

## Article

# Gender Reconfigurations and Family Ideology in Abdul Rauf Felpete's Latin American Haqqaniyya

Marta Domínguez Díaz <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St. Gallen, 9000 St. Gallen, Switzerland; marta.dominguez@unisg.ch

<sup>2</sup> Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna, 1010 Vienna, Austria

**Abstract:** This article discusses the ideas about gender contained in the *Enseñanzas Sufíes Para Los Tiempos Actuales*, a text by Abdul Rauf Felpete, the leader of the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya in Latin America, probably the largest Sufi group in the continent. I analyse these ideas against the backdrop context in which they were produced: on the one hand, a conservative Sufi Islamic frame inspired by Nazim al-Haqqani's ideas, and on the other, an Argentinian society that was incurring profound gender-related societal changes at the time when the shaykh delivered the sermons contained in the book. This historical moment was characterised by a growing feminist and LGBTQ+ activism and the arrival of a progressive government in Argentina, which over time, positioned this Latin American country in the vanguard of gender and sexual equality rights in the Spanish speaking world. In this context, Rauf Felpete proposes a gender model inspired in a Haqqani form of Islamic conservatism as a remedy to address what he perceives as the threat of civilizational decadence brought about by these changes. I discuss Rauf Felpete's family ideology, a set of moral norms based on gender determinism and pronatalism, articulated through two key concepts, first, *domesticity*, understood as a way to regulate female behaviour and, second, *motherhood*, viewed as a Godly ordained natural instinct. In order to put into practice these gender norms, the devout Haqqani is called to move to the countryside; rural communes are presented as the only possible way of living a pious and authentically Islamic life, a mode of living that implies profound reconfigurations of gender (and of lifestyle, more generally) for his Latin American followers.

**Keywords:** Sufism in Latin America; Islam in Latin America; gender and Sufism; Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya



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## 1. Introduction

Scarce attention has been paid to those forms of religious life that appear beyond the more well-established religious institutions in Latin America, and further attention to alternative forms of religiosity is needed: groups that, occupy a central, yet often unrecognised space in the religious field of the subcontinent (e.g., Semán and Viotti 2019, p. 196). However, this area of research has rapidly grown over the last decade, and there are a few recent and valuable contributions.<sup>1</sup> In Argentina, for example, studies have shown, that there has been a well-established Sufi scene since at least the 1980s (Pilgrim 2018, p. 54), with a presence of a *third-wave Sufism* dating back to the 1960s in various parts of the continent, Argentina included (Sedgwick 2018, p. 8). The case here studied is that of the Sufi order Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya,<sup>2</sup> an organisation that experienced an international expansion in the early 2000s, thanks mainly to the vision of his then leader Nazim al-Haqqani (d. 2014), who helped to establish groups of followers in most Western European countries as well as in North America.<sup>3</sup> The Haqqaniyya's influence reached Latin America, possibly through Mexico, where there were communities with closer connections to some North American groups, notably those in New York. During the 1990s, Abdul Rauf Felpete, a raised Catholic from Buenos Aires whose interest in oriental religions had previously

taken him to India, would travel to Lefke, in Cyprus, where the central lodge of the Haqqaniyya is located, and met Nazim al-Haqqani. He became his disciple and would then receive the authorisation (*idhn*) by the Sufi master to begin initiating people to Islam in Argentina and into the life in this Sufi order. Since then, the number of Latin American groups has been steadily rising, becoming the Haqqaniyya, the perhaps largest Sufi order in the subcontinent, and the best exponent of Sufism's *fifth wave* in South America. The trend is characterized by the partial Islamisation of Sufism's western trends, mainly thanks to the influence of so-called "travelling shaykhs", Sufis from the Muslim world that regularly visited Europe and North America, and thus, brought about a tradition that resembled the religiosities more common in Muslim majority contexts (Sedgwick 2018, p. 9).

In this case, however, the person who travelled was the follower, Rauf Felpete, and not the shaykh, Nazim al-Haqqani, who never visited Latin America. Upon Rauf Felpete's return to Argentina, he formed the first groups of Haqqani followers. Interest in Sufism had already started in Mar del Plata, where a Gurdjeffian psychologist had in the 1990s a group of followers of The Fourth Way (Montenegro 2020, p. 476); people from this group of Gurdjeffians would later become the first Haqqani disciples in the country. Since the 1990s, a number of Haqqani groups emerged across Latin America, and from then onwards, the region was somehow understood to be within the area of influence of the North American Haqqaniyya. This relationship may have triggered the visit of the head of the order in the US, Muhammad Hisham Kabbani (b. 1945) in 2011 to Argentina, visit in which he was welcomed by the National Secretary of Religion (Montenegro 2020, p. 476, n. 44). The current leader of the order Mehmet 'Adil (b. 1957) visited South America in 2016, granting Rauf Felpete the highest position in the leadership of the order in the subcontinent. This trip officially sealed differences that had been building over the previous years; a more liberal tendency<sup>4</sup> with a laxer approach to shari'a represented by Hisham Kabbani, and the one preached by Rauf Felpete, that follows the line of claimed-to-be successor of Nazim al-Haqqani, Mehmet 'Adil, whose Sufism is characterised by a shari'a-observing type of Islamic conservatism.<sup>5</sup> However, it is worth considering that these differences are evident at the level of official discourses, but are oftentimes less noticeable in daily practices and in most groups.<sup>6</sup>

In Argentina, today, there is approximately a dozen of stable communities of the Haqqaniyya that regularly meet on a weekly basis for sessions of Sufi ritual and prayer. Most of them do so in private homes; some of the groups, larger, have small meeting facilities (*derghas*). These *derghas* normally have a mosque and a community centre, and are characterised, unlike smaller groups, by having a permanently based shaykh on site. Although most of the groups exist in cities, the most important of these *derghas* is based in Mallín Ahogado, a quiet and remote area in the outskirts of Bariloche, Patagonia, the southernmost region of the country. The community is led by Rauf Felpete, who prides himself of being the head of the Islamic centre located the furthest from Mecca and the southernmost on Earth. The group that was first established in the 1990s (Pilgrim 2018, p. 5) has, since then, grown slowly but continually; today, this religious centre is the home to approximately thirty families (Pilgrim 2018, p. 9), and has become one of the largest Haqqani communes that exist in the world, and the largest Sufi centre in the subcontinent.

The order has been commonly identified as part of the New Age scene in Latin America, and, although the relationship between the Haqqaniyya and the wider New Age movement is more complex than it first appears,<sup>7</sup> the majority of people, including Rauf Felpete, that have ended up in the order had a prior interest in alternative spiritualities. Moreover, the Haqqaniyya seems to be of little attraction to the Arab community; there are approximately 3.5 million people of Arab origin in the country,<sup>8</sup> including Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims as well as Christians and Druze, as elsewhere in the subcontinent, whereas the followers are entirely composed of converts. The Islamic conservatism of Rauf Felpete's discourse, together with the complex relationship it establishes with the New Age field, tells us that these two signifiers, *Islamic* and *New Age*, rather than in opposition, often coexist in complex ways, sometimes in a continuum, others intermingling. This is evident in that, as

noted by Dickson and Xavier (2021, p. 2), the Haqqaniyya itself has been defined by some as *traditionally Islamic* (e.g., Sedgwick 2012, p. 209; Hermansen 2006) whereas by others as *New Age* (Knysh 2017, pp. 109–20), thus demonstrating that differentiating between the two is often difficult (see Dickson and Xavier 2021, for an interesting discussion on the complications of situating religiosities between the poles *Islamic* and *New Age*). In following the line of Mehmet ‘Adil, Rauf Felpete has established a community that promotes a simple and rural lifestyle based on the precepts of shari‘a. Like Haqqanis living in communes elsewhere, members of the group often dress in their own version of traditional Ottoman dress. Like elsewhere, the Patagonian commune enacts, mostly in an exemplary manner, the Haqqani lifestyle, and yet the majority of followers of the organisation live in cities, do not form communes and have, by contrast, lifestyles that in the Argentinian context would not necessarily be seen as unusual as those of the Patagonian group. This is also the case in the rest of the subcontinent, where the order is made up mostly of urban groups (i.e., known followers exist in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Panama and Peru).<sup>9</sup> Rauf Felpete is a relatively prolific author, and his books are sold in most virtual and real libraries across the Spanish-speaking world.

In this article, I argue that under the leadership of Rauf Felpete, the Haqqaniyya tries to bring potential devotees with an initial interest in alternative spiritualities towards an Islamic way of life, as interpreted and understood by the socially conservative approach to Islam of the order former’s leader, Nazim al-Haqqani. Those disciples formerly interested in the New Age cover, ideologically speaking, a wide spectrum of positions, from the more liberal (perhaps numerically better represented) to the quite conservative<sup>10</sup>, and for all of them, adapting to the lifestyle advocated by the Haqqani shaykh implies major life changes. Although these changes are evident in the case of liberal-minded followers, one should not assume that forms of moral conservatism are similar across cultures and religions. In fact, this case demonstrates that for conservative Argentinians, adopting an Islamic lifestyle also brings about significant changes to their way of living. An analysis of the approach to gender norms that appears in the writings of Rauf Felpete is used here to support the thesis that the Haqqaniyya in Latin America, and specially its leader, is trying to Islamise the New Age field, by attempting to attract New Agers to a traditional Islamic Sufi lifestyle.

With that purpose, I will analyse the ideas about gender contained in one of Rauf Felpete’s works, the *Enseñanzas Sufíes Para Los Tiempos Actuales* (Sufi teachings for modern times, hereafter the *Enseñanzas*), published in 2014 in paperback and in 2016 electronically, which contains some of the most relevant religious sermons (*sohbats*)<sup>11</sup> he delivered to different Latin American groups between the years 2010 and 2013 (Rauf Felpete 2014). The reason for selecting the text is twofold: first, because it consists of *sohbats*, texts that are useful to understand the ways in which he transmits his message to his disciples, but also, second, due to the fact that it contains a section with a sermon exclusively addressed to women, making it a valuable document for the study of gender norms in this form of Sufism. Although the overall text is not supposed to be an exposition of Rauf Felpete’s views on gender, but rather a manual for daily living, “ancestral teachings totally applicable to the 21st century” (p. 11), one soon realises that the relationship between men and women is one of its most recurrent topics, making of this book a detailed explanation of how this Sufi shaykh envisions gender relations to be regulated by a Godly sanctioned order.

I analyse these ideas against the backdrop of, on the one hand, a conservative Sufi Islamic message inspired by Nazim al-Haqqani’s position on gender, and, on the other, an Argentinian society that was incurring profound gender-related societal changes at that time. In doing so, I understand that Rauf Felpete’s appeal to embrace a Sufi form of Islamic conservatism has as much to do with the message of his master, as with the context in which the message is preached. Thus, first, the influence exerted by the ideas of his spiritual mentor, Nazim al-Haqqani, who was well known for his restrictive views on gender, is clear. However, second, the content and sense of urgency of Rauf Felpete’s discourse (i.e., gender egalitarianism is viewed as a problem that needs rapid and resolute fixing) occurs in a historical moment in which feminist and LGBTQ+ forms of activism

gained force and a number of progressive laws with regard to gender and sexuality were approved in Argentina. These changes have positioned this Latin American country at the vanguard of gender and sexual equality rights in the Spanish speaking world. In this article, I discuss Rauf Felpete's family ideology, in particular, critically assessing (1) his marriage and family ideology; (2) domesticity understood as a form to regulate female behaviour; and (3) motherhood viewed as a Godly ordained natural instinct. Moreover, I content that his promotion of an ideal, simple, rural life is intendedly proposed as the only possible way to put into practice these conservative Islamic social norms that imply profound lifestyle reconfigurations for his Latin American followers.

## 2. Androcentrism and Gender Segregation

Before we address what type of attitude towards gender characterises Rauf Felpete's understanding of Islam, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the androcentric use of language in the work here analysed, the *Enseñanzas*. Various are the features indicating that in the book male identity is taken as normative of humanness. The *Enseñanzas* do not use any form of gender-inclusive language, a way of expression most noticeable in the use of alternatives to the normative default plural form which in the Spanish language is masculine.<sup>12</sup> This would probably be not especially remarkable would the author not had been Argentinian, a country where the debate over inclusive language is particularly prominent. In the past, the use of gendered language did not necessary indicate (conscious adherence to) misogyny; even those advocating for gender equality normally used non-inclusive language. However, that changed during the decade of the 2010s; this was a time when inclusive language rapidly gained ground, and the use of a plural masculine gradually became mostly identified with conservative positions on gender. (In some cases, the issue of language inclusiveness denotes a generational gap, younger people being more aware of the political loading of language). Considering that Rauf Felpete's book was published in the decade of the 2010s, time in which the use of inclusive language was already firmly established, it makes sense to suggest that his use of the androcentric norm may have been intended. Consider how age plays out in here, the shaykh is not young; however, his average readership may presumably be much younger.

The androcentric character of the *Enseñanzas* is evident in that the text is written with a male reader in mind. This is because the text is a collection of sermons (in the text referred by the Turkish term, *sohbat*) given by the author to his disciples; note, here, that the Haqqaniyya does not hold gender mixed congregations. The fact that his audience were only men is thus reflected in the text. Gender segregation in Sufi communities takes many different forms; sometimes it is only men that cannot see women, though women see men. In others, the separation means that women can hear the sermon but cannot see, neither the men nor the shaykh. The congregations of the Haqqaniyya in Latin America vary from setting to setting in their gender disposition in space, but in most cases, there is a strict gender division in place at congregational spaces.<sup>13</sup> Considering that the *Enseñanzas* are a compilation of the sermons Rauf Felpete delivered between the years 2010 and 2013 in different Haqqani Latin American communities, the androcentric character shows us the context in which the text *takes place*, i.e., in this case it denotes the maleness of the addressee. However, that women seem to significantly outnumber men as consumers of Sufi literature, at least in Western European contexts and across the Americas, is a seeming irony that deserves further scholarly consideration, especially when noticing that the androcentric character of Rauf Felpete's texts is not necessarily an exception within the broader field of the modern Sufi literary genre.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Enseñanzas*, men are presented as default to refer to all the humans. This is not only apparent in the use of the aforementioned masculine forms of the plural, but more specifically, in that the addressee of the text is always a man. Examples of this are plentiful and I mention here just a few. One of the sermons, in which he defends the institution of marriage, is entitled *Dos Regalos Para la Felicidad del Hombre* (Two Presents for Man's Happiness, my emphasis); similarly, when the author counsels the reader to be realistic and

do not aspire to be with more than one woman, he asks *him*: “how many men do you know that are satisfied with the wife they have?” (p. 16); or, when the author asks the reader to behave responsibly and not abandon his *wife* (p. 23); or, when he solicits the reader not to let “our children” [...], “our women” [...], and “our elderly” depart from the right path (p. 41); as well as, when he pleads him to never miss having lived another life, with “another wife, another family” (p. 71). In sum, all throughout the book, the reader is assumed to be a heterosexual, married, and monogamous man. I want to note, however, that although marriage as well as heterosexuality are discussed in the *Enseñanzas* in more detail, monogamy is never addressed but simply assumed normative throughout the text.

The *Enseñanzas* is a collection of *sohbat*s to diverse groups of men-only audiences of Haqqani devotees in different Latin American locations. The exception to this is the sermon Rauf Felpete delivered to his female followers in 2012, a *sohbat* contained in this book, and entitled *Secretos De Las Mujeres* (women’s secrets, hereafter *Secretos*). In this sermon, Rauf Felpete lifts the androcentric paradigm and even questions it. *Secretos* was written having an only female audience in mind. However, the day he invited only the women of the community (in the Patagonian lodge) to the event, some of the husbands also showed up. We lack the details of what exactly did happen on that day, but we can sense, by reading the text, a certain degree of tension in the air. Accordingly, *Secretos* begins by asking (to a then improvised mixed audience):

why do we need to exclusively speak to women? Then, the answer comes alone, as one realizes, because everybody speaks only to men. Women need to be treated in a special way “from now on” [my emphasis added] because they are the jewel of creation. (p. 141)

We also lack the larger context that motivated the calling for a women-only meeting in the first place. However, this seems to be an event that wanted to set the base for a *new way* of treating women within the community. The *from now on* pronounced at the beginning of the discourse seems to indicate the wish for a change in attitude, something that, nevertheless, does not necessarily imply pursuing gender egalitarianism in other situations. Instead, a closer look at the text reveals that Rauf Felpete believes in natural sex differences that determine distinct roles for men and women in society, something, worth noticing, concomitant with the idea of addressing them separately. The model of society he proposes, according to his religious ideals, centers around gender determinism, and articulates around a monogamous nuclear family based on a heterosexual union; one supporting a division of gender roles, i.e., the breadwinner father and the childrearing mother.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Individual Willpower, the New Age and Minority Religions

The utopian (rural) society envisioned by Rauf Felpete is built around the family, one of the most important tropes in his writings. According to his views, it is by creating families that the perceived moral decadence of our societies can be overcome. Consequently, he asks the reader to abandon any intention to transform society at the grand level and to do it, instead, by building a family. The call to this goal heavily relies on individualism:

What are we doing with our lives? We with ours, not our neighbour with his, neither what are the [north] Americans doing with theirs and with the immense portion [of the world’s wealth] that they have got, nor the Chinese. No; [we with] ours. Because ours is the only one we can change. [The person] who changes himself can change his family, and by changing his family can change his neighbour’s and by changing his neighbours can change the neighbourhood. And, if he changes the neighbourhood, he can change his town. And [the person] who changes his town can change his country, can change a continent, and can change the remaining six [continents] (pp. 22–23).

In other passages, individual willpower is also considered positively, as it is believed to allow the person to make sound decisions, despite the difficulties. Making the decision



of joining Islam, is one, perhaps amongst the most important, of them: “light your little lamp on and go in the search of your path, without having anyone before or after you” (p. 65). One may wonder whether the support for individualism can be seen as a strategy, a tool that helps in gaining followers to a minority religious group. After all, do not all the followers of religious minorities need to celebrate individual willpower when they choose a lifestyle away from the mainstream? How to reconcile this individualistic drive, when it is used to attract people to a religion, such as Islam, fundamentally family-based? Rauf Felpete’s encourages disciples to rely on the willpower of the individual to make the initial decision, and with this determination, persuade their families to join them, “put everybody [that you can] after the light, [your] wife, [your] children and whoever that wants to enter, [s/he] will be welcomed” (p. 65). Individualism appears related to the constituent feature of the movement as a minority religion. The individualist determination is a key ingredient in calling people to join in. It works, in a way, a rhetoric tool used for religious proselytization.

We may also note that the adoption of this kind of individualistic, self-motivating approach to social change echoes with the post-idealist stance characteristic of the religiously unaffiliated in many parts of the world. It is also characteristic of the New Age. In fact, the idea that the society begins to change at home was popularized as part of the political disenchantment after the end of the hippy era, causing new agers<sup>16</sup> to develop this characteristically self-reliant approach to social ethics. Nonetheless, the problem we face in identifying whether Rauf Felpete’s ideas about the willpower of the individual can be related to the New Age lies in the fact that, as [Franck \(1999\)](#) has reminded us, ideas of social ethics based on individualistic self-empowerment that can serve as the basis for social change are not exclusive of New Age circles anymore. In fact, they have surpassed the circles of alternative spiritualities and have become characteristic of the mainstream in our societies.<sup>17</sup> One may wonder whether Rauf Felpete’s individualistic approach is the result of his prior/current relationship with the New Age.

His relationship to the New Age is evident. It is not only that the Haqqaniyya has been identified as being part of the New Age field ([Montenegro 2016](#), p. 88); most of its current followers have this background, including Rauf Felpete himself. He has publicly declared he has been Catholic, Buddhist, atheist, and that his spiritual quest ended up bringing him to India first and to Cyprus later.<sup>18</sup> He is known for making a living as an osteopath (he has proudly pointed out in a number of occasions that his religious duties as a shaykh are not remunerated),<sup>19</sup> and natural birthing techniques and fitotherapy are promoted in the website of the Patagonian group.<sup>20</sup>

I suggest that, considering the close connections between the group, the master and the two ideological references that are here at play, the New Age and Islamic conservatism, it is fair to suggest that both, the shaykh and the group have developed a distinctive identity that swiftly gravitates between beliefs and practices that are characteristic of the former and others that are habitual of the latter. Remarkably, some features may *simultaneously* be characteristic of both. In line with the suggestion made by [Dickson and Xavier \(2021\)](#) in their recent article about Sufism in North America, the Latin American Haqqaniyya also contributes to add nuance to our understanding of the interplay between the Islamic and New Age fields. Previous scholarship tended to view these categories as mutually exclusive, a group would either belong to one or the other. However, the case here analysed suggests that, not only that our definition of *Islamic* needs to significantly broaden (as suggested by ([Ahmed 2015](#))), but also that movements that may be considered Islamically conservative, can at the same time display a number of New Age features. In particular, in the Latin American Haqqani case, it is observable, (a) the use of an individualist approach to religion, at least in the initial stages, that helps appealing individuals towards Islam—once the person becomes a Haqqani, individualism is ideally dropped in favour of a communal lifestyle; (b) an interest in alternative healing techniques; and (c) a genealogy of spiritual seeking prior to joining the Haqqaniyya. However, most of the gender norms promoted

by Rauf Felpete are of the Islamic conservative kind and do not portray the liberal fluidity more typically attributed to some New Age groups.

#### 4. The Marriage Imperative

Most Muslims would agree in that Islam highly values marriage.<sup>21</sup> The diverse engagements Muslims today have with religious texts, despite being very varied, show us that commonly, sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad are being used in their praising of marriage as a religiously sanctioned activity. Among those sayings, it is the widely used, *marriage is half of one's religion* (meaning that one has completed half of the things one should do as a righteous Muslim only by the act of getting married).<sup>22</sup> Additionally, there seems to be an emphasis on getting married and not merely on the ways in which married life is made appropriate, a set of indications often referred as the *mahramiyyat*. This is particularly relevant in contexts in which Muslims are a minority, when an even greater divergence over family values is observable across generations, and where the idea that a Muslim may possibly have non-Muslim offspring is more present; for example, studies in European Muslim families prove that discussions on parental authority, child rearing, relations to the extended family, and on husband–wife relations become more prominent in the European context than they were in the previous generations and in the country of origin (Rytter 2014). Moreover, in some contexts, whether it is because people hold liberal values, and/or due to the fact that the age of marriage worldwide has been delayed due to the rising levels of educational attainment, the non-married Muslim adult has become a socially recognized category, something that is quite new to many. However, and despite all changes, marriage is expected from most Muslims, and it is often viewed as both a sacred act and a key legal agreement, one that lies at the centre of the ways in which people are socialized into the world, constituting a central mechanism for the organization of societies. From that perspective, the unmarried Muslim adult is an incomplete person. The importance of marriage in Muslim contexts is highlighted by existing studies on the field, “marriage is the goal of every Muslim” (al-Faruqi 1985, p. 64), “[marriage is] the single most important event [in the life of a Muslim]” (Fluehr-Lobban 2004, p. 98).

Rauf Felpete echoes the importance Islam grants to marriage in his *sohbats*; it is one of the preferred topics in his work. He encourages people to marry: “those of you who are not yet married, get married!” (p. 140),<sup>23</sup> and assigns sacrality to marriage, advising his followers, “be respectful and caring, and take care of the sacred marriage” (p. 141). If Muslim youngsters are oftentimes socialized to look forward to their wedding as one of life’s most important events (Murphy-Geiss 2010, p. 41), the Spanish-speaking singles in the Haqqaniyya are actively driven towards the same goal. Additionally, in those cases, the indication is to try to marry within the *tariqa*,<sup>24</sup> as the order, similar to many others,<sup>25</sup> helps individuals to find a partner:

Additionally, to those of you that are searching for [getting married], [I say] insha’llah ask for a dua, visualize the face of Kamaludin [a high religious authority within the order in Latin America]; ask [him] to get married. Insha’llah, ask and Allah will provide you with what you are asking for (p. 140).

The Argentinian shaykh perceives marriage as the central institution in the establishment of a worldly spiritual order, “the holy marriage is the pillar of Allah (peace be upon him) for the spiritual development [of people] on this planet” (p. 137), a position also common in Islamic literature. By contrast, he seems less interested in topics of also common concern in the Islamic marriage genre. For example, the (in)suitability of marrying particular members of your kin, a common theme in most modern Muslim marriage booklets, is non-existent here. Polygamy is also overlooked.

Answering the question of how similar Rauf Felpete’s family ideology is to the positions adopted in the New Age is rather difficult, given the diversity of positions in this regard that the New Age adopts. In keeping with the attempt of locating his religious ideology, what we can say is that Rauf Felpete’s traditional, heteronormative family model

mostly resonates with an Islamic conservative frame, but also with the family ideologies developed by the Catholic and Evangelical churches (especially its leadership), readily available in the Latin American context of Rauf Felpete's readership.<sup>26</sup> In addition, it is worth noticing that in Argentina, the percentage of adult population married has steadily declined over the last decades and it is today lower than in most Western European and North American countries.<sup>27</sup> The point is thus not only that marriage is Islamically appropriate and therefore encouraged, but also that insisting on people getting married makes a lot of sense in a context in which presumably getting married may not be a priority for many of his (current and potential) devotees.

### 5. Family Ideology as a Conservative Counter-Discursivity

Rauf Felpete's family ideology reverberate quite closely with the discourse of the Latin American Christian right (specially of the more normative and activist voices); in particular, seeing the emergence of a plurality of family arrangements in terms of deterioration of the family as an institution—the loss of a past glory—is common in both the Islamic and Christian conservative fields.<sup>28</sup> Rauf Felpete expresses this position in this way:

society is sick, very sick; [ . . . ] but this is new, because a hundred years ago this was not like this. Remember, because we will soon need to explain this as if it was ancient history; that the family existed as a real thing, and that it had existed for a very long time until not that long ago. Nowadays, the family is under attack, dismembered, destroyed, and broken; and the central axis of the family are women. (p. 144)

In the context in which Rauf Felpete speaks, this position can be considered counter-discursive in that what the mainstream Latin American public normally sees as the steady gaining of rights, a gradual progression that has occurred over the last half a century, he sees as a continual process towards social decadence:

there are countries more advanced in the attack [against the family], like Argentina, and others less so, like Uruguay or Chile. However, in all the cases, they are all being attacked by Satan, by Shaytan, who has decided to break the family apart, because the family is what brings us to God, what brings us to religion. I remember when I was a child, that on Sundays we had to go to church, you had to go with [your] family. Until the sixties and seventies it was this way. Then, craziness begun, the youth's rebelliousness, the hippie movement [ . . . ]; we let them break the family, so that a better system could arrive, but that system never came. (p. 145)

He perceives the introduction of a diversity of family arrangements (what he calls *breaking the family*) as a path of no-return; now it is common (albeit the great degree of diversity that exists depending on social class and geography) that these diverse arrangements are somehow more socially accepted. As a result, a gap between a conservative religious preaching and liberal social practices is observable, a phenomenon that also occurs in other societies around the world. In some Muslim majority societies, for instance, we can perceive a difference between the burgeoning consolidation of conservative religious positions in contexts in which diversity in family arrangements are appearing. I suggest that these re-traditionalisation of the religious discourse can therefore be seen as a practice of counter-discursivity, because religious counter-discursivity seems to be common in social *milieus* that find themselves in transition towards practicing and accepting more diverse family structures.<sup>29</sup> What we may thus infer is that religiously driven family ideologies mirror, and aim to respond to, the societal metamorphoses in which they emerge—and this is, and has been, the case in a number of historical and modern-day scenarios.<sup>30</sup> Rather than thinking about these discourses as the repositories of a pristine reality that is progressively breaking apart and disappearing, as the content of the discourse itself wants to imply, we may better understand them as counter-discourses, current responses to ongoing change.



Thus, despite Rauf Felpete's subjective way of historicizing the process of decline in the family as an institution, a process of decadence that he historically traces back to the last third of the twentieth century, we can more recently situate the tension in which this discourse emerged. Specifically, we can relate Rauf Felpete's discourse with the rapid gender-related social changes that Argentina has undergone since the first presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who assumed her duties of office in December of 2007. Since then, a number of laws broadening rights in marriage and family-related matters have been passed, such as the legality of same-sex marriages and the right to adopt children by homosexual couples (since 2010), or, the legalisation of abortion during the first fourteen weeks of gestation (a long-held demand of feminists that finally became law in 2020).<sup>31</sup> Rauf Felpete's ideas belong to a conservative sector of society that opposes such changes—see for example the video in which he explains, quite honestly, his views on the interruption of pregnancy.<sup>32</sup> This conservative counter-discursivity, resonates with the anti-modernism of a number of trends (Guenonianism, for example), as Felpete writes:<sup>33</sup>

all what is offered to us from this civilization is dark. Religions have been darkened, politics are darkened, the social [domain] is darkened, the family is darkened, everything [is darkened]. (p. 65)

However, it is also present in a number of (more overtly) religious fields. It adopts positions similar to those of the Christian right; it also stands close to the apocalyptic nonconformist position of some New Age authors, and at the same time, it relates to Islamic conservatism, where a discourse in defence of the patriarchal family as the tool to fight the *disintegration* of traditional society has existed since colonial times. More recently, in the Muslim Mediterranean, where the Haqqani original ideologues come from, declining fertility rates and changes to the structure of the family have given neopatriarchal family ideologies a renewed vigour ((Kandiyoti 2008); on the relationship between these ideologies and the rise of women right's activism, see (Moghadam 2004)).

## 6. Domesticity: Restriction Seen as Protection

Although sacralised ideas of the home are present both in Islamic and Christian discourses, the emergence of this trend is, historically speaking, quite recent and can be traced back only to the second half of the nineteenth century both in Europe and the Middle East and is primarily concerned with urban areas (e.g., Van Osselaer and Maurits 2020; Tucker 1979, 1985); other regions, less affected by industrialization, followed in later historical periods.<sup>34</sup> In the case I am analysing here, the sacralization of domesticity, although inspired in the Islamic ethos of Nazim al-Haqqani, needs to be read in the context of the profound social transformations in which it occurs. The position on gender produced by Nazim al-Haqqani uses sacralised notions of the home to restrict female participation in society (on this, see (Böttcher 2006), the only study that has been carried out insofar analysing gender ideology in the Haqqaniyya).

Once married, Rauf Felpete encourages men to actively work towards preserving their marriages, by looking after their wives:

be caring and respectful, take care of the sacred marriage and take care of your wives; [ . . . ] if you want to be happy you must have a wife, and if you have a wife, you must take care of her (p. 141). I speak to the men in our tariqah, take care of your wives [ . . . ] we the Latinos, heirs of the Spaniards and the Italians, have this thing of being very “macho”. So, we have to become less “macho” [ . . . ] take care of your wives. (p. 137)

One of the reasons why women must be, according to his view, protected, is because they are considered the central pillar of families; thanks to them, a family is maintained:

a man can be hit, be hurt, go to prison, be a sailor, die . . . but if a woman stays put, family endures. A man can go back home after being six months away and his home is in order. Take the woman away [from her home] and try to figure out what can the man do [without her]. Exceptionally, there may be an incredible

man that can fulfil both roles, but the vast majority of us, cannot simultaneously be dad and mum. Women can, men cannot. (p. 144)<sup>35</sup>

The case of a man staying away from home for long periods of time while the wife stays at home taking care of the children, is one known to many members of the Haqqaniyya order. In the times when Nazim al-Haqqani was the living master of this *tariqa*, he would travel on a regular basis and stayed away from his home in Lefke for prolonged periods of time. The order has a large female following, people who knew about how exhausted shaykha Amina, wife of Nazim al-Haqqani and mother to their four children, was due to his continuous travelling abroad; the story is still retold today by female disciples, and has also been scholarly recorded by Böttcher (2006, p. 262). During the mid-2000s, the female discipleship of the Haqqaniyya, especially some of the members (mostly British) of the European groups, showed disagreement with the gender approach adopted by the order's authorities. In particular, the fact that shaykha Amina has been trained by the same master than his husband in Damascus, shaykh 'Abd Allah, and for longer than him, yet, never was granted the *idhn* (spiritual authorization) to impart spiritual teachings (*tarbiyya*), stands out as an example of some of these critiques (Böttcher 2006, p. 261). As a result of this still ongoing tension, the female relatives of the leaders are nowadays (informally) considered role models, especially for the female disciples (Hermansen 2006), but they have still not been accorded formal leadership roles. Scholars disagree on whether gender norms vary according to geography, whereas some consider that the branches of the Haqqaniyya under the leadership of Hisham Kabbani and established in English-speaking countries follow more progressive gender norms than most of the continental European groups<sup>36</sup>, other authors still consider the supposedly liberal North American Haqqaniyya, "a strictly Islamic Sufi movement" (Hermansen 2006).

Central to this conservative position is the extolling of domesticity, "women are the queens of their well-equipped home", and that male's guardianship over them is important in order to control their whereabouts, "all the evil in the world comes from women who leave their houses without asking permission" (Nazim al-Haqqani in (Böttcher 2006, p. 263)). Echoing Nazim al-Haqqani's ideas, Rauf Felpete takes on the trope of *the queen of the home* to introduce a traditional frame of gendering relations to his Latin American audiences. However, he subtly modifies the discourse, uses a silkier tone whilst adapts this conservative position to suit the particulars of gender in the Latin American context. This is possibly why, infidelity (and here, one may note, it always appears as being of men towards women) emerges as a key concern—the number of times in the book in which he refers to this topic is significant, seven times in an explicit manner,<sup>37</sup> many others implicitly:

How many men do you know that are satisfied with their wives? I mean really satisfied. Thank you, God, my wife is my queen, the most beautiful queen that exists, this is what you should say. Additionally, if you say it, accept it and believe it, Allah in the darkness of the night will turn her into the most beautiful queen of beauty you could have never imagined. (p. 16)

Women are always associated with the domestic sphere. In replicating Nazim al-Haqqani's perspective, he implores men to turn women into "the queens of the household" (p. 137), as they have a fundamental role in taking care and guarding the home, sometimes *the queen* is presented as *the patron* (*la patrona*, in Spanish),

we need the castle [referring to the home] to be guarded, well-guarded. Additionally, in order for the castle to be well-guarded 'la patrona' [my emphasis added] of the castle needs to feel she is the owner of this castle. Do the possible and the impossible for this to happen, this is the treasure you should look after. (p. 139)

The excerpt can be understood to be an adaptation of the gender conservatism characteristic of the previous generations of Haqqani leaders to a context in which women may not so readily accept staying at home. The rather passive role of *the queen* is turned into the more empowering role of *la patrona*. Something worth noticing is that, in going back to the question of the textual androcentrism, although Rauf Felpete's addressee is still nominally a man, his message here seems to be implicitly directed to women.

One may contend that in a society in which women are so commonly harassed as to having motivated a number of campaigns to stop violence against them, Rauf Felpete's (even if idealistic) proposal may feel appealing to some. Harassment is indeed of grave concern to women in Argentina (as well as to those in most Latin American, and other, of course, societies). In Argentina, this concern has resulted in a series of legislative measures: in 2018, a major campaign against street harassment ended up in passing a bill for which it became a crime punishable with a fine; the Argentinian National Congress ratified in 2020 a Convention against Violence and Harassment in the workplace with legal consequences for offenders;<sup>38</sup> and, the government has also launched a major campaign against child grooming. Whereas the legislative advances are welcome, there are difficulties in implementing them (for example, fears that result in lesser reporting to Law Enforcement, or the fact that the authorities in charge of their implementation, i.e., the police and the judiciary, are sometimes known for their overtly misogynist attitudes). By contrast, Rauf Felpete is offering a (likely to be utopian) *mode de vivre* that promises a protection that oftentimes Law Enforcement is finding difficult to put in place. Thus, one can understand, the potential appeal that importing Nazim al-Haqqani's family ideology into a Latin American context can, under these circumstances, have for some.

Rauf Felpete reframes men's control over female's actions into a male's *protection* of females against the violence exerted on them by other males. He asks women to abandon their careers to become housewives, by using the appeal of *protection against threat*.

The ones [referring to women] that have husbands must stop working. They must take care of their children [instead]. If you do not want to stop working, this is fine, work from home. All those women who can, work from home. The least you leave the home, the better. These are very bad times for women. Try not to be out at night. Do not be exposed, do not be exposed (p. 147).

In a country with female participation in the workforce of similar rates than in some European countries,<sup>39</sup> telling women to abandon their jobs to exclusively devote themselves to housewifery may prove difficult.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the tone of the discourse is softened, from the obligatoriness we could see when expressed by Nazim al-Haqqani, to the level of *recommendation* ("all those women who can, work from home"). Similarly, *working remotely* instead of *not working* is a further cushioning of Nazim al-Haqqani's position, understanding that the women to whom Rauf Felpete speaks may be reluctant to quit the workforce.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the forms of female control clearly articulated in Nazim al-Haqqani's discourse are reframed by Rauf Felpete as forms of persuasion, "we should clarify this [that they should stay at home] to them [to our wives]. We cannot prohibit, but we should clarify" (p. 43).

A domestic life is celebrated as a mechanism of protection, that must be actively enacted by men, "are you going to let them [your wives] participate [of doing] things you do not know what they are [?], be careful!" (p. 43). This mechanism of protection implies, in his perspective, safety for the wife and, by extension, for the rest of family members,

we should try to safeguard our children, [ ... ] our women [ ... ] our elderly from the multitudes [ ... ] as with regard to ourselves, will you let your children walk at night in the city? will you let your wives walk at night in the city? (p. 43)

## 7. Motherhood as Sanctifying

In Rauf Felpete's understanding of gender norms, women should stay at home because their main role is to procreate, "[women] are the jewel of creation!" he extols, "the act of procreating in itself demonstrates that the Lord has put her in this role" (pp. 141–42)<sup>42</sup>. Although we are familiar with that there are Muslim family ideologists who are enthusiastically pronatalists (e.g., see the following studies, [Parkes 2005](#); [Sholkamy 2021](#); [Sachedina 1990](#)), rapidly declining fertility rates in all Muslim-majority countries over the last thirty years ([Courbage and Todd 2014](#), p. xii)<sup>43</sup> seem, again, to indicate that there is a gap between these forms of religious preaching and social practices ([Moghadam 2004](#)).

In the Argentinian context, Rauf Felpete uses the ideas often presented by other conservative religious groups in favour of *natural laws*, and, in particular, condemning same-sex parenthood, often also against the ideas of evolution. On this, Rauf Felpete's ideas can be situated within a section of Islamic conservatism that stands against the theories of Darwinism (see [Riexinger 2010](#)), but he equally echoes conservative Christian voices, some of which are quite prominent in Brazil, Argentina and other countries of South America, of the anti-gender ideology movement, a trend that defends the natural attributions of sex and opposes the conceptualization of gender advanced by gender theorists.<sup>44</sup> For Rauf Felpete,

if the Lord would have wanted men, like some animals that exist in nature to have reproductive organs [he would have done so] [ . . . ] but the man is arrogant and does not think that he was made this way for a reason. Thus, the woman was specifically made this way, [we] do not come out of a cabbage, neither we come from monkeys [ . . . ] we have been created precisely in this way and should ask ourselves what is the secret behind the fact that women can procreate and men cannot" (p. 142); "women have a magnificent secret, the one of creating life [ . . . ] without a woman there is no possibility of [the existence of] life. Thus, women are something [and I remark here, he literally says "something"] magnificently created with a goal and a finality [ . . . ] the first role of a woman is being a mother [ . . . ]; a woman needs to be a mother in order to be complete, to be fulfilled, to have a meaning in life [ . . . ]; of course that God has made some women not able to have children [ . . . ] but the ones that can, must have [them], the sooner, the better. (p. 143)

The idea that maternity comes naturally to women and that it is linked to her instinct, is perhaps best illustrated in this passage:

I have had seven children with my wife, and I know what is to wake up at two or three in the morning to console a baby. Fathers can only partly calm down babies, it is a mechanical consolation. We check that she [the baby] is clean, that she has eaten, that has no pain here or there [ . . . ] and then we cannot do anything else, but the baby keeps crying. Then, one puts the baby in the breast of the woman and she gets [instantly] calmed. (p. 146)

The excerpt illustrates the *natural and instinctual* character attributed to motherhood by Rauf Felpete. It is also a good illustration of the delicate balance he tries to strike between the advancement of a socially conservative message on gender and the recognition of the fact that his audience may presumably be more liberal than him. As such, he acknowledges a certain degree of male's involvement in the duties of care of small children ("I know what is to wake up at two or three in the morning to comfort a baby") but ultimately, ("one puts the baby in the breast of the woman and the baby gets calmed") denotes the unique connection between mother and infant. With this argument, he posits this form of gender determinism not as an ideological choice one makes, but rather as something dictated by nature. Likewise, gender determinism is not presented as a restriction to women but as empowering; in this view, the ultimate authority on childcare, is held, due to her *natural instinct*, by the mother. In following this line of thought, Rauf Felpete is heavily critical of (professional) childcare, blaming women for leaving their children in those facilities:

After forty days [after giving birth] mothers go back to work and leave children eight hours in creches [ . . . ]; what do we expect from them when these little children abandoned at forty days [of age] will be twenty [years old]? (p. 143)<sup>45</sup>

## 8. Gender Reconfigurations and the Utopia of Rural Life

In order to ask women to stay at home (and to feel gratified by it), the Haqqaniyya in Latin America needs to propose a change of paradigm with regard to the role of women in society. On this, Rauf Felpete again gravitates towards an anti-establishment discourse that resonates with some of the more left of centre, anti-system versions of the New Age, one that sees the woman with a career as someone that has lost her (maternal) sensibility:



“the CEO lady, in a hurry, perfumed, with a hairdresser’s hairstyle [ . . . ] she does not want that her son comes to hug her, [because] she does not want to look messy” (p. 143). By contrast, echoing a well-trodden Islamic ideal, he commends women to pursue modesty and simplicity:

try to go unnoticed, do not think that by going unnoticed you will not find a husband [ . . . ] neither will you lose your seductive power. Be simple, be plain and you will find all that God has for you [ . . . ] [which is] the best of the world, the best of the best. (p. 147)

He furthers his critique of materialism, a discourse that is also gendered:

we go to expensive places, such as the shopping centres in airports. [They only sell] rubbish [ . . . ]; rubbish with normal stones inserted in shiny plastic with plenty of golden [decorations]. They cost a fortune. You may think you are seeing diamonds. No, you are seeing rubbish that women wear and men too [ . . . ]; or, any of these perfumes of modern brands [ . . . ] [worn by] six hundred or seven hundred women in the world, all wearing [the same] at the same time, and they all have the same smell, and all of this costs three hundred euros [meaning, it costs a lot of money; think that the average monthly household income in 2016 in Argentina was of 282 euros]<sup>46</sup>. (p. 115)

Nevertheless, the anti-materialist stance of the Argentinian shaykh may have raised concerns of an economic kind among his disciples. Especially when he asks women to withdraw from the workforce, many may have wondered how the bills are going to be paid. This is reflected in a sermon he gave once in Panama:

the married ones [in the feminine form] try not to work. A lot of people come to me and say, I want my wife to stop working, but with a single salary we cannot afford [it] [ . . . ] but our master Mawlana Shaykh Nazim told more than once, ‘when women stop working men increase their salaries in a number of ways’ [ . . . ]; the expenses of the household derived of the woman being out [of the household] are incredible. Children get sick, you need more doctors, you need more psychologists<sup>47</sup> because they are sick, they need after-school support, they need a lot more things [than when women stay at home]. (p. 148)

In relation to the education of children, it is known that Nazim al-Haqqani has in a number of occasions discouraged girls from studying, a recommendation that not even the female members of his family supported. In a trip to Sri Lanka, he reproached his male audience for encouraging their daughters to study, and was critical of a parent who seemingly asked the shaykh to saintly intercede for his daughter to become a prime minister (Böttcher 2006, p. 263).<sup>48</sup> In the *Enseñanzas*, Rauf Felpete does not take a position on girls’ education. However, we know that some current and former devotees of the order (specially women) are critical of the conservative views on gender promoted by the organization, and, also, that those living in segregated rural communities tend to be more acquiescent with the conservative model on gender relations proposed by the leadership than those in urban groups. The disciples of rural groups have limited relationships with the peoples in neighbouring villages; most men, for example, either work for the people living nearby, but apart from this discreet labour relations, they are isolated and live away from the rest of society. This is the case of the Argentinian communities in La Consulta (Mendoza) of about twenty families and Rauf Felpete’s own group, in Mallín Ahogado (Río Negro) of about ten families (Salinas 2015, p. 107) as well as the one in Órgiva, close to Granada, in Andalusia (Spain). This rural lifestyle is posed as the solution to all problems. Apologetic of a rural lifestyle, the restriction that women who are asked to stay at home may feel, is blamed not on restrictive gender roles, but on the city lifestyle. By doing so, the isolationism that many would attribute to the lifestyle of Haqqani rural communes is shifted in Rauf Felpete’s writings; it is the people living in flats in the city the ones who are sequestered. He suggests that,

if you lock up your wives in the shoe boxes that are built [in the form of apartments] in cities, women will want to escape, because women are not birds to be locked in cages [ . . . ]. [They do not want to stay] in those horrible apartment buildings [ . . . ] within four walls. It is logical [that under these circumstances they do not want to stay at home]. [Under these circumstances] what is the [only] freedom that she can choose? work. However, [this is just] because everything [in this plan] is wrong. [On the contrary] if a woman is in a comfortable house [in the countryside], with space, with [the possibility of] movement, [ . . . ] [of feeling] loved, fulfilling her role of raising children, then [try to] offer her to work. They go out [to work] for necessity, for obligation, because men abandon them, [ . . . ] [and] because society puts a lot of stupidities in their heads. (p. 143)

He further emphasizes that city life is a life devoid of ethics, which is reason why cities concentrate, in his view, the majority of non-believers (p. 165). The shaykh additionally recommends living in rural areas for the pursue of a simple life; the ultimate goal of being a Muslim (p. 167) is living a life governed by shari'a:

achieving personal satisfaction is simple, you just have to stop doing all the sinful activities. Those [things] do not generate real satisfaction. They can create a little bit of satisfaction, [that is] subjective, [and] sick, but it lasts nothing. (p. 152)

It is a call to completely abandon one's previous life; he believes that the ego is nourished from the longing of the past (p. 97) and posits this as the reason behind people not sticking to this strict lifestyle. With regard to gender, it is also possible that implementing a lifestyle that requires commitment to gender norms that are at odds with those of most of the rest of the society could be better achieved when one is away from, and has lost all contact with, their previous and regular acquaintances; something that occurs, more commonly, among the members of the Haqqani rural communes.

## 9. Concluding Remarks

In this article, I argue that under the leadership of Abdul Rauf Felpete, the Haqqaniyya tries to bring potential devotees with an initial interest in alternative spiritualities towards an Islamic way of life, as interpreted and understood by the socially conservative approach to Islam of the order former's leader Nazim al-Haqqani. Those disciples formerly interested in the New Age represent a wide array of ideological positions, from the more liberal (perhaps numerically better represented) to the quite conservative; and, yet, for all of them, adapting to the lifestyle advocated by the Haqqani shaykh implies major life changes. The text, markedly androcentric, exhorts people to build families as the only possible mechanism available against civilizational collapse. It defends a conservative family ideology that is inspired in the neopatriarchal discourses readily present in the Muslim Mediterranean; in this case, the position on gender adopted by the former head of the Haqqaniyya, Nazim al-Haqqani, works as the main source of inspiration. At the same time, such gender norms are adapted to the Argentinian context of the rapid societal changes that occurred since 2007, time of significant broadening of sexual and gender-related rights. In this sense, Rauf Felpete's ideas can be seen as a practice of counter-discursivity, akin to that enunciated by other conservative religious actors in the region, notably the Christian right. In that sense, the emphasis placed on gender determinism and pronatalism as weapons against a perceived civilisation collapse, makes the positioning of Rauf Felpete's ideas between, on the one hand, the Latin American Christian right, and, on the other, the Middle Eastern Islamic conservatism, particularly unique.

Although the relationship between Rauf Felpete's ideas and Islam seem quite straightforward, the influence exerted by the New Age is far more complex. This distinctive form of Sufi Islamic conservatism evinces a number of features that we can identify in the New Age; first, a *New Age past* for most members, a background of *countercultural zeitgeist* (Chryssides 2007), in that a good number of both, leaders and devotees within the movement, have had, in the past, an approach to religion that can be defined in those terms—a genealogy of spiritual seeking prior to joining the Haqqaniyya; second, the recurrence

of an individualist discourse, particularly used in reference to the moment a person has to make choices that may be deemed unpopular in her/his social *milieu* (whether this is building a family, abandoning a career to stay at home, or joining Islam); third, explored only tangentially in the article, a certain interest in methods of healing that fall beyond the conventional; and fourth, a *countercultural* tone that re-appears in the call to break away from society, escape materialism, and move to the countryside to live in a commune. In terms of gender, the Islamic ideal of female modesty and humility is reinterpreted with a somehow anti-materialist, anti-capitalist twist more typical of New Age fringe groups than of traditional Sufi orders.

Conversely, the movement is certainly *not* represented in the most important features we normally consider as typical of the New Age (see them as defined, for example, by (Sutcliffe 2002)): first, holistic theology with the subsequent emphasis on the spiritual authority of the self—in contrast, the Haqqaniyya is a highly hierarchical group that places in the authority of charismatic individuals, such as the former and current leaders of the order, as well as Rauf Felpete himself, great importance; second, the belief in multiple deities and communication with them through channelling—contrariwise, the Haqqaniyya promotes monotheism emphasising *tawhid*; and third, a tendency towards de-traditionalisation—whereas Rauf Felpete tries with his ideas to do the opposite, to traditionalise, by bringing towards an Islamic field people akin to less conservative lifestyles.

With regard to gender norms, Rauf Felpete's ideas are an attempt to bring the traditional religious discourse of Nazim al-Haqqani into the Latin American context, with a quite straightforward call for gender determinism and pronatalism, as understood by Sufi Islamic conservatives, such as Nazim al-Haqqani's. In this view, the most important role of women is to procreate; they should concentrate in doing just that. Maternity is portrayed as a sacred duty, and such exclusive dedication is not presented as limiting the women's potential by not allowing her to explore other aspects of her identity, but on the contrary, as returning her to a natural, instinctual state of being. Rauf Felpete presents these ideas as if they were not a personal opinion, but rather a matter of fact; he aims at *demonstrating* that the instinct of women *is* childrearing and there is no choice to be made on deciding whether this is the case. In terms of asking women to stay at home, there is also a discursive shift. What is often considered as a restriction, is here presented as a privilege; the stay-at-home woman is said to be a queen, protected by her husband from the vices and perils of society. If she feels uncomfortable in this role, her duty is reinterpreted to become the more empowering *patrona*. All these complex yet subtle rhetorical techniques allow us to conclude that Rauf Felpete's gender ideology is an act of counter-discursivity, an effort to pull people away from the more liberal understanding of gender, and bring them closer to a conservative lifestyle inspired in the Haqqani way of living Islam. As such, ideas shared by neopatriarchal Christian and Muslim ideologues that resonate with the debates on gender of the Latin American contexts (and beyond), are here also crucially discussed; namely, abortion, homosexuality and infidelity.

In this article, I have argued that Rauf Felpete's ideas on gender and the family are as much inspired in the conservative Islamic model that proposed his master Nazim al-Haqqani, as they are a reaction against the deep societal transformations with regard to gender rights that is experiencing Argentina at the time in which he is writing and delivering his sermons. The diversification of family structures is considered an error by the author and an ideal traditional family, monogamous and heterosexual, is presented as a natural structure proper of the *good old days* threatened with extinction. He seems to be aware of the fact that his audience may be reluctant to embrace his conservative ideals, and for this reason, a number of negotiations appear in the text; ideas that are *a must* in Nazim al-Haqqani's discourse are reframed as mere recommendations, a woman that should not work becomes a woman that better does not work; the wife, in theory exclusively a caregiver, can work from home if she wishes so; the husband, in theory exclusively a breadwinner, comforts a crying baby in the middle of the night. The most controversial aspects of Nazim al-Haqqani's views on gender (for example, his stance

against girls' education) is absent in the *Enseñanzas*. However, all of these are discreet concessions, and, overall, the distinction of roles remains clear and gender determinism is overtly defended.

Rauf Felpete's unique way of importing a Sufi conservative religious ideology with a number of selective borrowings from other religious sources opens up a number of interesting questions that will deserve further study. It seems clear that his closest committed disciples share at least to a certain extent his support for a conservative lifestyle. It also seems clear that the book tries to appeal to a public much wider than his current discipleship; a wider audience, possibly interested in countercultural, *seen as oriental*, religious movements and ideas. The text seems to me to be an attempt to bring towards a conservative Sufi way of living Islam people with a diffuse New Age background, and by this, I mean, an interest in alternative spiritualities, broadly defined. However, the precise features of this audience are still unknown. It would be interesting to know who reads the text, what is the reception of the text not only among the followers, but also among the readers. Does this wider readership accept and reproduce the gender values that Rauf Felpete promotes? Do they selectively learn, renegotiate and critically incorporate some of the gender norms contained in the *Enseñanzas*? If so, how? How effective is Rauf Felpete in his project of Islamizing the New Age field in Latin America through the Haqqaniyya? How central is the promotion of a gendered lifestyle to his overall religious project? To what extent does this text need to be approached simply as a utopian model, thus *aspirational* in character? How appealing is for people his model of gender conservatism in the Spanish-speaking world of the early 21st century? Additionally, for those who feel attracted to his call, what do they, exactly, find in the message appealing?

The case of the writings of Abdul Rauf Felpete is an interesting illustration of the adaptations Sufi messages undergo once they travel through different geographies and cultures, trying in as much as they can, to be faithful to the authentic call of the initial message, yet bearing in mind the need to adapt, at least to a certain extent, to the identity of those reading and receiving it. Instances of cultural transmutation are also clear; the text is written clearly responding to the particular circumstances of the Argentinian context in which Rauf Felpete writes, and the conservative Islamic model of gender relations he proposes is used to make sense and respond to the rapid social transformations that the Argentina of the early 21st century is undergoing in terms of gender and family values.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the case of the study of Islam in Latin America, some of the first most significant contributions were contained in the edited volume *Crescent over Another Horizon* (Logroño Narbona et al. 2015); relevant in this volume with regard to the Argentinian context is Montenegro's (2016) contribution. Additionally, of value were the first attempts to survey and map the presence of Islam in the region (Chitwood 2016, 2017). The volume *Islam and the Americas*, edited by Khan (2015) also contains valuable case-studies but mostly concentrates on Central and North America and has a notable specialization on Caribbean communities. A recent journal issue edited by Frank Usarski (2019) about Judaism and Islam in Latin America contains recent research and a number of interesting cases, although the only contribution dealing with Argentina is a comparative perspective of conversion to orthodox Judaism and Islam, see Siebzechner and Senkman (2019a), for a version in Spanish see Siebzechner and Senkman (2019b). Studies about Sufism in Argentina are still rare. A worth mentioning recent contribution is Montenegro's (2020) study of the practice of saint's visitation to an Alawi *wali* by Argentinian devotees of both the Alawiyya and the Haqqaniyya.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, I will refer to the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya of Rauf Felpete simply as the Haqqaniyya. Although devotees of the group favour the use of the term Naqshbandiyya, rather than Haqqaniyya, to refer to themselves, I have chosen the latter to avoid confusion with another Naqshbandi group that also has a transnational presence in the Southern Cone region (i.e., in Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina) as well as in Mexico and Spain; I am referring to a Western Sufi group, less conservative, which consists of

followers of Omar Ali-Shah (Sedgwick 2018, p. 17). The Haqqaniyya I am referring to in this article, is also different from, the more worldwide famous Haqqani network, an Afghani jihadi group with connections with the Taliban. I also would like to note that some authors refer to the group as the Naqshbandiyya Rabbaniyya or as the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya Rabbaniyya, as the complete name of its current leader, the son of Nazim al-Haqqani, is Mehmet 'Adil al-Haqqani al-Rabbani (Sedgwick 2018), whereas others call them Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya or Haqqaniyya (e.g., Piraino 2016). I follow this tradition for the sake of simplicity.

There is a wealth of literature on the group, specially though, on its European and US branches; see for example, Piraino (2016); Yarosh (2019); Nielsen et al. (2006) and Milani and Possamai (2013). Furthermore, in his overview of the Sufi trends and groups that exist in Latin America, Sedgwick (2018, p. 23) gives details of the groups of the Haqqaniyya that exist in Argentina. He also provides an informative account of the order in Mexico, Chile and Brazil.

In this article the terms *liberal* and *conservative* represent the opposite ends of an ideological spectrum on social values. By liberal I mean the inclination to adopt and tolerate change or innovation in reference to social norms. In contraposition, by conservative I mean the position of aversion towards change or innovation in social mores and the holding of traditional (those that have been held by the majority over long time) values.

The majority of Haqqani devotees in Latin America today recognise the authority of Rauf Felpete, although there are still groups with a stronger attachment to the North American Haqqaniyya, mostly Mexican, but not only.

These differences have been partly addressed by Piraino (2016) who has described the different groups that exist in *the West* in his study of the Haqqaniyya's presence online.

The followers of the New Age come from diverse ideological backgrounds; whereas some (the numerical majority) support liberal mores, others, come from conservative (Catholic and non-Catholic) backgrounds. It seems obvious that for those closer to the political Left, adopting the lifestyle proposed by Rauf Felpete implies major changes. However, these forms of Islamic conservatism also imply major life changes for Argentinians ideologically conservative, as one should not assume that the conservatism proposed by different religious traditions is all the same.

Although there is difficulty in having reliable data, this is the number provided by the association of descendants of the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora, [https://web.archive.org/web/20100620004217/http://www.fearab.org.ar/inmigracion\\_sirio\\_libanesa\\_en\\_argentina.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20100620004217/http://www.fearab.org.ar/inmigracion_sirio_libanesa_en_argentina.php), last visited on the 3 September 2021. An interesting recent study of the Arab migrations to Argentina is Balloffet (2020).

Lucía Amparo E. Salinas (2015) as well as Susana Pilgrim (2018) have both conducted ethnographic work with Argentina's communities of Haqqanis; these are the most in-depth studies existing on the group.

Semán and Viotti have explained that, in particular, the Argentinian followers of the New Age that had an interest in *Oriental* religions were ideologically diverse: "*the interest in Eastern religions was heterogeneous and could not be ascribed to a single faction or ideological tendency. It mostly occurred among intellectuals of liberal and socialist origin but also among positivists and Catholics*" (Semán and Viotti 2019, p. 198); some of the Catholics, I would add, could presumably be ideologically more conservative. The coalescence of New Age and conservatism in Argentina is best represented by the conservative former president Mauricio Macri, a public figure that is often considered a New Ager, because to his scarce knowledge of the Catholic religion has to be added his public recognition of sympathizing with the "*Buddhist ideology*" (Macri in Semán and Viotti 2019, p. 193).

This is the word used in this order for referring to religious sermons. Although the most common spelling of this word is by obeying to the modern Turkish form, *sohbet*, throughout the text I use the term *sohbat* (with an -a- instead of an -e-) in respecting the form used by Rauf Felpete in all his written output.

Spanish, like other romance languages, has a clearer binary character than English. Pronouns, adjectives and nouns are all gendered; its plural form is regardless of the gender of the constituents, expressed in masculine form, marked with an -o. The alternative that gained popularity in Argentina and that was from there exported to other parts of the world was the practice of replacing with an -e the original -o; the new variant is neutral in that it neither represents the masculine -o or the feminine -a. Other language-inclusive alternatives have existed for years—language inclusiveness begun in the 1970s in the country, coinciding with the rise of feminism—such as the replacement of the -o with a @ or an -x, but the -e, it is often argued, defies binarism (unlike the @) and it is easier to pronounce (than the -x). Thence, its use quickly gained popularity in other Spanish-speaking countries as well, to the extent that it pushed in 2019 the Royal Spanish Academy, the institution recognised as to be in charge of preserving the normative standards of the Spanish language with safeguarding its *correct* (my emphasis) use, to decide whether the neutral form of plural -e, was to become accepted as correct—to which the Academy decided against. Despite of this, the use of inclusive language has become increasingly common, and specially in Argentina, it has been normalised in a number of mediums, from television, to social media.

The same seems to be the case in the Haqqaniyya in North America, where women also participate in the gender segregated rituals but are never granted leadership roles (Hermansen 2006).

I am not aware of any existing research dealing with the gender dimension of the readership of Sufi literature. That women outnumber men as readers of Sufi texts is an impression I have personally obtained over the years spent conducting research among Sufis, but further research would be needed to obtain a realistic picture.



- 15 An interesting study of gender complementarianism in Islam explores the dynamics of this form of gender determinism in Indonesian households, with interesting parallels to the case here presented, see [Rinaldo \(2019\)](#).
- 16 The term New Age encompasses a vast plurality of religious phenomena and as such, the New Age ideas on politics reflect this diversity, although it has been agreed that a number of core themes as well as some direction in the political direction is identifiable. The first to note this was [Kyle \(1995\)](#), whose study on the political views among New Agers is still today relevant, partly because the interplay between New Age religion and politics, remains largely understudied, with a few but notable exceptions ([Höllinger 2004](#); [Fonneland 2017](#)). In Argentina, the New Age field was at the same time, autonomous from, yet to a certain extent influential to a range of leftist political movements in the last quarter of the 20th century ([Manzano 2017a, 2017b](#)).
- 17 An example would be the rocketing numbers of individual support to and participation in NGOs since the 1990s; an example of how people feel as having the power to exert change in realities that are much larger than themselves ([Franck 1999](#)).
- 18 Interview given to the Argentinian Newspaper *La Voz*, on the 14 July of 2014; see, <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/supletemas/guardianes-de-la-ultima-frontera/>, last accessed on the 10 January 2022.
- 19 He has explained in an interview he has given to the Argentinian Newspaper *La Nación* on the 26 December of 2004 that he is a “huesero” (bonesetter), not a commonly used term, technique of bone accommodation he ensures has learnt from his grandmother, see, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/opinion/rauf-abdul-felpete-el-sheik-sufi-de-la-patagonia-nid666031/>, last accessed on the 10 January 2022.
- 20 See [https://www.rabbaniargentina.com.ar/?page\\_id=238](https://www.rabbaniargentina.com.ar/?page_id=238), last accessed on the 10 January 2022.
- 21 I am not here interested in discussing whether this is actually the case, but rather in noticing that Islam is often invoked by Muslims to legitimize their actions in relation to the realm of marriage. In this approach to Islam that emphasizes the dialectal nature of religious praxis, we may want to note that, marriage is not explicitly celebrated in the Qur’an but what it appears is a rather vaguer encouragement to mating for procreation, with perhaps the exception of sura 30:21: “Another of His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquillity: He ordained love and kindness between you. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect”. The verse is used sometimes by Muslims today to sustain the idea of the sacredness of marriage in Islam. Among the examples of the notion of mating I consider 7:189 (“It is He who created you all from one soul, and from it made its mate so that he might find comfort in her: when one lies with his wife and she conceives a light burden, going about freely, then grows heavy, they both pray to God, their Lord, ‘if You give us a good child we shall certainly be grateful’”), and 42:11 (“The Creator of the heavens and earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves—and for the animals too—so that you may multiply. There is nothing like Him: He is the All Hearing, the All Seeing”) the most illustrative. Moreover, there is in far more abundance verses indicating the modes of behaviour appropriate in relation to one’s wives; on these regulatory aspects of behaviour related to marriage there is plenty of verses, see for example, 2: 187, 2: 221–223, 2: 226, 4: 3–4, 4: 19–25, 23: 5–7, 24: 3, 33: 37, 70: 29–31, 58: 1–4. Hadith literature is also abundant with indications of this kind. (All the Qur’anic quotations in this article have been translated into English, and for that I have used the 2015 edition of the English translation by ([Abdel Haleem 2015](#))).
- 22 Examples of religious literature in the English language asserting the *half of your religion* injunction are manifold, here just a few: [Maqsood \(1995\)](#); [Ahmad \(2018, p. 3\)](#). For academic works discussing the directive, see for example, [al-Faruqi \(1985\)](#); [Fluehr-Lobban \(2004\)](#) and [Hassouneh-Phillips \(2001\)](#).
- 23 Perhaps in line with the encouragement provided by the Qur’an in verse 24:32: “Marry off the single among you, and those of your male and female slaves who are fit [for marriage]. If they are poor, God will provide for them from His bounty: God’s bounty is infinite and He is all knowing”.
- 24 Arabic word used to refer to an Islamic Sufi Order.
- 25 This is also the case, although quite informally conducted, among members of the Haqqaniyya in other parts of the world, as well as in the transnational order of Moroccan origin Qadiriyya Budshishiyya.
- 26 When looked comparatively, the ideas on the family of the Haqqani shaykh are quite similar to those of the Catholic and Evangelical Latin American right (see, for example, the studies of [Carbonelli et al. 2011](#); [Jones and Cunial 2012](#)). What seems to be in sharp contrast with Rauf Felpete’s position is not the ideas of Christian leaders but of devotees, with a number of studies indicating a wide ideological gap between leadership (leaders and small groups of Christian religiously pious activists) and discipleship, in ideological terms ([Bonnin 2009](#)). Preliminary observations of Haqqanis in Latin America, especially in urban settings, also seem to indicate that liberal attitudes are more common among them but further ethnographic research would be needed to verify those claims.
- 27 In 2011, the percentage of married people per 1000 inhabitants in Argentina was of 3.16, whereas in France was 3.58 (2012), in Spain was 3.53 (2012), in the UK 4.46 (2010) and in the US 6.8 (2012), <https://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/People/Marriage,-divorce-and-children/Marriages-per-thousand-people>, last accessed on the 10 September 2021.
- 28 For example see [Felitti’s \(2011\)](#) study. At the same time, there is a widespread similar approach to the diversification of family structures among Islamic preachers (not only Sufis). Although one might suppose that a wide array of positions appears represented within the field of Sufi family ideologies, they have never been systematically studied. In the broader Islamic field, see the remarkably similar approach that sees the diversification of family structures as a deterioration of the institution of the family in, for example, Yusuf [al-Qaradawi’s \(2019, p. 159\)](#) approach.

- See for example, the interesting discussion of the transitioning of Arab families towards a more diverse model of family, eloquently presented by [Courbage and Todd \(2014, chp. 3\)](#).
- For Christian family ideologues of the 19th century, time in which industrialization brought about major changes to the family structures of some Western European countries, see [Van Osselaer and Maurits \(2020\)](#).
- Although debates both in the streets and at a level of Parliament have existed since 2005, when a nation-wide organization called the Campaign in Favour of Legal, Safe and Free Abortion Rights was founded.
- Illustrative in this regard is the video of the shaykh condemning abortion in an interview he gave to a local newspaper and that has been posted in Facebook by his followers: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1764544513589431>, last accessed on the 27 December 2021.
- The anti-modern stance of the Guenonian philosophy has been masterly analysed by [Sedgwick \(2009\)](#).
- For a discussion of diverse historical contexts in the Muslim world (mostly in the Middle East, though) and on how they have changed over time with regard to family values and approaches to gender, see [Kandiyoti \(2008\)](#). The use of the family (and of religion) as the sources of salvation from a perceived as a civilizational collapse, is neither unique to the Middle East, nor to Islam. A number of Christian churches across the globe conceive religiously sanctioned notions of home, family and domesticity as a cure to what they consider is a political and moral chaos pervading their societies (e.g., [Ellis and Ter Haar 1998](#); [Newell 2005](#)). In the nineteenth century the cult of domesticity emerged, the idealization of the home as a safe and calm space separated from a perceived as dangerous external world. This makes sense, as some studies have noted, before the nineteenth century there was very little that could be categorised as homey about most houses ([Van Osselaer and Maurits 2020](#)). Rather than places for relax, they were production and consumption sites, and thus rather crowded and busy. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the household ceased to be a production centre, especially in industrialized and urban areas, both in Europe and in the Middle East. Tucker's study of nineteenth-century Egypt suggests that the strongly interventionist state policies of the Muhammad 'Ali period resulted in women's recruitment into public works, state-run industries, and expanding sectors of health and education, moment in which ideas of womanhood and an elaboration of the cult of domesticity became prominent. For more information on this particular case-study see [Tucker \(1979, 1985\)](#).
- Although, it is also worth noticing that this is the same person that encourages women to cease to work outside of the home to focus on the caregiving of family members; thence, contradictorily enough, who is to fulfil the breadwinner role if she has to stay at home?
- Germany and Spain are the countries where the largest continental European groups are based. They also have some of the most conservative members.
- Instances in which there is an explicit discussion of the issue of men being unfaithful to women appear in the following pages of the *Enseñanzas*: 16, 23, 70, 71, 96, 140, 152.
- Further information on the numerous Campaigns against Gender Violence undertaken by the Argentinian Government can be found in the government's website, please see, [https://www.argentina.gob.ar/generos/plan\\_nacional\\_de\\_accion\\_contra\\_las\\_violencias\\_por\\_motivos\\_de\\_genero](https://www.argentina.gob.ar/generos/plan_nacional_de_accion_contra_las_violencias_por_motivos_de_genero), last accessed on the 10 January 2022.
- Although this data does not include the informal work sector, that increases heavily the proportion of women who actually work in most countries; still, Argentina has female participation parameters that are much higher than those in most Muslim-majority countries, and specially in those Middle Eastern countries where the leadership of the Haqqaniyya has a presence, namely, Turkey and Syria. <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/indicators/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS/rankings>, last accessed on the 11 September 2021.
- It is known that in the US the expectation of conforming to conservative gender norms by American Sufi women causes oftentimes discomfort and that when *Western* women have visited shrines in the Muslim world they have been accorded privileges not granted to other women ([Hermansen 2006](#)).
- It is also known that the suggestion of women staying at home is equally difficult to implement in Europe, where the majority of those female followers that decide to obey to those recommendations are mostly those living in Haqqani communes in the countryside, e.g., in Andalusia, Spain, there is one of the largest Haqqani communities in the world in which women conform to these traditional role models.
- Although Muslims supportive of the idea of the motherhood's sacred character look at the Qur'an for legitimising their views, the verse most often used in this regard speaks of the need to honour mothers (31:14), yet nothing specific about their sacredness is stated.
- In the year 1975, the average number of children per woman in the Muslim world was of 6.8 children, in 2005 was 3.5, with some countries having very low rates, such as Azerbaijan with a rate of 1.7, and others in which the fertility rates are similar than those in France, such as Iran and Tunisia ([Courbage and Todd 2014, p. xii](#)).
- Quite famously, anti-gender activists belonging to evangelical Christian groups burnt an effigy of Judith Butler in Sao Paulo in 2017, see the protests in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhlDqBM9vYU>, last accessed on the 8 September 2021.
- This attitude against pre-primary education is also common, it seems, among at least some of the Haqqani devotees both in Europe and in Latin America; it also resonates more widely with societal attitudes towards pre-primary education in the Middle East, where Nazim al-Haqqani comes from. Correlative to their respective GDPs, the Middle East, with the exception of Algeria, has

among the lowest enrolments in pre-primary education in the world, see <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRE.ENRR>, last accessed on the 1 September 2021. Algeria's rapid expansion of pre-primary education is considered a success, a country whose pre-primary education gross enrolment went from 2% in 1999 to 79% in 2011 (El-Kogali and Krafft 2015, p. 78). For further information about the relative lack of pre-primary education in the region see (El-Kogali and Krafft 2015, chp. 2).

- 46 The data (in USD) can be obtained by dividing the Annual average household income into 12 months, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/argentina/annual-household-income-per-capita>, last accessed on the 25 January 2022.
- 47 Argentina being a country worldwide known for their close relationship with psychoanalysis and with high rates of people in therapy, especially in larger cities.
- 48 The case contradicts the common view that suggests that charismatic religious leaders are blindly followed and never questioned; this time, the audience seems to have reacted with uproar.

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