

**Review of Diane D'Souza: *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith*
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D'Souza's text is an introduction, primarily through ethnographic records of ritual practice and community organizing, to the religious lives of Shia women. The setting is India, with a sharp focus on the historically significant Hyderabad, a particularly important location for the development of South Asian Islamic identity. Her background is in the study of Islam in South Asia and Muslim-Christian relations, having done advanced research at the Martyn Interfaith Institute in Hyderabad and the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. The approach is oriented towards a largely descriptive style based on lengthy time spent in the field, in addition to more classically focused ethnographic fieldwork. In theoretical terms it tackles the themes of women's religiosity via the debate about popular religion and the tendency towards its association with women's domains and practices. Her work points to new areas of exploration for gender studies, religious studies, Islamic studies, South Asian studies and ritual studies, among other potential disciplines.

A fundament of the text is the examination of the feminine punctuations within the narrative of the assassination of the Prophet's household at Karbala, an event in which women's witnessing, calls for justice, mourning and even their powerlessness, are essential to its retelling. These punctuations are moments in which a Shia vision of womanhood is being constructed around the place of women in the events of Karbala, which are absolutely definitive for Shiism. At the epistemological core, then, is an awareness of these narrative traditions as a basis for the place of women in Shiism. The author builds from this to an analysis of women's ritual lives, in this context.

Within the tradition, after the Prophet and the Quran itself, the highest authorities are the twelve imams beginning with Ali, the Prophet Muhammed's son-in-law and cousin. To these are added the presence of the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, who can collectively (with the imams) be referred to as the 14 infallibles. All of the twelve imams were assassinated, with the exception of the 12th Imam who is believed to have gone into a mysterious occultation. The third imam, Hussein, the Prophet Muhammed's own grandson, was executed

at Karbala amid a number of what would now be described as 'war crimes,' by Yazid ibn Muawiya ibn Abu Sufiyan who represented the competing claim to leadership over the Islamic world, a caliphate mostly made up of leaders from outside the lineage of the Prophet's own descendants.

The title 'Partners of Zaynab: A gendered perspective of Shia Muslim faith' points to the identification that Shia women traditionally are said to embrace, striving to be like Zaynab, the sister of Imam Hussein, who was the most prominent surviving adult member of the family after the massacres at Karbala. She was a founder of the Shia tradition in the sense that it is she who actually relates the narrative of the Imam's death and the captivity of the clan under severe conditions of deprivation. Zaynab is the main witness to this pivotal narrative and therefore a significant transmitter of memory, the main memory upon which the particularity of Shia Islam is constructed.

The strengths of the texts are certainly in the detailed description of Shia ritual generally and, at times by comparison, the specific practices of women in the subcontinent. These generally take place outside of the mosque space in shrines intended for invocations. These places are also gender segregated, lending to women developing something of their own style of ritual performance, based upon, for example, the remembrance of the women of sacred history and prayers for concerns often linked to women's lives. The ritual spaces may house sacred objects such as the representation of Imam Hussein's standard or a hand representing the five members of the prophet's household. Women may sponsor sessions of koranic recitation and invocation ('amal') and lead ritual. Explanations about this, in the text, are precise (detailing the elements that go into the invocations, music, embodied ritual forms and their categories) and include ethnographic, historical and theological contextualizations. In particular there is also the domestic religious sphere in which women also host recitations, invocations and *sofreh* or *dastarkhan*, ritualized meals for the invocation of the Prophet and his revered household, both female and male figures. D'Souza highlights the invocation of Fatima and female figures, in these gatherings. These are often organized by women for the purposes of seeking intercession on behalf of members of the community in particular need.

There is also the description of the practical issues surrounding one of D'Souza's primary case studies, the Yadgar Huseyni, an organization of Shia women who gather to perform the aforementioned rituals. She takes a grounded approach to women's religious practice and organization by describing the organization of ceremonial meals, looking at details such as process of fundraising and teamwork. Yadgar Huseyni is a Shia women's association located in Hyderabad. The Yadgar Huseyni facilitates space, separate from the mosque, where practices pertinent particularly to the Shia community take place. These are forms of worship beyond the basic requirements of daily prayer, which are shared (in slightly different forms) by both Sunnis and Shias. The Yadgar Huseyni is one of a category of sacred sites that help define the identity of Shiism spatially and ritually, sometimes known by such terms as *Imambargah*, *Husseiniya*, or *Ashurkhana*. The gendered power-struggles involved are illuminative for those interested in the social consequences of contemporary iterations of traditional forms of ritual, particularly those that involve greater levels of female leadership and autonomy.

Theoretically, D'Souza emphasizes what I would describe as 'multiple feminisms' parallel to the notion of multiple modernities. One might interpret it this

way, highlighting the various forms in which women's movements in a South Asian Islamic context may, for example, be positioned towards masculinity in ways that seem 'traditional' in terms of western feminism, but which are particular local manifestations of a set of values concerning the centering of women.

Another conceptual contribution here is one I can only partly assent to but which is certainly a valuable perspective in any case. D'Souza refers to the notion of popular vs. clerical religion as an imperfect dichotomy, particularly in her conclusion. She problematizes the notion of a dichotomy in levels of religiosity because of the unclear lines between them, the fact that the distinction decenters ceremonies that are seen as central to many believers, and because of the tendency by western thinkers to misuse or misunderstand the distinction.

As a scholar of popular religion, I would offer a slightly different perspective: It is reasonable to argue that the notion of popular religion is important to retain, in part, because of its gendered nature. Women often have less access to religious instruction and texts and, thus, often produce their own ritual forms. Teasing out the particularities of each case and context along the spectrum of popular and textual religiosity may be a more fruitful exercise than dismissal of the binary. It can also be argued that the complexity of the notion of what makes up popular religion does not necessitate distance but simply further knowledge production. Some of the examples given by the author to challenge the concept of popular religion are certainly very useful for adding nuance, particularly those in which forms of less official or formal practice merge with the larger textual body of tradition, such as when a woman makes a personal vow to a venerated personage (often classed as a popular practice), part of which is a pilgrimage to the sanctuary in Mecca (a consistently mainstream and textual ritual).

While this work is descriptive, it does touch on some important theoretical issues. It is weak in its relationship to the greater body of literature relevant to the subject upon which the discussion grounded. The text does ignore the important basic convention in Islamic studies of direct citation of hadith rather than simply referring to general collections of traditions broadly. In other areas, the lack of connection to the literature is more understandable considering the level of immersion the author has in the subject and in the field itself. Although one could have hoped for another level of engagement between the literature and the work in the field, the material is original and helpful in an academy that has paid little attention to Shia religious life, much less that of Shia women. The overall contribution is such that it seems like a legitimate judgement to have chosen a more narrative-based approach to examining the religious lives of Hyerabadi Shia women.