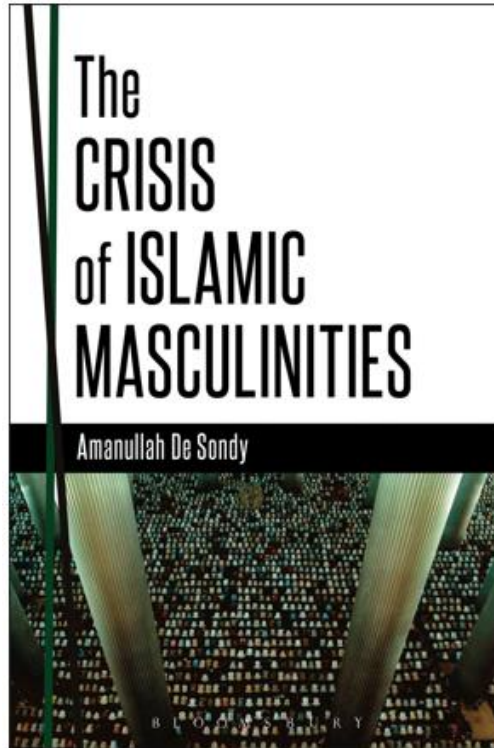


A Summary of *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*
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Amanullah De Sondy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

In *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*, Aman De Sondy argues that there is no ONE Islamic masculinity—or femininity. Rather, in engaging both in the historical and contemporary expressions of Islam, he demonstrates that one readily sees various expressions of faithful submission to God within the tradition. However, these are not merely questions of being a faithful Muslim; they are also questions of being a faithful Muslim *man* or *woman*. Aman frames his analysis theologically in arguing that the debates in Muslim societies about masculine identity play out along three axes: 1) the relationship between the man and the woman, 2) the relationship between the man and God, and 3) the relationship between Islam and the West. These three axes are theological but they have cultural and political implications.

The current crisis in regard to masculine identity—what it means to be a faithful Muslim man—in Islam arises because of contentious debates about appropriate expressions of submission to God in relationship to these three axes. What is the Muslim man's correct and faithful relationship to the Muslim woman? How does a Muslim man submit to God (the core of Islam) faithfully in fulfilling the

religious, cultural, and political duties assigned to him as a man? These first two axes are questions that have implications for men and for normative notions of masculinity; obviously they have implications for women as well—for normative notions of gendered identity itself. The third axis becomes an area of concern for Muslim man and women in general and for Muslim culture itself: How do Muslim societies relate to “the West?”

Examining any one of these axes alone reveals the complexity within these expressions of Muslim identity; when one attempts to trace all three axes, those complexities deepen and expand. De Sony takes as his task, then, not a thorough tracing of these three axes. Rather, he attempts to show that any effort to collapse such complex and varied expressions into strict, rigid lines can only be done by silencing narratives of faithful Muslim women and men in history who lived outside the norms imposed by such narrow interpretations of Islam. To demonstrate this, De Sony examines five different historical and contemporary contexts.

First, he examines the theological claims of Syed Abul Ala Mawdudi. Mawdudi articulated those claims in the middle 20th century as the modern state of Pakistan was coming into being. For Mawdudi, Islam was clear in its teachings: men had authority over women and the nuclear family was the defining, indisputable characteristic of Muslim culture because it alone provided the only structure in which sexual expression could be channeled to its proper ends. These strictures were clear: they were not matters merely of personal choice; they were, rather, the requisite expressions of Muslim culture and they must be carried out as a safeguard against decadent Western values. Mawdudi’s teachings are contrasted with the ideas and policies of Muhammed Ali Jinnah, a leader in the movement for Pakistani statehood and the first Governor-General of Pakistan, and Jinnah’s contemporary, the poet and philosopher Alamma Sir Muhammed Iqbal. Their similar visions for the modern nation of Pakistan, its social structures, cultural norms, and relationship to other nations (including Western liberal democracies) were decidedly less rigid than those of Mawdudi. De Sony uses these varied positions within Pakistan to demonstrate the ways in which the three axes played out in the middle of the twentieth century were related to earlier historical events, impacted by the political and social push for an independent Pakistan, and anticipated debates about Muslim culture and politics in these first years of the twenty-first century.

Second, De Sony examines a cross-section of Muslim feminist writings. Aman chooses writings by Muslim women (not by non-Muslim women scholars interested in Muslim cultures) who continue to practice Islam. He is interested in showing how a living religious tradition is understood by those who are faithful to that tradition even as they interpret that tradition and its sacred texts in new ways. De Sony identifies common elements of Muslim feminist theological writing: 1) an appeal to their experience both as faithful Muslims and as women, and 2) and new interpretations of key Quranic passages through close reading

and exegesis. In short, De Sondy offers examples of new interpretations of Islamic traditions and teachings occurring arising *internal to* Islam itself, not being imposed by outsiders' interpretations or critical analyses. De Sondy demonstrates that the feminist writers he surveys are attempting not merely to broaden the center of Islam in order to give more choices to women who reside in the mainstream of the tradition; rather, he argues that these women endeavor to redeem the margins themselves by calling on other Muslims to understand their tradition from the point of view of the faithful expressions of those women who reside on those margins. This is a radical move because changing women's positions at the margins destabilizes theology, society, and civilization.

The writers that De Sondy surveys employ various strategies for such an enterprise. They read the Quaran in new ways; for example, they show that God's mercy (*rahma*) is carried out in human lives through the woman's womb (*rahim*). They refuse simple interpretations of women's experiences; for example they argue that wearing the *hijab* reveals little about women's faithful submission to God: "in reality the *hijab* of coercion and the *hijab* of liberation look the same. The *hijab* of deception and the *hijab* of integrity look the same." They make new theological claims; for example they argue that submission to God, a core of Islam, does not give men license to exercise authority over women but rather calls both men and women to assess the ways in which they exercise power in their personal and social relationships.

Third, De Sondy surveys the Quranic teachings about Adam, Joseph, Jesus, and Mohammed to demonstrate that the varied narratives of these prophets tell us at least two things about masculine identity: 1) there is no singular site (no singular expression of the nuclear family) that must be in place to allow the prophet to come forth and, 2) there is no singular path for the prophet to take in following God. In short, there is no singular, universal requirement of familial life and no singular, universal expressions of masculinity required of Muslim men.

Fourth, De Sondy tells the story of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, the 19th century Indian Muslim poet. Ghalib is widely described as the greatest poet in the Urdu and Persian languages. His biography reveals the surprising tensions in Ghalib's life related to submission to God and what was by many accounts a rather hedonistic life. One of Ghalib's biographers, Altaf Hussain Hali, may well have been sexually intimate with Ghalib. Hali struggles to reconcile his faith and his sexuality:

"I thought that in all God's creation only the Muslims, and of the seventy-three Muslim sects only the Sunnis, and of the Sunnis only the Hanafis, and of the Hanafis only those who performed absolutely meticulously the fasts and prayers and other outward observances, would be found worthy of salvation and forgiveness—as though the scope of God's mercy were more confined and restricted than Queen Victoria's empire, where men of every religion and creed live peacefully together. The greater the love and

affection I felt for a man, the more strongly I desired that he should meet his end in the state in which, as I thought, he could attain salvation and forgiveness; and since the love and affection I felt for Ghalib were intense, I always lamented his fallen state, thinking, so to say, that in the garden of *Pizwan (In Paradise)* we should no more be together and that after death we should never see each other again.” (pp. 134-135)

According to De Sony, Hali eventually comes to believe that “that there is more than one way to lead a life in submission to God—more than one way to live a life as a Muslim man. He declares his love for Ghalib, and it is through this love that he finds a path to justify how God must also except Ghalib as his creation.” (135)

Fifth, and finally, De Sony examines the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism. Arguing that the essential element of Sufism is the experience of the love of God, De Sony goes on to demonstrate the surprising ways in which that love is revealed. De Sony (echoing the work of the Emory professor Scott Kugle) explores the life of the 16th century Sufi mystic Shah Hussayn. He argues that Hussayn’s life was anything but conventional and that it had little in common with what we would today describe as a male heterosexuality. What it did demonstrate, however, as devotion and submission to God and a striking testimony of the love of God.

In these five examples, De Sony makes a compelling case that Muslim identity is indeed gendered. However, he also makes a case against any simplistic, singular, universal conception of that gendered identity. As an alternative, De Sony lays out a description of religious devotion in Islam that makes a place for a variety of gendered expressions: Mawdudi *and* Ghalib, feminist readings *and* traditionalist interpretations. He closes with a theological claim: no one gendered expression can dictate human beings’ relationship to that ultimate Other, God, and that relationship remains central to Islam.