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Agency, Politics, Piety, and Performance

AFIYA S. ZIA and SHAHRZAD MOJAB

Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival. Karin Van Nieuwkerk.

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. 320 pages. ISBN 9781477302255 paper

The Veil in Kuwait: Gender, Fashion, Identity. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and

Noreen Abdullah-Khan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 89 pages.

ISBN 9781137487414 cloth

Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice.

Marion Holmes Katz. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 417 pages.

ISBN 9780231162661 cloth

Soft Force: Women in Egypt's Islamic Awakening. Ellen Anne McLarney. Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 2015. 312 pages. ISBN 9780691158495 paper

These books are recent contributions to the continuing debate about Arab women and their affective engagement with Islam. The two overlapping themes in these publications are, first, the appeal and perspective of a post-Islamist political society in Muslim majority contexts, primarily using Egypt as an example, and, second, probing the older theme of *fitna*, the distracting potential of women's sexuality and bodies and the ways it has been reclaimed and co-opted in the new millennium, often in collusion with neoliberal patriarchal capitalism. In the context of this broad framing, one should also note that, with the exception of *Soft Force*, the books in this review demonstrate an excitement about a supposed post-Arab Spring. However, the post-Islamist wave carried on the back of pietist and/or Islamist women offered in these texts is not entirely convincing.

Performing Piety documents the lives of several famous Egyptian female singers, dancers, and actresses who left the entertainment business in the wake of

As expected of a survey study, multiple divisions in the text discuss the findings yielded through the questionnaires (included as appendixes). Chapter 4, “The Guilt/Shame Paradigm,” unpacks the emotions associated with the concept of the veil as shielding men from the *fitna* (social disorder, chaos, sexual temptation) potential of Muslim women. It sets up the concluding chapter, which threads through the overlapping themes in the other books reviewed here having to do with veiling, fashion, beauty, cultural consumption, and consumer habits.

The authors find a paradox in that Kuwait’s religious consciousness does not reside comfortably between religion and modernity. Rather than reconciling and fusing fashion as or through the veil, the analysis shows that respondents continue to view religion and fashion as opposites (71). According to the authors, this “palpable” tension (72) that arises in the combination of *hijab* and fashion seems to remain irresolvable in the veiling environment of Kuwait. This, they argue, is different from other Middle Eastern countries where the veil is no longer *only* an expression of religious belief. According to the authors, this need to interpret and reduce everything cultural and aesthetic into religious and spiritual terms is prompted by the respondents’ guilt and unwillingness to take a critical or detached view of religion.

Women in the Mosque is not primarily about Muslim women’s ritual practices. Rather, it traces male Islamic (Sunni) legal scholarly arguments about the legitimacy of women’s attendance and participation in public worship. The study explores two key questions of whether women were historically encouraged to access mosques or not and what they did while in attendance.

Marion Holmes Katz’s chronological and geographic inquiry in *Women in the Mosque* spans the original resistance to the ban on women from the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1530 CE to the twenty-first-century examples of their prolific activism in places of worship. Hers is not a project that suggests that there has been a linear progression from freedom to oppression for mosque-attending Muslim women. Rather, Katz wishes to explore through Sunni legal and nonlegal sources (predominantly Maliki ibn Anas [796 CE] sources) how women sought religious fellowship and fulfillment in other venues because of their political and societal marginalization (4). The central arguments of the book are that women’s mosque usage differs from that of men (7), that a longitudinal survey of legal opinions on women’s access to mosques found a high degree of negotiability regarding legal norms, and that the basic models of gender underlying these norms have changed significantly over the centuries (99).

Katz connects legal prescription over women’s mosque attendance to the paradigmatic case of women’s mobility and visibility outside the home (3) and outlines jurists’ debates over the authority structure of the family and the limits of governmental power. Who was to set the standards of conduct? At the same time, Katz concurs with earlier studies that found that women’s mosque access does not

