

# Muslim Prayer in American Public Life

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ROSE ASLAN

The volume *The Practice of Islam in America*, edited by Edward E. Curtis, was released in 2017. It was an important work because it was a volume that took American Muslim ritual life as an primary source of study. It helped explain rituals and explored their manifestations in a variety of American Muslim contexts. Since then, there have been very few works on American Muslim ritual life. In the interests of transparency, I should note that both Rose Aslan and I contributed chapters to that volume. Aslan's piece was on prayer, based on the work she was doing for the volume under review. Her monograph is a welcome addition to the exploration of American Muslim ritual life.

Aslan's work is primarily focused on questions of prayer in the context of the United States. It is not about the history or formation of American Muslim identities, although those invariably come up in a text of this nature. As the first book of its kind, there is also an encyclopedic quality to it, where emphasis is on breadth over depth. These are not critiques of the book, but expectation setting as to the work the book does. One of the overall strengths of the book is that it draws on a variety of different sources to create a multidisciplinary exploration

of how prayer functions in the US context. It uses historical documents, survey data, interviews, internet postings, personal experience, and light ethnography. The book is partially historical, with a strong emphasis on the post-9/11 experience, especially in the 2010s, partially sociological, and engages with questions of *fiqh*, theology, and individual meaning-making.

The first chapter is very strong. It introduces to a history of the struggles that Muslims have had with prayer in the US, starting with narratives of enslaved peoples. As with most chapters, there are places where an instructor could bring in more theoretical emphasis depending on the type of course they are teaching. An American religious history course could focus on the normalization of Christianity as an American understanding of religion, or questions of race. Someone focusing on Muslims in the US could focus on the long history of Muslims in the US, and the differentiated treatment of enslaved people and their prayer compared to the deference given to Ambassador Mellimelli by Thomas Jefferson during Ramadan. The chapter sets the terms of the monograph well, stating early that it is invested in *salah/namaz*, as opposed to other types of prayer. It goes through differences between Shi'i and Sunni forms for prayer, without belaboring details. Most significantly, it treats particular Isma'ili prayers in a sophisticated and nuanced way, without dismissing them, or the community, as most of the literature does. Although the author does suggest YouTube videos to show how prayer is performed, I would have liked in text illustrations. This chapter would work well in a variety of classes because it is clear and comprehensive in its introduction to prayer, and illustrations would have elevated the work.

The following chapter involves survey data about American Muslim practices of prayer and makes the linkage between public performance of prayer and Islamophobia. There is some very useful data here that provides a snapshot of American Muslim life. The data itself is well presented and analyzed. However, only 10% of the respondents were African-American, which is a sizable difference from the estimated African-American Muslim population of around 30%. In a chapter focusing on data, I find it notable that there is no discussion as to why that

discrepancy exists and what it means for how the data is interpreted. The use of the data then begins a discussion of the impact of Islamophobia on the public performance of prayer is well-handled, and transitions nicely to the next couple of chapters on media representations of prayer.

If we borrow from peace studies and articulate three forms of violence - direct, structural, and cultural - then it makes sense to look at media as a space for both cultural violence and peace. Aslan divides this work over two chapters between non-Muslim creators and Muslim creators. With this division, there is still some nuance as to how prayer is presented. Muslim consultants are involved in shows run by non-Muslims, and still prayer is presented improperly. And non-Muslim producers may get the performance of prayer wrong, but are still invested in showing it with reverence. Aslan's work shows the nuances in presenting Muslim prayer. Of particular note is the careful reading she gives to all her examples. She focuses not just on the performance of the prayer, but the physical and social context, and the soundscapes used in these specific scenes. This attention to detail adds depth to chapters that could otherwise simply be descriptive.

Chapter 5 is focused on the structural violence that prevents American Muslims from performing prayer publicly. It focuses on accommodations in schools, universities, and the workplace. The survey of cases focuses on US law and adaptations that must be provided. One of the things that Aslan highlights is that even with mandatory accommodations there is a variety of practical responses that can happen in individual contexts. This chapter is the first to stop focusing on differences in Shi'i and Sunni practices. In many ways this omission makes sense, as US law does not make a distinction between different types of Muslim prayer, it is all simply "Muslim prayer." However, in discussing how different universities are creating spaces for Muslims to pray, there is no discussion of how different centers are creating inclusive prayer spaces for different types of Muslims. It is a notable omission in these detailed case studies.

In looking at how religious leaders respond to questions of how Muslims can and should respond to limits, both structural and cultural, on prayer in the next chapter, Aslan is more explicit that she is only looking at Sunni opinions. Her reasoning is that "because of the wider

[Shi'i] acceptance of flexibility in ritual practices, partly due to Shi'is' historical experience of often living as persecuted minorities among Sunnis" (p. 131) it is the Sunni *fatwas* that are dealing with these community issues as somewhat new. I read this positioning as a short-hand for the broader flexibility in Shi'i *fiqh*, as there are numerous historical precedents for Sunnis living as minorities and having to deal with similar questions. The chapter does a good job at looking at different responses from different types of religious leaders and some of the community politics involved. It is also a good introduction to the physical, mental, and emotional limits that may keep someone from praying or opting not to pray. One of the areas where this chapter feels a bit rushed is in the discussion of the "Shaykh Google" phenomenon, where Muslims go online to find answers to their religious questions. I think a pointer to some of the literature on this tool could help deepen the work.

The internet, as the book continually shows, is a powerful space for American Muslims to find community, and that theme continues in Chapter 7 on protest. A large part of the chapter focuses on the connection between prayer and protest in modernity. The historical context is useful, but too long for this chapter, and takes us outside of the context of the US in ways that are jarring. It is also unfortunate that we do not return to differences between Shi'i and Sunni and the connection between prayer and protest in a meaningful way. In a survey work, these sorts of examples should be included. Having said that, the discussion of the "Border Mosque" is an incredible case study that covers a wide range of issues and illustrates many of the earlier points in the book very well. The inclusion of first-person experiences helps to add texture and meaning to the experience that is welcome in a discussion of the power of prayer in public.

The last chapter provides a good record of some of the issues facing the American Muslim community during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This record also brings together some key points throughout the book, and frames through the lens of internal American Muslim concerns, rather than external concerns. That mirror framing is a useful way to end the book. This book is a significant contribution to our understanding of American Muslim ritual life. As a piece of research, it exemplifies the

variety of tools that are needed in the subfield, using archives, ephemera, online sources, and narratives as a way to build a more complete pictures of dynamic and living communities. The book itself reads well for the purposes of research, and I think could be taught as chapters for different types of courses.

HUSSEIN RASHID, PH.D.

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