

Women as Imams: Classical Islamic Sources and Modern Debates on Leading Prayer.

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In *Women as Imams: Classical Islamic Sources and Modern Debates on Leading Prayer*, Simonetta Calderini aims to review early and classical Islamic texts and doctrines on the topic of women's prayer leadership and to examine instances of women leading congregational prayer in the contemporary period. She organizes her study into two parts, "The Past" and "The Present." Part one comprises three chapters. In chapter 1, "Prayer Leadership, Imams and Women: Defining the Contexts and Setting the Issues," Calderini describes the terms of her analysis, notably *imām* and *imāma*, which she uses to denote prayer leader and prayer leadership, respectively. In chapter 2, "Congregational Prayers: Women Leading Women," she examines key *ḥadīths* (Prophetic-era reports) describing instances from Muhammad's lifetime in which women acted as *imāms* over other women; the central figure in this chapter is the Prophet's wife Umm Salama, though his wife 'Ā'isha is also described. In chapter 3, "Congregational Prayers: Women Leading Men," Calderini examines prophetic and post-prophetic narratives depicting women leading men in ritual worship and attempts to trace how those reports are utilized in juristic arguments on the topic. Part two, "The Present," consists of only one chapter, "Present Debates and Practices," in which Calderini reviews modern instances of women leading other women or mixed-gender congregations and also analyzes how the past is deployed in contemporary discourse around these instances.

Calderini's sources for part one are primarily *ḥadīth*-type accounts and medieval juristic texts. She begins by presenting reports of women leading prayer from the earliest generations of Islam, including the Prophet's wives Umm Salama and 'Ā'isha; his contemporary, Umm Waraqa; and the ninth-century figure, Nafisa bint al-Ḥasan. She then reviews juristic doctrines of the Sunnī and Shī'ī schools on the question of women leading women or mixed congregations in prayer, presenting both overarching doctrinal agreements and points of disagreement. She notes that, on the whole, the schools disregarded the possible implications of Umm Waraqa's *ḥadīth* as supporting women's leadership (*imāma*) over mixed-sex congregations. In these sections, she gestures at the different ways the jurists addressed *ḥadīths* on these topics, whether utilizing them to construct their positions, justifying their disregard of them, or preferring certain variants over others. For instance, she notes that classical Ḥanafi sources continued to refer to reports of women's prayer leadership even while rejecting their



continued applicability. She astutely observes a correlation between schools that more heavily weighed *ḥadīths* in their jurisprudence and those that were amenable to women's prayer leadership, whether over other women or also over men. Thus, Abū Thawr, Ṭabarī, Muzanī, and Dāwūd al-Zāhirī—jurists who were relatively more open to women's prayer leadership—were also from among the champions of *ḥadīth*-based jurisprudence.

In part two, Calderini reviews contemporary instances and contexts in which women have led prayer, either over women or over mixed congregations, or in which they exert religious leadership in other ways. Here, she describes women's mosques around the world, such as in China and the United States. She also provides some discussion of amina wadud's prominent leading of mixed-sex Friday prayers in the United States in 2005, and she introduces Gamāl al-Bannā, a male Egyptian scholar who—unusually—validated women's *imāma*. In this final chapter of the book, Calderini provides a theoretical discussion about how *the past* may be understood as an ever-changing idealized period of time. She identifies three sources of this Islamic *past*: scriptural exegesis, precedents from tradition or custom, and modern national histories. She also highlights distinctions between historical and contemporary Islamic discourses on women-led prayer, such as the involvement of lay (non-scholarly) figures in interpretation. She concludes with a concern that the meaning of the Islamic past could be increasingly decided by algorithm-based social media.

A few topics and themes take center stage. One is that of “the uses of the past” (13, 52, 74, 171–72): she analyzes *ḥadīth* narratives, *fiqh* (jurisprudence) debates, and contemporary ethnographic examples as case studies through which to examine ways that the idealized past is deployed to argue for particular positions on female *imāma*. Another central theme concerns semantic development in the meanings of *imāma*, and how its dual denotations as both political leadership and religious/ritual leadership refract one another in ways that affect women's participation in that role. Another topic that receives sustained attention is the divergence between *ḥadīths* and *fiqh*, on one hand, and between the *fiqh* doctrines of different schools, on the other.

In exploring these topics and themes, Calderini seems to forward two theses: One is that the institution of prayer leadership took shape over time, beginning as a somewhat gender-neutral practice—as illustrated by the Companion Umm Warāqa—and becoming increasingly hierarchical, due in part to prayer's connection with political leadership and the latter's limitation to men, and in part to the elaboration of juridical doctrines such as those on purity. The other is that *the past*—whether that means the Qur'anic-Prophetic period, the medieval classical period, or precedents in national histories and contemporary practice—has been and continues to be invoked to justify women's roles in congregational prayer, whether the congregants be all women or of mixed gender. She signals the different pasts imagined by Sunnīs and Shī'īs, and the symbolic place that the Prophet's wives 'Ā'isha and Umm Salama hold in each.

Unfortunately, Calderini's book suffers from organizational and stylistic flaws that impede clearly discerning the substance of her analysis. Some sections are so cryptically written that the overall effect is to be misleading; non-experts could easily come away with inaccurate understandings of the subject under discussion. Indeed, the preceding summary of the book's central themes and theses is more the product of this reader's interpretation than it is an account of what Calderini has herself articulated. These problems of substance, organization, and writing are exacerbated by problems of tone.

I begin with the organizational problems. Chapters and sections lack meaningful framing and paragraphs lack coherence, such that it is difficult if not impossible to identify the central propositions—or even the topics—of many sections. The presentational logic is murky and material is jumbled together without any signposting or explanation of relevance to the investigation at hand. A typical example is when, in chapter 2, Calderini discusses the Shāfi'ī school's reliance on *ḥadīths* in its doctrine on female-over-female prayer

leadership: she inserts a paragraph on the merits of attending Friday prayers for both men, women, and various other personal status categories; however, the relevance of congregational prayer's merits to the permissibility or validity of women's prayer leadership or to any of the book's other themes is unclear. Then, in mid-chapter, Calderini introduces Behnam Sadeghi's idea of the porousness of legal schools without telling the reader how this connects to her point or to her study as a whole. Meanwhile, content does not appear where one would expect it, and many key terms and concepts are either explained much too late or insufficiently. For example, the concept of an "interpretative key," which Calderini uses throughout the book, is never explained (see, for example, 64, 97, 110, 112). The section on legal sources in the introduction (12–13), where one expects a description of the *fiqh* texts she uses, contains only a couple of vague sentences on the topic. Her theorization of the past—presumably a central concept of her study—only finally appears in chapter 4, toward the end of the book (171–72). Perhaps the strangest organizational choice is evident at the very end of the book, which Calderini concludes with an urgent two paragraphs on the dangers of algorithm-based social media for Muslim beliefs about the Islamic past—the danger presumably lying in the fact that it is algorithms, rather than human beings, who articulate these beliefs. Bewilderingly, where one expects a tapering off of her analysis or a glance toward its ramifications, Calderini vaults into a completely different book.

I suspect that a key reason for this disorganization is that Calderini was trying to do too much—exploring too many themes and topics, forwarding too many theses—simultaneously. To illustrate, in chapter 2, she attempts to examine a plethora of theoretical concerns: the function of Umm Salama and 'Ā'isha as ciphers for sectarian debate, the parallel between women's authority in *ḥadīth* transmission and their authority in prayer leadership, jurisprudential shifts as reflections of changing socio-cultural practices, the use of the past in justifying juristic doctrines, the historicity of *ḥadīth* and similar reports, the relationship between *ḥadīths* and jurisprudence, *isnād* (transmission chain) criticism of *ḥadīths* attributed to Umm Salama, methodological differences between the regional juristic schools of Kufa and Madina and their respective reliance on reason (*ra'y*) versus *ḥadīths*, the ability to trace the provenance of juristic doctrines through geographical analysis of their transmission chains, the possibility of identifying individual originators of juristic positions, the vision or version of Madina that is intended in the ideal of Madinan praxis (*'amal*), the correctness of the Ḥanafī claim that women's prayer leadership was abrogated, and comparative analysis of methods of reasoning as a way of marking the boundaries between schools. Clearly, it is next to impossible to test so many theories in a single chapter, or even a single book, and so not surprisingly, none of them is well explored. With these various lines of analysis jostling against one another, readers can scarcely discern what is central and what subsidiary.

The work suffers not only from organizational but also substantive weaknesses. For instance, the bulk of the book is textual analysis, yet all too often, the primary texts themselves are not provided, with the result that Calderini largely tells rather than shows. Arabic technical terms—critical for this type of study—are typically not defined, are translated inconsistently, or are used loosely. The foregoing problems make comprehending her discussion exceedingly challenging for those who do not know the technical jargon and do not have access to the primary texts being discussed. Additionally, the reader encounters several instances of typographical errors, perplexing syntax, and puzzling diction that sometimes have substantive implications; for instance, the progressive organization *Muslim Wakeup!* is introduced as *Muslims Wakeup!* and the Progressive Muslim Union is mislabeled the Progressive American Union.

Imprecise wording leads, in some instances, to category confusion, as in Calderini's discussion of the validity of prayer and its leadership (*imāma*). In Islamic law, the validity

(*siḥḥa*) of permissible acts such as prayer is determined by the presence of internal elements (*arkān*) and the fulfillment of external conditions (*shurūṭ*). Without identifying these categories or explaining how they distinctly contribute to prayer's validity, Calderini translates these concepts using a variety of words such as *qualities*, *requirements*, *required qualities*, *variables*, *qualifications*, *characteristics*, *legitimizing criteria*, *conditions*, *preconditions*, and *prerequisites*, leaving the reader to read between the lines to understand the actual nature of the juristic discourse. To clarify: when it comes to *imāma*, and in questions of ritual obligation and worship more broadly, validity is more meaningful than permissibility—for the simple fact that it is not typically ever impermissible (*ḥarām*) to perform prayer. The question at the forefront of the juristic imagination—and that of practitioners—is whether one's prayer has fulfilled the criteria for validity in God's eyes. Unfortunately, Calderini never clearly distinguishes these two principles (of permissibility and validity), often uses them interchangeably, and sometimes subsumes them under the even more confusing idea of “legality” (40).

Similarly confusing is her use of *egalitarian*. In her section on medieval prayer leadership criteria (40–41), she describes as *egalitarian* a range of criteria—such as knowledge and piety—that are employed in classical discourses in a hierarchical manner. However, what she seems to mean is not that these traits are egalitarian but *acquired*, a distinction that changes the nature of the analysis.

Theoretically, the study is thin: while Calderini dips into several debates, she refrains from rigorous reflection on constructs that are central to her study: gender, space, *ʿawra* (shame), authority, purity, and prayer, among others. Indeed, she almost seems to eschew theoretical engagement with gender—as she states in her introduction, “While women are central to this work, this is not a book on gender” (2)—a stance that would seemingly impede depth of analysis. Thus, she relates the juristic insistence *that* women—if they lead other women—must stand in the middle of the front row, rather than in front like men, but she does not analyze *why* this is so. Is there something about the way ritual space is gendered in juristic discourse? Even when she does offer theoretical insights, as she does with the concepts of *imāma* and the past, the treatment is perfunctory and disjointed.

A final type of substantive problem in this work is that of misrepresentation—or misleading presentation—of specific texts, doctrines, or historical events. One striking example is the suggestion that Nafisa bint al-Ḥasan led the funeral (*janāza*) prayer of Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, the eponym of the Shāfiʿī school of jurisprudence. Calderini writes: “Despite legal injunctions against women's attendance at funerals and of them leading prayer, there are a few rare references to the actual practice of female leadership, such as to Nafisa Bint al-Ḥasan who led Imam Shafi'i's funeral prayers” (118). She repeats the idea a few pages later: “There are indeed a few pre-modern textual references to females performing rituals to a mixed congregation in mosques or in public spaces. One is the already mentioned Nafisa Bint al-Ḥasan leading Imam Shafi'i's funeral prayer” (124). These sentences imply that Nafisa bint al-Ḥasan led the large, public, congregational mixed-sex funeral prayer of this major scholar. The reader would do well to ask themselves how this could be so, given all the scholarly resistance—including within the Shāfiʿī school itself—to the idea of women leading mixed-sex prayers, a resistance that Calderini herself has documented in this very book? How could it be so, when earlier in the book, she suggests that incidences of women's *imāma* over men are virtually unknown after the Prophetic period? (84) And if this event did in fact happen, then how does Calderini present it so offhandedly, with no discussion? (It is the very last sentence of the section.) The unsuspecting reader may have no reason to doubt the plain meaning of Calderini's words, but for the specialist, the questions abound. Inquiry into the lone footnote for this claim leads to ʿUmar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla's entry on Nafisa bint al-Ḥasan in *A'lām al-Nisā*, which refers as follows to her participation in al-Shāfiʿī's funeral prayers: “And when al-Shāfiʿī passed away, she called for

his funeral prayer [i.e., procession], so it was brought in to her and she prayed over him (*wa lammā tuwuffiyya al-Shāfi'ī amarat bi-janāzatihi fa-udkhalat ilayhā fa-ṣallat 'alayhi*)” (‘Umar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla, *A'lām al-Nisā'* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1984), 5:188.) Importantly, Kaḥḥāla does not say that Nafīsa *led* the scholar's funeral prayers, but rather that she prayed *over* his body—a significant distinction. Calderini's description of this event thus misrepresents both the historical event and Kaḥḥāla, and would mislead most readers.

I wanted to like this book. Women's prayer *imāma* is an important and timely topic, and a rigorous examination of the religious discourse ranging from the Prophetic period until today would be an important scholarly contribution. Unlike those aspects of classical jurisprudence that are of limited application, congregational prayer is an ongoing and central practice for observant Muslims, and the topic offers a lens through which to examine a range of theoretical and historical concerns. But the book, unfortunately, does not live up to its promise. The details I provide here are not intended to nitpick but to provide sufficient illustration of the criticisms raised. This is not to say that there are not valuable nuggets to be found in the work. Calderini highlights a number of important questions in the juristic debate of women's prayer leadership, both past and present, and brings her great expertise to bear on these questions. However, as the work stands, to excavate these nuggets requires much labor and—for nonspecialists—much caution.

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