

*Interdisciplinary Journal of
Research on Religion*

Volume 19

2023

Article 1

Book Talk:

*Believing in South Central: Everyday Islam in the City
of Angels*, by Pamela J. Prickett
(2021, University of Chicago Press)

Response by Omar McRoberts*
University of Chicago

* Correspondence should be directed to omcrober@uchicago.edu (Omar McRoberts), or p.j.prickett@uva.nl (Pamela Prickett)

In *Believing in South Central*, Pamela Prickett explores the complex dynamics of lived religion in Masjid al-Quran (MAQ), an African American Sunni Muslim community in South Central Los Angeles. Founded in the late 1950s as part of the Nation of Islam, the MAQ is a long-standing part of South Central's historical urban ecology. Prickett offers a very sensitive parsing of the significance of the mosque's history for South Central's contemporary socioeconomic landscape. In turn, South Central's demographic, institutional, and economic history is part of the fabric of contemporary believers' collective identity. Prickett carefully tracks the community's economic decline and demographic transformation alongside the transformation of the mosque from a Nation of Islam temple to an orthodox Sunni community. In the process, she illustrates how the poverty of the community became part of the moral consciousness of believers, requiring religious engagement with the landscape of urban disadvantage even as some members of the mosque struggle materially. Lived religion in this Muslim community is gendered as well as raced, as women negotiate the legacy of traditional gender roles in ways that highlight their own variegated agency. Believers also deal with inequality among Muslims and are continually processing theological and material condescension from wealthier immigrant mosques.

Pamela Prickett's writing is elegant and compelling. It is a testament to the power of skillful ethnography, which is after all a writing practice. Ethnography is inherently a writing practice because we translate many observations into a form of writing, an archival format, which we then analyze. This, by the way, makes ethnography a fundamentally *historical* practice rather than the *presentist* method we usually assume. Ethnographers, as participant observers, are present to witness social worlds as they unfold, but we do not really *analyze* the actual present, which is always already gone. We analyze our written archival record of many presents historically observed. The second aspect of ethnography as a writing practice involves translating the insights from analysis as potently as possible to the reader. Prickett wonderfully achieves both aspects of this writing practice. As Gary Alan Fine once wryly observed, beautiful ethnographic writing often conceals a lack of solid data. Prickett's writing clearly is not concealing anything; this is painstakingly careful ethnography expressed in crystalline prose. My first curiosity, then, is about her approach to method and writing as practices that co-arise: what was her process of working between method and translation, especially in the discovery and transmission of the notoriously slippery affective dimensions of religious community life?

While not entirely emic in her depiction of believer's convictions, Prickett deeply respects people's faith as expressed in their own terms. This leads to some important revelations, especially about women believers' experiences of agency and choice. Following Saba Mahmood, Prickett elaborates on what it means for women to experience submission to something—prescriptions for modest Islamic

dress for example—as an act of *agency*. Submission to the gendered rigors of piety, Prickett argues, reflects an agential standpoint that ultimately expresses Muslim women’s personal power, which becomes the basis of their contributions to the “righteous community” of believers. But that agency is intersectional. Gendered performances of religiosity are raced as they “flip the script” on long-standing societal assumptions about dysfunctional gender and family dynamics among African Americans. Religious agency is also classed, as women enact gendered identities in ways meant to deal as effectively as possible with their own economic vulnerabilities. *Believing in South Central*’s most extensive discussion of intersectionality happens in its astute and moving methodological appendix, as Prickett discusses the complexities of her own ethnographic encounter with believers and with the broader community of South Central. This reader would appreciate more of her reflection on agency as something emerging at the intersection of religious, gender, race, and class identities.

Prickett is at pains to demonstrate how religious identity and practice in this community truly is *communal*. The achievement of virtue or piety happens not in isolation but through ongoing engagement with others. As she points out early in the text, measures of religiosity are typically individualized; such measures, and the large number of survey projects to which they belong, cannot capture the dimensions of religiosity that are truly collective. Ethnography can, and Prickett does. Specifically, *Believing...* delivers an original ethnographic account of *taqwa* as a communal practice rather than simply individual. Prickett interprets *taqwa* as a form of individual moral, pious consciousness that organizes personal behavior in a way that emanates out to influence collective and social organization. The point of *taqwa*, or individual sincerity on the path, is to build a righteous community. And the righteous community supports the flowering of individual piety. *Taqwa* does not negate or obviate the individual, but rather works through individuated spiritual awareness to support spiritual community. There are no religious individuals without community, and there is no community without spiritually realized individuals. There must be methodological lessons here beyond Masjid al-Quran, and beyond Islam. Often the lessons of qualitative research for quantitative and survey approaches are lost. What can standard, quantitative measures of religiosity learn from *Believing in South Central*? How can standard measures of religiosity learn from an Islamic concept like *taqwa*, which here is illustrated from a lived religious perspective as being both individual and communal in nature? Is this inherently communal understanding of religion incommensurable with individualistic measures (which are ultimately individualistic conceptualizations of religion), or are there ways they can fruitfully be in conversation?

Finally, Prickett observes that members of MAQ are engaged in a practice known as “black placemaking.” Believers are not merely inhabiting a landscape of

urban disadvantage, but are strategically using their Islam to transform it into a site of safety, of security, of sacredness, where believers manifest the beauty of *taqwa*. They are, Prickett asserts, “making religion work within the confines of local structural disadvantages” (p. 11). I would like to learn more about the conceptual and theoretical implications of this finding for the notion of black placemaking itself. How does introducing the empirical milieu of religion, especially in the context of black Islamic practice in South Central, challenge and expand the interpretive reach of the black placemaking idea?

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Author’s Reply by Pamela J. Prickett University of Amsterdam

I’m grateful to the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* for the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about my book with Omar McRoberts. Early in graduate school I read McRoberts’ *Streets of Glory*. The book would become an earmarked staple on my desk, its tattered cover evidence of how often the book travelled with me from home to school and back. I appreciated the book’s reversal of commonly-held assumptions that religious organizations are necessarily *neighborhood* organizations. I was inspired by McRoberts’ trademark sensitivity to the transcendent qualities of religion, and I sought to emulate this sensitivity in *Believing in South Central* (especially when I write about intentions and orienting oneself to existential, rather than material, concerns). So, it’s a tremendous honor to read McRoberts’ generous review and engage with his questions.

Believing in South Central is a character-driven ethnography that draws on more than six years of research in an African American-led mosque in South Central Los Angeles. This long-standing Muslim community once dominated parts of the

neighborhood, but since the late 1970s has inched closer to collapse. In close ethnographic detail, readers see the historical effects of economic, demographic, and internal religious changes and, importantly, how believers come together as a community to respond to structural decline. I examine what believers do within an Islamic framework to help each other combat poverty, joblessness, violence, and racial injustice—all the while keeping attention to how they make sense of their struggles as part of a larger existential fight for belonging. As McRoberts notes in his review, to do this I engage the work of Saba Mahmood, who studied the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. Building on Foucault and Asad, Mahmood (2005, p. 158) showed that it was through “forms of submission internal to different constructions of freedom”—namely, embodied religious practices—that participants advanced their own ends of cultivating a more ethical self. For example, women in her study practiced veiling as a means of modesty, which they saw as a virtue of Islamic piety. Veiling was a conscious act that served as both a critical marker and the means by which the women trained themselves to be pious. Mahmood wrote, “One cannot simply discard the veil once a modest deportment has been acquired because the veil itself is part of what defines that deportment” (p. 158). In this way, agency is understood as a person’s ability to act that may, at times, involve willing subordination.

Where Mahmood explored how Islam fosters individual subject formation, I was interested in how believers of this faith construct a moral *community*—and specifically within an urban setting marked by disadvantage. To achieve this, I veered away from traditional approaches in the sociology of religion, which frequently operationalize religion as an internalized set of beliefs, and instead I engaged an ethnographic lived religion approach. This approach, grounded in pragmatist thought, sensitizes the researcher to observing what people do together and with what consequences. We see how believers draw from faith in the realm of the everyday, including how they dress, what they eat, how they deal with birth, death, sexuality, and so on. Lived religion can also involve community traditions meant to create solidarity—activities that cross social, political, economic, and cultural realms. The strength of this approach is that the scholar cannot take for granted how people “do religion” based on readings of religious texts.

When we look at not just expected rituals (like prayer) but also social and economic practices, we see that piety at MAQ involved the cultivation of virtues that were achieved through engagement with others. As the head imam, in charge since 1973, said, “Islam doesn’t believe in isolation. Our test is living a community

life.” Taking this back to Mahmood’s work, veiling for the women in her study was not merely a way to signify a religious identity, but a way to shape the religious self. In my study, living a community life is not only a way to express a religious identity, but also a constitutive component of one’s faith. MAQ members cannot discard community any more than the women in Mahmood’s study could discard the veil.

If I have any recommendation to survey researchers, it would be to take seriously the communal dimensions of lived religion, by going beyond attendance and prayer to think about the charity work that religious organizations do, the meals that people of faith share, the activities pious parents arrange for their children, as well as the ways believers engage outside religious organizations in explicit attempts to build community. Even now, when we think about growing interest in Christian Nationalism, there’s a tendency to rely on survey data of *individuals’ beliefs*. Missing is how people find comfort and meaning in the communal aspects of religion. I think surveys could do more to try to capture the collective effervescent dimensions. At the same time, my real methodological nudge is: we desperately need more ethnography in the sociology of religion. And especially deep, immersive ethnography.

No other method could allow me to study how believers at MAQ created and sustained a moral religious community amid so many challenges. These challenges included concentrated poverty, a changing neighborhood demographic landscape, internal religious changes that saw the community lose its economic foothold at the same time believers transitioned from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam, the community’s minority status within American Islam, and believers’ ongoing struggles for respect from their Christian biological kin. Incorporating the concept of Black placemaking allowed me to examine these challenges without making them appear deterministic. Black placemaking offers a corrective to the deficit approach prevalent in much urban ethnography. By telling a different kind of story about Black urban life—one that starts with believers’ efforts to build religious community as the focal point rather than as a consequence of social problems—my book gives attention to the collective struggles of African Americans striving to do what they see as Islamic within a context of moral uncertainty. Yes, there are problems in South Central, but there’s also joy, laughter, and pleasure. This becomes clearest in Chapter 4, where I show the rich friendships that women in the community formed, including the legendary bond between Sisters Ava and Aisha. Their gatherings at the mosque, to eat, talk, and watch movies, were a point of pride.

Neither had plans to leave South Central, knowing well that the community they had formed was irreplaceable. These collective actions enabled the women to further a project of religious self-making that bonded them as African American Muslims. Ties continued after death, as I show towards the end of the book, with the case of another sister who died with no next-of-kin to bury her. The MAQ community rallied to organize and pay for the sister's funeral. In keeping my attention on what people do together (and not just what they say they do) and how they integrate religion into every corner of their lives, I play to the strengths of ethnography.

I agree with McRoberts when he writes that ethnography is “a fundamentally historical practice.” Yes, the site was “always already gone,” as he lyrically states, but it was always changing. Even if the MAQ I studied ceases to exist, the ways that believers engaged Islam remain. People formed lifelong friendships, raising their children together, and then aging in community. They've built lasting Muslim kin networks that will continue to shape the urban landscape for generations to come. This is where I see adding a religious dimension to Black placemaking as pivotal to countering the unrelenting focus on South Central as a plagued or dysfunctional place.

McRoberts asks me to discuss my ethnographic writing process and specifically how I move from method to translation. For me, writing is a beautiful, messy process. I can get lost in words and sentences, spending hours to refine a paragraph. Ethnographic writing, in particular, requires ethical sensitivity, theoretical cogency, intimacy with one's data, and reflexivity. I was determined not to write about my positionality only in the introduction or methods appendix, but to incorporate these throughout the text. In order to achieve this, I cultivated an intricate note-taking process while conducting participant-observation. In addition to what I observed, I wrote in brackets what I was thinking I might be seeing in relation to literature, and in a different style of bracket what I was feeling. I also developed a shorthand for when I needed to double-check something, either for its validity or interpretative accuracy (e.g., follow-up questions on someone's emotional state after an event). I kept my notes open or next to me as I wrote the book. This kind of writing takes time—admittedly more than our ‘publish or perish’ academic culture encourages. I'm afraid I have no shortcuts here for the reader. It requires prioritizing quality over quantity and knowing that the gift of writing well is to offer a written history of a community. That, to me, is an ethical imperative that cannot be rushed.

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