

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

October 6, 2015

Amanullah De Sony, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, Bloomsbury, 2015, i-x + 233 pp., \$37.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781472587145.

De Sony's engaging study, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, provides a timely addition to the emergent field of masculinity studies. As the first monographic book on masculinity in Islam, it also contributes to the growing number of studies exploring the intersections between religious identity and masculine gender. Indeed, De Sony's book illustrates how the study of masculinity from the perspective of Islam opens up new vistas on the complex ways in which religion, culture, and politics shape gendered identities in Muslim societies. The "crisis" to which De Sony alludes in the title of his book concerns the contemporary phenomenon by which "theocratic Islamisms" have come to idealize and propagate an "entrenched masculinity defined through familial dominance and shows of power, sometimes expressed as militarism" (1), as the sole authentic, acceptable paradigm of Muslim manhood. This situation has created a crisis in Muslim communities both for Muslim women feminists who are seeking greater gender equality and for Muslim men who do not fit the "cookie cutter" patriarchal model. The author explores these issues by evaluating "constructions of masculinities in Islamic traditions, chiefly the Qur'an, and the impact such notions have on the lived realities of Muslim men (and women)" (5). De Sony does a fine job in illuminating the role of a foundational text such as the Qur'an in shaping notions of masculinity while at the same time avoiding over-determining scripture's role in this process. Equally, in order to avoid the pitfalls of generalizing about Muslim men worldwide, he focuses his analysis on case studies from the Indian subcontinent between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

In terms of his approach, it is important to note that De Sony self-identifies from the onset as "a Muslim believer" (7) and makes it clear that he wishes "to trace—but not enter—a theological debate" (5) about Islamic masculinity. He does not wish to "defend or apologize on behalf of a religious culture" but rather begins from the supposition that "Islamic expressions of masculinity are diverse" and that "lived gendered experiences are manifold" (5). In his analysis he employs a "multiform approach that is historical and metainterpretive." He reads the silences, reads against the grain, and reads negatively "to expose what is hidden, what is operative but not acknowledged in terms of lived masculinities within Islam" (5). He also takes inspiration from gender and religious studies scholars such as Mary Keller, who study how identity markers of race, ethnicity, and gender inform religious identity, and from masculinities studies theorists who argue that masculinity

is dependent upon the premise that it has an opposite or counterpart, normally understood to be the female sex. Whereas in western secular societies the crisis of masculinity stems from feminist questioning of traditional forms of male power and from non-heterosexual forms of masculinity, De Sony asserts that in Islam “the crisis of masculinity is predicated in a different way” (11) around a “constellation” of others—women, God, and the “West.” In other words, De Sony seeks to illustrate through his analysis of the Qur’an and his case studies that Muslim masculinities define themselves not only in relation to women but also in relation to God and to the non-Islamic world (11).

De Sony develops these ideas in six chapters. Chapter 1, “The Knot Mawdudi Tied,” discusses the enormous influence that Mawdudi’s ideas on political Islam had in shaping an Islamic masculinity in India and Pakistan. He begins with a discussion of the key events in Mawdudi’s life that informed his political thought, for instance, his imprisonment by the British four times, which not only increased his vehement rejection of western culture but also hardened his convictions regarding the need to establish an Islamic state based on “authentic” Islamic principles. De Sony then argues that the cornerstone of Mawdudi’s model Islamic State was the family unit defined according to strict patriarchal gender roles in which “men are expected to be breadwinners and women the homemakers” (18). The result is a model of Muslim hyper-masculinity in which women owe their husbands or male guardians unconditional obedience. De Sony comes to these conclusions by critically reading Mawdudi’s writings, particularly his seminal book on *Purdah*. Whereas the Pakistani intellectual claimed to write a book delineating the ideal role and status of women, De Sony uses this material to show how in so doing, Mawdudi also constructed an ideal of Islamic masculinity. For instance, the restrictions he imposes upon women, such as forbidding them to work outside the home, and the natural biological debilities he ascribes to them (e.g., according to Mawdudi menstruating, pregnant, and lactating women are incapable of clear rational thought) are lacunae that must be filled by men. De Sony further demonstrates how Mawdudi promoted his ideas that the creation of a model Islamic society rested upon the institution of marriage in which men and women perform their gender roles to perfection using two strategies. First, Mawdudi made effective use of God talk, which facilitated a rhetorical slippage whereby arguing against his model of the family was tantamount to arguing against God himself. Second, he constantly contrasted this Islamic utopia with the worst examples of a debased western society riddled with pornography, divorce, venereal diseases, and wanton sex. De Sony concludes that any discussion of Islamic masculinities must contend with the gestalt that Mawdudi created.

Chapter 2, “Feminists’ Nonothering Hermeneutics,” analyzes the challenges facing Muslim women feminists who aim to demonstrate that they can be both pro-family and in support of women’s agency (56). Here too De Sony is careful to illustrate the diversity of opinion, pointing out that they are “not a monolithic bunch” (59) and that some, notably Amina Wadud, do not feel comfortable using the label “feminist.” Rather, she defines her position as “pro-faith, pro-feminist” and elaborates theological theories about gender in order to challenge patriarchy. He observes two methods of Muslim women feminists: self-reflection and critical engagement with their distinct individual circumstances, and reinterpretation of the Qur’an and other religious texts. At the same time, he points out the limitation of these debates to the realm of heterosexual Muslim masculinity since it is this form of masculinity that is most responsible for women’s subordination.

Regarding the first method, he analyzes examples of the “personalized scholarship” of Muslim feminists as a “hermeneutic for understanding and shaping Islamic tradition” (59), drawing upon examples from the lives and writings of women from Pakistan and elsewhere,

such as Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and slain Pakistani president Benazir Bhutto. Muslim women feminists such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas combine both methods by writing about their own experiences and by engaging in a “hermeneutics without hegemony.” Thus against traditional Islamic masculinist claims that women should not participate in politics, Wadud reinterpreted the Qur’anic story of the Queen of Sheba to argue that scripture did not forbid women from holding political authority over men. Barlas adopts an “ungendering method” of reading the reading the Qur’an in order to neutralize misogynist conceptions (68). A key example is her exegesis of Q 24:30-31, the verse traditionally invoked to impose and justify veiling and segregation upon women. Barlas emphasizes that the verse enjoins modesty on both men and women, and asserts that the essential parts women must cover extend from the bosom to the private parts; i.e., not the head (81). Women Muslim feminists also engage with examples from the prophet Muhammad’s domestic life, arguing that his renowned humility and gentleness contradict hyper-masculine patriarchal constructions of manliness. Significantly, De Sony shows how Muslim women feminists challenge the ways that God and the prophet are used to strengthen and uphold Islamic masculinity and, likewise, expose the manner in which Islamic law is deployed to impose rigid notions of gender identities and roles. He concludes that the scholarship of Muslim feminist women points the way toward reconfiguring Mawdudi’s binary oppositions that depend upon the othering of man and God versus women and the “West.” Significantly, gender equality can be advanced by reorienting Muslim life around submission or surrender, the relationship that both men and women must adopt with respect to God.

Chapter 3, “The Failed Search for a Single Qur’anic Masculinity,” examines the Qur’anic rendering of the lives of four prophets—Adam, Joseph, Muhammad, and Jesus—in order to demonstrate the diversity of models of masculinity in the sacred text. Particularly interesting is De Sony’s identification of the dual aspects of the prophets as prophets and as private men, which reveals “not one ideal Islamic masculinity, but a tableau of exemplary men” (79), many of whom depart from strict patriarchal paradigms and find themselves in a range of situations that do not always reflect idealized families. So, for example, Muhammad’s own family background as an orphan and his relations to his wives undercut conventional images of patriarchy and hyper-masculine aggression; his humility, gentleness, and discretion provide an alternative model of manliness that could be taken as an ideal to be emulated. Another interesting insight from the comparison of Muhammad and Joseph lies in the diverse models of male sexuality: both Muhammad’s sexual potency in the form of multiple marriages and Joseph’s sexual restraint are upheld as exemplary since both were motivated by the submission to God. De Sony makes the important conclusion on the basis of the multiplicity of prophetic heroes mentioned in the Qur’an that “there is no ideal masculinity in Islam” (119). Rather, he emphasizes that submission is the key concept in defining ideal prophethood such that the male prophet’s perfection derives from his relation to God, not from his patriarchal authority over his wives and family.

In Chapter 4, “Mirza Ghalib’s Hedonistic Challenge,” De Sony analyzes the life and writings of one of the greatest poets of Mughal India. The author maps the struggles and challenges Mirza faced as a spiritually devout married Muslim man who had fathered seven children (although all of them died) and who also led a courtier’s life of hedonism, wine drinking, and erotic affairs. Another interesting feature of this chapter is the observation that Mirza Ghalib’s involvement in the heterosexual and homoerotic liaisons that characterized Mughal courtesan culture, together with his participation in the gatherings (*Mushairas*) in which male poets showcased new poems and competed with each other for recognition as

the best poet, offer alternative arenas in which Muslim masculine gender identities are constructed and performed. De Sony sees in Mirza's life a kind of foreshadowing of the predicament that many Muslims experience today as many self-identifying Muslim males feel constrained by Islam and especially by the Islamism propounded by Mawdudi and his ilk. De Sony concludes this chapter with a warning that "strict and constraining definitions of Islamic masculinity like Mawdudi's encourage defection of pious men...who have interests other than war, dominance, xenophobia, and the heteronormative family" (152).

De Sony brings to light further tensions and paradoxes of Islamic masculinities in Chapter 5, "Sufism's Beloved Subversion." Sufism represents an alternative ideal form of masculinity because of the Sufis' exemplary submission and servitude to God. De Sony's analysis offers a nuanced critique of the tendency of some scholars to overstate the association of Sufism with gender egalitarianism and to see in the master-disciple relationship a feminization of the latter. According to De Sony, Sufism indeed undercuts the stereotypical association of masculinity with power because submission and subservience to God are the dominant leitmotifs guiding the Sufi's existence. And yet the Sufi master acquires power and authority precisely because he has mastered submitting himself to God. De Sony also finds in his treatment of master-disciple relations that "in the fluid and ambiguous state of discipleship, passivity and subordination were practiced without fear of humiliation and loss of manliness, indeed, they were valued behaviours" (144) and that none of the participants in such relationships are considered unmanly. In this way he gets beyond the imposition of binary categorizations that would equate any form of manhood not defined in terms of hegemony as somehow feminized.

With regards to the claims of Sufi gender egalitarianism, De Sony furnishes compelling evidence from male Sufi sources that assume that women's gender roles are an obstacle to full time devotion to God and obtaining perfect transcendence. This is especially apparent in his assessment of Sufis such as al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi who "used the ultimate, transcendent submission experience of mysticism not to knock down gender barriers but to reinforce them" (145). We also see further evidence of this in his discussion of sex and marriage, where he observes a pronounced preference for celibacy since, "sex disturbs the pure surrender of the soul" (144). It was also interesting to note that the conceptualization of the Sufi's death as an *'urs* (wedding) between man and the divine implicitly devalues normative marriage between man and woman. De Sony concludes that while Sufism provides a space for men and, to a lesser extent, women to defy certain constraints of legalist Islam, he reminds us that constructing a more fluid masculinity and more egalitarian gender relationships were not the goals of the Sufi mystics (178).

De Sony concludes that his exploration of key figures in the Qur'an and in Indian and Pakistani Islamic history has exposed the tendentiousness and precariousness of Islamic masculinities and has shown that fundamentalist conceptions of Islamic masculinity are not to be understood as the only or the authentic mode of living and performing one's masculinity. He has produced an inclusive and pluralistic vision of Islamic masculinities that accommodates polar opposite exemplars such as Mawdudi and Mirza Ghalib, that argues that the diversity of Qur'anic masculine paradigms must themselves be taken as proof that Islam does not support a single model of masculinity, and which offers a cogent analysis of the multiple positions Muslim women feminists have adopted and the methods they have employed to remain "pro-faith" while debunking the hegemonic discourses of Islamic traditions. By way of a critique, De Sony's analysis of the prophetic models might have included examples of other men whose profiles more closely resemble that of the heteronormative patriarchal models as a way of counterbalancing the alternative and

“dysfunctional” paradigms that he emphasizes. Otherwise it is a beautifully written (apart from a few minor editing errors) and well documented study that should be read not only by those interested in gender in Islam but by anyone interested in gender and masculinity issues more broadly.

Linda G. Jones
Ramon y Cajal Research Professor
Universitat Pompeu Fabra

© 2015: Linda G. Jones

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Jones, Linda G., Review of *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, *SCTIW Review*, October 6, 2015.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/753>.

ISSN: 2374-9288