Striving for God's Attention: Gendered Spaces and Piety

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This article looks at the inadequacy of space available to women in the two most holy sites for all Muslims: Masjid al-Haram *in Makkah and* Masjid an-Nabawi *in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. I argue that religious discourse, shaped by geopolitical factors, has framed piety for women primarily in terms of modesty, such that a woman is often considered a good Muslim if she is visible only within her female community but invisible to the larger society. Furthermore, I argue that the allocation of meager space affects not only the perception of women's religious standing in society, but also women's own perception about their moral selves. The article claims that by being relegated to small sections within religious spaces, women's collective worship is evident neither to the community at large nor can it be fully experienced by individual women, thus placing obstacles in women's path to seek to closeness to God.*

This article examines the gendered division of space in *Masjid al-Haram* in Makkah and *Masjid an-Nabawi* in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. Collectively, they are referred to as the Two Holy Mosques,[1] and are considered the two most sacred sites for all Muslims.

Many Muslims have written about their experiences of pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah,[2] but there is little scholarship that critically addresses the experiences unique to women.[3] This article is aimed at starting this crucial conversation from within the faith and draws, in part, from my own experiences of living in Saudi Arabia as a child, and later returning as an adult for religious visits.

In this article, I focus solely on the non-*hajj* visits to the Two Holy Mosques. Each able Muslim is obligated to perform *hajj* (pilgrimage) at least once in their lifetime; ability here is determined by many factors, including one's physical ability and economic means. My reason for not addressing the *hajj* season is that the rules and regulations enforced during this time are aimed at accommodating about two million Muslims from diverse backgrounds.[4] During *hajj* season, in a span of only six weeks,[5] *hajj* pilgrims arrive from all over the world. People practice different interpretations of Islam, speak different languages, come from different educational backgrounds,

economic levels, and cultural practices, and have different health concerns. Consequently, the arrangements are more amenable in a number of respects to accommodate the plurality of Muslims. In many ways there is a lesser degree of control on the space allocated to women and on the interpretations of religion allowed within that space. Apart from the *hajj* season, Muslims travel to these two mosques throughout the year to perform *umrah* (a shorter pilgrimage) in Makkah and *ziyarat* (visitation) in Madinah, under significantly different regulations where there is a greater element of control available to the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,"[6] the King of Saudi Arabia. This article examines this element of control and its implications on women specifically.

The article begins with exploring the experiences of Muslim women at these sites. I then look at both the geopolitical factors that affect the pilgrims and the religious discourse that attempts to legitimize that experience; the mark of a pious woman is often not based on how she practices Islam in general, but rather on how she practices one particular aspect of Islam: modesty. I argue that by being relegated to small spaces within the Two Holy Mosques, women's collective worship is neither evident to the community at large, nor can it be fully experienced by individual women, resulting in grave spiritual harm to women and their path to seek closeness to God.

Trip of a Lifetime: The Significance of the Visit

The city of Makkah, forty-three miles inland from the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia, is not only the birthplace of the last prophet of Islam, Mohammad Ibn Abdullah, but it is also considered the heart of Islam itself. At the center of Makkah is the *Kaaba*, a cubic brick structure covered in black cloth, embroidered with verses from the Islamic Holy book, the *Qur'an*. The *Kaaba*, according to Islam, is the House of God, built by the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham). It is enclosed within a large mosque, *Masjid al-Haram* or the Sacred Mosque. Muslims around the world face the *Kaaba* in their five daily obligatory prayers.

In his account of visiting Makkah, Ahmed Kamal highlights not only the ritualistic aspect of the journey but also the disposition or the mental attitude that is necessary for and formed by the experience. One can pray within the comfort of one's home with equal sincerity and devotion, but traveling the distance to Saudi Arabia carries the potential of intensifying one's love for God (Kamal 1961, 35).

Fewer than 300 miles away from Makkah is *al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah* (the radiant city). This city is the second holiest site to Muslims. Herein lies *Masjid an-Nabawi*, the Prophet Mohammad's Mosque. The Prophet's original home and his mosque, referred to hereafter as the *rawza*, are contained within this larger mosque. The mosque is visited to gain God's favor by showing love for God's last messenger (Qur'an 3:31). Praying at the *rawza* is also a replication of the actions of the Prophet Mohammad, wherein the intent and action of such replication holds great value to God (Qur'an 33:21).

I Am Closer Than You Are: Space Allocation

It is without dispute that visiting the Two Holy Mosques has immense religious significance to all Muslims, regardless of the Islamic school of thought to which they belong. I begin here with an account of the ways that the allocation of space differs between men and women in these two sites and how it adversely affects not only the spatial experience of women, but also their visual experience in virtue of that gendered division. The visual and the spatial experiences intertwine to obstruct women's quest to seek nearness to God.

Currently, less than a quarter of the space in *Masjid al-Haram* on the central uncovered floor—the area that gives a clear line of sight to the *Kaaba*—is allocated to women during the five obligatory prayers. This small area is generally quarantined off with bookshelves, water coolers, or makeshift barriers, which inadvertently serve as a source of visual obstruction to the *Kaaba* for the women seated in the rows right behind the barriers. Furthermore, because the space available is so small and the number of women so vast, women have to secure their prayer spot at least half an hour before the *adhan* (call for prayer). For the five mandatory prayers, men occupy the rest of the central floor of *Haram* and can easily secure their spots for the prayer, with a clear line of sight to the *Kaaba*, upon hearing the *adhan*. The central uncovered floor is packed to capacity for all prayers, and many pilgrims have to pray inside the covered main floor and on secondary floors. The topmost floor of *Haram* provides ample space for both men and women; however, this space provides little or no view of the *Kaaba* for anyone praying beyond the first few rows. Overall, spaces that provide a view of the *Kaaba* are disproportionately allocated to men.

I claim that the view of the *Kaaba* is a crucial aspect of the spiritual experience in Makkah. Accounts in all schools of Islamic thought prescribe the prayers one should recite when one first lays one's eyes on the *Kaaba*. A central purpose of a pilgrim's visit is precisely to be in the presence of God's house, where the auditory and visual sensations validate that spiritual experience. I shall elaborate on the implications of this on women's religious standing later in the article, but the point to note here is that one of the main reasons that pilgrims travel the distance is precisely to *see* the *Kaaba*.

In Madinah, the situation has drastically changed within the past decade. In recent memory, women have had different and shorter hours to visit the *rawza*. Times are divided into three two-hour periods: one time slot in early morning, one in the afternoon, and a two-hour time slot after night prayers. Previously, women would walk through, just as men, within their designated hours, pay their respect to the Prophet, pray next to the green grille surrounding his house and original mosque (*rawza*), and exit from another door of the central mosque.

However, over the past decade, changes have been implemented for how women enter the *rawza*. Women now have to enter a newer extension to the mosque at least an hour before they are allowed actual entry to the central mosque. Men are still allowed access through the main entrance and have no waiting times. After waiting, women are then seated in a waiting area inside the grand mosque. Seating is

determined by an arbitrary combination of one's spoken language, nationality, and visible ethnicity. Although most women decide where to sit for themselves, the division for some is far from how they would self-identify. Most women from Western nations are seated with whichever heritage the female guards perceive them to be. These guards address women in their respective perceived languages.

As women wait in this area, a language/nationality is chosen through a lottery held privately by the female guards, and the women seated within the chosen category rush toward the elaborate makeshift hallways that lead to the *rawza.* These hallways are constructed with white canvas tents and are put up daily during women-only hours. This process of going from the newer extensions of the grand mosque, waiting for one's turn, to actually entering the *rawza,* can take up an hour or two. Once you reach the *rawza*, you cannot view the green metallic grille that encloses the grave, because it is sectioned off with high, white tent barriers. Also blocked off is the Prophet's *mimbar*, the spot where the Prophet prayed. The rush during women's hours is enormous, and there is an ever-present urgency to leave the area because the next group of women (of a different ethnicity) is waiting to enter. Once inside, there is a constant push from the back of the crowd, forcing women to walk into other women's prayer spaces. There is pressure to secure one's footing to get one's prayer done before being forced out or knocked over by the crowd. This behavior is not due to inconsiderateness on the women's part, but rather is the product of the precious space lost to the constructed tent barriers and the limited time frame for the vast number of female pilgrims.

Men, however, can visit the *rawza* at any time that is not specifically designated for women. Men are not separated by arbitrary determination of their assumed ethnicity and can simply walk inside the main doors of the central mosque (as opposed to through the newer extension to the mosque). Once inside, men do not have canvas tent walls blocking their view of or access to the *rawza,* giving them more space and a view of the grille that encases the grave. They also have access to the *mimbar*. Since more hours are allocated for males and because there is no pre-designated ethnicity of people waiting to enter, there is less pressure in men's experience of the *rawza* (there is still a rush at peak hours or in peak seasons). They can sit and pray in peace, taking as much time as they wish, and experience nearness to God and his Prophet, an experience not as readily available to women. Furthermore, men are able to sit with other men from diverse backgrounds, hence promoting brotherhood and unity among the (male) *umma* (nation), another normative value in Islam. The experience of being rushed and squeezed into smaller spaces, of having little opportunity to view the sacred sites, has worked to undermine the very purpose of the female pilgrim's *long* journey: to seek *nearness* to God.

My Way or the Highway: Religion and the Saudi State

Men have more space and time to experience God, but movement and access for all is affected by state-sponsored social norms steeped in the *Wahhabi* Islamic school of

thought (*Wahhābiyyah*). In this section, I claim that laws that govern both genders are grounded in social and political factors. *Wahhābiyyah* is a relatively newer branch of the Hanbali school of thought, grounded in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Esposito 2011, 144). For the purpose of this article, the relevant key tenet is *Wahhābiyyah*'s opposition to innovations in religion (*bida)* within Islam and its adherence to (what they deem as) only the earliest teaching (Niblock 2006, 23–24). I claim that this interpretation of Islam, and how it interplays with the geopolitics of Saudi Arabia, is essential to fully understand the complex nature of control that is exerted on pilgrims in the Two Holy Mosques. In a later section, I will explore the impact of this sociopolitical backdrop on the physical movement of women in particular.

With the ascension of the Saud family as the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula, this particular interpretation of Islam became the official law of the land (Ayubi 1993, 99–101). The Saud rule has a symbiotic relationship with *Wahhābiyyah* ideology;[7] the Kingdom seeks its legitimacy in the political sphere from Wahhabi clerics who are, in turn, employed by the royal family to enforce Islam in the social sphere however the clerics see fit (Al-Rasheed 2007, 4). That is, the monarchy achieves the appearance of religious legitimacy because the clerics employ notions such as "the King as the *custodian* of the mosque," and in return, the power of the state enforces the vision of the clerics within civil society. In accordance with the state's interpretation of *Wahhābiyyah*, the Saudi moral guards/guides—also referred to as *muttawa* and employed by the "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice"—actively discourage people from any behavior that could be construed as giving undue reverence to the Prophet, his family, his companions, and the holy sites (Hyder 2008, 69). According to the clerics, any significance given to these sites and people contradicts unmediated access to God and takes away from the absoluteness of God who created them.[8]

Madawi Al-Rasheed explores the fluid boundaries between the political and religious and their "enigmatic duality" that leaves political as secular and social as religious (Al-Rasheed 2007, 57). This relationship between the Saud family and the Wahhabi clerics has perpetuated a particular set of rulings that governs not only Saudis but also imposes restrictions on men and women who visit the Two Holy Mosques from all over the world. Over the years, Wahhabi state-sponsored *fatwas* (rulings) "strove to curb alternative and competing religiosity, folk sacred spaces, and religious figures to ensure monopoly over the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge and authority" (Al-Rasheed 2013, 70).

In conjunction with the Saudi state monitoring the religiosity of Muslims, the nature of that control has also been molded by geopolitical factors. In part, the number of *fatwas* increased dramatically as a response to internal dissent that took the form of an occupation of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah in 1979. The dissenters claimed that the Saud family had abandoned Islamic principles, sold out to Western countries, and needed to be overthrown for true Islamic reform. The rebellion aimed to bring Arabia back to (Wahhabi) Islam. After the rebellion was violently crushed, the Saud family responded by making religion central to the state in order to quell any further dissent.

Furthermore, the content of the *fatwas* reflected a reaction to the then-concurrent revolution in Iran. The revolution in Iran was grounded in *Ja'farī Fiqh* or the Shia school of thought of Islam, and it was seen as a threat to the religious legitimacy of the Saud rule. So although the need for the Saudi state to enforce religiosity in the social sphere emerged as a way to legitimize its rule in the face of internal dissent, the content was aimed at distinguishing the state from the competing geopolitical powerhouse, Iran. Therefore, many of the *fatwas* were geared in opposition to Shia practices, some of which amount to revering the Prophet, his family, and related holy sites as significant aspects of one's religious salvation. For example, the destruction of many historical sites in and around Makkah and Madinah continues (Taylor 2012), a move that angers Shias (and many Sunnis) worldwide. This destruction is explained away in terms of need for expansion but also serves to deflect any perceived practice that threatens the state's interpretation of religion. Currently, the state's political motivations affect the bodily movements of all Muslims in these holy sites; more important, these motivations provide the underpinning discourse that is concealed within a guise of religiosity.

Another illustration of how such (or any) interpretation of religion becomes problematic when it is enforced through laws is the discourse surrounding mourning. The state discourages "emotional" displays of veneration for the Prophet, such as crying at the *rawza*. Although the behavior is discouraged for all, women are monitored more closely for fervent displays of love and/or sorrow because they are falsely perceived as having an essentialist emotional nature. Women's experience cannot be examined in isolation from the political discourse. Some of the discourse that surrounds the state's stance against mourning is that pilgrims may give undue (possibly divine!) reverence to humans. Additionally, Wahhabis hold that one ought to be at peace with death as it is ordained by God. Other schools of thought agree with this view of death, but give a different status to the death of the Prophet, his family, and beloved companions. For example, Shias cite the precedent for mourning: the Prophet mourned for one whole year over the loss of his first wife, Khadija, and his uncle, Abu Talib (Razwy 1997). However, the state reacts precisely in opposition to such a Shia interpretation, and women disproportionately become the target of such regulations because of the caricature of women as emotional beings. This is yet another instance of how normative religious reasoning is often inseparable from political discourse. The state attempts to legitimize its rule through the use of religious clerical authority, but the nature and content of that authoritarian rule is often in reaction to geopolitical factors affecting the region. In the final sections of the article, I will show how women carry a disproportionate burden within these sociopolitical landscapes.

Space Allocation and Religious Discourse

Geopolitical factors, such as the legitimation of Saud rule through religious discourse and establishment of a state-sponsored religious narrative in opposition to Shia thought, have affected the extent and content of religious laws that govern pilgrims in Makkah and Madinah. It is not surprising then that the public discourse that

licenses the meager allocation of space to women is couched within a religious discourse. This discourse is not merely normative Islam at play, but has to be considered within intersections of local practices, colonial history, and current sociopolitical factors (such as the ones discussed in previous sections), that then manifests itself in the current state of affairs (al-Hibri 2000). Keeping this intersectional framework in mind, I examine the religious prescription about *al- hayā'* or modesty, as it is linked to piety and space allocation currently in the two mosques.

Many Islamic rulings, such as those about modesty, often do not reflect the spiritual standing of humans; rather, they *offer a pragmatic structure to conduct one's everyday life within the nonideal world*. That is to say that while Islam delves into philosophical issues of human nature and moral standing, it also explicitly *provides structure that is appropriate for an unjust world*. Consequently, one sort of explanation offered for rulings that concern women in particular is not grounded in the moral status of women, but rather in the current patriarchal world where women are objectified. As such, it is argued the rulings are a safeguard for true believers (men and women) against objectification and impiety.

One justification for confining women within smaller spaces that is grounded in a notion of modesty is the concern about religiously illegitimate interaction with the opposite sex. Let us examine the logistics of this concern as they pertain to the nonideal world. Per Saudi laws, women in Makkah and Madinah *are* modestly covered. Because these cities host women from all over the world, there is no enforced uniform attire, however, the burqa and/or chador are most common. Regardless, *all* women have their entire bodies covered except their hands, faces, and sometimes feet. In addition, all women wear loose-fitting clothing, that is, clothing that does not emphasize the shape of their bodies. Women who are dressed "improperly" are stopped by the "virtue police" or *mutawwas* and asked to cover up. Given that women *do* follow the rules meant to regulate physical aspects of modesty within these two cities and all social/public interaction is already under the scrutiny of the state, the argument that women need to be out of sight of men does not hold. The state has already taken considerable measures to ensure an environment for the inculcation of modesty. Any steps that work toward seclusion of women to invisibility in an effort to secure modesty among believers is an attempt to actively *regulate the intent* of men and women *at the expense of* Muslim women being able to perform their religious obligations unhindered. This is a disproportionate price for Muslim women to pay, with very little payoff to any practitioner of the religion.

Indeed, during non-prayer hours, men and women together perform *tawaf* (going around the *Kaaba* seven times) and *sa'y* (walking seven times between Mountains Safa and Marwa). In both rituals, because of the human rush, there is little, if any, physical distance between individuals. During peak hours in *tawaf*, one often has no recourse but to be physically in contact with those surrounding oneself. During these rituals, the pilgrims are immersed in their spiritual experiences; thoughts of illegitimate interactions are not remotely part of that experience for most. After *tawaf* around the *Kaaba*, men and women often pray in the same row at *Maqam-e-Ibrahim*, a landmark signifying where Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) once stood to construct

Kaaba. Furthermore, because of where this landmark is situated, men inadvertently *have to* pray behind women during nonobligatory prayers. Similarly, the current designated area for women during obligatory prayers extends to the edge of the central uncovered floor. Directly behind this area, a few steps up, the covered area begins, where again, men *have to* pray behind women. Both of these instances occur in *Masjid al-Haram*. It appears then that in questions of space allocation during obligatory prayer times, concerns about illegitimate interaction grounded in notions of modesty ought not to play either a religious role—because Muslims are already covered as per Islamic norms, or a practical role—because interaction is strictly regulated and already occurring in many instances. Still, to fully understand this concern, we must also understand how being pious has been defined for women in particular.

Within the Qur'an and the Prophet's life, women's access to God has never been considered as limited in comparison to that of men. Over time, however, Muslims have linked the concepts of modesty and piety differently for men and women in ways that restrict spaces occupied by women.

Within everyday religious life, modesty is a notion that has roughly translated into behaviors one ought to refrain from: not showing off one's wealth in any way, not flaunting one's talents, or not being loud and obnoxious in one's speech. Such behaviors in excess can certainly be considered vices, and when done repeatedly they can come to define a person. However, to refrain from immodest behavior is not meant to be restrictive of one's self-expression or obstructive of one's projects, *if one refrains appropriately*. However, for Muslim women in particular, religious notions of modesty are restrictive in ways that impede their religious experience.

I claim that women's invisibility has become a marker of their modesty, and in turn their piety. That is to say, a woman is often considered a good Muslim if she is visible only within her female community but invisible to the larger society.

For men, piety can be loosely thought to comprise of these components: complete submission to God; offering prayers; being well-versed in the Qur'an and being familiar with Islamic history and jurisprudence; and practicing good *akhlaq* (virtue, morality, manners), *including* modesty. Although these qualities are recognized as markers of piety for women as well, the practical opportunities are limited for women to develop their skills in history and jurisprudence and in formally learning exegesis of the Qur'an. For women, modesty and piety have become inseparably linked. The most defining characteristic of a pious woman is not her knowledge of Islam or even how she practices Islam in general, but rather how she practices *one* particular directive of Islam, namely modesty.

According to Madawi Al-Rasheed in *A Most Masculine State*, the 1979 Sacred Mosque occupation served as a major precipitating factor in the issuance of *fatwas* on conduct in social spheres. Dissenters claimed that the Saud family had abandoned Islamic principles and in response, the Saud rule pushed religiosity within civil society. Unfortunately, women became the primary vehicle to "ensure the piety of the nation and its protection from increasing Westernization" (Al-Rasheed 2013, 110), and "[t]heir [women's] *invisibility* in the public sphere was, ironically, a visible token of state piety and the nation's commitment to Islam" (113).

Modesty is a virtue that definitely contributes to one's piety and can be cultivated through habit. Saba Mahmood writes about how the virtue of *modesty* is often viewed as a necessary trait for religious piety, particularly for women. For some of Mahmood's female subjects (she focuses on Egypt), modesty and confidence are not antithetical traits. Furthermore, performative behavior can lead to inward dispositions toward modesty, eventually dissolving the discrepancy between the performance of modesty and the desire to be modest (Mahmood 2011, 157). Significant for the purposes of this article is that the performance of bodily modesty (through veiling and so on) is often considered *the means to* acquire the trait (161), even though it is understood that modesty itself is a much deeper aspect of oneself, of which symbols, such as veiling or segregation, are *one* aspect.

This way of approaching the virtue of modesty helps us understand how limited women's space is seen as a form of *creating and sustaining* the environment for the practice of modesty within the nonideal world. Furthermore, the practice of performing modesty through invisibility can then be seen by some as a means to acquire it as well.

Attempts to explain and/or legitimize the meager space allocation to women in Makkah and Madinah not only fall short, but also are dangerous. They make inaction feasible because if the reason women should not have unhindered access to religious sites is normative, then believers feel bound to follow the restrictions and are resigned to a diminished spiritual experience.

I Didn't Feel What You Felt: Diminishing Experience

Both the geopolitical factors and the religious discourse that surround movements of Muslims in the Two Holy Mosques are essential aspects of the spiritual experience. I shall examine here how the added restrictions of being relegated to proportionally smaller areas and the regulation of women's bodily movements limit women's experience to a mere performance of rituals as opposed to a visceral, spiritual encounter. I look mostly at the diminished experience in Madinah in this section, because in Makkah there is less palpable resentment on the part of women and more of a resigned acceptance of the limited space. This may be in part because besides the five prayers in *Haram* in Makkah, women have as much access as men to the central floor and other significant sites.

In Madinah, the wait for women to enter the *rawza* can be tedious. During this waiting period, one often builds up false anticipation about the intensity of spiritual experience within the *rawza*. Many have traveled great distances, and it is probably the first and the last time they may experience the site. While attempting to capture this divine feeling, they also have to contend with their material reality.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, elucidates the concept of *immanence* and *transcendence*. The domain of immanence is repetitive and passive, whereas transcendence is creative and active. For Beauvoir, all human life is simultaneously an interplay of immanence and transcendence. However, women have been relegated to the domain of immanence, where the repetitive actions of their bodies do not *create* the

world, and where they remain stagnant within the material situation. Men, on the other hand, can be both immanent and transcendent. For Beauvoir, transcendence is reaching out into the future, creatively extending forward through one's projects, and transcending activity unrestrained by the body (Beauvoir 1949/2011, 17). In the case of religious experience in Madinah, women are subsumed within the logistics of performing the rituals without having the luxury of transcending into the spiritually creative world, where they would be more able to develop an affective relationship with God. Men, however, are less restricted by the body, both in terms of encumbering conceptions of modesty and of the vastness of space and time available to them to strive for a stronger relationship with God. This does not imply that the experience of visiting these holy sites is the sole path or even a *necessary* component that can enable one to have a close relationship with God, but rather that such experiences of spirituality provide a rich opportunity for believers to form such bonds with God. The material reality that women encounter restrains them within a repetitious life of immanence, and any interference by other women in that religious performance is seen as indicative of the *akhlaq* (manners) of womankind in general. To use Beauvoir's terminology, women have internalized their status as the *other* (Beauvoir 2011, 6–8). They see themselves through the eyes of the male-centric narrative—in this particular case, as antithetical to the embodiment of serenity and modesty.

Moreover, concentrating on individual acts of being pushed or shoved obscures the larger systemic position of inequality in which female pilgrims are situated. Unfortunately, more often the discontent about one's experience is mistakenly associated with other individual women's behavior. This is particularly easy to do, as one is generally pushed out by women of a different ethnicity from one's own, who are either refusing to leave or forcing their way in. It is simpler to see Arab or Iranian or Turkish women as inherently this or that, rather than that all female pilgrims are being confined and regulated, and that certain behavior, not "womankind's nature," is a product of this confinement.

Pilgrims from all over the world travel great distances to perform *umrah* and *ziyarat* to be closer to God; instead, their journey becomes an *experience of distancing* from God, from fellow female pilgrims, and from themselves. The situation is set up such that women see themselves as separate from others of different ethnicities, rather than as one *umma* (people/nation). Instead of being able to focus on their spiritual experience, their experiences are marred by the perception of the inconsiderateness of others. Instead of an experience of immersion, there are barriers—visual, spatial, and spiritual—to experiencing closeness to God.

Experience and Religious Standing

In this section, I examine the ways that women's experience affects their religious standing within their own communities and their understanding of themselves as religious agents. I also address the seeming contradiction of modesty and visibility.

A large aspect of modesty for both men and women relevant for spatial considerations is to not make a "show" out of one's devotion. A Muslim must not be motivated by a desire for worldly praise by fellow Muslims. That is to say, social exposure ought not to be the purpose of believers in performing their religious duties; rather their purpose should stem from a desire to be close to God.

As mentioned above, a large part of the discussion on modesty for women in particular has been linked to their invisibility. Within such a framework, visibility is equated with drawing unwarranted attention to one's acts of worship. It is falsely drawn from this that allocating more space to women is one such manifestation of attention that ought not to be there.

However, such logic does not capture an important aspect of modesty within a religious context. Just as women should not draw attention to their selfless acts or acts of worship, neither should men. Within the Two Holy Mosques, among men, no physical manifestation of religious hierarchy is noticeable to the public eye. No single man stands out during prayer as ranked over another (except the *imam* who leads the prayer). Similarly, for women, it is not any *one* particular person who needs to be visually seen as an individual, which would make her stand in contradiction with religious commitment to modesty. Rather, *as a community*, Muslims need to see the collectivity of women in the public arena. This is to say, no *one* particular woman's act of worship is for the world, but their *collective* gathering is a testament to their devotion as female believers.

Within a normative Islamic framework, one does not need social visibility (that is, being in the public sphere) to be individually pious, regardless of one's gender. Although one may not need excessive visibility—that is, visibility of the religiously immodest kind—to be pious, one does require a supportive social environment to form a good character. For women to see other women as visible within the religious sphere shifts how believers perceive piety in women. This sort of encouragement and validation is especially needed where the existing norm is the sight of large male gatherings peacefully praying and female pilgrims fighting for space. Women and men begin to perceive particular men as more spiritual over the entire category of women. Daphne Spain focuses on spatial divisions that create gendered spaces, thus institutionalizing advantages available to men. Spain argues that men and women are separated in ways that reinforce women's lower status relative to men. Her claim that spatial allocations are socially constructed and deliberate in design is useful in examining the circumstances of the Two Holy Mosques regarding access and entry for men and women. In both Makkah and Madinah, the relative freedom with which men are able to access and move around the holy sites gives the impression that men naturally belong on these sacred grounds. This naturalness translates into one having visibility and religious standing in the eyes of others. It is rarely the case that any individual woman is recognized as an expert on religious matters over other men, even when her character and/or knowledge is clearly above that of others. Spain highlights that spatial boundaries may be "constructed by social behavior at a particular point in time, [but their] legacy may persist (seemingly as an absolute) to shape the behavior of future generations" (Spain 1992, 6). Such is the danger with

relegating women to decreasingly smaller religious areas. It may have at some point been the case that comparatively fewer women were performing pilgrimages, but the current situation is drastically different, and the trend for space allocation is headed in the wrong direction.

The long-term implication of such invisibility is that it not only affects the perception of women's religious standing in society, it also affects women's own perception about their religious and moral selves. This situation above is akin to Marilyn Frye's notion of *the double bind of oppression*, "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation" (Frye 1983, 2). In this particular case, women who act in accordance with the norms of feminine modesty are penalized for their conformity by losing a valuable experience that has the potential to bring them closer to God. Women who defy social norms of modesty are also penalized by being seen as aggressive and impious, undermining their ability to see themselves as ideal Muslims. Women experience social sanctions for both conformity and nonconformity to the norms of modesty in ways that deprive them of religious elevation within their communities.

To this point, Henrietta Moore writes about how the organization of space is not just the result of social and economic hierarchies, but it also simultaneously reproduces and sustains those relations (Moore 1986, 89). The current allocations serve a perpetual cycle that justifies the minimal space given to women, worthy of their religious standing in community. And minimal access to space, in turn, sustains that status in the eyes of the community and within women's own perception of themselves and of other pious women. That is to say, the affairs that appear natural, innocuous, and based in pragmatic concerns of the Saudi authorities actually perpetuate the social hierarchies in the social realm.

Siraatul Mustaqeen[9] —The Way Forward

Muslim women may recognize the inadequacy of space for women, but many are reluctant to take action to rectify the situation. Often, this is because questioning religious authority is seen as an inevitable and dreaded gateway to doubt. However, doubt about worldly authority may threaten the moral legitimacy of the monarchy as religious, and ultimately serve to strengthen Islam by empowering half the population that follows it. Indeed, many have argued that Islam is meant to be interpreted within a sociohistorical context, and Islamic rulings ought not to be static with changing times (Wadud 1992, 8; Majid 1998, 354; Barlas 2002, 6). In light of the number of women pilgrims and a global historical shift in understanding women's role in society, Saudi authorities must address the disparity in space allocation for women. There are many ways that the practical concerns can be resolved, maximizing the positive effect on Muslim women and the *umma* (Muslim people/nation) at large.

Although the resolution appears simple, our inability and hesitancy as Muslims to institute these changes is even more indicative of the significance of the problem. In part, failure to rectify the situation is emblematic of the worthlessness of women's

experience and a lack of concern for their ultimate salvation. Women's religious experiences are not critical enough to garner attention in literature on pilgrimages and certainly do not merit any consideration in instituting change in practice. There is no international pressure from countries of influence, such as Indonesia, which has the largest number of yearly pilgrims, or the United States that, in addition to sending Muslim pilgrims, bears economic leverage over Saudi Arabia.

The issue of gendered space is of grave importance, because the repercussions are problematic for how Muslim women are perceived and perceive themselves. Ultimately, it affects women's ability to lay claim to legitimate religious standing. Indeed, it is telling that one of the central rituals performed by all pilgrims follows the *sunna* (practice) of a pious woman. Every day, thousands of Muslims perform *sa'y*, a ritual that involves moving between the mountains of Safa and Marwa in Makkah. This practice is grounded in the experience of Hajra (Hagar), the second wife of the Prophet Ibrahim, who searched for water between these mountains for her child, Ismail (Ishmael). One of the central practices in Makkah is not a replication of a Prophet's movements, but of those of a woman of great *taqwa* (piety), a woman whose uninhibited and unbounded bodily movements are replicated by men and women as a confirmation of their commitment to God. As believers follow in the footsteps of Hajra, moving freely, praying, there is a sense of spiritual freedom and spiritual immersion that many Muslims desperately seek, but that is available only to some.

Notes

I would like to thank Mahdi Rastani and Sue L. Cataldi in their generous help and constructive feedback in improving the quality of this article.

1. Officially, the two mosques are referred to in Arabic as *al-Ḥaramayn aš-Šharīfayn* or the Two Holy Sanctuaries.

2. I use the spelling "Makkah" and "Madinah" (over "Mecca" and "Medina") because these are the spellings used by the government of Saudi Arabia in their dealings with the international world, and also because they are phonetically closer to the Arabic pronunciation of the words.

3. Amineh Mahallati chronicles the historical memoirs from the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries of Iranian women's pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah, with little mention of issues of space (Mahallati 2011). Donna Honarpisheh writes a more analytic account of women's experiences in "relation to expressions of power and agency." She, however, focuses on pilgrimage to shrines in Shriaz, Iran. The different political and religious environment of Iran affects women's experiences in drastically different ways than in Saudi Arabia (Honarpisheh 2013).

4. In 2014, nearly 1.4 million foreign pilgrims were issued a *hajj* visa (Royal Embassy 2014). In 2013, just under two million pilgrims (local and foreign) performed *hajj* (Al Arabiya News 2013).

5. Although *hajj* itself lasts only ten days, entry and exit of all the foreign pilgrims spans six weeks.

6. *Khādim al-Ḥaramayn aš-Šharīfayn*, or the Custodian of (more accurately translated as: one who serves) the Two Holy Mosques has been the official title taken by the Kings of Saudi Arabia since King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz in 1986.

7. For a detailed discussion, see Mouline 2014.

8. One glaring example of the conflict between a state-sponsored interpretation of Islam and diverse adherents of Islam is the case of *JanatulBaqi*. *JanatulBaqi* is the final resting place for many companions and descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, outside the *Masjid-ul-Nabawi*. Right outside the boundaries of the graveyard, there are large TV screens playing prerecorded messages in Arabic and Farsi that tell the public that it is *haram* (sinful) to show reverence in ways that can be deemed as praying *to* the grave. Visitation hours have been further restricted for men, and women have never been allowed inside, for perhaps they are deemed too emotional.

9. *Siraatul mustaqeen* is an Arabic term, used in the Qur'an, and translates as "the straight/right path."

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