

Reclaiming the Mosque: The Role of Women in Islam's House of Worship

Jasser Auda

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The most famous Ḥadīth collection, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, records ‘Umar, the Second Caliph, to have said, “We did not value women as anything during the ‘period of ignorance’ until Islam came and started mentioning them, because of which we took into consideration their rights upon us” (Ḥadīth No. 5505). This narration, along with a multitude of other Qur’anic injunctions and Prophetic sayings, plus the practice of the Prophetic era, makes it

clear that Islam elevates the status of women, encourages (indeed ensures) their participation in the society, and makes them the vibrant contributors alongside men. But, ironically, in the subsequent periods of Muslim history, the jurisdiction of women in Muslim societies was reduced to the confines of the household, depriving them of active social participation. While there is no denying that some external political factors and cultural influences led to this situation, the ‘religious’/ ‘Islamic’ overtone given to this non-Islamic discrimination against women is most unfortunate.

The book under review is the result of the efforts of Dr. Jasser Auda, the leading international expert on *Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah*, to bring to the fore the role of women in “Islam’s house of worship.” It approaches the question from a jurisprudential point of view based on the original sources of Islam. In the first chapter, the author maintains that while there is some scope for permissibility of all-female mosques in Islamic jurisprudence, these have the potential to compromise, as do all-male mosques, the higher objectives of cooperation and unity in the Muslim community. He sees their prospect as an addition to the already existing division of mosques along different lines—ethnic (Turkish, Indian, Afro-American), jurisprudential (Sunnī, Shī‘ī), and political (Ikhwān, Salafī, Hizb al-Taḥrīr, etc.)

The following chapters of the book answer a range of questions like ‘how do we judge what is ‘Islamic’?’, ‘what does the Qur’an say about women and mosques?’, and ‘what does the sunnah say about women and mosques?’ The second chapter examines misuse of the word ‘Islamic’ as used in present times to label such things as ‘Islamic movies’, ‘Islamic slaughter houses’, ‘Islamic political parties’, while nothing substantially ‘Islamic’ is realized. The proponents of these ‘Islamic’ constructs continue to violate the spirit and purposes of Islam in no less measure than those who are opposed or indifferent to Islam. The author makes clear that something can be designated as ‘Islamic’ only on the basis of the Qur’an and Sunnah; and whatsoever contradicts with these foundational sources cannot be rendered ‘Islamic’ by any ‘ḥalāl’ stamp or signature of any ‘sharī‘ah committee’. In contrast, he calls for an integrated, purpose-based, holistic reading of Qur’an and Sunnah against the partial, historical, and historicist methodologies.

In Chapter 2, the author draws upon a number of Qur’anic verses to argue in favour of women’s participation in mosques. He draws our attention to the verses in which believing people, irrespective of their gender, have been asked to frequent the mosques. In his reading, this includes verses in which the Qur’an uses the word *al-nās* (meaning people, both men and women), wrongly translated by major translators as ‘men’. This reflects

the influence of assumptions and biases regarding the issue of women in the mosques. Indeed the author argues that the same holds true for those Qur'anic verses related to mosques employing the word *rijāl*, for he notes that the word's usage in the Qur'an itself as well as Arabic dictionaries supports a reference to both men and women. He argues that the word *rijāl* is used in the Qur'an to mean men (to the exclusion of women) only when there is simultaneous mention of the word *nisā'* (women). The next chapter addresses the question of women in mosques based on evidence from the sunnah of the Prophet, "indicating women's normal presence at all times and on all occasions at the time of the Prophet" (p. 31) The narrations mentioned make clear beyond doubt how women used to frequent the mosque during the time of the Prophet. Far from being prevented, they would pray along with men but also attend the sermons, enquire from their fellow male companions if something eluded their listening, camp their tents within the premises of the mosque, sweep the mosque, and even establish their 'clinic' in the very mosque itself. Women would further watch entertainment plays on special occasions in the mosque premises, as indicated by the statement of 'A'ishah, the beloved wife of the Prophet. The status enjoyed by women in the mosque during the times of the Prophet is diametrically opposed to the discrimination women face at places of worship in present times.

The preventing of women from visiting mosques is often grounded on a statement of 'A'ishah which she made in a particular context observing mischief by some women. Commenting on the particular circumstances, she remarked that if the Prophet had witnessed all that, he would have prohibited women from visiting the mosques. This statement of 'A'ishah is generalized beyond proportion and the clear injunctions of the Prophet are ignored. Moreover, no jurist of Medina during 'A'ishah's time took her statement as abrogating the default rule for women to visit the mosques. Soon after 'A'ishah's times, when Imam Malik of Medina was asked about the issue, he opined that women should never be prohibited from visiting the mosques. All this is discussed in the fifth chapter of the book. If some scholars have opined (wrongly) in favour of prohibiting women from visiting mosques, based on the jurisprudential principle of *sadd al-dhari'a*, the present circumstances demand recourse to the alternative principle of *fath al-dhari'a*, not only to ensure women's rights are fulfilled (to visit the mosque) but also to serve certain good purposes: remembering Allah, acquiring knowledge, meeting other women who frequent the mosques, public participation, etc. The next chapter addresses another narration used as an argument for preventing women from visiting the mosques, accord-

ing to which the Prophet told a woman (Umm Humaid) that her prayer at home was better than in congregation. The author conducted an exhaustive study of all the reports of this narration in different ḥadīth collections, and convincingly outlines the particular context of this narration. He maintains that the Prophet did not intend to change the default rule for women to visit the mosques; rather, he attempted to resolve a marital discord between Umm Humaid and her husband: she used to walk a long distance five times a day to attend the congregational prayers in the mosque of the Prophet, to which her husband objected.

The remaining chapters of the book deal with some of the most sensational issues regarding women's participation in the mosques, their interaction with men, some controversial narrations ridiculing women, segregation of sexes in the mosque, specific dress codes for women in mosque, and more. In sum, the present book is a timely response to one of the more heated debates of present times. It brings to light the status of women in Islam as reflected during the times of the Prophet. It is a must read for both the supporters as well as opponents of women participating in the mosques, in order to understand the issue from the original sources of Islam from a jurisprudential point of view.

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