

RECENSIONI

Masooda BANO & Hilary KALMBACH (eds.), *Women, Leadership, and Mosques. Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012, 581 p. (Women and Gender. The Middle East and the Islamic World).

Combining different methodologies and various disciplinary approaches – e.g. Islamic Studies, Women Studies, Development Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, Religious Studies – this remarkable volume brings together the contributions of several leading international scholars who participated in the homonymous conference (St Anthony's College, Univ. of Oxford, Oct 2009). It aims to describe, document and discuss the changes that have occurred in the last three decades, in both majority and minority contexts, in the sphere of religious Islamic authority – i.e. the mosque and the madrasa – which, as Kalmbach points out in her Introduction, pp. 1-27, embodies the idea of religious authority linked with those activities that require explicitly Islamic knowledge: teaching, preaching, interpreting religious texts, leading worship etc. It is indeed a fact that over the past thirty years many female religious leaders have played a significant role in their communities despite the traditional male primacy, and this increasing ability of Muslim women to exercise Islamic authority deserves scholarly attention.

The volume is organized into three sections according to the different sources and dynamics of the phenomenon considered, rather than to mere geographic distribution.

Section I, entitled “Space for Female Authority: Male Invitation, State Intervention, and Female Initiative” (pp. 31-183), shows how these factors have allowed women to depict religious authority in mosques and madrasas in different contexts and with a variety of typologies; it explores the conscious invitation of the male religious hierarchy in China (Maria Jaschok on the figures of *ahong* and *qingzhen nüsi*), the female agency in creating spaces for female leaders in Morocco (Margaret J. Rausch on the *muršida*), the State sponsorship of female preachers active alongside male colleagues in Turkey (Mona Hassan on the *muftiate*), gender segregation as an “opportunity” in Saudi Arabia (Amélie Le Renard on prominent female preachers recently recognized and integrated by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs), to the case of two of the most influential Šīʿa female scholars or *muḡtabidas* in modern and contemporary Iran, Nuṣrat Amīn, 1886-1983, and Zuhrat Šifatī, b. 1948 (Mirjam Künkler & Roja Fazaeli). The last contribution of the first section is devoted to the international revivalist movement of the “Qubaysiyāt”, having several hundred thousand adherents in Syria and widely spread throughout the Middle East, originating under the guidance of Munīra al-Qubaysī, b. 1933 (Sarah Islam).

Section II, “Establishing Female Authority: Limitations, Spaces, and Strategies for Teaching and Preaching” (pp. 187-362), gives a number of examples of how gendered social norms impact the ability of women; and, on the other hand, how female teachers and preachers take advantage of alternative spaces or new institutions to overcome limitations and constraints. It is shed light on the *ustanis* in Bijnor district in North India (Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffery), and on female leaders in the Netherlands (Nathal M. Dessing), Russia (Nick R. Micinski), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Catharina Raudvere), Switzerland (Petra Bleisch Bouzar), Belgium (Els Vanderwaeren) and Germany (Petra Kuppinger); and finally it examines the continuity of memory connecting Muslim societies to a shared historical past (Matthew Pierce on the authoritative model of Fatima).

The third and final section, “The Impact of Authority on Muslim Women, Muslim Societies, and Conceptions of Islamic Authority” (pp. 365-506), comprises six valuable essays each of which deals with the rich diversity of consequences of female Islamic activism: in Sweden (Pia Karlsson Minganti), Egypt (Hiroko Minesaki), Indonesia (Pieternella van Doorn-Harder), Germany (Riem Spielhaus), North America (Juliane Hammer) and South Africa (Uta Christina Lehmann).

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The conclusive essay by Masooda Bano, “Female Leadership in Mosques: An Evolving Narrative” (pp. 507-533), might be considered the cornerstone of the entire book and would merit more than a word of appreciation. Through the example of the Pakistani leader Umm-i-Hassan, principal of the female madrasa “Ġāmi’a Ḥaḥṣa” in Islamabad, whose teachers and students entered into an armed resistance in 2007, the essay summarizes the emergence of female Islamic authority after nearly ten centuries of exclusion, focusing and debating its three main dimensions: what helped to create a space for female preachers; what factors have enabled them to consolidate their authority; how is this authority being used.

A useful glossary of the “Terms Describing Female Leaders and Leadership” – some of which are used for male leaders and do not have a female equivalent – completes the study. As can be seen from the above description of the contents, this volume, bound to command the attention of a diverse readership, is a varied discussion on a key concept in the study of religions, an effort to weigh up a delicate argument, and a mine of carefully structured and elaborated information.

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