PART ONE

PIETIES AND POLITICS
In the last two decades one key question that has occupied many feminist theorists is how issues of historical and cultural specificity should inform both the analytics and politics of any feminist project. While this questioning has resulted in serious attempts at integrating issues of sexual, racial, class, and national difference within feminist theory, questions of religious difference have remained relatively unexplored. The vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions is perhaps most manifest in discussions of Islam. This is partly because of the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come to be called ‘the West,’ and partly because of the challenges contemporary Islamic movements pose to the secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part. The suspicion with which many feminists tended to view Islamist movements only intensified in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, especially the immense groundswell of anti-Islamic sentiment that has followed since. If supporters of the Islamist movement were disliked before for their social conservatism and their rejection of liberal values (key among them ‘women’s freedom’), their association with terrorism—now almost taken for granted—has served to further reaffirm their status as agents of a dangerous irrationality.

In this essay, I will probe some of the conceptual challenges that women’s participation in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theorists and gender analysts through an ethnographic account of an urban women’s mosque movement that is part of the Islamic Revival

---

1 I would like to thank Princeton University Press for allowing me to reprint this excerpt from my book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2005.

2 This dilemma seems to be further compounded by the fact that women’s participation in the Islamic movement in a number of countries (such as Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia) is not limited to the poor and middle classes (which are often considered to have a ‘natural affinity’ for religion), but also from the upper and middle income strata.