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Muslim Group Is Urging Women to Lead Prayers

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

As they do every Friday, Muslims will answer the call to prayer at mosques around the city today. But in a bold move, some plan to break with convention and attend a service led by a woman at a conference hall on the Upper West Side — an act that has stirred a modest, but fierce, debate about the role of women in Islam.

The event is the work of a small but growing group of activists, journalists and scholars who consider themselves among the pioneers of a "progressive Muslim" movement in the United States. They hope to encourage discussion about the centuries-old tradition that separates men from women during congregational prayer and reserves the role of prayer leader, or imam, for men.

Critics of the event, which will be led by an Islamic studies professor at Synod House of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, say it does not reflect the popular, more devout views of American Muslims. They worry that the controversy will cast aspersions on a religion that is already poorly received by segments of the American public.

The plan, however it plays out, has already provoked disapproval from clerics abroad and intense debate in Internet chat rooms. In addition, a bomb threat forced the organizers to change the site of the service, said Sundaram Tagore, the owner of a SoHo art gallery where the event had originally been scheduled.

Rather than discouraging the organizers, the controversy has given them greater resolve, said Asra Q. Nomani, the lead organizer.

"People have to really focus on the second-class status that women have in the Muslim world," Ms. Nomani said. "We are taking actions that no one else would have dared to think about before. Nobody cared that we didn't have a place in the faith. We



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Dr. Amina Wadud, a professor of Islam studies in Richmond, Va.

were just abandoned."

Whether Muslim women are permitted by Islamic law to serve as prayer leaders is the subject of continued debate among scholars. It is generally accepted that women cannot lead congregational prayers or any kind of prayer in a mosque and must pray in a separate area of the mosque — either in separate rows, another room or behind a partition, said Khaled Abou El Fadl, a law professor who specializes in Islamic law at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Ms. Nomani, an author and former reporter for The Wall Street Journal, created a stir last year when she entered her mosque in Morgantown, W. Va., through the front entrance, reserved for men, and insisted on praying with them.

Then, a month ago, shortly before publishing a book about women in Islam, Ms. Nomani asked Dr. Amina Wadud to lead the prayer in New York and deliver a sermon. Ms. Wadud teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

Word of the prayer spread after Ms. Nomani and the editors of Muslim WakeUp!, a Web site, publicized the event and her book. Some opponents believe the service is, in part, an attempt to drum up publicity for

Ms. Nomani's book.

Major Muslim organizations have declined to sponsor today's scheduled event or speak publicly about it. In the search for a site, the organizers were rebuffed by three New York mosques and several university student organizations, Ms. Nomani said. Even the head of the most established Muslim organization for women in New York, Women in Islam, said she would only attend the prayer as an observer, not as a participant.

"My concern is a backlash," said Aisha al-Adawiya, the executive director of Women in Islam. "This kind of change has to come from within the community. It's being driven from outside."

The view that the event is somehow being orchestrated from outside the Muslim community is commonly expressed and may reflect a challenging schism between immigrant Muslims and their children and grandchildren.

"A new generation of Muslims is coming into its own," said Yvonne Haddad, a professor of history who specializes in women and Islam at Georgetown University. "The children of the immigrants are looking for new ways to create an American Islam, one in which they feel comfortable in an American context."

This voice has sounded loudly in New York City. A New Yorker, Ahmed Nassef, a co-founder of Muslim WakeUp! also started the Progressive Muslim Union in November.

Quoting studies that show that only 10 percent of Muslims attend mosque every week, Mr. Nassef said he believes that the Muslim community is in a crisis. The root of the problem, he said, is that the nation's mosques and Islamic centers are largely run by immigrants who are out of touch with the new generation of Muslims.

"Many of our institutions really don't speak for us," he said.

In some ways, Imam Ahmed Dewidar, of the Islamic Center of Mid-Manhattan, personifies the split in the community between old and new. Mr. Dewidar immigrated to the United States from Alexandria, Egypt, a decade ago. "I have never heard of this before," he said, regarding the idea of a woman leading Friday prayer. "It's so strange."

But Mr. Dewidar has been urging Muslims at his mosque and elsewhere to be nonconfrontational should they attend the prayer.

"We are living in a very open-minded society, and everybody should believe whatever he or she wants as long as they are not harming others," he said.