

## **The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam**

*Marion Holmes Katz*

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Despite the central importance of festival and devotional piety to pre-modern Muslims, book-length studies in this field have been relatively rare. Katz's work, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, represents a tour-de-force of critical scholarship that advances the field significantly both through its engagement with textual sources from the formative period to the present and through its judicious use of theoretical tools to analyze this material. As its title suggests, the work strives to explore how Muslims have alternatively promoted and contested the commemoration of the Prophet's birth at different points in history, with a particular emphasis on how the devotionalist approach, which was prominent in the pre-modern era, fell out of favor among Middle Eastern Sunnis in the late twentieth century. Aimed primarily at specialists in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, especially scholars of history, law, and religion, this work is recommended to anyone interested in the history of Muslim ritual, the history of devotion to the Prophet, and the interplay between normative and non-normative forms of Muslim belief and practice.

Throughout the book, Katz does a fantastic job of balancing a close reading of sources together with discussing theoretical hypotheses that do not overstep the bounds of the textual evidence. The care with which she draws reasoned conclusions from the available sources does not prevent her from proposing significant new ways of understanding Muslim approaches to the *mawlid* (narrative of the Prophet's birth and early life). For instance, from the opening pages she successfully challenges the common notion, reinforced by N. J. G. Kaptein's fairly recent work, that the *mawlid's* rise should be attributed to the Fatimids. Rather than focusing on state ceremo-

nial, as in the Fatimid hypothesis, Katz examines the works of individual writers to show how a series of Imami Shi`i and later Sunni authors developed both elite and popular narrative versions of Muhammad's birth that likely preceded state celebrations of this event by centuries.

Chapter 1, "The Emergence of *Mawlid* Narratives," scrutinizes diverse manuscript and published sources to document the history of this early discourse. Aside from overturning the conventional wisdom about the *mawlid*'s supposed Fatimid origin, one of this chapter's most intriguing contentions is the possibility that the widespread narratives raised certain themes of particular interest to women (and especially women's "life-cycle" rituals); thus, these accounts may have been shaped with a female audience in mind. The relative stability and ubiquity of these "semi-popular" narratives gave them a certain canonicity, Katz contends, even though they did not seek to meet the standards of more rigorous scholarly texts. Although the categories of "popular," "canonical," "normative," and "mainstream" can be somewhat slippery, in this first chapter the author largely avoids the common pitfall of positing too sharp a dichotomy between "great" and "little" traditions within Islamic thought and practice.

The following three chapters, namely, "Gifts and Reciprocity," "Emotion [and] Law," and "Time and Merit," build upon the first chapter's historical background to analyze three different pairs of thematic concepts. These three central chapters also build upon one another, as is to be expected. For instance, "Gifts and Reciprocity" treats the idea of how religious gift-giving and devotions can generate and transfer merit. Building upon such ideas, "Time and Merit" develops the concept of merit in more depth, examining how controversies over the sacredness of particular periods of the year become linked with devotional ideas about how rituals performed at special times are thought to have the greatest capacity to generate merit.

"Emotion, Law, and the Celebration of the *Mawlid*," the most fascinating central chapter, describes how numerous pre-modern authors construed such emotions as joy and love not as individualistic and spontaneous acts, but rather as "performative" conventions that could be generated through the *mawlid* narrative and legally mandated. The argument over the appropriateness of standing (*qiyam*) at the moment when the narrative declares the Prophet's birth, and what exactly is at stake in the action, serves as a microcosm through which Katz examines the positions of various parties in the debate over this event's legitimacy. Since emotions formed the basis of a number of the arguments used to defend it from its pre-modern and modern

critics, this third chapter forms an axis around which the book's main argument revolves.

The fifth and final chapter, "*Mawlid*s under Attack," shifts from the thematic back to the historical focus, tracing how the modern critics increasingly gained ground. Katz explores the intricacies of the modern arguments, detailing how in the late twentieth century its critics had set the terms of the debate and how its defenders were forced to retreat from the devotionalist idea that the *mawlid* could generate merit and potential salvation for participants. One detects a tone of nostalgia here, a disappointment at the "de-ritualization" and disenchantment of the world brought about by the attacks of both modernist and revivalist critics. While some might criticize the book for its apparently pro-*mawlid* stance, the author's position is fully appropriate given her choice to focus on tracing the rise and fall of the Sunni devotionalist approach to the Prophet's birthday.

On the topic of the book's focus, it is worth noting that Katz limits her analysis first and foremost to Arabic-language texts and deals primarily with the controversy as it plays out in Egypt, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula. Other geographic and linguistic locations receive her attention as they bear on this development; but aside from her admirable attention to secondary literature, one should not look to this study for an analysis of the *mawlid* outside the Arab context. Even within this Arab context, the study revolves around the analysis of *mawlid* texts and the legal debates they engender, rather than, for instance, ethnographic reports about how the event itself continues to be a living practice among Muslims in different parts of the world. This focus makes sense, but it would have been nice if Katz had spelled it out more explicitly at the book's beginning, together with a section that introduces each of the movements within the book's argument, thereby helping the reader to anticipate the connections between each of its disparate parts.

Aside from this minor criticism, which centers more on the book's organization than the substance of its argument, I enthusiastically recommend this book to all who have an interest in Islamic ritual and law. On the whole, I find *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad* to be well-researched, innovative, and incredibly erudite. It is destined to be a foundational study for those examining the history of Muslim rituals in general, and the history of Muslim festivals in particular.

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