

Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Quran, Hadith and Jurisprudence, by Kecia Ali. Oneworld Publications. 2005. Hb. 245pp., £40.00. ISBN-13: ISBN 9781851684557; 2008. Pb. 245pp., \$19.95. ISBN: 1851684565.

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In this important book, Dr Kecia Ali offers a comparative analysis of classical and modern Islamic discourses on sexual ethics. The author demonstrates a skilled familiarity with the textual sources of the Quran and hadith literature and is clearly well acquainted with Islamic exegetical and jurisprudential tradition. As an American Muslim feminist, she offers a probing re-reading of traditional Islamic values, sexual ethics and how they relate to Muslim experiences in the modern world. Ali offers a critical survey unresolved issues not dealt either by the primary texts or a largely male-dominated classical legal tradition. Highlighting tensions in Muslim scholarship in this area, she asks difficult questions rather than proposing a new vision of Islamic sexual ethics.

Four themes underwrite and unify the issues addressed in this study. First, it is argued that the quest for Islamic authenticity has stifled intra-Muslim debates on sex and sexuality. Second, in an examination of differences between classical and contemporary Muslim discourse, the gap between contemporary “values” and actual sexual practices have led to an increased reappraisal of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” model entrenched in Islamic praxis. Third, the socio-cultural shifts that have occurred in modern Muslim societies highlight a structural bias within Islamic legal theory that seem to minimize the need for female mutual consent as an implicit religious value in the area of sexual relations. The final point is the author’s concern about interpretive communities and how they have evolved and compete in modern debates around this subject.

Using case studies on the topics of marriage, divorce, slavery, illicit sex, male agency and female bodies in the Quran and a discussion of the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha, each chapter analyses and exposes tensions between ancient and modern interpretations of Islamic law. For example perhaps the most conspicuous discrepancy between modern Islamic dis-

courses on sexual relationships is the omission of references to concubinage. Contemporary Muslim jurists give little attention to discussing or even thinking about the ethical and legal issues associated with slavery. Despite the denials of modern apologetics, enslavement of female captives of war has occurred in recent times in Mauritania, Sudan and Afghanistan during the rule of the Taliban, in each place, its proponents justifying their acts by recourse to Islamic law. Other controversial issues such as homosexuality and “female circumcision” are interrogated in light of its practice in Islamic history. While traditionalists may feel unconvinced by some of the conclusions, this study will provide a challenging contribution to this growing field.