowed or defenders of Shari'a family law, for instance, will be able to mobilize the discourse of religious or cultural freedom to justify unequal legal treatment of women in society. And the question of "choice" is a tricky one when choices are always constrained by the political and economic systems within which they are made.

For women's NGOs in Bulgaria, both positions have their drawbacks. If women's NGOs support the rights of Muslim women, they take an unpopular position in allying themselves both with the orthodox Islamic FBOs and, ironically, with the Anglo-American liberal "rights" model. If they support the government and its project to "protect" gender equality in Bulgaria, they may find themselves in bed with the nationalists and with the heavy-handed antireligious methods of the old communist state. These contradictions may explain why none of the major women's NGOs in Bulgaria weighed in directly on the headscarf affair during the summer of 2006, even though the Director of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee believed that the ban was upheld because of the women's rights activists on the commission.

As the number of conservative Islamic FBOs continues to grow in Bulgaria, there may be more challenges to postsocialist ideals of gender equality and more demands for religious freedom in the years to come. Progressive NGOs can be an important mediating influence on these future debates, but will have to choose their allies carefully and avoid being co-opted by groups on either side of the argument.

Most importantly, women's NGOs will have to find new and original ways to include Bulgarian women's diverse needs and perspectives into the national debates while still maintaining their commitment to some form of gender equality that can both combine feminist individualisms and an alternative ethics that supports collectivist social projects.

Finally, the Bulgarian struggle between "women's rights" and "religious rights" is just one example of a much broader international debate on what role a sovereign democratic state may "acceptably" play in regulating the growing proliferation of spiritual discourses and practices within its own territory. Do states have a role in demarcating what are "acceptable" religious practices and beliefs from those "unacceptable" practices and beliefs that may undermine societal values? Where may that line be drawn? There is no question that the rise of neoliberalism and the liberalization of markets that followed the collapse of communism in 1989 (Harvey 2005) has contributed to an erosion of both state power and the social welfare infrastructure that once supported women in their economic roles. Is the mounting pressure for "spiritual" liberalization truly about promoting democracy and freedom of conscience, or may it be just another installment of the neoliberal project to dismantle state authority, including its authority to legislate for gender equality?

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NOTES

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1. This form of Islam goes by a variety of different names. It has been called “objectified Islam” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996), “Wahhabi Islam” (Schwartz 2003), or “authenticated Islam” (Deeb 2006). For this paper, I employ the term “orthodox Islam” following the anthropologist Talal Asad (1986, 1993). He describes orthodox Islam as the “scripturalist, puritanical faith of the towns” (1986, 6), and that the proponents of orthodox Islam are attempting “. . . a (re)ordering of knowledge that governs the ‘correct’ form of Islamic practices. . . [a] process by which *long-established indigenous practices* (such as the veneration of saints’ tombs) were judged to be un-Islamic by the Wahhabi reformers of Arabia. . . and then forcibly eliminated (Asad 1993, 210—emphasis in the original). Thus, while orthodox Islam originates largely in Saudi Arabia and its modern day proponents tend to have close ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arabian states, it has spread quite widely and its influence can be found within Muslim communities around the world.

2. There are various organizations funded from Turkey, Iran, or Western Europe.

3. This article is part of a larger research project on Islamic Aid in Bulgaria, which was conducted between 2004–2007. Although I have lived in Bulgaria for over two years, specific research for this article is based on nine months of fieldwork, of which four months were spent living in the central Rhodopi region in 2005 and 2006. As well as ethnographic interviews, participant observation and archival research, I have collected and analyzed a wide variety of Islamic publications produced by and for Bulgarian Muslims: books, pamphlets, magazines, and websites. In addition to their content, these publications allowed me to pursue a project of “forensic accounting,” trying to trace the acknowledged sponsors of the materials in order to make more transparent the opaque network of Islamic foundations and associations operating throughout the country. I also examined articles published in the three regional newspapers between January 2001 and July 2006. Finally, I conducted formal interviews with members of parliament, government officials, representatives from relevant NGOs and leaders of the Muslim community in Sofia.

4. Here I also follow Asad (1986) in his definition of “traditional” Islam as being not a fixed and stagnant ritualistic practice of Islam that is historically unchanging, but rather one where “the past is the very ground

through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition's adherents are constituted" (Mahmood 2005, 115).

5. "Women and religion in Europe," Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 1464 (2005), Available online: <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/ERES1464.htm>. Access date: January 30, 2007.

6. The Jesuits, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are generally more aggressive in their proselytizing than mainline Protestants, for instance.

7. This particularly intensified after the election of George W Bush when religious beliefs came to have a direct bearing on aid policy. For instance, Bush signed the "Global Gag Rule," on his second day in office. This law denies foreign organizations receiving U.S. aid the right to use their own non-U.S. funds to provide legal abortion, counsel or refer for abortion, or lobby for the legalization of abortion in their country.

8. The term "NGO" was first used in 1945 in Article 71 of Chapter 10 on the establishment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations Organization Charter. Available online at: <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/chapt10.htm>. Access date: January 11, 2007.

9. P.B.U.H.

10. Here the Bosnian official is erroneously attributing the *burqua* (a specific form of Pashtun Afghan dress) to the Arab charities.

11. Bulgarian Muslims are ethnically Turkish, Slavic and Roma. The majority of Muslims are Hanafi Sunni and about 5% are heterodox Shia Muslims.

12. Bulgaria's Muslim community consists of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, as well as Turkish, Roma and Slavic Muslims.

13. "The IICO and charitable organizations," Available online at www.iico.org/home-page-eng/organizations-eng.htm. Access date: November 29, 2006.

14. The organization posts regular news of its activities and presence at international events on its website: www.oirk.org.

15. This rumor also appeared in the national press, see: Iren Delcheva, "Ex-mufti Converts Women into Islam: Arab Fundamentalists pay 200 leva to Muslim Women who wear Hijabs," Standart, 3 February 2007. Available online at: www.standartnews.com/en/article.php?d=2007-02-03&article=3448. Access date: August 1, 2007.

16. In Columbia, the anthropologist Elizabeth Brusco (1995) has argued that women convert to evangelical Protestantism as a way of reigning in the macho tendencies of their husbands: alcoholism, womanizing and domestic violence.

17. See Asad (1993) on the question of belief versus practice in the definition of religion.

18. This re-imagining of women's roles sets the Muslims apart from the mainstream majority of Bulgaria's Orthodox Christian population where women have stayed firmly in the labor market. Only the wives of the "new rich" and the Mafia were taken care of by their husbands/lovers in

the 1990s—for most educated or middle class women it remained the norm to have some sort of employment outside of the home.

19. English translation of transcripts of the hearing obtained by the author from the Commission for the Protection Against Discrimination through the Bulgarian “freedom of information” act.

20. Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, Official Gazette No. 284, 6 December 1947, English text from: Roumen Genov, “Women in Bulgarian Society: History and Recent Changes,” Available online at: http://www.stm.unipi.it/ClioH/tabs/libri/2/06-Genov_83-92.pdf, Access date: December 30, 2006.

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