Muslims always seem to be talking about the injustices done to them by the outside world. But I rarely hear Muslims talk about the unfairness that exists within our own communities. I pray in a room where there is a one-way mirror, so the men cannot see me. I am told we are a distraction. I look out and I see them but they just see a mirror. The presence of women in my mosque has been erased.


In this opening reflection from the 2005 documentary *Me and the Mosque*, director and narrator Zarqa Nawaz offers significant insight into questions associated with the presence, participation, and significance of Muslim women in North American mosques and communities. Her statement assumes that women once had a significant presence, at least in her mosque, and that such presence would be a reflection of fairness and ultimately justice. Women are treated unfairly by being excluded from the main space of the mosque and by extension from leadership positions within mosques and communities. The documentary goes on to chronicle recent developments in North American mosques regarding the establishment of physical barriers between men and women in prayer spaces. Incidentally, the film features journalist and activist Asra Nomani who initiated the Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour and the woman-led Friday prayer in New York City. It is with these events and the surrounding debates that this essay is concerned.

Asra Nomani’s march on her own mosque in Morgantown, West Virginia, her year-long Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour and the woman-led Friday prayer in March 2005 can be read and evaluated in several ways. They will be treated here as a set of historical events of symbolic significance beyond the question of whether it is permissible for Muslim women to lead men in prayer. Nomani’s activism has garnered her significant media attention and the support of Muslim scholars, activists, and community members, as well as a wide range
of critical and/or dismissive reactions from other Muslims. Here, I want to place these related events and discourses into the larger context of religious authority, ritual and communal leadership, and space. My arguments here are based on the assumption that geographical—and with it social, political, and religious—contexts matter for questions of women’s religious leadership and authority. The nature and sequence of these events hinges upon the particular histories of American Muslim women on the one hand, and the dynamics of American feminism and religion in the public sphere on the other. Based on available ‘texts’ about these events, including books, journal and newspaper articles, internet publications, documentary films and unedited event footage, I want to advance several related arguments: (1) that the activists involved in these events draw on emerging Qur’ānic interpretations focusing on gender justice, and that the prayer event is an embodiment of such *tafsīr* which in turn assumes or requires religious authority; (2) that the question of space in mosques is in reality a larger debate about gender equality; and (3) that the claim to ritual leadership is closely linked to other forms of leadership for women in Muslim communities.

The main events I will be referring to in this essay, and the main actors involved, may require some elaboration. In June 2004, a group of Muslim women led by Asra Nomani gathered in Morgantown, WV, for a special prayer. Nomani, a journalist and writer, had completed her pilgrimage to Mecca and had challenged the board and members of her mosque in Morgantown after the new mosque building featured a separate entrance and an altogether separate room for women to pray. Calling the small group “Daughters of Hajar: American Muslim Women Speak,” Nomani’s goal for their march on her mosque in Morgantown was to demand prayer space for women in the main hall of the mosque. Before the march on the mosque, Nomani, her parents and son, activist and writer Sarah Eltantawi, poet Mohja Kahf, novelist Michael Muhammad Knight, and Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur—the editor of the book *Living Islam Out Loud*—as well as Abdul-Ghafur’s

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