

Tazeen M. Ali. (2022) *The Women's Mosque of America: Authority and Community in US Islam*. New York: NYU Press, \$30.00 (Paperback), 288pp, ISBN 9781479811304

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In her eponymous book, Tazmeen M. Ali presents the Women's Mosque of America (WMA) as a special reimagining of the mosque that provides an alternative to patriarchal ethos by amplifying women's voices and promoting their religious authority (2022: 4). Through this reimagining, the author traces the contributions of key WMA leaders and congregants toward century-long debates around the mosque, which has "never been fixed in meaning" (2022: 5). For Ali, neither has women's place within the mosque. The WMA "promotes an explicitly gendered model of religious authority ... that does not replicate existing forms of male authority" (2022: 12), breaking from these by centering women's lived experiences. These experiences are sites of Islamic knowledge which would, in a male-centered environment, be left untapped. Using Talal Asad's concept of Islam as "a discursive tradition to theorize Islamic authority as historically contingent and embodied within interpretative communities" (2022: 13), Ali departs from an understanding of that authority as conceived within the boundaries of language, formal religious qualification and geography. The WMA is described as a vehicle not for discrediting such credentials, but rather for illuminating where these preclude inclusivity in US Muslim communities (2022: 18).

Throughout the first two chapters of *The Women's Mosque of America*, Ali sets the scene for the WMA's formation, locating it within the history of women's Qur'anic interpretations in the US. This history is not without controversy. Guiding us through the roadblocks faced by founder M. Hasna Maznavi and other leaders, Ali highlights how the WMA has supported the legality and validity of woman-led Jummah, employing the aforementioned traditional modes of Islamic authority to open new horizons for others (2022: 37). She dissects criticisms directed toward the WMA during its initial stages of conception, including concerns based on scripture, Ummatic division and potential for overlapping religious commitments (2022: 46). There is a clear pluralistic approach here, where the WMA's existence is not a replacement but an expansion, directing "community conversations on Islamic authority and more broadly on the form and function of mosques in meaningful ways" from the edge of the mainstream (2022: 48–49). Hence, Ali argues that – as a new and often, for participants, supplementary institution – the WMA is transitional in that it functions to complement and enrich instead of to supplant other mosques (2022: 64).

Leaders at the WMA deal with criticism which suggests otherwise by situating themselves “squarely within Islamic history”, all while complicating some of its legacies (2022: 72). Doing so is not straightforward, as the Islamic tradition and the lineage of women-only mosques they hail from “are mediated into the present by custodians ... who decide which aspects of the past are nonessential ... and, therefore, may be deleted or deemphasized” (2022: 73). As a result, claims to Islamic authenticity and historical continuity are as integral to the WMA’s project as they are contestable. Conversely, perceived association or complicity with Western views can work as a means of delegitimization, leading to a need to compensate by leaning into tradition. In response, the WMA combines elements old and new to become part of a history that allows it to wield practical and corrective influence. The WMA congregants interviewed by Ali, while locating themselves within the Islamic tradition, “reject an authenticity gap between the ‘Islamic East’ and Muslims in the US”. This allows them to consider women who do not appeal to cultural norms in the community “as legitimate figures of religious authority”, elevating their interpretative and lived insights (2022: 77). Non-scholars, non-Arabic speakers, and racially marginalized participants stand to benefit from this; Ali builds that in using tradition to break from it, the WMA indicates “how women’s experiences can serve as authoritative” in the context of a mosque (2022: 96).

Ali’s third and fourth chapters delve further into how women’s lived experiences are conferred with this authority. Part of such authority, for WMA congregants, comes from female-embodied experiences with “subjects such as sexual violence, marriage, and motherhood” (2022: 111). These become a site for the cultivation of religious knowledge, as well as a basis for interaction with scripture and community that is vulnerable, nurturing, and empathetic (2022: 116). As Ali states, the WMA hence solicits “a particularly gendered performance of emotion” and difference from which it garners legitimacy, as difference is the basis for its claim to fill a gap in Islamic knowledge and worship in the US (2022: 122). Further discussing the mosque’s distinct model of authority, Ali gives weight to the WMA’s dedication toward intersectionality and interracial solidarity. As a multi-racial and diverse congregation, the WMA is a space where non-white women can draw commonality from their “mutually conflicting relationship[s] with American whiteness” (2022: 154). Constructing parallel histories of subordination as women and as racialized subjects and then calling for care and activism from the intersection of these parallel lines, Ali shows how the WMA identifies multiple sites of oppression from where its congregants can engage in uniquely – and religiously – informed critique and mobilize political action (2022: 171).

Part of such political action, to which Ali turns to in her final chapter, is the building of community via interfaith solidarity and intrafaith inclusivity. Familiarity with marginalization in religious spaces is a powerful source of

common ground that draws women across faiths to the WMA, as is evidenced by Ali's discussions with non-Muslim attendees (2022: 192). Building coalitions between them and "solidarity amongst women across religious, racial, and ethnic difference is one of the WMA's values" (2022: 200). Nevertheless, Ali cautions that interfaith community-building does not guarantee Muslim women's acceptance by the wider US public, and pluralism can obscure Christian hegemony over religious minorities in the WMA's American context (2022: 203). She emphasizes the importance of the WMA's simultaneous commitment to intrafaith inclusivity, providing materials used by various branches of Islam and not associating itself with a single one (2022: 219). This promotes an atmosphere of unity among the American Muslim women in attendance which facilitates a chorus in calls for social justice (2022: 228). Hence, WMA congregants can come together in using their experiences with Islamophobia to mediate interfaith engagement and navigate the challenges of pluralism – but should be careful not to give the latter precedence over the former.

Ali's account of the WMA is a comprehensive case study which, despite the author's clear respect for the project, does not evade the critical. She understands the WMA as, beyond itself as an institution, a discursive reconstitution of women's place within religious space. This is not a top-down project. Leaders and congregants both engage here, with differing motivations but compatible experiences stemming from their womanhood (2022: 232). The accounts of these women are embedded fluidly into the book, given authority in and of themselves, similarly to how the experiences of women are given weight in the WMA. Perhaps another similarity between the WMA's approach and Ali's writing is some reluctance to comprehensively engage with the feminist question, which lingers in each chapter but does not stay long. While this question could have merited its own section, its recurrent presence throughout the book nevertheless reaffirms its importance and reflects its unfixed nature. *The Women's Mosque of America* succeeds in establishing that "the American Muslim women at the WMA are worthy of our attention as legitimate actors who intervene in critical debates over authority, religious community, and national belonging" (2022: 236). It builds promising ground for a reconsideration of Islamic women's religious authority in the US; one that positions them as agents of that authority, not leaves in its changing winds.

References

- Ali, T.M. (2022) *The Women's Mosque of America: Authority and Community in US Islam*. New York: NYU Press.