It is August in Tehran. I’ve been walking up and down the same two blocks in the center of the city for an hour. I’ve asked the attendant at the door of the neighborhood mosque and the man who sells phone cards at the corner, but neither has ever heard of the Iranian Network of Women’s NGOs or its director, Shahla Habibi. I try a couple of doorbells on the unmarked buildings, but there is no response. Finally, after the time of my appointment with Habibi has come and gone, I decide to call from a pay phone. Habibi repeats the address I already have, but this time sends her assistant down to open a creaking metal door. I am ushered up three flights of steps. I arrive flustered and sweaty.

The heat, my tardiness, and the difficulty in locating this office have only contributed to a general level of nervousness with which I started the day. Habibi is a prominent post-Revolution figure in national politics. In 1995 President Rafsanjani appointed her as Iran’s first presidential advisor on women’s affairs, a position that would later become part of the official cabinet. She led the Iranian delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and now (2010) runs a nongovernmental organization in Tehran. These impressive credentials were in the back of my head when I dressed earlier in the morning. I decided, in an attempt to increase my status in her eyes, to wear my most conservative Islamic dress: a knee-length baggy black overcoat or manteau; long, loose pants; black socks with my sandals; and a black head scarf, tied under my chin. This was in strong contrast to more fitted manteaus and brightly colored headscarfs I usually wore to fulfill a woman’s legal duty to veil in public. I feel dowdy but respectful.

I am mindful that Habibi has agreed to this interview only because of my affiliation with the well-respected and well-funded Institute of Women’s
Studies and Research in Tehran. I begin carefully, treading lightly as I try to determine the limits of what Habibi is comfortable discussing with an American researcher. My questions start out vague and open-ended: What do you think are the most important women’s rights issues in Iran today? What are the challenges for women in the Islamic Republic? What do you hope for the future of women? I take my lead from her responses, which steer us toward a discussion about Ruhollah Khomeini’s legacy to women’s political participation in the Islamic Republic. Habibi is a large woman with a booming voice, and quickly becomes animated in our discussion of Khomeini, whom she calls my Imam, a title that means leader but also invokes the concept of the Imamate whom Shi’a understand to be the rightful leaders of the Muslim community. She shifts forward and back in her chair, explaining the many ways Khomeini changed her life. She confesses that she is also writing a book on Khomeini’s rhetoric: a collection of his writings and speeches to be published in Persian, Arabic, and English so that all women can have the benefit of his counsel. She has obviously been touched personally and professionally by Khomeini’s words and is pleased that I also recognize how important he is to women’s lives and women’s morality in Iran.

Into her mini-lectures about Khomeini’s life and teaching, Habibi not only weaves her own beliefs about women’s primary duties as mothers and wives, but also snipes about how Western women can be too professionally ambitious and neglectful of their families. She asks whether I am married, and on learning that I am not seems reassured that I have not abandoned my duties at home to conduct research in Iran.

We shift to discussing her participation in the United Nations (UN) Beijing conference in 1995. At one point she argues for support of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in shari’a law and the possibility of a female president being elected in Iran before one is in the United States. When I admit that this is possible, she is pleased and breaks into a quiet, deep chuckle. At this point in our conversation I am completely at ease. Habibi and I can joke about the state of feminist politics in the world today. Feminist politics in Iran is not so different from what it is at home.

In my next question I refer to Habibi as an Islamic feminist. In response, she slams her hands down on her desk, cuts me off mid-sentence, and says, “I am not a feminist. Do not call me a feminist. I do not believe in your feminism.”2 I stammer and apologize, knowing that despite my familiarity with Khomeini’s writings and my effort to wear “good hijab,” I have at best distanced myself from Habibi and at worst offended her. Our interview stalls. For the next half hour she returns to the feminist label again and again, defining herself against it, bringing up Western women such as Simone de
Beauvoir and Madeline Albright, who, in Habibi’s opinion, misunderstand women’s proper roles and the significance of religious women’s actions.

Later I cannot get Habibi’s assertion that she does not believe in my feminism out of my head. I am extremely embarrassed that I offended her on a personal level. But I am also uncomfortable because her rejecting my label was questioning my right to interpret her argument and actions. In her words I heard echoed my own doubts about my scholarship, especially my ability to work cross-culturally.

Accusing me of wrongly attributing “my feminism” to her, Habibi signaled that she was aware, even if I was not yet, that I had in mind a specific conception of what freedom was for women, and was hearing only that type of freedom in her arguments. She was quite right to realize that I was more interested in her arguments about shari’a support for CEDAW, which is essentially a UN treaty that couches women’s freedom in legal equality, than I was in those about a woman’s duty to her family. The more I thought about our interaction, the more I realized that my assumptions about what women are or what they want limited my ability to see what they actually do. This meant that, in essence, I was learning from Habibi only what I already knew. I had slid into a sort of academic ventriloquism, “throwing my voice” to the women I studied, becoming the subject of my own scholarship.

But I was not the only one engaged in a form of interpretation based on prior conceptions of women. Habibi was hearing me through an interpretative framework as well. For example, her rant about feminism was not just about separating herself from Western feminist assumptions about women. Her critique of what she called my feminist ideology was based on her understanding of what she considered women’s natural roles to be. She too was neglecting the cross-cultural diversity of what women want and thus what their political actions might actually do. We were engaged in a mutual act of ventriloquism, mishearing, misreading, and ultimately misunderstanding each other.

What I said to Habibi, her reaction to it, and my subsequent reaction to her reaction led to the central question of this book: How can a scholar understand religious women’s political arguments without her own feminist commitments interfering? This question is based on two challenges Habibi indirectly raises for my project. The first is the need to question categories I am given by my own secular, liberal framework. Secularism is by no means neutral in its approach toward religion. Even in forms tolerant of religiosity in the political sphere, it assumes that certain actions are more legitimate than others, such as those that promote equality and empowerment.3

For example, this project began as a cross-cultural study of gender equality or women’s empowerment. Using this approach, I had planned to
focus on feminist resources in the teachings of Pope John Paul II and Ayatollah Khomeini. This is the sort of project most colleagues still assume I am doing given my case study: a boxing match, if you like, between two villains of women’s empowerment, a match to be scored and judged by the tenets of liberal feminism. But as my conversation with Habibi suggests, women do not necessarily agree on what counts as equality or as empowerment. This means that a conceptual ignorance, perhaps even arrogance, characterized my initial approach. After my encounter with Habibi, however, my feminist faux pas became a litmus test for my engagement with women and their writings. I often stop to ask myself whether I am throwing my voice again or being careful to question my own categories.

The second challenge is how to understand the diversity among women’s arguments. This diversity exists among traditions, within a single community, and even at times within the feminist politics of individual women, which can vary contextually and biographically. Differences between traditions are expected, given variations in theology, local political conditions, and historical women’s movements. But can something be learned from these differences? Does such a thing as cross-cultural feminist politics exist? If it does, how can it be studied in comparison without privileging one community’s action over another’s?

A further difficulty is how to make sense of diversity among women in the same local context. For example, when some of the other women I interviewed in Iran learned that I was interviewing Habibi, they were surprised: “She is very conservative, do you know that?” “She does not agree with us on many issues.” “She will be very suspicious of you.” “You will get only regime propaganda from Mrs. Habibi.” This raises the question of who gets to represent “proper feminist politics” within one community and for the scholar complicates her selection criteria for subjects of study. Certainly Habibi herself would be critical of women’s political actions in Iran that did not share her understanding of women’s essential qualities.

Finally, given that several discourses of gender exist within the same culture, and several discourses about the moral life circulate within a religious community, any given individual woman is exposed to multiple visions of womanhood. Even when she intends to subscribe to a particular discourse, as some of the women studied in the volume do, this discourse is often not the only influence on her. This understanding of overlapping, complex systems of ethical knowledge may be helpful for a thick description of moral agency, but it greatly complicates how to isolate specific contributions of women to a community’s ethical understanding.

These challenges are not unrelated. Both derive from a concern with discursive contexts, whether my own (secular liberal feminism) or the
discursive context of the women I study. I address both challenges in this book by attempting to engage feminist politics at the ground level, which involves defining what counts as feminist politics in this study as well as selecting a case study that can isolate aspects of women’s political engagement in order to analyze how it has productive power within a religious tradition.

ENGAGING FEMINIST POLITICS

If Shahla Habibi frames the conceptual approach in my research, Frances Kissling, who is discussed in chapter 5, is the first creative conformer I was exposed to and the original inspiration for this project. I worked for Kissling from 1998 to 1999, when she was president of Catholics for a Free Choice. To take this job I left my work with more secular liberal human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, International Women’s Judges Foundation) and entered the world of faith-based activism. The discursive shift to Kissling’s world was jarring. I observed her at meetings with congressional representatives, leaders of women’s rights organizations, and diplomats at UN events. It quickly became clear that her message was moral and feminist in ways different than those to which I was accustomed. Her arguments about safe motherhood were based on different assumptions, sources, and logic than those of Kate Michelman of NARAL or Patricia Ireland of NOW. It is not only women’s autonomy or choice that are at stake for Kissling, but women’s physical, mental, and spiritual health. Kissling bristles at environmentalists’ arguments that spin contraception and abortion in terms of population control. Her discourse is ethical and theological.

Kissling made me appreciate the diversity of feminist politics, particularly those within religious communities. At the same time, I found that her politics pushed me to reexamine my own, and her discourse seemed to have had a similar effect on some international women’s human rights activists. This led me to wonder what else might be learned from arguments by religious women about womanhood. Were there other ways religious discourse could fill out or deepen gender-based politics? If taken seriously, would it change what counted as political and as women? These questions inspired, or at least gave rise to, this project.

It is important to acknowledge that labeling any project focused on religious communities feminist is problematic for at least two reasons. There are historical-political reasons to be concerned with a feminist approach to understanding religious women. It is a well-known narrative in gender and postcolonial studies that feminism was co-opted by those in the West
who used the excuse of “protecting brown women from their brown men” to implement a wide range of agendas that had little to do with improving women’s lives. But while those of us in the progressive left are quick to critique the deployment of feminism against “the Other,” we often neglect how feminism has mistreated religious minorities in Western settings. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, has pointed out the vilification of the Catholic working class by feminists in the United States around the issue of temperance. One doesn’t have to look far in current media coverage to find assertions that link Islam to women’s oppression.

The anecdote that begins this preface makes very clear that feminism is also a problematic term for some of the women I study, and yet in this project I have decided to continue to use the term feminist politics to describe the types of discursive practices studied. In part this is because to reject the term feminist outright is to privilege the more problematic definitions of feminism that neglect cultural and economic differences between women and the scholarly work done on its behalf. Judith Butler’s work is immensely helpful on this point. She writes, “one might continue at the same time to interrogate and to use the terms of universality.” With regards specifically to feminism she argues, “to question a term, a term like feminism, is to ask how it plays, what investments it bears, what aims it achieves, what alterations it undergoes.” However, and most important, acknowledging “the changeable life of that term does not preclude its use.”

On another level, retaining feminist is an acknowledgment that the women I interview base their form of political action on a conception of woman, no matter how diverse or problematic they understand this concept to be. Even if scholars are trained to deconstruct and problematize such conceptual frameworks, feminisms have motivating power in the real world. In other words, the concept of woman remains relevant to the production of ethical knowledge within religious communities not only because of the gendered anthropologies of male clerics, but also because of the moral praxis of religious women.

What do I mean by feminist if not the imperialistic feminism of which Habibi was so suspicious? I understand feminism to include any system of thought that challenges stereotypes that misrepresent women’s experiences. But this definition intentionally leaves undefined stereotypes because misrepresentation depends on one’s perspective. I retain the feminist label for this project but keep in mind that alternative definitions of feminism do exist and that feminism is as much an historically varied and philosophically contested tradition as Roman Catholicism in the United States or Shi‘i Islam in Iran. There are liberal feminists, naturalist feminists, care feminists, social-constructionist feminists, radical feminists, and so on.
This diversity is part of my motivation for exploring religious women’s brands of “feminism” as a possible way to expand, rather than narrow, our understanding of productive feminist actions. I hope the way I claim feminism leaves me and the reader open to learn from women within settings different from our own.

A further distinction between feminist description, feminist analysis, and feminist politics is possible, and will help clarify what I mean by feminist politics. Feminist description seeks to provide details of the experience of living female-gendered lives. This can be pursued through social scientific studies or ethnography that consciously attempts to convey women’s experiences in their own words. The question feminist description addresses is this: what is going on in particular women’s lives?

Feminist analysis goes a step further, attempting to explain why women are like they are. More than just description, analysis searches for reasons between the actions and beliefs of women, as well as for external factors that create and influence these actions. This second line of inquiry is important because it counters a tendency in ethnographic work to accept at face value the self-understanding of women. For example, feminist analysis can look at the conscious reasons articulated for an action, but it can also uncover an agent’s contradictory logics or consider sociological motivations for a specific action, thereby explaining “a craftiness that does not know itself.”

This type of feminist analysis does not, however, necessarily imply that individuals are incapable of self-reflection (false consciousness theory) but rather assumes that certain dimensions of politics cannot be explained by an agent’s intentions alone.

Feminist politics is the most proscriptive or normative of the group. I define feminist politics as a form of action that attempts to reshape the conditions of women’s individual or collective existence. It often begins with assumptions about women’s constrained freedom under particular conditions and a desire to eradicate these conditions. In other words, feminist politics begins with some normative claim (e.g., women are equal to men) and a normative agenda of insurgency (e.g., women must be treated as equal to men). In contrast, although both feminist description and feminist analysis begin with the assumption that by looking at women we can learn something that is neglected in gender-neutral analysis (or that women and men are different, if not ontologically, at least in how they are treated or understood in a variety of arenas), they do not necessarily imply any normative agenda.

A problem in cross-cultural work on women is a tendency to slide from description (is) to prescription (ought), without attention to explanation (why). In the case of Habibi, I moved from description (she supports CEDAW) to
prescription (she ought to be engaged in subversive political action based on a secular liberal model) too quickly. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that “it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know,” this book is an explicit attempt to begin with and make central feminist analysis in order to explain the “more meaning” that women themselves might not know.

Feminist politics still occupies a central role in this project, but the feminist politics I try to highlight are of the women I study, not my own. In other words, what counts as a political claim and political agenda is determined by the practices of the women I investigate. This is not to say that I am disinterested. My role as a scholar is still feminist insofar as I have chosen to describe and explain the feminist politics in two communities. I study these women because I am personally committed to women’s freedom, even if I am aware that what constitutes freedom may be different among different women. If this book has a political agenda, it is that this diversity is productive for feminist thinking and action. But I also study Catholic and Shi’i women because I believe that they are doing something innovative within their communities that is important to even a secular understanding of women’s flourishing. For this project then, feminist politics is the way I characterize the actions of Catholic and Shi’i women: I attempt to isolate their engagement with tradition on the specific issue of women’s proper action, and how their engagements contribute to the tradition’s gendered moral vision.

Finally, continuing to label my project as feminist to some extent foregrounds the tensions within feminism—between divergent philosophical articulations of feminism and political, analytical, and descriptive feminisms. I cannot get beyond the contributions and challenges that feminism’s legacy brings to this project. But if I keep this tension at the surface, it might prove productive. In some cases, disclosing my understanding of and commitment to a type of feminism provides an opportunity for a deeper conversation. In the case of Habibi, once it became clear that I was a feminist and she was not (according to her definition of a feminist), we were able to move past these labels to her argument of the coherence of equitable rights and distinct duties for men and women under shari’a.

**SELECTION OF THE CASE STUDY**

This book uses a transnational (United States and Iran), intertradition (Catholic and Shi‘i) comparison between the feminist politics of different religious women. Using texts and some ethnography, the arguments of eleven women are analyzed against the pronouncements of Ayatollah Khomeini and Pope John Paul II, who each provide a local religious context. The goal
is to isolate what sorts of traditional logics of womanhood the women draw on and which others they reform. The focus is not on specific issues of feminist politics (reproductive rights, leadership roles, status in the family) but rather on the rhetorical tactics. This means that selection of examples discussed in each chapter is based primarily on similarity at the tactical level and only secondarily on similarity at the thematic level. In the end, this book is not only about how women engage with various structures of authority in a process that creates wisdom and allows them to live moral lives, but also about how women contribute to the logics of the religious tradition beyond specific women’s issues.

To orient the reader, it is helpful to provide initial justification for a number of dimensions of this case study, which although treated separately here, evolved together: mainly the selection of the two traditions, two clerics and eleven women, and the rationale for a comparative case study in the first place.

**Catholicism and Shi‘i Islam**

Catholicism and Shi‘i Islam are two traditions that have antiliberal, and anti-women reputations. This is especially so at the level of clerical pronouncements, where papal encyclicals and ayatollah fatwas are assumed to limit the freedom of Catholic and Shi‘i women, respectively. My case study is selected in part to demonstrate how these liberal secular assumptions about these traditions are only partly correct and importantly misleading. I find that the practices of Catholic and Shi‘i women are not only determined by but also contribute to the ethical and political landscape in their respective religious communities. This means that I am challenging the orthodoxies of liberal feminist politics (a sort of fundamentalist feminism, if you will) in order to ultimately strengthen feminism as a scholarly endeavor. If these two religious communities have something constructive to add to feminist politics, which I believe they do, further study of religion, rhetoric, and authority in gender studies can contribute to feminist thought in general.

**A Clerical Context**

Returning to my anecdote, my interaction with Habibi made it clear that to determine the ethical impact of what she was saying, I had to juxtapose it against a specific context. At times she engaged UN treaties, at other times *tafsir*, at still others nationalist ideology. And her words could be understood to be productive in different ways from these different implied discursive contexts. During that initial interview, I was particularly keyed to her argument about CEDAW because I was considering her arguments from an international women’s human rights framework. Choosing this framework,
however, contributed to my neglect of some of her ethical arguments because although it is fundamental to liberal feminist politics, it is not the only framework that Habibi works within. I realized that to understand how women’s arguments engage their local religious traditions, I had to find a discursive context that would allow me to see women’s political actions as religious discursive practices. I had to find a new place to stand in order to see more than myself in the mirror.

It was during an initial set of interviews with prominent lay leaders in both communities that I found that many shared a common context: clerical rhetoric. That is, when pressed, they each acknowledge they respond to the ethical teachings of a particular religious leader: John Paul II or Ayatollah Khomeini. There is a wide range of opinions among the women studied about whether clerical rhetoric is good or bad, but general agreement that, given its authority in the community, this rhetoric warrants engagement. By focusing on this engagement, either direct or indirect, I work to understand how women place themselves within a religious tradition and at what point they work to reaffirm, critique, or innovate the teachings of their respective religious leaders. The place I stand is within the logic of clerical teaching on women, to better understand what women’s discursive practices do with this logic.

This book challenges the facile assumptions that the authoritarian structures of the papacy and the Iranian theocracy are uniformly and necessarily bad for women. I am interested in a different sort of inquiry: If these clerical leaders are in fact patriarchal, how exactly do they construct their visions of women? What are their gendered moral anthropologies? How do they attempt to convince women that their vision of women’s proper roles is the correct one? In other words, my focus on rhetoric is meant to provide a more nuanced way to understand these leaders’ authority.

A causal relationship between the clerical discourse and feminist politics of women is not posited. Rather the clerical discourse represents one source of authority within the community and this study uncovers the almost shocking fact that even when attempting to control women within religious structures, clerical authority provides the tools for a wide variety of feminist politics. Nor do I intend to overstate the influence of clerical authority in these communities. In fact, the ultimate focus of this book is on how women are producers of moral knowledge. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church and Shi’i Islam in Iran are two contexts in which the authority of clerics plays a crucial role in gender politics, so this book uses clerical rhetoric to provide a context for analysis.

Some readers will object to the coupling of Pope John Paul II and Ayatollah Khomeini in this study. This concern is addressed in the introduction through an argument about their shared forms of charismatic authority, but
a few words about the reasons for the selection of these specific thinkers are appropriate here. As mentioned previously, interviews of American Catholic and Iranian Shi‘i women made it clear that John Paul II and Khomeini were each an important source of local understandings about morality for women. Both thinkers were religious leaders who became immensely influential in their respective community’s understanding of proper practice, particularly on the issue of women’s proper roles. There is also some parity in their background and thought. Both studied and lectured on philosophy and mysticism early in their careers, wrote passionately about the importance of ethical living, and were concerned with the challenges raised by the social, political, and economic context of the twentieth century. Finally, both were centrally concerned with the political actions of women. More than any other cleric within their respective communities in the last quarter of the twentieth century, John Paul and Khomeini wrote about and spoke to women. Through their arguments about women’s moral and political lives, they made womanhood a legitimate topic of religious discourse and increased women’s opportunities to contribute to an ongoing conversation about the ideal conditions of women’s collective existence.

The Creative Conformers

The primary data for this book is the moral discourse of eleven women. I spent the summer and fall of 2004 meeting with a number of potential “creative conformers” in the United States and Iran. Even though I could not include all the women I spoke with, these conversations determined the ultimate selection my creative conformers and the themes of conformity I focus on (the subjects of the five chapters). It was challenging to limit myself, particularly given the wide range of political activities of Catholic women in the United States and Shi‘i women in Iran, and subsequent arguments that support these activities. To make the selection, I came up with three criteria based on my ethnographic work.

First, all the creative conformers are recognizable public intellectuals in their local communities. Anyone who has studied Catholic feminism in the United States will already be familiar with the women discussed in this book: Lisa Cahill, Diana Hayes, Helen Hitchcock, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Frances Kissling. The same can be said of my selection of Shi‘i women in Iran: Mahboubeh Abbas-Gholizadeh, Leila Arshad, Monir Gurji, Elaheh Koulaei, Masoumeh Ebtekar, and Shahla Sherkat. Public intellectuals were studied on one hand because their discursive practices have particular productive power given their visibility. But a more important reason exists: Given the present pressures faced by those politically active in Iran, I did not want to argue that a particular woman’s discourse was meant to be
public and political unless her position already made this dimension of her argumentation clear. The eleven women have held a variety of positions, including nun, member of parliament, missionary, candidate for president, academic, theologian, Qur’anic interpreter, leader of a church group, journalist, and director of a civil society organization. They write for scholarly journals, mainstream religious publications, and publish their own journals and newsletters. They are by no means representative of all Catholic women in the United States or Shi’i women in Iran because they all would be considered elite. But they each have been enormously influential on contemporary Catholic and Shi’i feminist politics.

Second, I selected women who I believe engage John Paul’s and Khomeini’s moral guidance through a wide range of tactics rather than only thematically. My initial attempts to line up the women on core issues of religious leadership, reproductive rights, and public dress was problematic; Iranian Shi’i and American Catholic women are simply not concerned with the same set of issues, and to force a comparison on the issue of abortion, for instance, was to misrepresent the range of feminist tactics in Iran. In addition, tactical similarities emerged through comparison of radically different conceptual debates. A Catholic argument over women’s ordination involved logics and tactics similar to a Shi‘i debate over religious dress; discourse about natural family planning in the United States becomes an interesting counterpoint to debates about a woman’s right to custody of her children after divorce in Iran. In addition to ideological diversity among the women studied, and more important, there is both tactical variety and overlap.

Third, it was not my intent to identify the strongest articulations of dissent, but rather responses that construct new and intriguing rhetorical spaces through their architectonics, content, and logic. In each section I mention relevant direct refutations, but my focus is on arguments that work indirectly. For example, although Frances Kissling is best known for her articulation of a pro-choice Catholic position, I have selected a lesser-known speech in which she considers the value of fetal life. An indirect response may be more difficult to identify in a woman’s rhetorical performance, perhaps even impossible to see, without the groundwork of deconstructing the clerical rhetoric. Ultimately, however, I argue indirect responses do more to redefining religious feminist politics than a direct rebuttal based on secular-liberal assumptions.

Fourth, I determined that I needed a text to work from. This decision was due in part to the limits of my fieldwork: Given the diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States, or lack of them, I was not able to conduct a second stint of fieldwork in Iran. This meant that I had to rely more heavily on textual sources collected in the field than I ini-
tially anticipated. But a conceptual need for a text also emerged during my interviews of the Iranian women: it became clear I was sometimes being told what the women thought I wanted to hear. This is the flipside of the academic ventriloquism. I was not the only one throwing my voice. During interviews the women themselves sometimes fell into a pattern of channeling my voice. In an interview I had no way of knowing when an argument was being constructed for my benefit, as a Western feminist scholar. A similar problem emerged when I interviewed Catholic women: Some of them made assumptions about my project, given my institutional training or the juxtaposition of John Paul and Khomeini in the same book, and were suspicious, defensive, or overly enthusiastic. Referring to a text, I can more easily isolate arguments directed explicitly to the community of believers. For example, Iranian women, not American researchers, are the primary audience for a text written in Persian and published in Iran. The types of texts I select—editorials, interviews, published speeches, and academic essays—also attempt to isolate discursive arguments aimed at a particular local audience of adherents.

**WHY COMPARE?**

This book puts comparison at the center of its analysis. Each chapter works among and between two traditions, clerics and laity, and different women’s visions of the moral life. Comparison places the features of each religious tradition’s gender teachings in relief and thus de-centers the unconscious and unspoken norms of prominent feminist models. Working within the religious understanding of gender in two traditions prevents us from passing moral judgment over one or the other. The ability to remain open to multiple perspectives is especially important given recent geopolitical events when the United States seems poised for war with Iran. Considering the Shi‘i perspective alongside one that is more prominent in U.S. politics will help counter impressions of Iran as backward, irrational, or evil.

In many ways, working comparatively (among traditions and nations) makes both my and the reader’s job more difficult. This book asks you to keep in mind two traditions, two clerics, and a number of diverse feminist politics. Technical definitions from each tradition are explained, historical contexts for rhetorical events provided, all of which might mean losing the goal of describing feminist politics in the details. However, we are simply unable to describe or explain feminist tactics in the way that allows for cross-cultural diversity without this complexity. For this particular project, comparison opens up the possibility for Western readers to both understand Islamic women and rethink Western feminism more than a study focused
solely on Iran would. As Michel de Certeau writes, “Other laws restore to us what our own culture has seen fit to exclude from its own discourse.”

NOTES

1. This post was later held by Zahra Shojaei under President Khatami, and by Nasrin Soltankhah during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s administration.


3. Saba Mahmood provides an excellent discussion of the how secularism lends itself to a specific form of hermeneutics, important particularly in U.S. foreign policy, which is no less literal or inflexible than traditional religious forms of hermeneutics. “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire,” 323–47.

4. Talal Asad has helpfully pointed out that empowerment was originally a legal term (meaning giving power to someone, or having the power to act), which has come to be understood by some liberal theorists as “a metaphysical quality defining human subjectivity, its objective as well as precondition.” “Agency and Pain,” 35.

5. For a discussion of how these overlapping discourses of gender function in the Iranian context, see Torab, “Piety as Gendered Agency,” 236–39. See also her most recent monograph, Performing Islam, 242–49.


7. “When feminism became linked with temperance at the turn of the century, the anti-Catholic bias sometimes became explicit, vilifying the growing Catholic working-class political leadership cities, such as Boston and Chicago, as the epitome of ‘rum, Romanism, and rebellion.’” Ruether, “The War on Women,” 3.


9. Ibid., 178–79.

10. This definition is informed by Marilyn Strathern’s discussion of feminist anthropology in “An Awkward Relationship,” 287.

11. For other discussions of the analytical and political dimensions of feminist scholarship see Mahmood, Politics of Piety; Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent;” Butler, Gender Trouble; Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes”; Strathern, “An Awkward Relationship.”

12. For an example of feminist descriptive work in the American Catholic context, see Isasi-Díaz, En la Lucha, 86–140. For an example of feminist description of Iranian women, see Esfandiari, Reconstructed Lives.


14. My thanks to Aaron Stalnaker for pushing me to clarify this point.


16. Azam Torab has written eloquently on this subject and proposes a theory of multiple selves that are constituted through the web of multiple discourses that individuals find themselves within. Performing Islam, 242–49.
17. My definition depends largely on Charles Hirschkind’s recent reworking of Hannah Arendt’s definition of politics in *The Ethical Soundscape*, 8.

18. For an expanded discussion on feminist analysis versus politics, see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10; Hirschkind and Mahmood, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” 339–54.


20. A possible exception is Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari, from whom Khomeini draws many of his understandings of the moral life. But, unlike Khomeini, Mutahhari did not speak directly to large groups of women in Iran.

21. The one exception to focus on a text is Arshad’s rhetoric on custody discussed in chapter two. In this case I draw from our interview. The argument Arshad gave me verbally is similar to the one I heard from a number of women active in that reform campaign, including Shirin Ebadi and Elaheh Koulaei. However, I was unable to locate an article from my source publications, *Farzānah* and *Zanān*, devoted to the justification for the custody reform.