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Marion Holmes Katz, *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice*, Columbia University Press, 2014, 417 pp., \$95.00 US (hbk), ISBN 978023116266.

In her extraordinary new book, Marion Holmes Katz examines an interesting question: how does a *ḥadīth* that records a general prohibition against excluding women from attending congregational prayer in mosques come to be interpreted as a ban on women's access to them?

In *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice*, Katz traces the historical trajectory of a debate, based on several notable *aḥadīth*, which evolved from a moral exhortation granting women access to mosques to a legal prohibition on women entering them. To this legal debate, Katz adds the historically-grounded but generally incorrect perception among scholars and Western travelers that women in Arab-speaking Muslim communities were not present in mosques. The result is a rich, in-depth, and often amusing analysis of legal debates and social records of women's mosque attendance from the eighth to the early twenty-first century.

Through the analysis of a wide-ranging and immense volume and expanse of primary source material, Katz examines the multiple and shifting contexts that give meaning to this question, shaping and reshaping it in manifold ways, through numerous geographical sites, different temporal periods, social milieus, and even architectural spaces.

The question of women's access to mosques evokes its own further queries: Did the opinions that arose from these debates comprise a moral exhortation or a legal ruling? To which women did they apply? Who enforced them, rulers or husbands? Was it meritorious for women to go to mosques or, to the contrary, was it a cause for social disorder, moral corruption, and chaos, in other words, *fitna*? Did the decadence of the time after the Prophet's death alter the restriction on prohibiting women from attending mosque? Finally, to the extent that women did attend mosques, specifically where in the mosques did they go? Did they have their own spaces or did they mix with the men? What exactly did the women do in the mosques? Besides prayer, did women engage in other activities? Were those activities sacred or profane? Katz gives us insight into each of these questions.

Katz sets out to "gather and evaluate the evidence for women's activities in (or their absence from) mosques in the period between the generation of the Prophet and the modern Islamic revival" (2-3). She aims to analyze the relationship between jurists' debates on the lawfulness of women's presence in mosques and women's documented participation in mosque activities. For scholars of the social history of the Arabic-speaking Muslim world

and of Islamic jurisprudence, this study is significant because it gives us a sense of “the normative assumptions about gender” playing out through these debates (3). Juridical opinions, exhortations, and rulings about women’s access to and participation in mosques can also reveal underlying beliefs or attitudes about women’s mobility and visibility in society, which can, in turn, shed light on our understandings of their roles in the community, their status in the family, and their value in ritual participation (3).

Of this project’s boundaries, Katz tells us up front: “The scope of this study is broad, yet also limited” (8). Not only does she restrict her investigation to Arab-speaking Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, North Africa and Andalusia (with some attention to the Ottoman Turks), she also refrains from delving into the issue of reliability in the *ahādīth* she examines, choosing instead to triangulate the legal debates about women’s access to mosques with social historical texts. Even as she limits the substance of her question to women’s access to mosques, Katz records the different ways that women used mosques, both sacred and profane. In addition to prayer, women attended mosque for socializing, attending festivals, selling goods, seeking redress for legal disputes, and even participating in postchildbirth rituals. With the last point, Katz also highlights the gendered status of the mosque. One of the important findings emerging from this book is that women used mosques for different purposes than men did. Katz notes that scholarly attention to women’s presence in mosques falls short where it only considers mosque usage through male-centric practices; it fails to capture the important ways women were present in mosques (7).

The narrow attention to women’s access to mosques leaves aside related questions of women’s involvement in the foundation (or patronage) of mosques, women’s religious and scholarly authority, and their ritual leadership. The issue of access to mosques as well relates to contemporary debates, for instance, about whether women can lead prayers. This study, nonetheless, gives scholars working on these related topics, or in different geographical regions or *madhāhib* not studied here, much substantive material with which to start. Katz also provides a fine methodological paradigm, a roadmap, of sorts, for other such studies that marry jurisprudential debate or normative discourse with recorded social practice.

In the first chapter, entitled “Women’s Mosque Attendance as a Legal Problem,” situated over a vast period of twelve centuries, from the eighth to the nineteenth century CE, Katz studies what legal scholars of the four primary Sunni *madhāhib*, plus the *Zāhirīs*, considered to be exemplary social practices for women. In this long chapter, almost one hundred pages, comprising a third of the book’s substantive pages, Katz reveals jurists’ complex understandings of women’s roles as they debated whether women could be prohibited from attending mosques. These exchanges show that Islamic legal scholars did not issue rulings based on a view of “women” as a monolithic category. To the contrary, one of the key dimensions of the juristic debates was to *which women* were the rulings referring. Were they talking about young women, old women, married or single, unaccompanied, with other women, or chaperoned by a male relative? If old, then did they mean post-menopausal or simply non-virgins? What about women who never married? Women’s age, status, moral comportment, sexual or aesthetic allure, we learn, were all being considered and at times debated by the Islamic jurists at one point or another. Indeed, Katz’s tracking of the legal debates also divulges a fascinating malleability in the fundamental need to control women’s mobility and visibility. Not only does this need change over time, it also varies from one geographical location to another. This point of contention—to which women do the jurists refer—speaks to a broad variety of practices as well as interpretations of the scholarly sources. Of course the need to control women’s movements also relates to issues of

women's veiling in public spaces, women's seclusion, and gender segregation in Muslim-majority societies, which are not the immediate focus of this book.

Then there is Katz's excavation of *fitna*, a complex term that scholars frequently associate with the chaos or disorder brought about by women's sexual allure. While Katz tells us that there is no complete history of the concept (3), in this work, she goes a long way toward developing this crucial concept of Islamic jurisprudence and social thought. We learn, for instance, that the issue of *fitna* was not one with which early Mālikī jurists were deeply concerned, at least not until the question of whether this was a basis for slowly drawing parameters around women's right to attend mosque was raised by Ibn Rushd in the eleventh century CE (25). Katz notes that Ibn Rushd's invocation of this term—as a way to describe the potential for social disorder by the mixing of unrelated men and women—was an innovation by this judge and imam of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Prior to his usage, *fitna* referenced “political strife and religious schism” (25).

Indeed, the concept of *fitna* evolves to replace the question of which women the *aḥādīth* on women's access to mosques refer to. The answer lies in the understanding of what, or rather, who arouses *fitna*. Thus, alongside the development of *fitna* to designate women's capacity for sexual temptation and the concomitant demise of social order, we learn that the *aḥādīth* banning women from mosques can apply to any woman whom the jurists find evoking allure. The young and beautiful, to be sure, but the bejeweled, perfumed, and otherwise adorned women who attract men are all portents of *fitna* and proscribed by jurists, depending on place and time, of course. And so, the women to whom the *aḥādīth* refer come to signify any woman whose presence could stir sexual desire.

Readers who are familiar with the scholarship on women and gender in Muslim-majority societies will find, in some sections of this book, a dialogue with social historians like Leila Ahmed.¹ Katz cites Ahmed's work as a central interlocutor, whose earlier observation that women's presence in mosques flagged after the Prophet's death is tested here. In addition, this book is in conversation in important ways with other scholarly works, like that of Fatima Mernissi, whose own jurisprudential quest to understand the *ḥadīth*, “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity,” a quarter of a century ago informed her pioneering research.² Just as Mernissi's work is foundational for its sociological approach to Islamic jurisprudence, Katz's is also at the cutting-edge for representing a new stage of scholarship on women and gender studies in Muslim societies, one that places juristic legal debates in dialogue with social historical findings like those of Ahmed's.

The important legal debates from the first chapter are situated, in the second chapter, in what can be discerned from the evidence of practice as distilled from the social history of the region. Entitled, “Reconstructing Practice,” Katz addresses social practice, again over a vast geographical expanse through twelve centuries. The chapter is divided regionally and temporally, based on available historical documents on Iraq, Spain and North Africa, Cairo, Syria, Jerusalem, and Ottoman Istanbul. Katz highlights, often through charming descriptive anecdotes, the evidence for women's presence in mosques. As she does, she also outlines the normative patterns, agendas, or assumptions underlying the stories, whether they present the prospect of separate women's quarters in mosques (Iraq), the vibrant presence of women in mosques (Cairo), or the gathering of coed audiences in mosques to listen to preachers

¹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

² Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1991).

(Syria). The observations that women were not allowed in mosques, as recorded by European travelers in Ottoman Turkey, tell us something about the biases and presumptions of their authors. Katz notes that such categorical statements reveal more about the “orientalist attitudes” of colonial administrators who sought to justify the violence of colonialism with a benevolent civilizing mission: “women’s lack of access to mosques is explicitly interpreted as a sign of subordination, and the subordination of women in turn is explicitly interpreted as a sign of the inability of Muslim peoples to lead themselves into freedom and progress” (176).

The third chapter provides a fascinating case study in which women’s entry into mosques was contested and debated. Entitled, “Debating Women’s Mosque Access in Sixteenth-Century Mecca,” this chapter balances the breadth and scope of the first two chapters with the specificity of a memorable instance of restricting women’s access to mosques. With rich historical material complemented by corresponding jurisprudential debates, Katz reconstructs the story of Meccan authorities’ decision to prevent women from attending the Sacred Mosque during nighttime hours. Katz explores the historical and political context from which the policy to ban women from the mosque arose through a unique document, a personal account written by an Egyptian-born legal scholar who had settled in Medina, Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ghaffar. After presenting a brief biographical sketch of the author, whose “main focus was on mathematics and its application in Islamic law” (201), Katz mines his manuscript, the original still preserved in Cairo, for all that it tells us about the contest over women’s access to the Sacred Mosque. The inimitability of the document is found not solely in the account it provides, but rather in the author’s ability to combine a detailed narrative of the controversy with transcriptions of key documents and then vigorously advance his own novel legal argument opposing the ban.

Finally, the last chapter, simply entitled, “Modern Developments,” offers an insight into contemporary debates. Drawing on more recent historical records from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Katz directs the contestations over women’s access to mosques to current questions, giving the issue renewed significance and consequence. By the early twentieth century, the tide had turned against preventing women from mosque attendance toward greater access to mosques. This chapter does not assume a causal relationship between legal dictums and social practice, but rather “a complex interrelationship between the two” (289) that can be better extrapolated through empirical research. The book contains no concluding chapter, but this final chapter, drawing out the contemporary implications of women’s access to mosques over the centuries and through different regions, serves readers to better understand the significance this study holds for current research around issues of women’s rights in Muslim-majority societies and beyond.

The book is remarkable for the evidence Katz presents from jurisprudential and historical records. Laying out, as she calls it, her “necessarily fragmentary assemblage of information about women’s usage of mosques” (14), Katz’s findings are nonetheless impressive and far-reaching. Throughout the book, Katz shows that “legal norms were in a more complex dialogic relationship with actual behavior” (10) and ultimately argues that legal debates and associated rulings were not simply the dictates of male jurists delivered from on high, but rather, they were reactive, responding to social practices of the times (198). This is important, not only for revealing the gendered dynamics involved in Islamic rulemaking, but also for highlighting the malleable nature of Islamic principles, themselves. Overall, Katz’s findings provide jurisprudential and historical evidence that the flexible character of Islamic legal rulings is tied to the exigencies of time and place, resulting in a

fluidity and dynamism in rulemaking, similarly noted by scholars working in different regions, topics, and even disciplines.³

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³ See for instance: Wael Hallaq, "What is Shari'a?" in *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law*, Volume 12 (2005-2006), eds. Eugene Cotran and Martin Lau (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 151-80; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993); and Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

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