

## Women, Leadership, and Mosques

# Women and Gender

The Middle East and the Islamic World

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# Women, Leadership, and Mosques

## Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority

*Edited by*

Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach



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## PREFACE

The ability of women to exercise various types of Islamic religious authority has increased significantly since the early twentieth century, especially during the last two or three decades. Scholarship, however, has focused overwhelmingly on certain facets of this increase, in particular female leadership in Sufi groups and attempts to reinterpret Islam to accommodate gender equality, whether through an explicitly feminist framework or not. Largely missing from the literature is serious analysis of the growing acceptance of women within mosques and *madrasahs*, spaces which have long been centers of Islamic authority, but which have traditionally excluded or marginalized women. The acceptance of female leadership and activities in these spaces is a significant change from historic practices, signaling the mainstream acceptance of (some forms of) female Islamic leadership.

Intellectual curiosity about the causes, parameters, and consequences of this shift led us to organize a conference that was entitled *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* and was held at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, in October 2009. Our goal was to keep a tight focus on changes in the formal sphere of religious authority—the mosque and *madrasah*—while bringing together a geographically and methodologically diverse range of papers discussing female leaders in both Muslim majority and minority contexts. We invited a number of leading scholars already working on this under-researched topic and issued a call for papers.

We were pleasantly surprised when this call yielded an overwhelming response, including sixty abstracts of good quality. This interest—from both leading academics and younger scholars in the US, Europe, Africa, and Asia—further confirmed the timely nature of our project. We expanded the number of places at the conference, but had to make many difficult decisions in selecting the twenty-one papers that were presented there, twenty of which are presented in the volume.

While reviewing the accepted abstracts, we identified three dominant themes related to female leadership: factors related to its emergence, factors related to its consolidation, and factors related to its impact—specifically, the multiple ways in which these women use their Islamic authority to reinforce or change norms within their communities.

Concentrating on these three themes helped focus our analytical work before, during, and after the conference, as we moved towards production of this volume.

We asked each participant to prepare an in-depth study of the authority of a female leader or leaders in their region of study that focused on one of our three themes and addressed mosque or *madrakah* space. Because it was a publication-driven conference, we required authors to submit papers in advance for pre-circulation, and structured the conference such that the emphasis was on dialogue instead of presentation. At the conference itself, we were fortunate to have Walter Armbrust (a co-sponsor of the project), Francis Robinson, David Parkin, and Karen Bauer chair sessions and help steer debates, which greatly enriched the quality of discussion. The end result was an extremely stimulating and enriching debate over two days that highlighted the complexities of each theme, and provided each participant with focused feedback on their paper that was incorporated into subsequent revisions. We hope to have captured the depth of these debates in our introductory and concluding pieces.

We are extremely grateful to have been able to work with such a skilled and dedicated pool of authors. Unsurprisingly, a volume of this scale posed many logistical challenges, and we had to work hard to ensure consistency in thematic depth as well as style across the chapters. Interestingly, it was often easier to fix the former than the latter. We faced several challenges related to terminology and translation that should be mentioned at the outset.

With respect to translation of terms, we have let our authors decide when to preserve local terminology and when to translate into English, which has resulted in significant presence of foreign words in the text. Given the diversity of contexts represented in this volume, it is also important to recognize that the meaning of commonly used terms—often those of Arabic origin—shifts in important ways over time and space, and these terms need to be read and interpreted in the context of each chapter.

To assist our readers, our editor at Brill suggested that we try to capture these tensions by providing two sets of glossaries. First, there is a standard glossary, which lists all the foreign terms and abbreviations used in the volume with translations. In addition, we have prepared a second glossary that groups terms describing female leaders and leadership activities thematically, so that the reader can get a sense of

the vast number of terms that are inevitably compressed into English-language descriptions of various roles.

The issue of transliteration was equally contentious. Across the twenty-three chapters, the authors use many different languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu, Chinese, and a wide range of European languages. We chose to use the Library of Congress romanization system for transliteration of non-Latin scripts instead of more commonly used conventions because it went beyond Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The end result, however, involves several less familiar transliterations of Arabic characters, including ‘ah’ for *tā’ marbūṭah* (instead of ‘a’ or ‘ā’) and á for *alif maqṣūrah* (instead of ‘a’ or ‘ā’). All terms of foreign origin are put in italics and transliterated, while names of individuals and organizations are transliterated but not italicized.

Several of our participants—especially those writing about Europe or North America—felt that some terms having Arabic origins (such as *fatwá*, *imām*, *muftī*, *shaykh*) are sufficiently distanced in their chapters from their original Arabic context and thus should be spelled in the local language. The disciplinary backgrounds of the authors also influenced their comfort with the mechanics of transliteration with diacritics. Thus, while we, as editors, have tried to standardize transliteration of common terms as much as possible, there is some variation between chapters. Here we must acknowledge the meticulous attention that our copyeditor, Ben Young of Babel Editing, has given to this manuscript. The long hours he has put in have greatly helped achieve consistency in style.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the authors in this volume for their excellent contributions, active cooperation, and hard work throughout the conference and publication process. We are extremely grateful to St Antony’s College and the Oriental Institute for providing the funding that made the conference possible. Walter Armbrust, fellow of these institutions, provided significant support throughout this project, which we sincerely appreciate. We would like to thank Margot Badran for accepting this volume into the *Women and Gender: The Middle East and the Islamic World* series, and the editorial staff at Brill, especially Kathy van Vliet and Nicolette van der Hoek, for their assistance in getting the volume in print. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the support provided by the sponsors of our respective research fellowships—the ESRC and AHRC (who fund

Masooda's Ideas and Beliefs Fellowship), and the Warden and Fellows of New College (who fund Hilary's Sir Christopher Cox Junior Fellowship)—who allowed us time to work on this ambitious project.

Masooda Bano & Hilary Kalmbach  
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INTRODUCTION:  
ISLAMIC AUTHORITY AND THE STUDY OF FEMALE  
RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Hilary Kalmbach

Women in many parts of the Islamic world publicly speak for Islam as preachers, teachers, and interpreters of religious texts. Though men have held a near-monopoly over public religious leadership for much of Islamic history, over the past thirty years the ranks of Muslim women active as religious leaders have swelled to include individuals from almost all parts of the globe, including the Middle East; North, East, West, and South Africa; Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia; Europe; and North America.

The emergence, re-emergence, and expansion of female religious leadership in a wide variety of Muslim communities is significant for a number of reasons. The activities of female leaders represent a major shift in structures of Islamic authority, as they have curtailed male domination of religious leadership and core religious spaces such as the mosque and *madrasahs*, and have increased female attendance at public prayers and mosque lessons. The religious authority of these women is often limited due to gendered restrictions or longstanding traditions, but many play a significant role in the social and religious lives of their communities regardless. Finally, growth of female religious leadership is inherently linked to larger social, religious, and political changes that have impacted Muslim communities since the early twentieth century. To understand fully these larger trends, these women, their roles, and their impact on society and religion must be taken into consideration. Conversely, the activities of these leaders offer scholars a lens through which to view the nature of change in Muslim social and religious practices.

Detailed, nuanced, and comparative examination of the ideas and practices of many of these women is absent from contemporary scholarship; the main focus of scholarship to date has been on those seeking to overturn restrictions on the social and religious activities of women, to the detriment of detailed examination of women active in other, often more conservative, environments. Even though the dress

and lifestyle choices of Muslim women are frequently seen as barometers of the social and religious attitudes of a given community, the role that conservative female Islamic leaders play in the religious and social leadership of many communities has not been fully unpacked by scholars, the media, or policy makers.

This volume rests on belief that the increasing ability of Muslim women to exercise Islamic authority deserves scholarly attention, and that it is crucial to look equally at the full range of women active as religious leaders, from those who are striving to radically change Islamic gender norms, to those who have gained places as teachers in the oldest, most influential, and most conservative of Islamic religious institutions. It advances the study of Islam and Muslim women by placing detailed case studies of a wide spectrum of female Islamic leadership into a framework that highlights larger themes connecting these varied contexts. It unites authors normally divided by disciplinary, linguistic, and regional barriers, including individuals from Islamic Studies, Women's Studies, Development Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, and Religious Studies, who work in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Chinese, Bosnian, Indonesian, Russian, Dutch, Swedish, German, and English, and focus on the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Bridging disciplines—and in particular uniting ethnographic and textual approaches—is a crucial part of capturing the full scope and significance of contemporary female Islamic leadership. In order to maintain this diversity and maximize the connections between contributions, we avoided dividing the chapters according to factors such as geographic area or whether the Muslim community was of majority or minority status.<sup>1</sup>

The central focus of the volume is analyzing the dynamics governing the construction and exercise of female Islamic authority in mosque and *madrasah* space. Each chapter provides a richly contextualized case study of the religious authority of women who lead prayer or interpret Islamic texts, paying particular attention to the spaces—both physical and virtual—in which this leadership takes place. We focus

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<sup>1</sup> The conference participants writing about Europe were particularly adamant that they remain united with those discussing Muslim communities in the geographic East and South. Seemingly simple distinctions are more complex in practice: while the vast majority of European Muslim communities are minorities, not all are diasporic or recent in origin; also, not all Muslim communities in the East—for instance, in India—live in Muslim-majority state contexts.

particularly on women active in mosques and *madrasahs* because these spaces have long been central to the establishment and exercise of religious authority, as they are platforms where religious leaders can exert influence over the religious and social practices of their communities.

Each chapter addresses one or more of the overarching themes that structure the volume, yet retains the disciplinary approach and methodology preferred by its author. In the three sections of this volume, we focus on factors governing the emergence, exercise, and impact of female Islamic authority. Numerous chapters link the emergence of female religious authority to state action, male invitation, or female initiative. The exercise of female religious authority is, in almost all instances, limited by gendered norms, interpretations, and practices, yet it is incorrect to assume that these restrictions make it impossible for female leaders to impact the social and religious practices of their communities. Many of the religious leaders profiled in this volume utilize space in creative ways to overcome some of these limitations, while a handful of female leaders vehemently reject these limitations and instead argue for gender equality.

Section introductions explain volume-wide themes in more detail, link individual chapters to each theme and each other, and—along with the introduction and conclusion—assess what the chapters say collectively about contemporary Islamic authority, thought, and practice. The introduction lays out major themes in the study of Islamic authority and explains how a study of female Islamic leadership focused on religious authority can contribute significantly to scholarship on Islam and Muslim women.

*Changes in Islamic Authority: Legitimacy, Knowledge, and Performance*

Religious authority is a key concept in the study of religion, as it dictates who has the right to interpret religious texts and apply them to the lives of followers. In many contexts worldwide, the influence of Muslim religious leaders and their teachings spreads beyond the religious arena and impacts upon social, political, and economic activities, making it all the more important to understand the dynamics affecting their ability to lead.

Islamic authority manifests itself in complex ways, which presents challenges to scholars using it as an analytical focus for the study

of Islam and Muslim societies. Many (though not all) Islamic communities have historically had neither a hierarchical church nor an official clergy, unlike more centralized religions such as Christianity. The absence of a central arbiter leads to ‘role uncertainty’ and lack of agreement on the qualifications and experience required of would-be leaders.<sup>2</sup> Specific paths to religious authority exist, but they are more fluid and less centrally regulated than in many other faiths. While Islamic leaders provide crucial guidance and instruction, their presence is not necessary for the observance of many religious rituals, such as daily prayers, fasting, and the *hajj* pilgrimage.

The relatively decentralized nature of Islamic authority, however, does not mean that Islam lacks important religious leadership roles. In the more than 1,400 years since the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, Islamic authority has coalesced into a wide variety of positions and institutions. These have included the caliph, the *‘ālim* (scholar, plural *‘ulamā*), the *muftī* (legal scholar who issues opinions in the form of *fatwās*), the *qāḍī* (judge who issues binding rulings), the Sufi *shaykh* (mystical leader), and *khaṭīb* or *imām* (mosque preacher). Shī‘ī leaders initially included infallible religious leaders—called *imāms*—succeeding Muḥammad, and have more recently developed into a scholarly establishment headed by one or more *marāja‘-i taqlīd* (sources of emulation, singular *marja‘*).<sup>3</sup>

Further complicating scholarly study of Islamic authority is the significant expansion of claims to religious authority in the twentieth century due to mass education and literacy, new communication technologies, altered social structures, and new trends in Islamic thought and practice, a development described alternatively as a “fragmentation” of Muslim leadership and a “proliferation of religious knowledge, actors, and normative statements.”<sup>4</sup> As Muslim societies modernized—

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet’s Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 33–34.

<sup>3</sup> Scholarship on Islamic authority in Shī‘ī communities is expanding significantly, in part due to the efforts of the Clerical Authority in Shī‘ī Islam Project—known as the Hawza Project—directed by Professor Robert Gleave of Exeter University. See <http://www.thehawzaproject.net>.

<sup>4</sup> For the former, see Dale F. Eickelman and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 131–35 and Francis Robinson, “Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam?” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 19 (2009), 350–352. For the latter, see Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, “Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim

often as a result of Western pressure or colonialization—the ‘*ulamā*’ lost their near-monopoly over interpreting and teaching Islamic texts.

In the early twentieth century, reformist ‘*ulamā*’ in India, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia argued that contemporary interpretations should be based primarily on Islamic texts—the Qur’ān, *sunnah*, and *ḥadīth*—and not on the centuries of Islamic jurisprudence and schools of interpretation that they had spent decades mastering.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, they inadvertently opened the door for literate individuals with little or no exposure to traditional religious learning to claim the right to teach and interpret Islamic texts. These leaders, dubbed “new religious intellectuals,” are seen as religious authorities due to their pious reputations, commitment, and ability to connect with lay audiences, as well as a capacity to understand and interpret Islamic texts, often (though not always) gleaned through part-time instruction obtained outside traditional scholarly institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge to the authority of the ‘*ulamā*’ was significant, especially as these new leaders and their national and international organizations have since played major roles in the development of Islamic thought and practice throughout the twentieth century. These new leaders are heterogeneous in terms of both ideology and approach to Islamic texts, and include modernists (some of whom support plural approaches and interpretations, and would like Islam to remain, first and foremost, an individual practice), and Islamists (who would like their interpretations of Islam to play a central role in modern Muslim social and political organization). When discussing the rise of new religious intellectuals, it is important to remember, however, that many ‘*ulamā*’ have successfully met their challenge,<sup>7</sup> and continue to play an

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Societies; A Critical Overview,” in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 12.

<sup>5</sup> The argument was, in essence, that they could exercise *ijtihād*—independent reasoning—not only on new topics, but also when debating issues on which earlier jurists had come to conclusive rulings. See David Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Muhammad Khalid Masud, “Islamic Modernism,” in *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore, and Martin van Bruinessen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 13, 165.

<sup>7</sup> Numerous contemporary ‘*ulamā*’ have significant followings among and can communicate effectively with individuals with modern education, and thereby successfully compete with non-‘*ulamā*’ preachers. See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The ‘Ulamā’ in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

important role in religious education and leadership in Muslim communities worldwide.

### *Legitimacy*

Analyzing the authority of Muslim religious leaders is therefore both important and challenging. Many analysts, similar to Weber, distinguish between two related concepts: authority and power.<sup>8</sup> Holders of authority are seen as legitimate leaders of their communities, and these communities recognize this legitimacy by choosing to comply with their demands. While one can be coerced into complying with the demands of an individual in a position of power, an authoritative relationship involves followers recognizing the leader as legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

Much scholarship has therefore focused on the sources from which legitimacy can spring. Weber's classic framework involves three ways that leaders can establish legitimacy: charismatic, legal-rational, and traditional. Charismatic authority relies on (often extraordinary levels of) personal magnetism, while legal-rational depends on often-institutionalized rules and practices, and traditional is founded on customary (often hereditary) ideas, structures, and practices. Patrick Gaffney modifies Weber's typology to classify Egyptian preaching into three types: the saint, the scholar, and the warrior.<sup>10</sup>

The typologies used by Weber and Gaffney are useful in so far as they encourage scholars to think about the qualifications, motivation, and structures inherent in different types of leadership roles. Similarly, it has been crucial to document the emergence and resurgence of groups such as the new religious intellectuals and the 'ulamā', as

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Press, 2002), 54–56; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Ulama and Contestations of Religious Authority," in *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore, and Martin van Bruinessen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 214–26.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see Krämer and Schmidtke, "Introduction," 1. One of the places where Weber discusses this distinction is in (the translated) Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology* (London: Peter Owen, 1962), 71–74, 117–18.

<sup>9</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*; Krämer and Schmidtke, "Introduction"; Stanley Benn, "Authority," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Collier-Macmillan Publishers, 1967), 474; Robert Peabody, "Authority," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan & Free Press, 1968), 215.

<sup>10</sup> Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 34–43. For more on Weber in an Islamic context, see Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).



Eickelman, Piscatori, and Zaman have expertly done. At the same time, focusing a wide-ranging project such as this volume primarily on typologies and categories increases the risk of underemphasizing or obscuring the extent to which different types of legitimization overlap and change over time.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to recognize that the boundaries that individuals and groups draw between themselves and others—boundaries that are represented in scholarship by abstractions such as categories and types—are interesting not only because of who they separate, but also because of the meanings that are associated with choosing to cross them.<sup>12</sup> Ideally, studies of social groups focus not only on those who conform, but also those who do not, as these individuals can shed important light on interrelationships and change.

Along these lines, this project aims to capture the diversity of contemporary female Islamic leadership by focusing on the myriad pathways and processes that would-be leaders follow to obtain and consolidate religious authority. It starts with the assertion that all Islamic authorities must acquire and demonstrate that they have some sort of special knowledge about Islam. The details of this process—the sorts of knowledge they claim, the ways in which they acquired this knowledge, and ways in which they demonstrate it—reveal a significant amount about the leader and his or her authority over religious

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<sup>11</sup> These scholars do recognize this pitfall. Eickelman, Piscatori, and Zaman accurately point to education as the key factor separating the *'ulamā'* from new religious intellectuals, yet also recognize that the picture is more complex (for instance, individuals have attended both Islamic and modern schools). Gaffney recognizes that his three modes of legitimization occur in combination and his richly detailed analysis captures many important dynamics; however, presenting each preacher as a personification of a single mode de-emphasizes the extent to which overlap occurs. See Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 13, 165; Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 36; Zaman, *'Ulama'*, 7–11; Zaman, "Contestations," 219–26. Zaman notes further that the *'ulamā'* are differentiated by their unique "mode of argumentation" which normally depends on "discursive engagement with the history of earlier scholarly debates." Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Consensus and Religious Authority in Modern Islam," in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 155.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Douglas' work explains how individuals who do not fall neatly into one social category introduce tension that is often resolved either through removing the individual from the picture, or by shifting boundaries such that the individual fits. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 5, 36, 38–40. Also useful are the works of various boundary theorists. For an overview, see Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167–95.

and social matters. Tracing, analyzing, and contrasting the paths to religious leadership emphasizes the process by which authority is obtained, and further demonstrates that commonly-used categories are neither homogenous nor entirely dissimilar from each other. This approach serves to highlight the similarities, differences, and changing relationships between leaders, and the extent to which boundaries are crossed and blurred. First, however, more must be said about Islamic knowledge and how it is acquired and demonstrated.

### *Knowledge*

The ultimate source of Islamic knowledge are Islam's principal texts, first the Qur'ān, and then the *sunnah*, the corpus of transmitted actions and sayings—known individually as *ḥadīth*—of the Prophet Muḥammad. A distinction can be drawn between theoretical knowledge, which can be studied, and practical knowledge, which can only be acquired by doing. The former is dominated by scholars and theologians, while the latter includes insight gained through ritual practices as well as the paths followed by Sufi masters and their disciples.

One of the many Arabic terms for knowledge, *ʿilm*, can be used generally for religious knowledge,<sup>13</sup> especially knowledge relating to the texts and traditions from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions that have been transmitted—often in both oral and written form—by generations of specialist experts. The Arabic term used for scholar—*ʿālim*, plural *ʿulamāʾ*—is derived from the same root, as are verbs meaning to know, to learn, and to teach. The term *fiqh* initially indicated the independent application of transmitted Islamic knowledge to a particular situation,<sup>14</sup> and has since come to refer to Islamic jurisprudence. As Islamic scholarship expanded, the *ʿulamāʾ* developed methods for the transmission, assessment, analysis, and application of these received texts to social, religious, and legal situations, practices that eventually coalesced into schools of legal practice and interpretation (*madhāhib*, sing. *madhhab*). Mastery of source texts as well as the methods and past rulings of one or more schools

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<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Ilm.” Accessed online at [www.brillonline.nl](http://www.brillonline.nl) on May 6, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Fikh.” Accessed online at [www.brillonline.nl](http://www.brillonline.nl) on May 6, 2010.

required years of study under the supervision of previous generations of scholars.

The respective importance of these forms of scholarly knowledge has shifted significantly in the modern period, though tradition—or more accurately the appeal to tradition—has remained important. This has been identified by Krämer and Schmidtke as a ‘legitimizing strategy’ and described as

the marked tendency [among “scholars, saints, and ordinary believers”] to refer to the normative and authoritative traditions in order to justify their own thoughts.<sup>15</sup>

Zaman’s discussion of tradition introduces William Graham’s concept of ‘traditionalism’ which references the belief that connections with idealized histories and individuals are the sole source of legitimacy in any period for attempts to construct and reconstruct society.<sup>16</sup> Zaman further reinforces its connection to contemporary change by noting that

the traditionalism of which Graham speaks is something broader in scope and significance [than *ḥadīth* transmission and authentication]: it is the recurrent effort by Muslims to articulate authority and evaluate claims to such authority by positing and reaffirming a connectedness to the past.<sup>17</sup>

The tradition that is appealed to in these instances is neither static nor unchanging, but instead a fluid concept that is the focus of significant contestation because of the cultural and social capital it provides to those authorities who are seen to be knowledgeable about it.

The early twentieth-century reformist arguments that contemporary interpretations of Islam should be based primarily on the original source texts and not past rulings inadvertently, but significantly, lowered the amount of material that an individual has to master to produce authoritative interpretations. Past scholarship and practice—or at least what they are perceived to be in the present—remain pivotal in the discourse and legitimization practices of contemporary ‘*ulamā*’, yet are also important to new religious intellectuals,<sup>18</sup> as many of those who reject the relevance of the scholarship of the religious schools

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<sup>15</sup> Krämer and Schmidtke, “Introduction,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> Zaman, ‘*Ulama*’, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Zaman, ‘*Ulama*’, 7–10.

reference instead what they perceive to be the practices of the first generations of Muslims.

In mystical contexts, the term *maʿrifah*—derived from the same root as the verb ‘to know’—is similar to the most basic meaning of gnosis: cognition of the divine.<sup>19</sup> Sufi orders, under the leadership of master *shaykhs*, have developed paths of spiritual exercises of varying types to assist disciples in obtaining this type of knowledge about Islam. While Sufi knowledge is generally seen as less connected to texts, as it concerns what is internal, individual, and invisible instead of the laws and practices of the material, visible world, it is important to remember that its practices are also derived from the Qurʾān and other central texts.<sup>20</sup> Another key concept in mystical circles is that of the *barakah*, or blessing, that is often associated with Sufi masters, both during their lifetimes and after their deaths. It can be passed down to their descendents or chosen successors, and contact with it is seen by many to be beneficial.

#### *Acquiring and Demonstrating Knowledge*

Personal connections and space play key roles in the acquisition and demonstration of scholarly and mystical Islamic knowledge, both in the past and today. The importance of personal connections, in particular in the receiving and demonstrating of Islamic knowledge, reinforces the importance of scholarly networks and links Islamic leaders with both their contemporaries and generations of scholars stretching back throughout Islamic history.

Person-to-person transfer of Islamic knowledge through a *silsilah* or *isnād*—a chain of transmission—has historically played a major role. Students and scholars at all levels received knowledge—often orally—in this manner, be it verses of the Qurʾān from the local *madrāsah* instructor, advanced texts or *ḥadīth* from an *ʿālim*, or mystical knowledge from a Sufi *shaykh*.<sup>21</sup> At the advanced levels, this transmission

<sup>19</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Maʿrifa.” Accessed online at [www.brillonline.nl](http://www.brillonline.nl) on May 6, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive overview of this connection, see *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 1st ed., s.v. “Ṣūfism and the Qurʾān.” Accessed online at [www.brillonline.nl](http://www.brillonline.nl) on May 19, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Historically, *muftīs* and *qādīs* in many areas delivered rulings with consideration for a particular individual’s circumstances. For further discussion of this and the role of orality, see Brinkley Morris Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

was often accompanied by an *ijāzah*, or certification attesting ability to transmit a text or fulfill a particular type of role, such as ‘*ālim*, *muftī*, *qādī*, or even Sufi *shaykh*.<sup>22</sup>

Processes of performance have also long been central to the demonstration of Islamic knowledge. The need for legitimacy means that possession of Islamic knowledge is not sufficient; a leader must be seen by others to possess it. Leaders must demonstrate the knowledge and embody the norms that are expected by their peers and audiences, which makes their authority dependent on both performance and relationships.<sup>23</sup> Amassing legitimacy requires a multi-dimensional interaction in which the speech, dress, and conduct of the authority both influence and are influenced by those witnessing the performance, be they peers, students, or the general public. If the authority’s actions differ greatly from the expectations of this audience, then the leader’s authority in that context diminishes.

This process can be self-reinforcing: once an individual has secured a job requiring him or her to teach, preach, or issue interpretations of texts in public, being seen in this position further enhances his or her authority. Eickelman and Piscatori describe this dynamic as “circular,” noting that leaders “draw boundaries because they have authority, and doing so further confirms their authority.”<sup>24</sup>

Potential leaders are limited by the expectations of their audience and competition from their peers (who are also presumably trying to meet these expectations), but once an individual has authority, he or she has at least some ability to change these expectations. Eickelman and Piscatori state that while authorities must “appear to embody cherished values and represent the symbolic reference points of society, including sacred texts,” as their authority increases, so does their influence over the ideology of the community:

deference or acquiescence...is only part of the story. Those bearing authority transform themselves over time into ‘natural’ leaders and, through the manipulation of the symbols of society and the invocation

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<sup>22</sup> See George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 147–52; and *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Idjaza,” accessed online at [www.brillonline.nl](http://www.brillonline.nl). 23 June 2010.

<sup>23</sup> This point is reinforced by the work of numerous scholars. Krämer and Schmidtke describe authority as “premised on recognition and acquiescence” and therefore “relational and contingent.” Krämer and Schmidtke, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 59.

of tradition, they make claims of obedience and obligation on others. Authority inheres in those who are considered to have justifiable control over a society's symbolic production, and with enhanced and routinized elaboration of this control, leaders can compel obedience but usually prefer to encourage it.<sup>25</sup>

Their analysis hints at the potential for blurring of power and authority—in essence, possessing sufficient coercive power to reinforce compliance among followers—once an individual establishes him or herself as a leader within a given community.

Public spaces designated for religious activities have long been the premier locations for both performance and person-to-person transfer of knowledge. Mosques and *madrasahs* provide institutional platforms in which Islamic leaders demonstrate their knowledge and establish their authority in front of lay audiences drawn from the surrounding community. The most prestigious of these spaces—regional and international centers of religious education, such as Cairo's al-Azhar mosque or the Shi'i seminaries of Najaf—also connect aspiring and established religious authorities, enabling students to obtain and publicly demonstrate—as a lecturer or audience participant—knowledge of key texts in Islamic legal and literary science. This, in turn, increases their standing among the community of scholars and could lead to work as a teacher, *mufti* or mosque official.<sup>26</sup> This position at the center of networks of scholarly authority means that the most famous of these places have become more than just physical spaces, but institutions that carry significant authority in and of themselves.

Expanding use of mass communication technologies such as print, radio, cassette tapes, and television throughout the twentieth century has resulted in significant changes in how Islamic authority is legitimized through the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge. Performance and space remain central, though changing audience expectations and the availability of a wider variety of spaces—physical and virtual—have significantly aided challenges to the near-monopoly of the '*ulamā*' on authoritative performances and platforms. In particular, increasing popular demand for religious instruction has led to the expansion of religious teaching and preaching aimed at individuals

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>26</sup> Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*.

studying on a part-time basis, either to increase their basic knowledge or to obtain varying levels of scholarly proficiency.

New media have also facilitated the emergence and expansion of alternatives to face-to-face, individualized knowledge transmission. New media enable authorities—‘*ulamā*’ or otherwise—to connect with new, often global, audiences, and to send out mass-messages and rulings that are not tailored to individual or place. The plethora of information and authorities available also threatens to sever the person-to-person connection between scholar and student, as it increases the ability of individuals to study at a distance, independently or with groups of non-specialists. Finally, individuals in a particular locality are no longer forced to rely solely on the teachings and rulings of local authorities, but have (or can request) access to the instructional material, intellectual output, and advice of scholars around the world. It is important to remember, however, that these new technologies have altered, but not ended, the longstanding influence and practices of the ‘*ulamā*’.<sup>27</sup>

As new modes of religious instruction and leadership expanded, so have attempts by various states to increase their control over the instruction and employment of religious leaders. In Egypt, programs supervised by al-Azhar certify men and women to deliver basic Islamic instruction in mosques, *madrasahs*, and other community spaces (see Minesaki, Chapter 3.2, this volume). The Egyptian state exerts influence at the highest levels of Islamic authority through the position of Grand Mufti, who heads the Dār al-Iftā’ founded in 1895, and the Shaykh al-Azhar, whose authority over a centralized religious education system was gradually increased.<sup>28</sup> In Morocco and Turkey, graduates of state-run programs often work as official state religious functionaries, preaching, lecturing, and providing information about correct Islamic practice (see Rausch, Chapter 1.2, and Hassan, Chapter 1.3, this volume). State efforts to control religious affairs, however, are continually complicated by the need of religious leaders to be seen as legitimate by at least some of their peers or the general public.

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<sup>27</sup> Zaman’s work concerns the adaptation of many contemporary ‘*ulamā*’ to these conditions, by developing the communication skills and technological awareness necessary to preach and write for modern-educated audiences, both locally and globally. Zaman, “Contestations,” 214–20.

<sup>28</sup> Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 27–29, 46–47, 100–106.

*Tracking Similarities, Differences, and Change*

The utility of focusing on how Islamic authorities acquire and demonstrate religious knowledge is shown in the ease with which not only boundary formation, but also boundary-crossing and change over time, are incorporated into the analysis. This approach is represented in the volume in so far as we have limited categorization and focused instead on the source, construction, and impact of female Islamic authority in particular contexts around the world. The use of this approach, however, is not limited to historically marginal groups such as women, but extends also to analysis of some major figures of modern Islam, many of whom straddle the boundaries customarily drawn between *'ulamā'*, Sufis and new religious intellectuals.

Among the *'ulamā'*, prominent boundary-straddlers include Muḥammad 'Abduh, Aḥmad Kufṭārū, and Yūsuf Qaraḏāwī. Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), the Azhar-trained Egyptian scholar and Grand Muftī, was by education solidly a member of the *'ulamā'*, yet he was a staunch advocate of reforming the structure and content of Islamic education, and argued that interpretations could be based on source texts only—a method later used by new religious intellectuals. Kufṭārū, Syria's late Grand Muftī (d. 2004), straddled another boundary, that between *ālim* and Sufi *shaykh*. His case is even more interesting due to his involvement in founding and expanding a private Islamic educational institution, initially known as the Abū Nūr Foundation—renamed the Shaykh Kufṭārū Foundation after his death—which he was supposedly permitted to do because of his cooperation with the Syrian state.<sup>29</sup> Qaraḏāwī has the depth of knowledge of an *ālim* who trained at the highest levels of al-Azhar,<sup>30</sup> yet—similar to new religious intellectuals—he also has longstanding ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, eschews adherence to a single legal school,<sup>31</sup> uses speaking and writing styles that resonate with the general public,<sup>32</sup> and was an

<sup>29</sup> Annabelle Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik Unter Asad* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Krämer provides a detailed biography: see Gudrun Krämer, "Drawing Boundaries: Yusuf al-Qaradawi on Apostasy," in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 184–92. On his education see also Zaman, "Contestations," 220.

<sup>31</sup> He instead strives for "moderation." See Zaman, "Consensus and Authority," 171; Krämer, "Drawing Boundaries," 196–97.

<sup>32</sup> Krämer, "Drawing Boundaries," 193.



early adopter of radio and satellite television to spread his teachings worldwide.<sup>33</sup>

The careers of these individuals—and many of the leaders discussed in this volume—demonstrate how focusing on knowledge acquisition and demonstration can reveal the multiple, diverse, and, at times, unexpected strategies deployed by contemporary Islamic leaders to increase their authority and influence. This information adds to scholarly perceptions of group composition and interrelationships, and reinforces an image of contemporary Islamic authority as multifaceted: the need to refer to knowledge and practices inherited from past generations of Muslims remains constant, yet perceptions of this inheritance as well as the ways in which leaders obtain and demonstrate connections with it continue to shift.

### *Authority and the Study of Contemporary Female Islamic Leadership*

The relatively decentralized and multifaceted nature of twentieth-century Islamic authority presents both opportunities and challenges for women who want to exercise religious leadership. For much of Islamic history, women have not had a significant presence in mosques and *madrassahs* in many Muslim communities, which has hampered their ability to obtain Islamic authority by building public reputations as teachers and transmitters of Islamic knowledge.

This does not mean, however, that women have been entirely excluded from the transmission and application of Islamic knowledge in past centuries. A sizable number of female religious authorities appear in Islamic sources, especially biographical dictionaries, prior to the sixteenth century, primarily as Companions of the Prophet, *ḥadīth* transmitters and Sufi saints,<sup>34</sup> but also as scholars, instructors,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 190–91; Leif Stenberg, “The Global Mufti,” in *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity*, ed. Birgit Schäbler and Leif Stenberg (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 156.

<sup>34</sup> Roded estimates that 10–15% of Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad cited in major biographical dictionaries were women, but that this percentage dropped significantly in subsequent generations. Sayeed refines this further, noting a drop in female *ḥadīth* transmission starting in the ninth century and ending in the eleventh century, when the number of active female *muḥaddithāt* increased. Roded and Nadwi note the disappearance of women—both contemporaries and those from earlier generations—from biographical dictionaries starting in the sixteenth century. Muhammad Akram Nadwi, *al-Muḥaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface

and patrons of religious endowments.<sup>35</sup> Women have also historically been active as Sufi leaders, especially in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.<sup>36</sup> The *barakah* of Sufi leaders could be passed on to both sons and daughters, and women have historically held prominent and celebrated positions as leaders of religious sisterhoods even when they have been largely excluded from centers of religious scholarship. These historical examples—from both Sunnī and Shīʿī communities—provide contemporary female leaders with historical precedents to cite when their ability to lead as a woman is challenged, as in the case of Bint al-Hudá's use of (shifting) historical memories of Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' (see Pierce, Chapter 2.8, this volume).<sup>37</sup>

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, female Islamic leadership has dramatically expanded—in directions old and new—in part because of the structural changes in Islamic authority described earlier, as well as shifts in the roles and activities of women in many Muslim communities. The chapters in this volume demonstrate that, as

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Publications, 2007); Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saād to Who's Who* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1994); Asma Sayeed, "Shifting Fortunes: Women and *Hadīth* Transmission in Islamic History (First to Eighth Centuries)," (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005); Jonathan P. Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Discussion of these female leadership activities is increasing. See Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat*, 273–90; Mona Hassan, "Relations, Narrations, and Judgements: The Scholarly Networks and Contributions of an Early Female Muslim Jurist" (under review); Mirjam Künkler, "Of 'Alimahs, Wa'izahs, and Muftahidahs: Forgotten Histories and New State Initiatives" (manuscript).

<sup>36</sup> For instance, see Niyazi Mustafa, "Rābi'ah al-'Adawīyah" (Cairo: Aflam Hilmi Rafla, 1963); Fatima Mernissi, "The Story of a Contemporary Woman Mystic," in *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader*, ed. Ruth Roded (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); Catharina Raudvere, "Female Dervishes in Contemporary Istanbul: Between Tradition and Modernity," in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*, ed. Karen Ask and Marit Tjomslund (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Annemarie Schimmel, "Women in Mystical Islam," in *Women and Islam*, ed. Azizah al-Hibri (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982); Shemeem Burney Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India*, 1st ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Annabelle Böttcher, "Islamic Teaching among Sunni Women in Syria," in *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Another example is Hudá al-Ḥabash's citation of Umm al-Darda' as a precedent for female mosque preaching and instruction. Hilary Kalmbach, "Social and Religious Change in Damascus: One Case of Female Islamic Authority," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008). Despite the use of female historical figures in contemporary legitimization debates, scholars must be careful not to read the agendas and awareness of the present onto the historical records of the past.

literate, publicly active members of society, women have been able to claim exoteric, scholarly religious authority based on at least some—and occasionally a significant amount of—formal learning, mixed with reputation, teaching experience, charisma, a pious image, commitment to religious and charitable causes, and family ties. Women have taken up space in mosques and *madrasahs* to teach and lead prayer for other women, solidly establishing, re-establishing, or expanding female leadership in public religious spaces. Women also have played a major role in many twentieth-century Islamic revivalist movements, spreading new or reinvented forms of religious practice, dress, and interpretation among Muslim women.

### *Female Leadership Roles, New and Old*

Contemporary female leaders fill a wide range of roles in a variety of spaces, including those long held by traditional scholars—that of *‘ālim*, *mujtahidah*, and *imām*—and those that have significantly expanded during the late twentieth century—that of revivalist instructor, speaker, and advisor. The varying contexts in which these women exercise religious authority make it clear that assuming religious women in conservative Muslim communities are not actors, but are passively acted upon, falls far short of capturing the complexity of their activities.<sup>38</sup>

Women with significant formal religious education have been able to access some of the career paths and public spaces that have long been open to male scholars, even occasionally those open to the higher ranks of male scholars, such as a *mujtahidah*, or an individual entitled to independently interpret texts (see Künkler and Fazaeli, Chapter 1.5, this volume). Expansion of educational opportunities for women alone has not been enough for significant change, however, as expansion of places for women at the highest levels of Islamic education—such as the women’s section of Egypt’s al-Azhar—has not resulted in a parallel increase in women occupying high-level positions.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> This point is addressed further by Saba Mahmood, who frames her study of the Egyptian mosque movement in opposition to the assumption that conservative Muslim women who adhere to the values and constraints associated with mosque movements are acting in an illogical manner that betrays their best interests. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–2, 5, 37–38.

<sup>39</sup> One example, highlighted in *Veiled Voices*, is the inability of Dr. Su‘ād Sāliḥ to become a member of Egypt’s Islamic Research Council (Majma‘ al-Buḥūth al-Islāmīyah)—despite the assurances of the late Shaykh al-Azhar (and former Grand

Opportunities have also arisen for women in states that have incorporated mosque officials into the state bureaucracy, such as Morocco and Turkey, to serve as mosque preachers, teachers, and issuers of state-sanctioned *fatwās* (see Rausch, Chapter 1.2, and Hassan, Chapter 1.3, this volume). Women in Hui communities in China have institutionalized and expanded their longstanding role as instructors by opening women-only mosques with entirely female ritual and communal leadership (see Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, this volume). Female activists based primarily in North America have attempted to link reinterpretations of the Qurʾān promoting gender equity with female leadership of mixed-gender communal prayer, efforts that have attracted significant attention worldwide (see Hammer, Chapter 3.5, and Lehmann, Chapter 3.6, this volume). Other women have chosen to limit their activities to expanding their public instruction and leadership of women (see Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume).

The number of positions available to women as teachers providing instruction to women and girls in mosques and *madrasahs* has expanded significantly in parallel with late-twentieth-century Islamic revival movements that ‘call’ Muslims back to Islam in many parts of the world. Some of these female leaders have a formal Islamic education—often in smaller schools or government certificate programs—but, similar to new religious intellectuals, a crucial part of their authority is based on informal training, family ties (see Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, Chapter 2.1, this volume), volunteer work within the movements, teaching experience, and a reputation for personal piety and commitment to activist work (see Le Renard, Chapter 1.4, this volume). Women in various contexts locate their revivalist work in mosques and *madrasahs* (see Minesaki, Chapter 3.2, and Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume),<sup>40</sup> in the virtual spaces created by television

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Mufti), Shaykh Ṭaṅṭāwī, that qualified women can become *muftīs*—because only one man voted for her. A piece by Margot Badran in the *American Research Centre in Egypt Bulletin*, (183, Fall–Winter 2002–2003) presents Suʿād Sāliḥ in the context of Islamic feminism. It goes into detail about her background and qualifications, explaining how she came to work as a professor and department chair at al-Azhar’s Women’s College and to apply for the status of *muftī*, which would give official recognition to the *fatwās* she issues on television and lectures. Interestingly, while Sāliḥ notes that Islam allows women to issue *fatwās*, presumably on a general basis, she argues for female representation within the official *muftiate* in gendered terms, saying that many women feel most comfortable asking for *fatwās* from a woman, and that many male *muftīs* are not qualified to answer their questions.

<sup>40</sup> See also Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change.”

(see Karlsson Minganti, Chapter 3.1, this volume) and the Internet (see Le Renard, Chapter 1.4, this volume),<sup>41</sup> in public or semi-public non-mosque spaces (see Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, and Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, this volume), and domestically (see Vanderwaeren, Chapter 2.6, and Minesaki, Chapter 3.2, this volume). Decisions surrounding spaces are influenced by external constraints introduced by state or male religious authority (see chapters in parts 1 and 2, this volume), and affect the authority of the individuals concerned (see especially Micinski, Chapter 2.3, this volume).

In this volume, religious authority is linked only with those activities that require explicitly Islamic knowledge, specifically teaching, preaching, interpreting (or reinterpreting) texts, leading worship, and providing guidance on religious matters. However, attempts to expand religious authority are linked, in many contexts, to women occupying (or trying to occupy) communal leadership positions, for instance as organizers of lessons and events or representatives on mosque or communal administrative bodies (see Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, Hammer, Chapter 3.5, Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, and Karlsson Minganti, Chapter 3.1, this volume). A major question addressed by these chapters is whether expansion in female communal leadership can be linked to the increasing number of women in explicitly religious leadership roles.

### *Why Focus on Islamic Authority?*

Careful examination of the sources and dynamics of female religious authority contributes to the study of female Islamic leaders in a number of ways. First, it allows us to place the seemingly contrasting activities of various female Islamic leaders on the same continuum, uniting a body of scholarship that has hitherto been divided between studies of women who have explicitly set out to challenge Islamic sanctioning of gender inequality, and women from revivalist movements whose challenge to norms is subtle or nonexistent.

The first body of scholarship is significantly larger and focuses on women from North America, Europe, and Malaysia who reinterpret texts, engage in activist work, or otherwise push the boundaries with regard to what is permissible for female religious leaders to do. Leaders who feature prominently include the North Americans Amina

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<sup>41</sup> Dr. Su'ād Sāliḥ, discussed above and below, is an example of a female Islamic leader with a television program.

Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Kecia Ali, and the German Rabeya Müller, and organizations of note include Sisters in Islam, a Malaysian group founded to promote interpretations of the Qur'an that protect women's rights.<sup>42</sup>

The ideas, practices, and impact of the second set of women—comprising the majority of mosque and *madrasah* instructors—are rarely examined in a similar amount of detail, perhaps because many either do not engage with or openly oppose many (though not necessarily all) of the gender norms prevalent in Western societies. Prior work on this topic consists primarily of in-depth studies of single contexts.

Several of these studies engage extensively with the terminology used in feminist theory and Women's Studies. Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun's *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam* details the struggle of Hui Muslim women—doubly marginalized by their religion and gender—to obtain space for religious practice and leadership, most notably women-led mosques, and fits into a growing literature on minority routes to women's liberation in China.<sup>43</sup> In *Women Shaping Islam*, Nelly van Doorn-Harder argues that the leaders of the women's branches of major Indonesian Muslim organizations use their Islamic knowledge—often gained through formal education—to resist the expansion of foreign-influenced extremist groups and their misogynistic interpretations of Islamic texts, though the quest for emancipation of these often-conservative women frequently takes a decidedly non-Western path.<sup>44</sup> Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* uses a detailed ethnography of the Egyptian women's mosque movement to argue that the terminology used in feminist theories of agency is not sufficient to explain fully the complexities of the place of female mosque leadership in wider social and religious contexts.<sup>45</sup>

Catharina Raudvere's ethnography *The Book of the Roses* approaches the topic from a different direction. It focuses on the structure, activities—ritual, educational, and charitable—and leadership of a Turkish

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<sup>42</sup> For a concise overview of scholarship on these leaders, see Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 280–85; and *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, 1st ed., s.v. "Qur'an: Modern Interpretations."

<sup>43</sup> Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

women's group that has much in common with both Sufism and Islamism, and where women without formal affiliation to a Sufi group—instead only loose ties to an absent male Sufi leader—independently lead Sufi rituals.

Complementing these monographs are two films focusing on female mosque instruction. Brigid Maher's *Veiled Voices* weaves together profiles of three religious leaders and their families: Ghiná Hammūd, a Lebanese religious leader working to overcome the stigma of divorce, Dr. Su'ād Sāliḥ, a prominent Egyptian religious scholar who teaches at al-Azhar and issues *fatwás* on her television shows, and Hudá al-Ḥabash, a Syrian instructor with extensive family support.<sup>46</sup> Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix's *The Light in Her Eyes* focuses on Hudá al-Ḥabash and her efforts to educate women and girls, bringing out the rites of passage through which her students move.<sup>47</sup>

In short, focusing this project on religious authority and space—and otherwise giving authors free reign methodologically—enabled us to consider collectively contexts that were not only geographically and methodologically diverse, but also represent an unprecedented range of female leadership activities. This range stretches from North American gender activist Wadud and members of various European Islamic women's associations, to moderately and extremely conservative mosque and *madrāsah* instructors from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Furthermore, the project as a whole makes it clear that female Islamic leadership in ostensibly conservative contexts is complex and significant, and as worthy of study as leadership in more documented contexts.

Structuring our examination of female religious leadership in terms of authority also allows us to document the role of women in its re-emergence and development, without overstating their impact or making assumptions about their underlying motives.<sup>48</sup> Many of the chapters in this volume show how female leaders use or develop alternative

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<sup>46</sup> Brigid Maher and Karen Bauer, *Veiled Voices*, DVD (Seattle, WA: Typecast Releasing, 2009). Further resources are available on the film's website, <http://www.veiledvoices.com/>.

<sup>47</sup> Hudá al-Ḥabash's authority as an Islamic leader is specifically discussed in Kalmbach, "Social and Religious Change." For the film, see Julia Melzer and Laura Nix, *The Light in Her Eyes*, DVD (Clockshop: forthcoming), and <http://thelightinhereyesmovie.com/>.

<sup>48</sup> This tendency in scholarship on Muslim women is discussed further by Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 8.

structures and institutions to create spaces in parallel with (or occasionally in opposition to) existing religious social and political institutions, as well as how female initiative interacts with and exists alongside established (and often male-dominated) religious and political institutions. For instance, while female leadership in Chinese Hui communities has historically been linked to the invitation of male religious leaders and state policies promoting gender equality, the female leaders of women-only mosques in these communities stress their role in expanding and institutionalizing previous leadership roles to enable female-led mosques (see Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, this volume). Volume chapters on Russian Tartaristan and Turkey show how female leaders appointed by the state interact with those who rose to leadership positions without state assistance (see Micinski, Chapter 2.3, and Hassan, Chapter 1.3, this volume).<sup>49</sup> Female initiative—and its interaction with other routes to authority—also appears in volume chapters on Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Sweden, and Germany (see van Doorn-Harder, Chapter 3.3, Le Renard, Chapter 1.4, Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, Karlsson Minganti, Chapter 3.1, and Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, this volume). In short, it is clear that while space for female religious leadership has been created for women by governments or male-dominated religious establishments, it has also emerged as a result of women creating or expanding space for female teaching, preaching, or other leadership activities.

The major expansion of teaching positions for women in mosques and *madrasahs* documented by many of the chapters in this volume is not only linked to twentieth-century religious revivals (and related increases in female demand for religious knowledge), but also to increases in the public activities and standing of women since the early twentieth century, increases that involved initiative on the part of both men and women. In Egypt, this link is more than temporal, but embodied in the link between feminist organizer Hudá Sha'ráwī and Egypt's first eminent female mosque preacher, Zaynab al-Ghazālī. In the 1930s, al-Ghazālī left Sha'ráwī's Egyptian Feminist Union to promote an alternative, ostensibly more 'Islamic,' path for women's

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<sup>49</sup> Micinski (Chapter 2.3, this volume) focuses on this aspect and assesses its impact on each woman's authority. He uses Faranak Miraftab's notion of invited and invented spaces, where the former emerges with the support of well-established governmental and non-governmental institutions, and the latter arises outside of (and often in opposition to) these established authorities.



public activism.<sup>50</sup> The leading role that al-Ghazālī played in Egyptian religious, social, and political affairs from the 1930s through to the 1990s set a significant precedent that has undoubtedly influenced the religious leadership roles that contemporary Muslim women are able to hold.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, focusing on the authority of female leaders emphasizes both the possibilities and limitations of the wide range of leadership roles filled by women, which enables us to explain differences in influence and impact between leaders. In many Muslim communities, the authority of female religious leaders is subordinate to and dependent on male authority and the traditions of the male-dominated religious establishment (see Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, Chapter 2.1, and Dessing, Chapter 2.2, this volume). This is in part because the behavior and teachings of both male and female religious leaders must appear to conform to the religious norms of their communities, norms that often include more restrictions on the dress and behavior of women. Another contributing factor is the previously discussed importance of past examples and practices in the structure of Islamic authority. The influence of present perceptions of the social and religious ideas of the past restricts the parameters of female leadership and interpretation in many communities. Further complicating the situation is the increasing politicization of women's status in many Muslim communities and the related rejection of concepts such as feminism and gender equality because of their portrayal as foreign and hegemonic, and therefore inauthentic, intrusions into local culture.<sup>52</sup>

These limitations make it difficult, even impossible, for female religious leaders in many contexts to alter the gendered structure of society (in so far as they wish to do this) without losing their authority as religious figures. Widespread support for some degree of gender segregation in many Muslim communities is a double-edged sword for these women: while it enables them to expand their public role as instructors of women and girls, it also limits their ability to expand

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<sup>50</sup> Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), 86–87; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 67–70; Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 26–27.

<sup>51</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 70–72.

<sup>52</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Introduction," in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 7; Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 243.

significantly their leadership activities, in some instances into mosque spaces and in others to mixed-gender audiences.

Context-specific limitations related to socio-religious norms and the influence of different interpretations of tradition assist efforts to explain why certain women—primarily those willing to support the status quo with respect to gendered norms—have been able to rise to positions of considerable influence within Muslim communities worldwide, and why the influence of other groups of women—for instance, those who seek to change gender norms—is limited to communities who already welcome this message.

Female leaders who wish to change socio-religious practices in their community—either subtly or radically—while maintaining their legitimacy as religious leaders must make difficult choices. Even though some female Islamic instructors promote female education and public involvement, provide students with tools to take greater control over their daily lives (see Minesaki, Chapter 3.2, and Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume), resist the spread of more conservative organizations, interpretations, and practices (see van Doorn-Harder, Chapter 3.3, this volume), and actively influence the image of Muslim women in non-Muslim societies (see Karlsson Minganti, Chapter 3.1, and Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume), the dynamics surrounding legitimization mean that they are more likely to spread and reinforce existing social and religious practices than go against them.

The controversy surrounding female leadership of the communal Friday prayer, an activity that has remained male-dominated due to dominant interpretive traditions and practices, provides a perfect example of these dynamics. The 2005 North American Muslim Women's Freedom Tour that included Amina Wadud's highly publicized leading of Friday prayers represents an attempt to significantly change existing thought and practice (see Hammer, Chapter 3.5, this volume). While it sparked discussion around the world, the negative reaction it received in many communities demonstrates how the claims to authority of women who aim to radically change existing social and religious practices are most likely to be recognized fully only in communities whose norms are similar to those they advocate. Other leaders have chosen a less overt path. For instance, German leader Halima Krausen has chosen consciously to avoid leadership of prayers so that she can instead expand her influence, impact, and authority within communities who reject female leadership of prayers (see Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume).

These factors explain why this collaborative project focuses on Islamic authority, and further reinforces the notion that female mosque and *madrasah* leadership—in all contexts—is a topic deserving of further documentation and analysis, as well as underlining the utility of authority as a concept around which to structure studies of contemporary Muslim activity. Analyzing, contextualizing, and comparing how and where would-be Muslim leaders acquire and demonstrate religious authority enables analysis of similarities, differences, and changes in the activities of leaders. This focus and approach is especially useful given the multiplicity of contemporary Islamic paths to Islamic authority and the corresponding diversity of individuals and organizations claiming to speak for and act on behalf of Islam and Muslims. It enables full consideration of the role of women in its reemergence and development. It assists in explaining the possibilities and limitations implicit in particular female leadership roles, clearly showing that, while the relative lack of centralized authority in Islam can present opportunities to women, the importance of audience expectations in processes of legitimation can also place significant barriers in front of women seeking religious authority. Finally, focusing this volume on the authority of female leaders has made it possible to unite bodies of scholarship—as well as groups of scholars—who have hitherto been divided by disciplinary and ideological boundaries.

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SECTION I

SPACE FOR FEMALE AUTHORITY: MALE INVITATION,  
STATE INTERVENTION, AND FEMALE INITIATIVE





## INTRODUCTION TO SECTION I

The collection of chapters presented in the first section of this volume help illuminate the processes that have created space for the emergence of female leadership in the formal sphere of Islamic authority—namely the mosque and *madrasah*—across various contexts. The rise of female leaders within mosques and *madrasahs*—spheres which have for over thirteen centuries remained largely male—is indicative of a shift either within the working of Islamic authority or in the socio-economic context of Muslim societies, or a combination of the two. The contributions in this section indicate in particular the importance of male invitation, state intervention, and female initiative in creating space for female authority. Each chapter shows how a combination of these factors—such as the ‘*ulamā*’ playing a role in establishing female *madrasahs*, the state developing programs for the training of female preachers and creating posts for them, or women seizing the opportunity to build their own *da‘wah* organizations from the ground up—has enabled women to command a space within mosques and *madrasahs*. What this section also wonderfully depicts is the agency of these women, which is strikingly visible across the different contexts, irrespective of their differing interpretations of Islamic precepts on gender-based divisions.

The section opens with Maria Jaschok’s fascinating account of the complex forces leading to the emergence of women-only mosques in China. With great skill, she illustrates how the rise of *qingzhen nüsi* (women’s mosques) in China can be understood only by appreciating both the agency of the women leading these mosques as well as the opportunities created by historical events. The crisis faced by the Chinese Muslim population when pitted against the state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries played an important role in revitalizing the energy of male scholars to popularize Islam. This process also led to recognition of the need to educate Muslim women in Islamic texts such that Islamic ideals could spread beyond the confines of the mosques into every Muslim household. This conscious invitation by the male religious hierarchy has in turn had a bearing on the shaping of leadership in female mosques in China, as the most prominent female scholars come from families of established male religious scholars.

However, as Jaschok indicates, in consolidating their authority and winning appeal within the Muslim communities, the individual efforts of these women cannot be underestimated. The female *ahong* (which essentially translates as *imām*, although usage is contested) does not only provide religious guidance to the women in her community: she also plays multiple roles ranging from teaching and counseling, to representing congregations on political bodies and becoming an elected member of local branches of the Islamic association as well as of the People's Congress. Thus, opportunities created by historical developments, shaped by male scholars, and maximized by female preachers, have led to the emergence of the institution of women's mosques in China. However, the paper also illustrates the continued challenges faced by these female religious leaders: female mosques remain contentious and, with the passage of time and the growth of influences from outside, are being increasingly viewed by some as *bid'ah*, an innovation, the religious legitimacy of which is open to question.

In the following paper, studying the *murshidah* program in Morocco, Margaret Rausch similarly identifies the role of structural factors as well as of female agency in creating space for female leaders in Moroccan mosques. Unlike the conscious efforts made by the male religious elite in China to allow space for the emergence of female preachers, in the case of Morocco it is the state that has deliberately created space for the emergence of female leadership in mosques. The *murshidah* program, starting in 2004, was part of a broader movement led by King Mohammed VI aimed at reform of the Moroccan religious sphere. The reform aimed to confront rising competition and potential outbreaks of violence from Islamic revival initiatives, and creating space for female preachers was one of the moves to reshape the existing structures of religious authority. However, just as in the case of the *ahong* in China, when it comes to asserting their right to exercise this authority, the agency of the *murshidahs* themselves has been critical in winning legitimacy in the eyes of the public. By providing details of the *murshidahs*' engagement with the ordinary public, Rausch provides a convincing account of how state endorsement alone cannot secure the legitimacy to speak for Islam; the right to assert this authority depends on the actual knowledge and behavior of the one exercising it.

The *murshidahs*' need for gaining local authority and public legitimacy is ongoing, as their capacity to successfully apply their expertise and exercise their authority ultimately rests upon continual acquies-

cence and acknowledgement by the groups receiving their services and the administrators in the institutions in which they serve. Though Rausch does not explicitly address this concern, her recognition of the historical existence of more locally embedded forms of female authority, often within Sufi circles in Morocco, does suggest a need to recognize that the rise of this formal state-supported female religious scholars program could potentially have an effect on the authority of respected female figures within the traditional sphere—an issue which is of relevance in other contexts where the state has introduced female leadership programs, such as the case of Turkey discussed in the following chapter.

Mona Hassan's chapter on Turkey sets out in detail a case of state sponsorship of female preachers. These officially appointed preachers are active in mosques and surrounding communities alongside male colleagues in the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs. Female leaders of unofficial Sufi groups and other religious movements are also active in local communities, but not in mosques, which are administered by the directorate. The Turkish state bureaucracy's efforts to significantly expand the number of state-employed female preachers (*bayan vaizler*) since 2004 have been made possible—indeed, essential—by the large number of women graduating from university with one or more degrees in theology. Hassan explains that this initiative is also linked to state recognition that women are especially good at spreading information and knowledge through social networks, and that they were not well served by previously existing state religious services.

Hassan argues that these women—who have university-level training in theology as well as state-sponsored professional training—are gradually changing perceptions in both religious and secularist communities that women can be fully qualified scholars who publicly preach in mosque spaces. In addition to preaching in mosques and the wider community, these women work alongside their male colleagues to staff phone lines and offices where callers and visitors request religious opinions from scholars.

The challenges that these female *bayan vaizler* confront are significant: they face people—men and women, colleagues and the general public—who resist accepting a woman as a scholar (over the phone or in person); they must build audiences from scratch in communities where women do not normally attend the mosque; and they compete with longstanding unofficial organizations for the attention and allegiance

of religious women. By rising to meet these challenges, these women improve their relationships with their male colleagues, wider official and unofficial religious constituencies, and secularist communities.

Unlike the Moroccan and Turkish chapters, which show the state playing a direct role in creating space for female Islamic preachers, Amélie Le Renard in her paper on Saudi Arabia illustrates how state policies have indirectly influenced the emergence of female authority. In this chapter it is not active inclusion by the state but forced *exclusion* that has created space for female preachers. The paper shows how the state policies of strict gender segregation and the exclusion of women from most religious spaces in Saudi Arabia have facilitated the rise of female preachers in new parallel female religious spaces, both physical and virtual but always more or less autonomous from male spaces, over the last two decades. As women gained more university degrees in Islamic sciences they sought to establish their own organizations and study networks, and the growth of these networks led to the emergence of female leaders.

While noting the structural factors leading to the creation of this parallel universe, in line with the first three chapters this case also illustrates the agency of the women in capturing the available opportunities for creating space for themselves. Le Renard notes that most prominent leaders have founded centers and websites; others amass reputations as religious leaders by volunteering as teachers or activists in the spaces founded by others and building up a network of students who recognize their authority, and thereby become seen as charismatic and knowledgeable speakers. In Le Renard's assessment these spaces have not necessarily led to contestation of the dominance of male '*ulamā*' over scholarly authority, but they nonetheless create opportunities for relatively autonomous female religious leadership. These female preachers are seen by young women in Riyadh—even those not active in religious groups—as 'modern' role models because of their compelling style, both in person as well as in the presentation of their websites, the interesting nature of the subjects they address, and the focus of their messages on female concerns.

In contrast to the first four chapters in this section, which focus primarily on female instructors and preachers, Mirjam Künkler and Roja Fazaeli explore the cases of two Iranian women who have been able to win recognition as religious scholars and authorities. The authors present a comparison of two Iranian religious leaders: Nuşrat Amīn, who rose to prominence before the 1979 Revolution, and Zuhrah Şifātī, who emerged as one of a few female *ayatullahs* afterwards. The

chapter shows how support from within the male leadership helped win this recognition. At the same time, while presenting their profiles and their aspirations, the chapter sets out two interesting dilemmas that indicate the limits of the space available to these women despite reaching the ranks of recognized *'ulamā'*.

In common with most other chapters in this volume, the authors find that these two women scholars, despite claiming their right to speak to men as equals, both defended the need for distinct gender roles in society, and maintained that women must limit their exposure only to male relations who are tasked with taking care of them. Further, the authors note a paradox: despite the large rise after the 1979 Revolution in the number of institutions where women can study religious jurisprudence and theology, few women have attained top-level status as a *mujtahidah*. The vast increase in female religious education opportunities post-Revolution has not resulted in an increase in high-level female leadership. The chapter thus raises questions about the commitment of the Iranian state to training female scholars for senior positions within the religious hierarchy, as the curriculum at the country's foremost women's seminary, Jami'at al-Zahrā', was simplified and standardized in the mid-1990s so as to train women for *tabligh* (Islamic propagation) instead of scholarship. Thus, like the case of China, this chapter also shows how even in contexts where the emergence of female leaders in religious hierarchies has a longer history than the majority of cases covered in this volume, the institutionalization of this authority faces serious challenges.

The next chapter, by Sarah Islam, presents the complex and as yet little-studied case of the Qubaysiyyāt movement in Syria. The case again illustrates how historical developments, state policies, and women's agency all have a bearing on the growth of women's authority as scholars and leaders of a major religious movement. State oppression of many other Islamic groups created space in which the apolitical Qubaysiyyāt could emerge. Founded in the 1980s in Damascus, the group's main activity was study circles held in private homes from 1982 to 2006; subsequently, they have been invited to move their lessons into mosques and allowed to open secondary schools.

The chapter notes how founder Munīrah al-Qubaysī's ability to make the teachings of Islam relate to the everyday life of Muslim women has been central to the growth of this movement. The Qubaysiyyāt do not promote asceticism; instead they actively encourage their members to secure both secular and religious education, and strive for upward socio-economic mobility, while marrying and raising children. In

Islam's view, their religious knowledge, strict religious practice, and success in professional careers have been important sources of legitimization for Qubaysī leaders. She ends with a brief overview of the Qubaysiyyāt's activities overseas, especially in the US, where they have had a radically different impact on women—instead of being active publicly, many of their members have withdrawn from both secular and religious activities other than those run by the organization.

Thus, across the six chapters, we see how chance opportunities created by historical developments and state policies have been central in triggering the emergence of female leaders wanting to claim the right to speak for Islam. At times, these demands have been supported or initiated by male *'ulamā'*, and in other contexts women themselves have initiated them. How the nature of the relationship with established male religious authority impacts upon the legitimacy of these female preachers is an important question that will be addressed more explicitly in the latter part of this volume. This section begins by highlighting in detail the processes leading to the initial creation of space for these female leaders and preachers.

CHAPTER 1.1

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY: FEMALE *AHONG* AND *QINGZHEN NÜSI* (WOMEN'S MOSQUES) IN CHINA

Maria Jaschok

If an *Ahong* is like the light of a lamp, women believers are like shades which surround the light. (Yao Ahong, Kaifeng, China)

In this opening quotation, Yao Ahong,<sup>1</sup> currently presiding over the oldest documented women's mosque in China, talks about the role of the female *ahong* as anchored in the symbiotic relationship between her and the women who come to worship at her mosque.<sup>2</sup> The *ahong*, she explains, is the light (of Islam), protected by believing women who, like the shade of a lamp surrounding her, keep the light glowing against all ill-winds.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The title *ahong*, from the Persian *akhund*, is used in central China's Hui Muslim communities as interchangeable with *imām*. The term can be applied to both women and men; however, its application to women is highly contested, and sometimes greeted with outright hostility, due to a combination of factors including gender, local Islamic interpretations, education, and historical traditions. In certain respects, *ahong* has also become a generic title applied to all who teach, administer, or preside over religious affairs at the mosque. However, some of the most independently minded women use the title to assert their claim to *nan-nü pingdeng* (gender equality) in the religious sphere.

<sup>2</sup> Our work is almost entirely concerned with Hui Muslims and Sunnī traditions (traditionalist and reformist, *gedimu* and *yihewani pai*). The Hui nationality is the most populous of the ten ethnic minorities who together constitute the Muslim population (estimates for the total Muslim population vary between 18 and 25 million, living all over China). Estimating the number of women's mosques is a difficult and on-going task, due to their traditional invisibility, their incorporation into men's institutions, and the criteria for the registration of religious sites. In Muslim communities in central China, the number of women's mosques amounts to at least one-sixth of the number of mosques available for men. Zhengzhou city has eleven women's mosques, with a rising trend for the establishment of fully independent ones. This contrasts with the decrease in the number of women's mosques in southern parts. In Beijing, whereas in 1958 there were eighteen, today there is one. In Shanghai, one was reopened in 1996. In the northeast, numbers are largely stagnant; in the northwest, schools are favored rather than mosques; in the southwest there is only one fully independent women's mosque, in Kaiyuan.

<sup>3</sup> See *A Woman's Mosque, A Space for Women: Visiting Wang Jia Hutong Women's Mosque in Kaifeng*, DVD produced by Shui Jingjun, Huang Yan, and Shui Lulu, among others, with the collaboration of Yao Ahong (Kaifeng), as part of the WEMC-IGS

It is the argument of this paper that the religious authority of a female *ahong* rests in a nexus of social relationships, which have in the course of time become associated in the minds of women with the most cherished traditions that mark the uniqueness of women's own religious and social institutions. Indeed, the old term for a Muslim congregation, the *fang*, places the mosque at the symbolic and spatial center of communal identity. This makes discussion of the history of female leadership in Islam in China inseparable from discussions of the sphere of Islam more widely, and the institutions for which female *ahong* are responsible; these are the symbiotically linked outcomes of historical innovations designed to save the Islamic religion and Muslim culture in China from extinction. The continuity of female place in Islam is thus predicated on the dynamics of interlocking relationships between a given *fang*, constituted by female *ahong*; the *shetou* (members of the mosque democratic management committee helping with practical affairs); and ordinary believers.

While the origin of female religious leaders in China's Sunnī traditions may be traced back to the great crisis faced by the Muslim population, which Bai Shouyi,<sup>4</sup> the influential Hui historian of Islam, refers to as 'the time of adversity' for Muslims, the continuity and subsequent development into positions of acknowledged, if contested, authority are due to a number of factors. Some arose from imaginative cultural projects for the salvation of Islam in China in which selected, knowledgeable women were assigned carefully prescribed responsibilities for women in need of rudimentary religious and ritual instruction; others arose from opportunities grasped by women once in possession of their own space. In this trajectory from 'symbolic shelter'<sup>5</sup> to the status of women's own mosques as *duli* (independent or self-sufficient), women developed traditions and conventions that would become vessels for ideals, aspirations, yearnings, and claims to rights owed to all women. In this fluid process between necessary innovation and fear of aberration, the central concept of *bid'ah* (innovation) became a source

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China Research Component, and funded by the UK Department for International Development, September 2008/June 2009. Film available from the website of the Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts project, [http://www.wemc.com.hk/web/links\\_and\\_resource.htm#](http://www.wemc.com.hk/web/links_and_resource.htm#).

<sup>4</sup> Bai Shouyi, *Zhongguo Yisilanshi* (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Hanna Papanek, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter," in *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1982), 3–53.



of constraints, imposed and negotiated in the material culture of women's mosques in which the authority of female leadership is embedded, and yet was also molded by the force of women's will to assert their agency, critical judgment, and power of assessment. Chinese Muslim scholars and *ahong* share with Muslim scholars elsewhere differences of judgment over the place of innovation beyond the early Islamic period and over ambiguities between individual agency and ordained doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Chinese female Muslim leaders, on the other hand, have pointed to the long history of their religious and educational accomplishments as evidence that the *qingzhen nüsi* (women's mosques) have the status of *hao bidaerti* (laudable innovation). Female-led institutions, they argue, have proven *indispensable* to Islamic survival and renewal, and continue to be justified today.<sup>7</sup>

*Sources of Authority: From Yicong (Woman's Dependency on Husband's Family) to Keeper of 'the Light'*

The contested nature of the terminology by which legitimacy of status is granted to, or withheld from, female leaders tells of a convoluted story of female religious authority—one which is enduring and ongoing. This history reflects both the diversity of Islamic traditions in China and also local differences in the ability of women to exercise religious authority in Islamic institutions.<sup>8</sup> We are concerned here

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<sup>6</sup> John Esposito, *The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras Hamori and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (London: Zed Books, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Women *ahong* avoid entering the complex debates over the definition of *bid'ah* and its place in Islamic jurisprudence. Their efforts are focused on building on their long history of contribution to the survival of Islam and on their entitlements as citizens of China to gender equality.

<sup>8</sup> Chinese Muslims live either in exclusively Muslim communities or settlements, or in mixed Han/Muslim communities in which they are the majority or form part of the minority; see Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). The size of the Muslim population determines the role of the mosque and in turn the relationship between women and a given mosque. Where a Muslim community is large enough to support separate mosques for women and men, the women's mosque forms the center of religious activities for women. Where there is only one mosque in a Muslim community, both men and women worship and study in the same mosque. Under these circumstances, different arrangements may be found: women may be assigned their own separate prayer room (*libaidian*) and ablution room (*shuifang*) within the mosque compound, while all worshippers use the same main entrance; in other instances, women are provided with a female ablution room, and pray together with men in the

with practices and institutions which grew up largely, if not exclusively, in the *gedimu* Sunnī tradition of Hui Muslims in central China: the female *ahong*-led women's mosque is a distinguishing feature of *zhongyuan diqu*,<sup>9</sup> and not altogether representative of practices elsewhere. And yet even here the title is contested, subject to continuing clashes of interpretation into which play historical, religious, political, locally specific, and, inevitably, patriarchal factors. The title of *ahong* functions as a generic term to refer to religious practitioners in positions of authority and who commonly preside over the religious affairs of the mosque to which they are contracted. Such a title suggests a range of functions which may vary according to the contracted duties of an *ahong*, the needs of a given *fang*, and the qualities of learning and leadership a given *ahong* brings to the position. Duties assigned may include religious instruction and more specific training of future religious personnel, leading collective worship and giving sermons, presiding over rites and ceremonies, and sharing in the administrative and representational duties associated with the mosque. In modern times, the title of *ahong* is, as mentioned, tantamount to *imām*, and is suggestive of formal rank and contractual status with respect to a mosque or other Islamic institution. Controversy over the use of the title by women, and the authority invested in the title of female *ahong*, is intimately linked to a gendered interpretation of women's value and place in the history of religious survival in China.<sup>10</sup>

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, China's Muslim population was confronted with an urgent imperative to reform Islamic education, and to popularize religious knowledge in a manner which would enable it to extend beyond the mosque and into the Muslim home.<sup>11</sup> This unprecedented cultural project, which was undertaken by Muslim scholars, religious practitioners, and Islamic teachers, offered

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same prayer hall, but pray in a separate area segregated by a screen or curtain. In other areas, women pray at home but go to the mosque on specific festivals or memorial days (e.g. Fatima Day); when women do enter the local mosque, they remain in the peripheral areas. In western parts of China, among the Uyghur Muslims, women are forbidden to enter the mosque ground. The severity with which this prohibition is enforced varies from absolute taboo, to exceptions for special days or festivals when women are allowed to partake in collective activities in the mosque.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhongyuan diqu* (central China) includes the provinces of Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong; here women's mosques are most numerous.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), revised and published in Chinese as *Zhongguo Qingzhen Nüshishi* (Beijing: Sanlian Chubanshe, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*.

opportunities for women to gain more religious knowledge and also to become educators themselves. In view of the gender segregation called for both by the Confucian morality in the Chinese host society and also by Islamic prescriptions, the more learned and devout among women were called upon to take the place of men as teachers of girls and women. The daughters or wives of *ahong*, called *shiniang*, thus commonly became the predecessors of later generations of women *ahong*. The emergence of a distinct profession of women religious leaders in central China between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century heralded what was to become a unique feature of organized Islam in China. The emergence of trained, and ordained, women *ahong* must be linked to the transformation of female education and worship, from ad hoc instruction to institutionalized religious learning, culminating in *nüxue* (female *madrasahs*) and multi-functional *qingzhen nüsi* (women's mosques). As women's institutions grew more complex, so did the work undertaken by the women in charge, which in turn contributed to their growing standing and authority. In the late nineteenth century, female *ahong* began to reside at the *nüsi*, where they were responsible for religious affairs internal to mosque life. It was only in the course of the early twentieth century, when some *ahong* ventured beyond the mosque gates, that accusations of transgressive, un-Islamic conduct would be made—as in the case of Yang Huizhen Ahong (see below).

Most of the female *ahong* were from religious families and there is evidence, if scant, that as early as the seventeenth century a number of erudite female scholars had emerged from this group of women. These *junshi* occupied a respected place among Muslim scholars even before the emergence of an Islamic education system for female learning.<sup>12</sup> In later times, women *ahong* could find their vocation through study at a women's mosque, but in the majority of cases female *ahong* continue to this day a familial tradition in religious teaching. For example, six of the seven contemporary female *ahong* presiding over the independent women's mosques studied by Zhu Li in the 1990s had been mentored by family members in the core Islamic texts prescribed for women since early childhood.<sup>13</sup> Once the curriculum of Arabic and Persian books assigned to women had been mastered, the student, called a

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<sup>12</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*, 165.

*hailifan*, would be ordained as an *ahong* in a special ceremony called *chuanyi guazhang* (wearing the garment and putting up a banner).

In certain parts of Muslim China, the status and function of the female *ahong* has become comparable to that of their male counterparts; but the reputation, degree of authority, and influence of an individual female leader depend no less on the interplay of individual leadership qualities and a given female *ahong*'s ability to negotiate with local cultural and Islamic traditions of gender segregation. The title of *ahong*, with its tacit recognition of women's aspiration to equal status in the religious sphere, although frequently used in central China's Hui Muslim communities, might sometimes be withheld and replaced by the title of *jiaozhang* (a person teaching at an advanced level), *shin-ang* or *shimu* (a title of respect given to female kin of a male teacher or *ahong*), *jiaoyuan* (teacher of Islam), or *hailifan* (student of Islam). In Muslim communities in which independent female religious institutions were either short-lived or never allowed to emerge in the first place, the title of *ahong* is rarely if ever used.<sup>14</sup>

Women *ahong* in central China's Hui communities tend to reside at their mosque, if at all possible, where they are in charge of religious affairs, education, the training of *hailifan* (studying to become *ahong*), and of general guidance of women in their *fang*. They hold *woer'ci* (sermons), respond to invitations to preside over key rituals of family life, such as the blessing of the home, the washing of the corpse, or the blessing of a new-born. Much of their job description depends on the nature of the congregation, the *ahong*'s personal abilities and reputation in the community, and also on the economic circumstances of the *fang*. Historically, female *ahong* have not presided over wedding and funeral rites, but a number of younger *ahong* are slowly instituting changes. Their main responsibility is for ethical education, so the much-respected Du Ahong from the Zhengzhou Women's Mosque told us, comprising instruction of young brides (laying the cornerstone of proper Muslim family life), the general religious and moral education of believers, the training of future generations of *ahong*, and the *zhuma* (Friday) sermons. These sermons are based on texts drawn from the Qur'an and deal with women's responsibility for raising a

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<sup>14</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*; Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, "Muslim Communities in China: Mid-18th to Early 20th Century," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures Volume 1: Methodologies, Paradigms and Sources*, ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 123–28.

Muslim family, thus ensuring continuity of Islamic faith of all Muslims in a secular world. Some of the respected *ahong* are often sought out to provide counsel in family strife, in intergenerational conflict, and conjugal quarrel. Indeed, in predominantly Muslim settlements or communities, where there is no *fulian* (women's organization), the role of a respected *ahong* may extend far beyond that of teacher and leader of rituals.

Whereas the *ahong* presides over all aspects of religious affairs, the democratic mosque management committee, composed of respected older women elected from the local community, manages all other aspects of mosque administration. Women have the right to make decisions on matters regarding their mosque, consulting men where deemed necessary. A female *ahong* may also invite her male counterpart to perform rites which go beyond her assigned religious function and religious authority.

The autonomous nature of some women's mosques has led to a situation where idiosyncratic interpretations of women's duties by *ahong* may reflect a very strict patriarchal understanding of women's duty to husband and society, or, alternatively, show independence of mind—as is the case with Du Ahong (discussed below), in her frequent rejection of cultural and 'feudal' distortions of Islam. Instructions on general health and hygiene, and most specifically on health during menstruation, pregnancy, and delivery, reveal an astute grasp of rules that are protective of women's health.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the multiple functions of teaching, counseling, ritual, and prayer guidance, *ahong* represent the interests of their congregations in political bodies. Outstanding women *ahong* and female administrators may become elected members of local branches of the Islamic association, as well as of the People's Congress.

In their feminist analysis of 'transformational leaders,' Aruna Rao and David Kelleher stress that such leaders "need to be open to seeing the world as primarily made up of relationships." Such an understanding of power as relational in nature, they argue, shifts the emphasis to its transformative capacity to infuse relationships, human organizations, and institutions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Conversations with Du Ahong, Beidajie Women's Mosque, Zhengzhou, Henan, in September 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Aruna Rao and David Kelleher, "Leadership for Social Transformation: Some Ideas and Questions on Social Institutions and Feminist Leadership," *Gender and Development* 8, no. 3 (2000): 77.

Many influential female *ahong* are highly regarded for their understanding of human relationships—something which overrides the meticulous regard that their male counterparts have for the strict discipline of religious life and management of the mosque congregation. The smaller scale of women’s mosques, and the kinship-type relations among women in the congregation and between *ahong* and the congregation, express more open, more equal, and more horizontal relationships than is the case with most men’s mosques. Women express preference for the homely, welcoming atmosphere, which feels *xiang jia* (like home) and is an oasis of respite from family pressures.

*Nüsi and Its Material Culture: A Women’s Mosque ‘Just Like Home’*

How did historical conceptions of *bid’ah*, as it applied to women’s assigned space, come to define the architecture and interior of women’s mosques, their religious as well as material traditions? It is an important insight from Pierre Bourdieu that “all aspects of culture, high or low, participate in the process of legitimizing structures of power in a process that simultaneously renders those structures invisible.”<sup>17</sup>

Whereas we have little in terms of written sources which would give us an understanding of early debates within the Muslim community of *imāms* and scholars regarding potential aberrations from ritual laws, the history, as far as we can reconstruct it, as well as the material culture of women’s mosques, does give certain clues.

Mosques in central China show varying degrees of Chinese and Arabian influence. Historically speaking, the architecture of the earliest men’s mosques, built in the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, reflects a strong Arabic influence; whereas later buildings came to manifest an increasing accommodation with the non-Muslim host environment.<sup>18</sup> As women’s mosques are of later origin, they are almost all built with a Chinese-style exterior, often indistinguishable from the Confucian lineage halls of old, with only the interior reflect-

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, quoted in Sarah Stanbury and Virginia Chieffo Raguin, “Introduction,” in *Women’s Space: Patronage, Place, and Gender in the Medieval Church*, ed. Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Sarah Stanbury (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Dillon, *China’s Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement, and Sects* (London: Curzon Press, 1999); Raphael Israeli, *Muslims in China: A Study in Cultural Confrontation* (London: Curzon Press, 1980).

ing an Arabian-influenced aesthetic. This typical aesthetic dualism can be noted in the earliest documented women's mosque, Wangjia Hutong Women's Mosque, in Kaifeng, which dates back to the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820).

The comparatively humble appearance also reflects women's more limited income, as mosques depend in the main on believers' donations for sources of finance. Most women's mosques were built either inside the compound of a men's mosque or adjacent to it. The location is vital, as only those built outside a men's mosque would be able to develop independently.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there is no minaret and no one is called to prayer. Collective prayer was not considered a part of women's religious duties; instead, women believers would seek out the mosque only when domestic chores, which always take priority, allowed. Only the most independent-minded women *ahong* have instituted strict, collective prayer discipline, by which they intend to demonstrate women's equal right to attain redemption.

The local influence on architectural style is apparent in the common *siheyuan* structure of women's mosques, which characteristically feature a compound architecture, with buildings framing an inner courtyard. Plants, potted flowers, and—if salvaged from the days of religious persecution—stone tablets recording important events in the history of the women's mosque, are placed in the inner courtyard. The courtyard offers opportunity for congregation, for intimate exchanges and, on special days such as Fatima Day, for grand celebration.

The spiritual center is the prayer hall. There is ordinarily very little ornamentation. Only the *yaodian* (a prayer niche indicating the direction of Mecca) carries Arabic calligraphy. Very rarely can women's mosques compete with men's mosques when it comes to ornamentation and decoration of the interior. Furthermore, because the female *ahong* is not expected to deliver the *woer'ci* to the congregation, there is no *xuanyutai* (raised platform on which to address the faithful) as is a feature in prayer halls in men's mosques. Those women *ahong* who have taken it upon themselves to give the *woer'ci* after the Friday prayer, do so by facing the worshippers, seated, in close vicinity to the women. Most mosques have rooms set aside for religious instruction, and all mosques provide a *shuifang* (ablution room). The plainness of the interior testifies to the relatively modest incomes of the female

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<sup>19</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*.

congregation; however, the cleanliness of the interior, even in the most dismal and dusty environments, is a point of pride for the believers. Purity of the spirit and of the religious culture of a mosque—that is, its standing—is given expression in the spotless state of the buildings and of the courtyard. Such an orderly appearance also reflects the standing of the resident *ahong*. Her *keting* (private quarters/reception room) is the social center of a women's mosque. Here, visitors call on the *ahong*, consult her on family matters, give news of deaths and birth, or just engage in chat on their way to market.

### *Confucian Gender Segregation and Islamic Prescriptions*

How did the segregated lives of women—with Muslim women, in addition to Islamic taboos on the mixing of non-kin women and men, also sharing with their Han Chinese neighbors all-pervasive societal notions of domesticated life as paradigmatic for respectable women—allow for the evolution of female religious leaders into positions rarely encountered outside the religious sphere? How did they survive and sustain themselves? Which sources of authority and legitimacy supported them, and which confined them?

The normative systems of Confucian and Islamic patriarchy have historically assigned to women and men contrasting spheres of duties and responsibilities, that of *nei* and of *wai* (of inner and outer/public spheres, respectively). Core Confucian concepts of *side* (virtuous behavior, proper speech, proper demeanor, proper employment) and *sancong* (ties of dependence on father, husband, son), as well as *wucaai* (feminine ignorance of worldly knowledge), were reworked by Hui scholars during the Ming and Qing Dynasties of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into the paradigm of the Muslim woman as *xianshu qiancheng* (good and virtuous, refined, and pious). The fusion of Confucian morality, local conventions, and Islamic prescriptions crystallized into an idealized Muslim code of conduct exemplified by wifely submission to the husband, *yicong*, as symbolic of women's ready submission to Allah's command.<sup>20</sup>

But private and familial virtues may be called upon even in the public sphere where the collective good demands. Patriarchal traditions in

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<sup>20</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*, 46–56.



this case may help rather than hinder women's involvement in public affairs,<sup>21</sup> stressing kinship rather than gender. Indeed, it could be argued that the kinship terms ordinarily employed to address women teachers and *ahong* to this day convey the familiar and familial—and thus unthreatening—nature of their duties, even when performed outside the home.

As the postcolonial critic Mervat Hatem<sup>22</sup> points out, there are ambiguities and ambivalences associated with women whose value to a society under threat makes them core participants in measures needed to resolve the crisis. When China's Muslim population faced the threat of assimilation, or even extinction, women were called upon to contribute to the revival of proper Muslim family life by functioning as primary educators. However, this essential role, extended to the teaching of other women outside the family home, was subject to strict rules which confined their mobility and the scope of the educational activity they could perform.<sup>23</sup> Women who were sufficiently learned and of appropriate background, and who had a male mentor to guide them (often a father or husband), would, as teachers and instructors of women and children, come to represent 'the power of the powerless.'<sup>24</sup>

*'Laudable' Innovation to Save Islamic Faith and Muslim Heritage*

When the American Muslim scholar Ingrid Mattson visited China, she sought out a women's mosque to perform her prayer.<sup>25</sup> In an illuminating paper on the contested notion of female leadership in Islam, Mattson, in direct reference to her encounter in China, asks how a *nū ahong* (translated by her as female *imām*) can be justified in the context of Sunnī Islam as practiced by the majority of Chinese Muslims. The Sunnī minority Ḥanafī legal position does not support the collective prayer of women. Mattson asks: "How are we to make sense of the

<sup>21</sup> Mark R. Thompson, "Female Leadership of Democratic Transitions in Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 75, no. 4 (2002–3): 535–55.

<sup>22</sup> Mervat Hatem, "Toward the Development of Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East," in *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed. Judith E. Tucker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 29–48.

<sup>23</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Václav Havel, quoted by Thompson, "Female Leadership," 555.

<sup>25</sup> All page references to Mattson's article are to the Hartford Seminary website version.

phenomenon of women's mosques in China? What does it mean to be an imam of a (women's) mosque, if the imam does not lead others in congregational prayer? Are Chinese women's mosques strange deviations, or are they useful models for building relevant Islamic institutions [i.e. in other countries]?"<sup>26</sup>

It is her argument that in the context of traditional Islam such mosques would not be considered out of place. Islam, she says, encourages adaptability and flexibility, with form following function to serve the local needs of believers. In order to substantiate this argument, Mattson makes reference to the sources of knowledge cited by diverse Islamic authorities concerning performance of ritual and congregational prayers as related in the *sunnah* and *ḥadīth*. The Prophet's statement on the act of worship is frequently quoted by *imāms*, often preceding the sermon: namely, that "The best of speech is the book of God, the best guidance is the guidance of Muḥammad, the most evil matters are the most recent ones, every innovation [*bid'ah*] is an error." Mattson quotes the medieval scholar Imam al-Nawawi on the 'innovation' *ḥadīth* as follows:

What is meant by (innovation in) this (hadith) is most innovations.... Scholars say that there are five classes of innovation: obligatory, laudable, prohibited, reprehensible, and permitted. Among the obligatory (innovations) are: organizing the proofs of the theologians against the heretics and innovators and things like that. Among the laudable (innovations) are writing books of (religious) knowledge, building *madrasas* (religious schools) and *ribat* (religious retreats) and other things.<sup>27</sup>

Mattson remarks that who classifies what is a 'reprehensible' or 'laudable' innovation, and under what conditions, will shape the adaptability of Muslim prayer congregations to local needs. How proponents or opponents of a given development interpret a given *ḥadīth*, or give emphasis to or ignore sources by way of giving legitimacy to their stance, varies greatly. When opponents of women *ahong* and women's own institutions of prayer and education defend a minority Ḥanafī position hostile to such practices, they ignore, Mattson points out,

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<sup>26</sup> Ingrid Mattson, "Can a Woman Be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women's Leadership," <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/articles.htm#mattson>, 13. Revised version to be published in *Sisters: Women, Religion, and Leadership in Christianity and Islam*, ed. Scott Alexander (Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Mattson, "Can a Woman be an Imam?" 14. Parentheses and ellipsis in the original.

those *ḥadīth* cited by advocates of women's capacity to lead in collective prayer and worship, which suggest that such acts are 'recommended' or *mandub* (a religiously meritorious act).

Applying the above to the female *ahong* in China, the largely 'contextual' and 'relational' nature of leadership allows for additional functions to be added in response to specific needs, developing their local forms and features. Historically, ad hoc religious instruction for women was given in the private homes of male scholars and *ahong*. While they took place in the family sphere, they nevertheless allowed for 'reprehensible' contact between women and non-kin male teachers, which was condemned as immoral by Muslims and Han Chinese alike. To resolve this problem, documents tell us, male teachers who had taught from behind curtains were replaced by women trusted to possess sufficient learning, which constituted the seed for subsequent developments.<sup>28</sup> Such development can be argued to be entirely within the ritual laws of the *sunnah*. Whether on matters of transmission of faith, religious education, or women leading prayer, Mattson maintains, the adoption of a more active role by women represents the spirit of adaptability so apparent in the *ḥadīth*.

How might the changes that have occurred in the course of the history of *nūsi* be interpreted to reveal women's own understanding of their place in organized religion and Chinese society more generally? Women's capacity to shape life to accord with their aspirations has always and everywhere been linked to resources. Claims for equal rights and greater access to political and economic resources on the part of women *ahong* have received considerable enhancement through the Chinese State Council's 1994 issuing of decrees on mandatory registration of legitimate religious sites. For female leaders, the award of legal status confers recognition of their independence and of their equality with men's institutions. Such status has benefited women's mosques when registering educational projects and setting up income-generating schemes in order to ensure the continued growth of the mosque.

Chinese state policies have, inadvertently, brought about a shift in the 'moral geographies' of devout women, adding to their space of legitimacy and widening their social mobility in a manner which, it might be argued, would suggest a shift also in women's experience

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<sup>28</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*.

and subjectivities.<sup>29</sup> Abdi Ismail Samatar observes in her study of a ‘women’s mosque’ in Gabiley, northern Somalia, that the anomalous presence of such a building helps to undermine normative assumptions that keep Muslim women on the periphery with respect to prayer and religious leadership.<sup>30</sup>

An illustration of the historical and political contingencies of such a widening of female authoritative space comes from the biographies of two influential, transformative women leaders. Their impact testifies to the dynamic interplay of agency and environmental constraints in shaping opportunities for female authority.

*Authoritative Female Leadership, the Role of the State, and the  
Politics of Gender Equality*

Hui Muslim women in China, because of the history of female-led mosques, can look back on a long genealogy of inspirational role models. The criteria for *hao ahong* (good *ahong*) have been honed in the participatory culture of women’s mosques, where collective decision-making processes encourage lively debates and frank assessments of leadership performance. Since 1958, when the democratic mosque management committees of *shetou* were set up by the Chinese Government to help take care of all practical aspects of mosque life, the

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<sup>29</sup> In relation to the concept of ‘moral geographies’, Amy Freeman, in reference to the feminist geographer Doreen Massey’s work, says: “Spaces are coded as morally correct or incorrect and regulated based on the practices known (or believed) to take place there and the reputation of the people occupying these spaces. The existence of these moral geographies influences the range of possibilities for women’s mobility and the consequences of transgressing dominant moral codes.” Amy Freeman, “Moral Geographies and Women’s Freedom: Rethinking Freedom Discourse in the Moroccan Context,” in *Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion, and Space*, ed. Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 148.

<sup>30</sup> Abdi Ismail Samatar erroneously presents the women’s mosque in Gabiley, northern Somalia, as the first ever women’s mosque built by women for women (Samatar, “Social Transformation,” 242). This mosque shares a wall with the men’s mosque. In order for women to hear the *imām*’s words during worship, a door-opening, closed off by a curtain, connects the women’s prayer hall with the adjacent men’s mosque. The women have a female instructor who teaches co-jointly with a male colleague. This is a somewhat different situation from the independent women’s mosques in central China which conduct all of their religious affairs separately from the men’s mosque. (Although this does not preclude contact with friendly male *ahong*, and invitations to male *ahong* to participate in feasts and special celebrations which mark the ritual life of women’s mosques; on the contrary, the number of guests, male and female, are a mark of their standing in the community!)

participatory nature of the internal organization of mosques has come to affect all aspects of the way they are run, including leadership selection (see above). When *ahong* are identified for a potential appointment, they are invited for a visit and to hold conversations with the mosque's management committee and, if approved, are appointed for a limited term of service at the mosque, usually lasting three years. If satisfactory to the *shetou* and to the women worshipping at the mosque, an extension of the contract is offered. If unsatisfactory, the *ahong* will be replaced and a new selection process commences. During this process there are great and lengthy debates among members of the *fang* concerning the qualities and capabilities of the woman *ahong*, such as her learnedness, selfless devotion, respect for ordinary women, and readiness to work *together* with the *fang* on tasks small and great. Such an *ahong* must 'not put on airs,' and has to perform all her assigned functions with zeal and without complaint. Purity of spirit (*jiebai*, more colloquially referred to as *ganjing*) features importantly in discussions over the ideal conduct of the *ahong*, which some believers describe as 'not putting money into their own pockets.'<sup>31</sup> The purity expressed in the words and conduct of an *ahong* is related and illustrated with vivid stories of misuse of money and worldly uses of *nietie* (alms). It is thus not surprising that one of the most well-known and respected women leaders, Du Lao Ahong, from the Zhengzhou Beidajie Women's Mosque, can say of herself that she has never *chi nietie* (literally, has never 'eaten up alms').

In the course of our research on the history of women's mosques, we came across the story of a woman *ahong*, Yang Huizhen, who, many years after her death, had not yet been forgotten by local Muslims. Her story was recounted to us with great respect for her compassion, selflessness, and courage on behalf of the vulnerable and homeless during years of civil unrest in China; however, during her lifetime these very qualities were considered evidence that she had transgressed the limits of conduct appropriate to a female leader in charge of a women's mosque. Although this *ahong* had qualities not unlike those associated nowadays with Du Ahong (see below), her authority was dependent on male religious practitioners and bureaucrats in the Islamic circles in which she moved, whose understanding of women's roles was

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<sup>31</sup> Conversations with *ahong* and *shetou*, Wangjia Hutong Women's Mosque, Kaifeng, September 2008 and May 2009.

limited. Yang Huizhen's popularity among ordinary believers was not sufficient for her to keep her position; and no other sources of authority were available.

*Biographies from an 'Archaeology of Women'*

(1) *Yang Huizhen Ahong (ca. 1913–89): Ahong, Teacher, Social Activist*<sup>32</sup>

Yang Huizhen, of Huizu nationality, was born in Zhoukou, Henan Province, into a wealthy family. Nothing in her family background foretold the path she would eventually choose. Although her place of birth, Zhoukou, known as 'Little Mecca,' and Kaifeng, where she spent the early years of married life, both had a tradition of women's mosques, her family life would have made it difficult to frequent the mosque for worship. It is known that she was literate in Chinese, unusual for her time and place, and that she added the study of Islam when the family moved to Shanghai, ruined by the husband's opium addiction. Her teacher was a well-known male *ahong*, and she was well prepared for her position as leader of the *nixue* when she was invited in 1942 by the (male) Muslim leadership in Jiaxing, near Shanghai, to lead their women's community in prayer.

Yang Huizhen, by all accounts, was well respected in the local community for her piety, erudition, and capabilities. All seemed to be going well until she took charge of affairs that led her to venture beyond the mosque gates and out into society—that is, beyond the Muslim community of Jiaxing. Faced with streams of refugees needing shelter and relief during the civil war between Communist and Nationalist forces (between 1945 and 1949), she set up a welfare center, established a charitable school, and provided employment opportunities. Not only was such active involvement in society in violation of the principles laid down by Islamic authorities for proper conduct by a female *ahong*, it was indeed considered unusual by the standards of society at the time.

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<sup>32</sup> Biography reconstructed by Guo Chengmei, Hui scholar, Jiaxing Islamic Association branch official, and son of a prominent *ahong* family. See Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*, 276–83.

The same leaders of the men's mosque who had appointed Yang Huizhen now accused her of dereliction of duty and terminated her contract, backed by the China Islamic Association. The accusations made against her included that she had ignored the authority of the Islamic Association, had made her own decisions in violation of the Association's regulations, and had lobbied 'everywhere' for donations on behalf of the refugees in her care. Yang Huizhen was deterred neither by expulsion from the mosque nor by the public attacks on her, and she continued with her tireless lobbying on behalf of the homeless, unemployed, and orphaned. Her fame spread, and in the end her detractors were persuaded to readmit her into the local Muslim organization and to help with her charitable work. It is said that through her efforts, Muslims in Jiaying acquired a favorable reputation for charity previously only associated with Christians and Buddhists. The *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women 1912-2000* states that

Yang Huizhen's position in her religious community benefited from the established rights of women to Islamic education and professional training, but her career also demonstrates the severe punishment meted out to women who dared to think and act outside the social boundaries defined by a patriarchal society.<sup>33</sup>

(2) *Du Shuzhen Lao Ahong (1924-)*

Du Shuzhen Lao Ahong, from the Zhengzhou Beidajie Women's Mosque, is proud of the generations of female leaders before her, who share with her qualities of religious piety, informed religiosity, passion for teaching, and the tireless quest for the elevation of women in all spheres of society. Du Ahong, now in her late eighties and in charge of religious affairs at the Zhengzhou Women's Mosque, lives in a different era, one which is more restricted and regimented under the Party/State than Yang Ahong ever was under the Nationalist Government. Yet Du Ahong has been able to effectively negotiate the patriarchal mind-set, due to the political rights guaranteed after 1949 to all women under the constitution, and due to the progressive legislation passed by the Chinese People's Republic, which has come to be applied in the religious sphere largely due to the efforts of women themselves. Equal

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<sup>33</sup> Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, "Yang Huizhen," in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Twentieth Century 1912-2000*, ed. Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A. D. Stefanowska (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 618.

rights and treatment are the bargaining tools through which relations with male counterparts and male-dominated institutions are negotiated in ways that serve women's interests. In the process, the concept of 'purity,' held dear by women *ahong*, serves to justify the relatively more humble status of women-led institutions in relation to men's.

All income and donations benefit the development of the mosque and its charitable causes. This was a lesson, Du Ahong says, taught to her by one female *ahong* and one male *ahong* (from her own *lao pai* and from the *yihewani pai*),<sup>34</sup> and she has never forgotten their exhortations. In her conduct, Du Ahong embodies the high moral standards that make members of her congregation proud to be associated with the mosque. Adding to the respect she enjoys is her fearless condemnation of commercial values she feels have crept into the internal culture of mosques, and her insistence that women must be able to take responsibility for their own prayer and congregational spaces, which have over many generations been expressive of women's faith and courage, even during times of persecution and campaigns against religion.

#### *Gender, Leadership, and Space in China's Muslim Contexts*

The historical function of women's own religious space was the shelter of women from the public (male) gaze through the protection afforded by curtains, walls, and closed gates. Paradigmatic constructions of Muslim/Chinese femininity enunciated by the influential Hui scholars Wang Daiyu, Ma Zhi, and Liu Zhi in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries conflated the preservation of women's *jiebai* (purity) with that of Islam, thus justifying enduring segregation by reference to religion and culture.<sup>35</sup> But in the course of centuries of occupation, the most able women *ahong* have re-invested received notions of purity-as-dependency with new meanings, suggestive of the strength of women's spirituality and devotion, in turn transforming historical

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<sup>34</sup> *Lao pai* refers to the oldest Islamic tradition in China, *gedimu*, which is accused by more reformist Muslims of making too many compromises with local cultural traditions, as too 'indigenized'; members of the *yihewani pai*, nineteenth-century reformers, and advocates of a more 'pure' Islam in China are among its numerous critics (Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*).

<sup>35</sup> Jaschok and Shui, *History of Women's Mosques*, 46–56.



gender segregation into women's occupation of their own space for prayer and worship.

The unique model of collective leadership to be found in women's mosques, consisting of the woman *ahong*, the committee of worthy female elders, and also of ordinary female Muslims, is an innovative and creative response both to the historical crisis of Islam in China, and also to Communist Party/State interventions, and its religious and gender policy. Historically, women's own spaces of education and worship under female leadership can be regarded as a legacy of indigenous strategies for the salvaging and perpetuation of Islamic faith and Muslim practice. These segregated places, assigned to women in response to Confucian and Islamic prohibitions on the mixing of women and men, and their constraints on women's conduct in public spaces, transformed and evolved in time into a number of traditions which are now central to women's religious faith and life—such as the system and literary corpus of *jingtang jiaoyu* (mosque-based religious education), and the richness of the orally transmitted culture of *jingge* (religious chants). Faced with challenges from Islamic orthodoxy at home and abroad, and given the growing influence of Salafi and Wahhabi Islam as China opens up to the Middle East, a more restrictive Arab Muslim template of gendered authority is being brought into tension with Chinese Muslim traditions of institutionalized female authority. Notably, the Communist Party State is proving a helpful ally and a stabilizing influence in the quest for institutional independence. Mandatory registration of all religious sites has strengthened the position of women *ahong* in their claim to social status, to legal entitlements, as well as to rights and economic resources. Political legitimacy and participation in political bodies have improved their bargaining position as they compete for resources and income-generating schemes with the adjacent (male) mosque. Moreover, *ahong* are not slow in utilizing as a bargaining chip China's much-vaunted 'liberation of women' under the Communist Party, making the case, and successfully so, that the country's constitutional and legal provisions are also applicable when it comes to women's rights in the religious sphere.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Illustrations of successful defenses by women *ahong* against (local) patriarchal inroads into their rights, through appeal to local government authorities, appear in Jaschok and Shui, *Women, Religion and Space in China* (Routledge, forthcoming).

I argued at the beginning of the chapter that the authority of a female *ahong* is intimately linked to the social relationships that determine her degree of influence inside and outside the mosque gates, and which grant renewal of tenure when the entire female *fang* is seen to benefit from her leadership. Present discourses among male *ahong* and ordinary (male and female) Muslims over the viability and orthodoxy of *qingzhen nüsi* as women's independent sites of worship offer contrastive interpretations of *bid'ah*, with some holding that a unique and significant institution continues to serve the changing needs of women well. Others maintain that the time for erasing 'an un-Islamic practice' has come. Interviews with local Muslims indicate that even where continuity of female-led traditions is advocated, it is not without ambiguity. This advocacy may represent a benign patriarchal recognition of women as spiritually 'needy,' thus requiring gender-appropriate guidance and support, but it may also represent justifications of a 'modern' approach to women's rights to their own space, to their own female leadership, and to equal standing in Muslim and in secular society.<sup>37</sup> Two representative contrastive views come from the middle-aged male *ahong* Jin Fengyuan, and from Ma Zhenhua, a retired technical manager who worships at a women's mosque led by a highly respected *ahong*. The male *ahong* maintains that the Qur'an ordains a proper sexual division of labor in all spheres of life, and that the women's mosque is an important symbol of such segregation upheld by Chinese Muslims:

Therefore, the existence of women's mosques has its societal base, and this kind of social foundation cannot be changed. Because of this [social foundation] women's mosques need also to continue to exist; moreover, they can develop in even greater measure.

In contrast, Ma Zhenhua views female-led mosques with a sense of pride in women's equal standing:

Because I consider that Muslim women are most certainly not the appendage of men. They must have their own rights, capabilities, and independence, after all, women's mosques are for women a kind of expression of independence.

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<sup>37</sup> Interviews carried out by Shui Lulu in 2006 (Zhengzhou Guangchang Hui Muslim district), using a questionnaire drawn up by Jaschok and Shui. In-depth questions were asked of six women and six men across generation, social class, religious commitment, education, and professional standing. Names of respondents have been changed to preserve anonymity.

When history, culture, and religion are called upon by contesting parties to justify continuity or breakage with 'a female Chinese Muslim institution,' their varied interpretations are rooted in contemporary values and issues. Gender, political ideology, economic interest, and national and ethnic identity all play a part in shaping this debate, of which the outcome, including the future of women *ahong* within China's organized Islam, is still uncertain. However, as long as Muslim women defend with passion and conviction the institution that gives them spiritual consolation as well as social identity, the nexus of interdependencies on which this institution is based—which, to return to Yao Ahong's metaphor of the light of Islam and its surrounding protective shade, connects *ahong*, female elders, and ordinary believers—will not be ruptured easily.

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## CHAPTER 1.2

### WOMEN MOSQUE PREACHERS AND SPIRITUAL GUIDES: PUBLICIZING AND NEGOTIATING WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN MOROCCO

Margaret J. Rausch

The recently established institutionalized role of *murshidah*, woman preacher and spiritual guide, trained and certified by the Moroccan state to offer spiritual counseling and instruction in Islamic doctrine and practice to women, is the most recent manifestation of the ever-changing nature of religious authority in Islam.<sup>1</sup> This newly carved-out space for women in the realm of formal religious authority is one facet of the state-initiated religious institutional reform program; other measures have included the appointment of women scholars to advisory positions in state religious councils, including the High Council of Ulema. Both new positions invest women experts on the foundational Islamic texts, the Qur'ān, and the *sunnah*<sup>2</sup> of the Prophet, with religious authority. Unlike many of their historical and contemporary female counterparts,<sup>3</sup> the women holding these positions enjoy official state recognition and remuneration equivalent to that of their male counterparts. Although the women serving on the High Council of Ulema have a superior official ranking within the religious hierarchy, the *murshidahs* enjoy wider visibility and greater proximity to the

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<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork for this chapter was conducted in January and September of 2009. The first segment was funded by a University of Kansas faculty research grant and a faculty travel award from the Kansas African Studies Center at the University of Kansas.

<sup>2</sup> The term *sunnah*, meaning custom or tradition of practice, refers to the sayings and living habits of the Prophet Muḥammad gathered orally as reports, and transmitted to later generations, by his contemporaries. The reports were later collected, evaluated regarding their authenticity, and officially compiled to complement the Qur'ān as authoritative sources on correct practice in Islam. Each report, or *ḥadīth*, contains a main text, or *matn*, and a chain of transmitters, or *isnād*. See glossary entries for *ḥadīth* and *sunnah* for more details.

<sup>3</sup> Institutionalized opportunities for women to access positions of religious authority in majority Muslim countries are increasing, with *vaizeler* in Turkey presenting an interesting example (see Hassan, Chapter 1.3, this volume).

recipients of their services, upon whose recognition and acquiescence their authority ultimately rests. This proximity and visibility expands their potential for reshaping individual interpretations of Islam and local understandings of women's right to exercise religious authority. This chapter investigates the parameters and sites of the *murshidahs'* duties and their techniques for negotiating their religious authority in different settings. It begins by locating the *murshidahs* within the wider context of women's historical and contemporary access to religious authority in Morocco, and then goes on to examine the incentive for and logistics of the *murshidahs'* training module as one component of the larger religious institutional reform program.

*Gender and Religious Authority in Islam: Conventional Configurations and Exceptional Examples in Morocco*

As noted in the introduction to this volume, the history of the Muslim world contains many examples of women acquiring status and recognition as religious scholars and authority figures. Although most remained outside the formal religious hierarchy, some did gain access to official structures. Historically, Moroccan women have occasionally served in positions of religious authority, particularly in the area of knowledge transmission. One example is Zahrā' bint 'Abdallāh bin Mas'ūd al-Kūsh (d. 1020) who studied with her father and maintained her own *zāwiyah*<sup>4</sup> (Sufi center) in Marrakesh, where she taught other women and led them in ritual.<sup>5</sup> Another example is Āmina bint Khajjū,

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<sup>4</sup> The term *zāwiyah* is the most common designation for a Sufi center in Morocco today. The term *ribāṭ* was used to refer to a Sufi center in the early history of Morocco. See glossary entries for these terms.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Rausch, "Ishelhin Women Transmitters of Islamic Knowledge and Culture in Southwestern Morocco," *Journal of North African Studies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 175. In *Transmission of Knowledge*, Berkey examines similar examples from medieval Cairo. There, women created *ribāts* (Sufi centers) to temporarily house divorcees and widows and to instruct them in Islamic doctrine and practice; see Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Other sources on the history of women's access to religious authority, in formal and informal venues, and their contributions to the transmission of knowledge among women, but also men, include Muhammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007); Jonathan P. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus*,

a fully trained legal scholar who taught local women Islamic and Sufi doctrine and practice in her own *zāwiyah* in the northern Moroccan town of Shafshāwan.<sup>6</sup> In southwestern Morocco's Sous region, women from scholarly families, trained in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) like their male counterparts, served as experts and instructors in a local late seventeenth-century initiative to promote knowledge of Islam among the region's illiterate inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> The contemporary breadth of centuries-old ritual practices led by women, sanctuaries and shrines honoring pious women, *madrasahs*<sup>8</sup> bearing women's names, and biographical lexicon entries recording women's achievements in the religious sphere all provide evidence that, historically, women had a high level of access to religious expertise, authority, and leadership. These commemorative markers have potentially contributed to raising the expectations of generations of women. Early twentieth-century women scholars' instruction of local women in women's *madrasahs* in Fez, and the mid-twentieth-century admission of women to the most renowned Moroccan and North African *madrasah*, the Qarawiyyīn,<sup>9</sup>

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1190–1350 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994); and Bouthaina Shaaban, "The Muted Voices of Women Interpreters," in *Women and World Religions*, ed. Lucinda Peach (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 279–97. Contemporary examples can be found in Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Āmina's instruction appears to have been one component of a larger regional education campaign. She was the wife of 'Abdallāh al-Habṭī, who was a disciple of al-Jazūli (d. 1465), the founder of the Jazūli Sufi Order. Al-Jazūli promoted education for women, as did his successors and their disciples, including al-Habṭī and 'Abdallāh al-Ghazwāni (d. 1528/9). Al-Ghazwāni is reported to have initiated entire villages into the order, men and women alike, in an effort to promulgate Islamic knowledge. Al-Habṭī and his contemporary Yūsuf al-Tlidi (d. 1543/4) maintained separate women's *zāwiyahs* presided over by highly trained women scholars of *fiqh*. Āmina also collaborated with her husband and brother in the creation of a regional social and religious reform program. See Rausch, "Ishelhin Women Transmitters," 175.

<sup>7</sup> See Rausch, "Ishelhin Women Transmitters." For details of a similar education initiative in Tajikistan, see Rausch, "Inside a Women's Ritual: Modern Responses to *Baraka* in a *Mevlud* Ritual in Tajikistan; Preliminary Research Reflections," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> The term *madrasah* designates a center for religious learning that was commonly established adjacent to and functioned in conjunction with a mosque or Sufi center.

<sup>9</sup> The *madrasah* was part of the al-Qarawiyyīn mosque, known in French as al-Karaouine, founded in 859 by Fāṭima al-Fihri, the daughter of the wealthy merchant Muḥammad al-Fihri. The family migrated to Fez in the early ninth century and settled with other immigrants from Kairouan, Tunisia on the west side of Fez. Fāṭima

located in the same city and part of the prominent mosque with the same name, which was founded in 859 by a woman, Fāṭima al-Fihri, offer more recent examples of the recognition of women's right to acquire and exercise religious expertise and authority.<sup>10</sup> The cumulative impact over time of these incremental changes can be found in the expansion of women's activism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and their gradual entry into a wide spectrum of public domains.

Moroccan women's more recent emergence as religious experts and authorities in Sufi orders and Islamic revival groups can be counted among the many subsequent fruits of women's persistent engagement.<sup>11</sup> Among them are the Qādirī-Būdshīshī Sufi Order and the

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and her sister Maryam, who were highly educated, received a large inheritance from their father. Fāṭima used her share to construct al-Qarawiyyīn, while Maryam funded al-Andalūs mosque nearby. Al-Qarawiyyīn, like most large mosques elsewhere, was a place for religious learning, centering on Qur'an, *sunnah*, and *fiqh*. Its offerings were later expanded to include Arabic grammar, rhetoric, logic, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, geography, and history, and it eventually became the largest mosque and *madrasah* in North Africa. It drew prominent Muslims, but also Jews and Christians. They included Muslim scholars Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1395), Jewish scholar Moses ben Maimun, or Maimonides, (d. 1204), French scholar Gerbert of Aurillac (d. 1003), known as Pope Sylvester II and credited with introducing the use of zero and Arabic numerals in Europe, Dutch Orientalist and mathematician Jacob van Gool (d. 1667) and Flemish grammarian Nicolas Cleynaerts (d. 1542). Nonetheless, General Hubert Lyautey (d. 1934), who led the early twentieth-century French Protectorate (1912–1956) and “civilizing mission” in Morocco, called it the “Dark House.” In 1957, King Mohammed V elevated it to university status and introduced music, the natural sciences, and foreign languages into its curriculum. Women's historical access has not been studied.

<sup>10</sup> Many of these examples involved women adherents to Sufi orders, whose authority was not based on charisma or derived from their service as guides, healers, or ritual leaders. Instead their authority was grounded in their knowledge of the foundational sources, which they transmitted to other women. The overlap in modes of acquiring religious expertise and authority between Sufi and non-Sufi authority figures, though considerable in some locations, is disregarded or overlooked, and differences between them overemphasized, by some scholars. In “Tradition, Innovation, and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East,” *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 38–65, Berkey discusses this overlap and describes an interesting example.

<sup>11</sup> See Fatima Sadiqi, “Impact of Islamization on Moroccan Feminisms,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2006): 32–39, and “Facing Challenges and Pioneering Feminist and Gender Studies: Women in Post-colonial and Today's Maghrib,” *African and Asian Studies* 7, no. 4 (2008): 447–70. For a Turkish example, see Catharina Raudvere, *The Book and the Roses: Sufi Women, Visibility, and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 2002). A Syrian example can be found in Hilary Kalmbach, “Social and Religious Change in Damascus: One Case of Female Islamic Authority,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1



Islamic revival group al-‘Adl wa-al-Iḥsān (Justice and Charity), both distinguishable by their extensive outreach programs and national networks.<sup>12</sup> In the case of the Qādirī-Būdshishī order, the network has penetrated into state institutions with the appointment of two prominent affiliates to the highest positions in the Ministry of Pious Endowments and Islamic Affairs: Ahmed Toufiq as minister and Ahmed Kostas as his highest deputy; the order has also been extended to encompass Moroccans, but also local converts residing in Europe and the US. The order’s active recruitment measures since the 1970s have led to a considerable increase in the number of adherents, many belonging to Morocco’s educated elite. In the many new women’s circles in Qādirī-Būdshishī *zāwiyahs* around the country, women leaders guide their congregations in the Arabic-language *dhikr* (remembrance ritual), offer instruction on *sunnah* and *fiqh*, and serve as models of women’s religious expertise and authority in local contexts. Al-‘Adl wa-al-Iḥsān, founded by Abdesslam Yassine, a former Qādirī-Būdshishī adherent, parallels the order in significant ways. It actively recruits new members and maintains an extensive and active women’s section, headed by Yassine’s daughter Nadia who administers the growing network of women’s educational and philanthropic activities and events. These expanding opportunities for women to transmit knowledge and exercise religious authority provide an appropriate backdrop for investigating the state’s recent move to publicize women’s religious expertise and to institutionalize positions of religious authority for women, which culminated in the creation of the *murshidah* role.

Reform of the Moroccan religious sphere has been a priority of the current king, Mohammed VI, who can claim major achievements in this area, but its origins lie in the reign of his father and predecessor King Hassan II. Prominent measures of this initial phase include

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(2008): 37–57. For a study of an American branch of an Istanbul-based Sufi Order, in which women head and lead rituals in gender mixed circles, see Rausch, “Encountering Sufism on the Web: Two Halveti-Jerrahi Paths and Their Missions in the USA,” in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 159–76.

<sup>12</sup> See Patrick Haenni and Raphael Voix, “God by All Means... Eclectic Faith and Sufi Resurgence among the Moroccan Bourgeoisie,” in *Sufism and the “Modern” in Islam*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 241–56; and Malika Zeghlal, *Les islamistes marocains: Le défi à la monarchie* (Casablanca: Le Fennec, 2005).

the creation of the country's first modern institution for higher religious education and the unprecedented addition of a woman's poetry recitation performance to the official Prophet's birthday celebration in the Great Mosque in Casablanca in 1993, which is broadcast annually on national television. Notable measures initiated by Mohammed VI include inviting a woman, Dr. Rajaa Naji el-Mekkaoui, a law professor and expert on family law at Mohammed V University in Rabat and one of the architects of the *murshidah* program, to deliver the annual, nationally televised 2003 Ramaḍān<sup>13</sup> lecture to high-ranking military and government officials and foreign ambassadors, held in a palace chamber which until that event had never been entered by a woman.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in 2005, Mohammed VI appointed 104 women to religious councils: 68 at the local, 35 at the regional, and one at the national level. This recognition was further underscored in 2009 by the inclusion of two women speakers, an American Sufi *shaykhah* and a Moroccan scholar, in the second edition of the Sidi Chiker World Meeting of Taṣawwuf (Sufi) Affiliates, hosted by the Ministry of Pious Endowments and Islamic Affairs; this event included 1,500 guests from twenty-four countries and was extensively publicized by Moroccan and European reporters and journalists. All of these examples are informed by the state's goal to incorporate women religious experts and authority figures into the national network of religious education and administrative institutions and to publicize this incorporation through extensive media coverage of its different facets, including the *murshidah* module of the broader religious reform initiative.

*The Murshidah Program: Publicizing State Islam and 'Democratizing' Religious Authority*

In early October 2009, a special news feature produced for and shown on national television at the request of the Ministry of Pious Endowments and Islamic Affairs documented *murshidahs* participating in various segments of their training program and performing some of

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<sup>13</sup> Ramaḍān is the ninth and holiest month of the Islamic lunar calendar when Muslims are required to refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and engaging in sexual activity from dawn to sunset and from acting unkindly and harboring negative thoughts at any time during the entire month.

<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, two other women have held this lecture.

their on-the-job duties, as well as visiting the US, as part of an effort to publicize this novel addition to the religious education system.<sup>15</sup> This news feature complemented the barrage of articles that have appeared in the national and international press since 2005. The articles—which, like the news feature, focus primarily on *murshidahs*, mentioning their male counterparts, *murshids*, only in passing, if at all—have covered events occurring at every stage in the development of the *murshidah* program. Most of the articles have included statements by ministry officials portraying the *murshidah* program in a positive light, while a small number have been more critical, presenting it as a mere tactic by the state to improve its image at home and abroad. The expanding scholarship on the topic, while welcoming the new role for women, contends that the reforms and the state’s Islamic perspective are limited and highly constrictive, respectively,<sup>16</sup> and that the *murshidah* program falls short of establishing equality of access to mosques and to the central authority position of *imām*.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, this extensive news coverage has broadened public awareness of the state’s recently initiated strategy to expand women’s participation in the religious domain and of its recognition of women’s right to acquire and transmit religious knowledge and to serve as religious authorities; these initiatives have come to be seen as facets of the state’s official perspective on Islam. Simultaneously, the coverage has made public the state’s efforts to serve the interests of members of less privileged population groups by providing them with free access to religious education and counseling provided by *murshidahs* and *murshids*. Finally, it exemplifies the state’s intent to promote transparency, accountability, relevance, and consistency in the perspective, approach, and operations of these institutions.

The role of *murshidah* is one component of a broader reform initiative whose interrelated objectives are to modernize the national religious education and administrative institutions, to create a national

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<sup>15</sup> The details in this section derive from materials posted on the ministry website, journal and newspaper articles, and fieldwork conversations and observations.

<sup>16</sup> Driss Maghraoui offers a critical assessment of the reform programs and the state’s Islamic perspective, which informs discriminatory policies vis-à-vis Shi’is, Christians, and homosexuals; see Driss Maghraoui, “The Strengths and Limits of Religious Reforms in Morocco,” *Mediterranean Politics* 14, no. 2 (2009): 195–211.

<sup>17</sup> Souad Eddouadi, “Morocco’s ‘Mourchidates’ and Contradictions,” *Reset DOC (Dialogues On Civilizations)*, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000001323> (accessed May 15, 2001).

network for the public transmission of religious knowledge, and to promote the state's Islamic perspective. Central to these objectives is women's participation, which one *murshidah* characterized as "the first step toward the democratization of the religious sphere." These objectives initially emerged from a number of impulses and recognized needs, including confronting rising competition—and potential outbreaks of violence—from Islamic revival and reform initiatives; educating less privileged segments of the population as a means to assist them in improving their lives, but also to ensure their loyalty; acknowledging the existence of a diversity of perspectives and voices nationwide; and integrating a broader spectrum of these perspectives and voices into institutional structures.

The modernization project of the reform initiative seeks to address these impulses and needs in several ways. It is designed to promote efficiency within the public and the religious education systems and to bridge the gap between them by restructuring the latter and expanding its curriculum to include modern subjects and teaching techniques. Some religious education institutions have already revised their curriculum, while others are currently in the process of doing so. This coupling of the two types of education characterizes the Islamic studies training program for the *murshidahs*. State employees currently serving in mosques and other religious institutions who were trained exclusively in Islamic studies will participate in the retraining program, centering on digitized and online Arabic and Berber-language materials, whose development began in 2007. The impetus behind this retraining program is the development of an efficient and unified national network of religious education and administrative institutions. The network centers on the responsibility of religious educators and administrators to facilitate the extension of religious education to needy population groups, in particular through the services of *murshidahs* and *murshids*. A state religious television channel supports this multifaceted learning apparatus at all levels.

Simultaneously, these modernization measures promote the state's Islamic perspective, which informs all of the instructional materials, including a general handbook. The handbook elucidates the state Islamic perspective and lays out the principles and guidelines of the network and its institutions. As stated in the handbook, the institutions, through the work of their employees, are expected to establish "harmony among all the voices" in the religious domain by "promoting national religious and cultural unity." This unity centers on four

foundational pillars, namely *Ash'arī*<sup>18</sup> doctrine; *Mālikī*<sup>19</sup> school of law, which is “open to the other schools of jurisprudence and is highly adaptable to new circumstances;” Sufism and Sufi ethics, which “prioritize spirituality”; and the political approach embodied in the institution of *amīr al-mu'minīn* (the commander of the faithful),<sup>20</sup> which refers to the king of Morocco, who bears this title as the leader of the Moroccan population. This fourth pillar is characterized as “a source of spiritual tranquility for Moroccan citizens.” All educators and administrators, including the *murshidāhs*, are required to acknowledge their willingness to strictly follow the handbook's principles and guidelines by formally reading aloud and signing an oath as part of the official ceremony celebrating their successful completion of the training program and their assumption of their new positions.

Since its inception in 2005, 50 *murshidāhs* and 150 *murshids* have graduated annually from the training program. Consisting of forty-five weeks of rigorous and intensive training, the program comprises

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<sup>18</sup> *Ash'arī* designates the school of early Muslim speculative theology founded by Abu al-Ḥassan al-'Ash'arī (d. 936). It was instrumental in dramatically changing the direction of Islamic theology, separating its development radically from that of Christian theology. The school holds that human reason is not capable of establishing with absolute certainty any truth-claim with respect to morality, metaphysical ideas, or the physical world; that full grasp of the unique nature and attributes of God exceeds the capacity of human reasoning; and that, although humans have free will, they are incapable of creating anything in the material world. Moral truth-claims derive from scripture, but Muslims may accept as truth claims based on consensus of authorized *'ulamā'*.

<sup>19</sup> *Mālikī*, the third largest of the four Sunni schools of Islamic law, today with roughly 15% of all Muslims as its followers, is found mainly in North Africa, West Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. It derives from Mālik bin Anas's work (d. 795) *Al-Muwaṭṭa'*, the first legal work to combine *sunnah* and *fiqh*. It is a collection of authentic *ḥadīths*, with commentary by Mālik regarding points of compliance or variance between reported *ḥadīths* and the *'amal*, or practices, of the first three generations of Muslims in Medina. It differs from the other schools most notably in the sources used to derive its rulings. All four schools use the Qur'an as the primary source, followed by the *sunnah* of the Prophet. In the *Mālikī* school, *sunnah* includes recorded *ḥadīths*, but also the legal rulings of the first four caliphs, particularly 'Umar (d. 644), *ijmā'* (the consensus of scholars), *qiyās* (analogy), and *'urf* (local custom that is not in conflict with Islamic principles). Mālik contended that the *'amal* of the *ṣaḥābah* (companions of Muḥammad), the *tābi'in* (first generation born after the death of Muḥammad), and the subsequent generation provides superior proof of the living *sunnah* than isolated, but sound, *ḥadīths*.

<sup>20</sup> The term *'amīr al-mu'minīn*, or commander of the faithful, is a title that was adopted by the last three immediate successors of Muḥammad, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī, and various caliphs of the subsequent Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd dynasties, as well as by some contemporary Muslim leaders and monarchs.

thirty-two subjects. The Islamic subjects encompass the Qur'ān, the *sunnah*, Islamic law, Arabic language, Qur'ān recitation techniques, Muslim history and geography, and the art of preaching, all taught by members of the High Council of Ulema. The humanities and social sciences subjects include communications, business management, information technology, economics, and law, all taught by faculty from local universities. The 1,350 hours of instruction are divided into three fifteen-week segments with practical job-related exercises and activities and a comprehensive final examination. The combination of Islamic studies and modern fields is particularly important for *murshidahs*, since their job responsibilities entail both transmitting Islamic knowledge and offering guidance in its broader application in other areas of life.

Three major differences distinguish *murshidahs* from their male *murshids*: one in the area of admission requirements, the second regarding the responsibilities of their positions, and the third related to media coverage. Admission to the program requires being under the age of forty, holding a bachelor's degree (*license*) or a diploma of recognized equivalence from a Moroccan university, and ranking among the highest in their graduating class. Although there is no stipulated field, a large percentage of the *murshidahs* interviewed for this study had received their bachelor's degree in Islamic studies, Islamic law, or Arabic language and literature. The difference between the two groups lies in the requirement regarding Qur'ān recitation, which is part of the evaluation process for admission to the program. Women are only required to memorize half of the Qur'ān, while the male applicants are expected to know the entire text by heart. Since the program began, the number of applicants has greatly exceeded the number of places, with women applicants outnumbering men by a wide margin. The ministry is considering increasing the number of places, particularly for women.

Regarding job responsibilities, both groups of graduates are trained to serve as spiritual guides and preachers in mosques, as well as youth centers, schools, orphanages, factories, hospitals, and prisons throughout Morocco. They are assigned to specific mosques and other institutions in or near their neighborhoods of residence, whenever possible. *Murshids'* assignments encompass more mosques and a smaller number of the other institutions, since their job duties include the additional tasks of periodically leading prayers and delivering sermons as temporary replacements for the *imāms* officially serving in the

mosques to which they are assigned. *Murshidahs*, who are excluded from the latter tasks based on a *fatwá* issued by the High Council of Ulema at the outset of the program, are responsible for between five and eight mosques as well as several other institutions, since demand for women's instruction is higher. This discrepancy is due to the fact that women from disadvantaged population groups are less likely to complete school, or even attend at all; public school is an important venue for religious instruction for many Moroccans. Furthermore, women are considered to be in greater need of religious instruction since they are more actively engaged in the guidance of others, in particular their children. Moreover, men are commonly employed and have less time to devote to religious instruction at the mosque. *Murshidahs* and *murshids* serving in the same districts meet weekly in mixed gender assemblies with assigned facilitators employed by local religious administration offices to report on and discuss their work experiences and to plan future strategies, activities, and events. In addition, both may be invited to join the annual program, headed by selected *imāms*, for visiting Moroccan mosques in Europe and Canada to offer support and guidance to their congregants during the month of Ramaḍān. The final difference lies in the above-mentioned prioritization of the role of the *murshidahs*, which, though parallel and equal in importance to that of *murshids*, has taken precedence in the news coverage and strategic planning of the ministry.

Ministry officials and religious institution administrators interviewed for this study reported various official and unofficial plans and ideas for enhancing *murshidahs'* visibility, accessibility, and proximity vis-à-vis the population groups they serve. One planned measure is the expansion of the separate spaces for women in future mosques and in existing mosques during renovation. Another plan still under consideration is to create telephone lines staffed by *murshidahs* and *murshids* to answer questions and offer advice on religious issues of personal concern. A third idea, expressed unofficially by an administrator and aimed at enhancing the *murshidahs'* visibility in the public sphere, entailed the creation of a physical marker in the form of a badge or vest bearing her title. His vision was to enable people to address their questions and concerns on the spot, as they arise, whether on a bus, on the street, in a taxi, in a café, or anywhere in the public sphere. As he explained it, this enhanced availability would eliminate the likelihood of people forgetting or losing their courage during the time lapse between the moment when the question or concern occurs to

them and the individual's next possible opportunity to speak with a *murshidah*. The possibility of immediate consultation would enhance the spontaneity, depth, and clarity of the resulting conversation, in his view. Regardless of whether this idea is eventually considered for implementation, it demonstrates the degree of emphasis on promoting visibility and accessibility of *murshidahs*.<sup>21</sup>

Most *murshidahs* expressed their appreciation of state efforts to enhance their visibility, acknowledging the importance of their mission and emphasizing the pride they take in exerting the greatest possible effort toward fulfilling it. They also welcomed the enlargement of the women's mosque space and the opportunity to provide advice by telephone. However, the idea of wearing a badge or vest was received unfavorably: the public announcement of their availability would increase the circle of recipients of their knowledge and advice, but would also expand their already heavy workload in a way that was intrusive to professional style and individual freedom, as one *murshidah* expressed it. Nonetheless, by enhancing their visibility, accessibility, and proximity, such a physical marker, like the other two measures, would expand the occasions for publicizing and negotiating their religious authority.

*Women Mosque Preachers and Spiritual Guides: Negotiating Religious Authority in Situ*

The extensive media coverage of *murshidahs* and their services has heightened public awareness of their availability, arousing the interest and enthusiasm of large numbers of women for their instructional sessions in many mosques and other institutions around the country.

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<sup>21</sup> Reflections on the importance of religious authority figures' visibility in their communities and the role of their conventionalized forms of attire in making possible their recognition as such by the broader public in everyday contexts in early twentieth century Morocco can be found in Dale Eickelman, "The Art of Memory: Islamic Education and Its Social Reproduction," in *Comparing Muslim Societies: Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization*, ed. Juan R. I. Cole (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 97–132. In *Knowledge and Social Practice*, Chamberlain addresses this issue in relation to a law banning the wearing of turbans by women promulgated in medieval Damascus, which, as he argues, suggests that women's access to positions of religious expertise and authority had become so common, and the women's sense of their equality with the men holding these positions had grown so strong, that they had begun to adopt the conventional male headgear that honored and elevated, as well as publicized, the holder of this position and status.



This coverage has also made clear that the state is promoting *murshidahs* as religious authorities and that it supports and recognizes the significance of women's religious education. While this public state promotion, recognition, and support has facilitated the processes by which *murshidahs* negotiate their religious authority in the various contexts where they offer their services, it has not eliminated altogether the need to demonstrate their knowledge, expertise, and piety through day-to-day interactions with the community. The need for gaining local authority and public legitimacy is instead ongoing, as their capacity for successfully applying their expertise and exercising their authority ultimately rests upon acquiescence and acknowledgment of this expertise and authority by the groups receiving their services and by administrators in the institutions in which they serve.<sup>22</sup>

The means of establishing their authority vis-à-vis the women whom they serve rests on a number of factors, including their tactics for self-presentation and persona projection, their communication and interpersonal interaction skills, and their knowledge transmission techniques. The parameters, expectations, and practicalities regarding these negotiation strategies are learned and practiced during their training. The success and failure of practical applications of these strategies are discussed with colleagues and administrators during regular reporting sessions. However, their actual performance varies with the individual characteristics of each *murshidah* and the particularities of each context.

The *murshidah* program has been in existence for only four years, so the process through which the women are constructing their new roles and staking their claims to the right as women to exercise religious authority is still evolving. This section highlights how *murshidahs* adapt to the specificities of different locations and to the personalities and attitudes of the individuals they encounter. It investigates the way they negotiate their right to serve as religious authorities by demonstrating their newly acquired skills and emphasizing various elements of their personas and educational backgrounds in response to these attitudes and personalities, which become evident through interactions. The following analysis begins by drawing on reflections from

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<sup>22</sup> In *Speaking for Islam*, Krämer and Schmidtke, like other scholars, underscore the importance of the role of community acceptance, alongside officially acknowledged standards, in gaining recognition for religious and other kinds of authority.

the narratives provided by *murshidahs* regarding their training and initial months of employment.

In their recollections of their initial feelings, all of the *murshidahs* reported a high level of enthusiasm. Their enthusiasm derived from their sense of pride that they felt towards their mission, which was particularly strong during the training program. It resulted from their delight in being part of a new program and an important mission. The mission was to promote the true face of Islam by promoting a tolerant version of it—one that encourages forgiveness, compassion, and peace—to underprivileged and marginalized groups, and by striving to attenuate any potential tendencies to drift towards Islamic extremism. On another level, they perceived their mission as encompassing the modernization of Morocco's religious landscape through the incorporation of women religious authorities. They asserted that women are well suited to this new role because they are more patient, compassionate, and sensitive than men. This positive emotional engagement was replaced by more realistic attitudes when the actual work began.

In the case of some *murshidahs*, in particular those working in rural areas, small urban centers, and in rough neighborhoods in large cities, the initial enthusiasm was tinged by pangs of skepticism and disappointment. These *murshidahs* found some of the challenges of their responsibilities discouraging, while others made them skeptical about reaching the goals that they had initially envisioned as achievable. Like all *murshidahs*, they are responsible for numerous mosques and institutions, as well as the local communities encompassed by them. Traveling from village to village and town to town, or from one neighborhood to another, and counseling people on solutions to social problems, along with offering lessons on religious topics, made them feel like itinerant social workers. Fatigue, as well as disappointment, increased as their daily work schedules began regularly to exceed eight hours. Another problematic aspect that they highlighted was the potential for physical harm. Although the risk of this is considered nonexistent or highly improbable in Morocco, two conditions of their work make physical harm a real possibility. They often had to schedule sessions and individual appointments in the late afternoon or early evening, which meant returning home after dark; and occasionally they visited clients in their homes, some of which were located in parts of towns and cities inhabited by the disadvantaged, where crime rates are high and Islamic extremist recruitment more likely.

To some *murshidahs*, these conditions, together with the requirement to report suspicious behavior or activities to their local administrative institution, posed a potential threat to their safety and made them view their job as at least partially entailing 'spy work' and therefore as potentially dangerous. As they became more familiar with and comfortable in the assigned neighborhoods and communities, and found ways to restructure their workloads, while still satisfactorily serving a large number of clients, their skepticism and disappointment decreased. This decrease sparked a new optimism that the work they were performing would improve the conditions of peoples' lives and strengthen interpersonal bonds and community networks, which would diminish the extremist threat. It inspired hope that *murshidahs* could become permanent members of the religious administration in local communities and that the number trained annually would increase, as the ministry had promised, enabling them to serve the communities more effectively.

More important than these emotional and logistical adjustments is the development of strategies for daily work tasks. The negotiation process in the *murshidahs'* encounters with male administrators and colleagues is sometimes challenging. Their piety, together with their corresponding comportment and appearance, is of prime importance to their claim to status as religious authority figures, while their age, which reveals a limit to the breadth of their experience, is best de-emphasized. Similarly, their command of the foundational Islamic sources is essential to their position<sup>23</sup> and the central justification for their right and capacity to exercise religious authority. Their educational background is probably the most important but also the most variable factor in their self-representation in these contexts. Sometimes

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<sup>23</sup> In their enlightening discussion of the basis, parameters, and contextually embedded nature of religious authority in Islam, Krämer and Schmidtke acknowledge expertise in the foundational sources as the standard 'official' measure for determining the right of an individual to access religious authority in Islam, as well as other religious traditions. See "Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies; A Critical Overview," in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1–14. The difficulties of reconstructing the parameters of religious authority, held by Sufi and non-Sufi scholars, in Moroccan history are examined in Bettina Dennerlein, "Asserting Religious Authority in Late-19th/Early 20th-Century Morocco. Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar al-Kattāni (d. 1927) and his *Kitāb Salwat al-Anfās*," in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabina Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 128–52.

they find themselves emphasizing their Islamic studies training, other times they call attention to their bachelor's degrees and the Western component of their training program. Ultimately, drawing on both their religious and modern education assists them in commanding respect from male colleagues and administrators.

It is their dual command of religious and modern education that makes them more qualified than most, if not all, of their male colleagues, including the *imāms*, with the exception of the *murshids* who have received the same training. Some *murshidahs* have found that the strategy of dropping periodic subtle reminders that they have a bachelor's degree, in addition to their certificate of completion of the dual-track state religious training, in combination with occasionally quoting from the Qur'an or the *sunnah*, has helped them assert their authority vis-à-vis male colleagues and the public. This tactic enables them to gain the respect and recognition that they need for solidifying their status and position as religious authority figures who are equally, if not better, qualified than their male counterparts. As in the other contexts, the *murshidahs* frequently adapt and revise the negotiation process by adjusting their choice and presentation of the same factors in accordance with the attitudes and personalities of the individuals they encounter.

The most important group of clients is the congregation of women who attend their lessons in mosques, since the mosque is the primary location of their work. The presence of women's congregations in mosques is not controversial or new. Their lessons take place in special chambers used exclusively by women, located adjacent to the main chamber and accessible only through external doors. Women are completely isolated spatially from the male congregation, except in the case of mosques where the men's and women's spaces are connected by openings covered by screens allowing women to observe the men at prayer. The *imām's* voice is audible in the women's chamber via a public address system. Women attend prayer services in these chambers at any time of the day according to desire. They are often full to capacity during the midday (*al-zuhr*) prayer<sup>24</sup> on Friday. Another time when the presence of women is high is between the mid-afternoon (*al-ʿaṣr*) and the sunset (*al-maghrib*) prayers, a time when women are tradi-

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<sup>24</sup> *Salāh*, the obligatory Muslim prayer, is performed five times a day. See glossary for more details.

tionally free from housework to socialize and attend women's rituals of various kinds. The chambers are also heavily frequented throughout the day and evening during the month of Ramaḍān.

The women's chambers serve as the location for various types of instruction, including Arabic-language literacy classes, Qur'ān recitation, and religion lessons, with availability, frequency, level, and quality differing from one mosque to another. The literacy classes are taught by women, and in rare cases by men, whose background, training, and institutional connections vary. They center on instruction in writing and grammar, practiced through readings from the Qur'ān, *sunnah*, and *sīrat al-nabī* (The Biography of the Prophet). Certified women reciters teach Qur'ān recitation classes. The instructors of both types receive remuneration from the Ministry of Pious Endowments and Islamic Affairs or private associations. Classes on a variety of religious matters have been offered on a volunteer basis or with remuneration since the 1960s by *wā'izāt* (women preachers), whose background, training, and institutional connections are likewise varied. The religious instruction and spiritual guidance offered by the *murshidahs* is the newest addition to this multi-faceted women's religious education program, and its principal differences from the other types concern its official nature and the *murshidahs'* level of training. Holding their instruction sessions in local mosques removes the need to familiarize the women attendees with a new setting, and holding them between *al-ʿaṣr* and *al-maghrib* prayers enables the *murshidahs* to draw the largest possible congregation.

The task of alleviating reticence and eliciting a favorable reception for their instruction—and therefore ensuring sustained and enthusiastic attendance—entails focusing their negotiation tactics on the women's acceptance of their personas and their messages. A number of factors enter into this negotiation. All *murshidahs* wear the conventional *jalāba*, a long-sleeved, ankle-length over-garment native to Arabic-speaking women from all backgrounds in the north and worn by women belonging to the educated elite in the rest of the country, and a scarf that covers all of their hair and neck. These are worn at all times on the job, as well as in public when they are not working. It is a prerequisite for a woman when entering a local mosque to wear a *jalāba* and scarf, or the *ḥā'ik*—the one-piece, full-body wrap commonly worn by illiterate and semi-literate women in southwestern Morocco's Sous region—or other similar regional variations. Their attire, together with mannerisms, tone, demeanor, and language, all

exemplify their personal piety, and articulate the respect, modesty, and religious refinement that coincides with their position and status as religious authority figures. It is one of several key factors in the negotiation process in this as well as other work contexts.

Other factors include language, use of religious textual citations, and educational background. Since *murshidahs* generally originate from the regions to which they are assigned, in locations where the congregants know little or no Arabic, they hold their lessons in the local dialects of Berber, forging an emotional bond between the *murshidah* and her audience, and evoking a sense of pride at seeing a local woman in a position of religious authority in the mosque. Many of the congregants are familiar with the idea of women serving in religious leadership positions, as many of them attend local women's supererogatory rituals or the Qādirī-Būdshīshī women's circle *dhikr*. However, in this case the official status of the *murshidah*, together with the location and the content and form of the lessons, distinguishes her from the women ritual leaders to whom they are otherwise accustomed. One of the factors related to this distinction is the *murshidah's* use of excerpts or passages from central religious texts either as the main focus or supporting evidence.

The primary objective of the *murshidahs'* mosque service is to transmit knowledge of Islamic doctrine and practice. To this end, they offer lessons focusing on the Qur'ān, *sunnah*, and *sīrat al-nabī*. The lessons consist of reading from these sources in Arabic, translating them into Moroccan Arabic or Berber, and elaborating their relevance to the women's lives. The lessons, not unlike the sermons delivered by the mosque *imāms* and *murshids*, entail explaining the application of the values, principles, practices, and moral lessons found in these central sources, and therefore encompass some level of interpretation. Furthermore, the choice of topics and details, like the approach and mode of presentation, are subject to personal preference. All of these aspects are informed by the *murshidahs'* theoretical and practical training, which is based on the state's Islamic perspective, but are also shaped by the *murshidahs'* personal perspectives and interpretations.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For an examination of the indirect ways interpretation plays a role in the teaching and learning process, even in early twentieth-century Morocco, when rote memorization of instructional text was still the dominant pedagogical methodology, see Eickelman, "The Art of Memory."

Unsurprisingly, an intentional emphasis on women and women's issues was observable: *murshidahs* receive special training in women's jurisprudence, or *fiqh al-nisā'*, from women scholars. Many *murshidahs* have found that the interest of their women audiences is most easily aroused by stories about women renowned for their piety or who served their communities as role models, leaders, and authority figures—such as the Prophet's wives and other prominent women in the early community in Medina. These stories, together with the *murshidahs'* own presence as experts and leaders, and the opportunity for women to receive instruction, transmit a woman-friendly vision of Islam.

*Murshidahs* also prepare some of their women congregants for the *hajj*, and in some cases they accompany them on their journey as guides. The preparatory lessons focus on doctrinal issues and basic practicalities, supplemented by stories of the performance of the *hajj* by members of the early Medinan community, especially women members. The *murshidahs'* self-presentation and projection of their persona are also important to the success of their instructional sessions. Their dignified demeanor, pious comportment, and modest apparel, but also their punctuality, dedication, approachability, and the organized structure of their lessons, command the respect and admiration both of their women audiences and also the mosque *imāms*. Most of the *imāms* are welcoming and supportive, but some of them admit to having felt threatened initially by the idea of the presence of an alternative Islamic authority alongside them in their mosques. However, all of them eventually realized the advantages. One *imām* interviewed for this study reported an overall improvement in attendance in his mosque, even among male congregants, resulting from the enthusiasm of the women, whose presence had increased considerably since the arrival of the *murshidah*. In general, the *imāms* tended to praise the *murshidahs'* skills as teachers, communicators, and leaders.

The second objective, which is equal in importance to the lessons, comprises facilitating conversations about problems and issues of a more personal nature, such as spousal relationships, domestic violence, infidelity, parental love, and the upbringing of children and adolescents; or of broader interest, such as ethics, worship, and devotional practices. The *murshidahs* cite segments from the Islamic sources to illuminate their point or justify their perspective. Despite their lack of literacy and general education, most of the women appreciate the fact that this use of sources both enhances the quality of the instruction

and validates the *murshidah*'s status as a religious authority trained by the state. They are seldom aware of the exact details of the *murshidahs*' educational background. Nonetheless, most of them appreciate the fruits of their training and have great respect for them. The fact that *murshidahs* are relatively young, in their mid to late twenties, heightens the women attendees' esteem for them.

Persona projection and self-presentation are crucial in this area. Encouraging the women to open up and participate in this type of activity requires developing their confidence and trust, and dispelling their fears and anxieties, as well as cultivating mutual respect and trust among the women. Most *murshidahs* contended that achieving success in this area is gradual. It depends on developments in the overall atmosphere and the dynamics of the group, which is part of an ongoing process. According to one *murshidah*, her use of positive images of women and her self-presentation as a concerned spiritual guide and effective role model can raise the women's self-esteem. Many women attendees reported feeling more at home in the mosque. Most *murshidahs* agree that personalized input, one-on-one interactions, and the cordiality, kindness, understanding, and humor permeating their encounters, are an additional plus in encouraging regular attendance. It also enhances the trust negotiated by means of the other factors, and increases warmth, intimacy, and potential for bonding that can inspire their eventual openness to exposing and discussing personal problems and family issues.

The women congregants come to the mosque more often and look forward to the *murshidahs*' lessons, many of them explained. They derive great satisfaction from learning and participating. The *murshidahs* hold lessons on one day and review sessions with questions and answers on the next. The women take great pride in demonstrating their new knowledge of doctrine, practice, and the foundational texts, and emphasize the importance of having a woman as an expert to guide them in applying their new knowledge in practice. They feel more in control of their lives because their doubts and unanswered questions regarding doctrinal and practical issues related to interpersonal relationships and religious obligations have dissipated. The whole experience has had an empowering effect. Many of the women claimed to have developed a new attitude toward communication and the pursuit of knowledge. Their inquisitiveness has increased. They have a renewed relationship to their religion, and feel more confident



in their knowledge about it. Others asserted that the *murshidahs*' lessons have become an important event in their week.

This mood-elevating and self-esteem-heightening dimension of their work is significant in other institutions, especially the prisons. Most of the *murshidahs* interviewed for this study found their visits to prisons particularly rewarding, but also quite challenging. They offer lessons on doctrine and practice, teach Qur'ān recitation, lead group discussions of personal issues, and occasionally conduct private consultations with those in need. In addition, they organized group events and meals that include Qur'ān recitation, especially during religious holidays. One *murshidah* explained that the most moving experience she had had in her prison service was working with an Italian inmate. The woman had a limited working vocabulary that combined Moroccan dialect and French, supplemented by gestures and sign language. She had developed a strong emotional affinity to Qur'ān recitation, in spite of her inability to understand it. Her eyes fill with tears when she hears it recited and she calls out *Yā rabbī!* (O My Lord), the *murshidah* explained. This experience made her realize how important her work is. Its importance lies in the moments of joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment that she brings to the lives of the prison inmates. The prison directors hold the *murshidahs* in high regard for their religious expertise and communication skills. They underscored the pleasure that the inmates derive from their visits, and expressed satisfaction with the resulting overall boost in the morale.

Another challenging but invigorating group to work with is young people. This work takes place in youth centers or schools, and consists of instruction, activities, and events. Several *murshidahs* asserted that their work with youth is the most difficult yet gratifying area of their service. Teenagers are often attracted to styles and attitudes imported from the West, and find religion outdated or unimportant. The main topics addressed consist of problems pertaining to their age group, such as premarital sexuality, delinquency, truancy, and lack of motivation for schoolwork, as well as strategies for their avoidance or resolution, and issues of more general concern such as ethics, obligatory religious observance, and spirituality. Many of the same factors enter into the negotiation process, although the desired response may be different. The attitudes of this young clientele and nature of the topics addressed necessitate additional strategies: here, even more so than in other contexts, the *murshidahs*' training in psychology and other social sciences

serves them well, as they negotiate a presence that is simultaneously up-to-date, pious, and serious, and that is ultimately convincing and appealing to these often sharp and highly critical young adults. Flaunting their Western-style education is a plus in this context; however, doing so while at the same time demonstrating their religious commitment and piety can be complicated. Many of the young women found the *murshidahs* congenial and admired their life achievements and work. The *murshidahs'* young age facilitates their efforts to forge bonds with the youth. These bonds aid them in instilling the necessary trust for eliciting the cooperation that is crucial to achieving the central objectives of their work: namely, guiding the youths in developing meaningful and productive activities, perspectives, approaches, and values for their lives, helping them set and commit to future life goals, and reducing the likelihood that they will choose unproductive or detrimental paths.

Some *murshidahs* felt that using concrete examples that appeal to their emotions is the most effective way to instruct youth. One *murshidah* sought to augment the desire of one of her groups of teenage girls to focus more seriously on their futures by heightening their awareness of successful professionals in their community. Whenever possible, she invited one of these professionals to speak to the group. Another *murshidah* focused one of her lessons on teaching the difference between physical and intrinsic beauty to a group of teenagers. She sought to demonstrate to them that overemphasis on physical beauty and neglect of one's intellectual, spiritual, and ethical side can be disastrous. Developing only one's physical beauty, which is devoid of these other vital qualities, makes one as vulnerable as a rose, whose petals eventually fall off, leaving a bare stem with no appeal to anyone, she explained to them. To further illustrate her point she used another analogy: she compared the difference between a well-rounded person and one focused only on superficial attributes to the difference between paper money and a blank piece of paper. When crumpled up, the blank paper is no longer of any use, she explained to them, but the money retains its value. Often such techniques not only prove effective in getting the point across, the *murshidah* asserted, but they also leave a lasting impression on many young people, and even transform their relationship to her. She continued by explaining that many youths find her analogies and other techniques intriguing. They spark their admiration, and over time they develop trust and respect for her. Observing this process is gratifying, the *murshidah* explained. This sense of grati-

fication derives not only from the pleasure and pride that is awakened by success, but also from the feeling that she is contributing in significant ways towards ensuring that these teenagers will lead happier and more meaningful lives and that, in this way, she is performing an important service toward creating a brighter future for her country.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Multiple benefits derive from institutionalizing a position of religious authority for women. For the state, it serves broader objectives of promulgating the official perspective on Islam and creating a modern, efficient, and transparent network of religious education and administrative institutions that promote unity within the diversity of perspectives and voices, ultimately ensuring loyalty in the face of competition from controversial and potentially violent groups, although coercive means and compromise of some democratic values inform some official measures and policies.<sup>26</sup> For the *murshidahs*, it represents an opportunity to serve as religious experts and authority figures, as well as a secure, satisfying, but challenging form of employment. As a result of their direct proximity to the groups of women they serve and on whose acknowledgement and acquiescence their authority ultimately rests, the need to demonstrate their expertise and negotiate their authority constitutes an ongoing process. This process proves gratifying for the *murshidahs* and enriching for the women they serve. For these less privileged women the *murshidahs'* lessons and guidance constitute a source of enlightenment, satisfaction, and hope for the future, as well as meaning and improvement in their daily lives. For the *murshidahs*, their work demands their dedication and creative input, but fosters their self-development.

By creating a position for women to serve as educators and spiritual guides in mosques, the state has bestowed official recognition on a form of women's participation in the religious sphere that Moroccan women have perpetuated outside the mosque for centuries. Serving in a similar capacity to their predecessors, *murshidahs* transmit, interpret, and apply their knowledge of the foundational sources of Islamic doctrine and practice. By enabling women to serve as certified transmitters

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<sup>26</sup> Driss Maghraoui, "The Strengths and Limits," and Souad Eddouada, "Morocco's 'Mourchidates' and Contradictions."

and interpreters with broad public visibility, this new institutionalized role contributes towards incremental changes in understandings of Islam and Muslim women's right to exercise religious authority, which can potentially foster further gains for women in the religious and other spheres.

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## CHAPTER 1.3

### RESHAPING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY: STATE-SPONSORED FEMALE PREACHERS

Mona Hassan

Over 350 women currently work as preachers for Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs. Often highly educated individuals with advanced degrees in Islamic Studies, these women are entrusted with offering religious services throughout the country's mosques and *muftiates*. Through performing a wide range of duties, these female preachers are gradually altering Turkish perceptions of both the mosque and the Directorate which administers them as male-gendered domains. In a global context, the employment of these women by a state bureaucracy, combined with the length of their formal religious education, is particularly striking. With the active support and intervention of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs, therefore, these female preachers are establishing a new model of female religious authority in Turkish society based upon the elevation of well-trained and certified women to official positions of religious influence, whereby they are energetically engaged in (re)shaping the populace's understanding and interpretations of Islam.

#### *The Administrative Vision and Role of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs*

The Directorate of Religious Affairs has its roots in the early formation of the modern Republic of Turkey. In 1924, the offices of the Şeyhülislam were abolished along with other traditional Ottoman institutions under the "Abolishment of the Ministries of Şer'iyye and Evkaf" Act, and the Directorate was established in its stead as an administrative unit that reported to the Prime Minister in order to tame, bureaucratize, and control the expression of religion in the public sphere. The institution has undergone numerous changes over the decades in tandem with Turkey's socio-economic and political development as well as with the country's increasingly visible religiosity. Since 1965, the Directorate has been broadly responsible for directing "what is related

to the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, to enlighten society on matters of religion, and to administer sacred places of worship.” More broadly, the responsibilities of the Directorate today include maintaining mosques, conducting the call to prayer (*ezan*), providing the five daily congregational prayer services in mosques, offering Friday sermons, providing consistent preaching services, running *hajj* services, answering religious questions, organizing programs for Ramazan, administering funeral services, organizing conferences, offering services to new Muslims, preparing the religious calendar for prayer services and holidays, and supervising *qibla* regulations in mosques.<sup>1</sup> To discharge these extensive duties, the state bureaucracy employs *muftis*, preachers, Qur’ān course teachers, *imams*, and *muezzins*, among many others.

In June 2009, 1,280 tenured male and female preachers (*vaizeler*) worked for this Turkish state bureaucracy,<sup>2</sup> and the number of women employed in such positions has grown significantly over the past two decades. From twenty-nine tenured female preachers in 1990, the figure increased to fifty-seven by 2001, and then seventy-six in 2003. The following year, in 2004, Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs opened scores more tenured preaching positions for women, and by 2008, 233 women worked in these tenured positions (*kadro*).<sup>3</sup> Toward the end of 2008, the Directorate opened an additional two hundred contractual (*sözleşmeli*) slots for female preachers, although not all of these new contractual positions have been filled. As of June 2009, the women working as tenured and contractual preachers constituted over one-fourth Turkey’s official preaching workforce.

A confluence of factors, especially the swelling numbers of female graduates of Turkey’s theology faculties,<sup>4</sup> combined with the Direc-

<sup>1</sup> For more details, see the articles in the special issue of *The Muslim World* 98 (July/August 2008); Mehmet Bulut, “Diyaret İşleri Başkanlığının Yaygın Din Eğitimindeki Yeri” (PhD diss., Ankara University, 1997), 107–48; Mehmet Aksoy, “Şeyhülislamlıktan Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı’na Geçiş” (PhD diss., Erciyes University, 1997); Kemâleddin Nomer, *Şeriat, Hilafet, Cumhuriyet, Laiklik: Dini ve Tarihi Gerçeklerin Belgeleri* (Istanbul: Boğaziçi Yayınları, 1996), 247–74, 299–307; İftar Tarhanlı, *Müslüman Toplum, “Laik” Devlet: Türkiye’de Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Istanbul: Afa Yayınları, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Information from the archives of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, June 2, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı İstatistikleri 2008* (Ankara: Strateji Geliştirme Daire Başkanlığı, 2009), 25.

<sup>4</sup> I explore the dynamics of this long-term process further in my article “Women at the Intersection of Turkish Politics, Religion, and Education: The Unexpected Path to Becoming a State-Sponsored Female Preacher,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 111–30.



torate's growing desire to better serve the female half of the Turkish population, explains this recent increase in the number of state-sponsored female preachers. Most of the Directorate's services over the years have centered on the mosque, where, in the words of current Vice-Director of Religious Affairs, Dr. İzzet Er:

Weekly Friday sermons are the most important and indispensable element of the [Directorate of Religious Affairs'] mission to enlighten society about religion. The weekly sermons serve as the most significant means of providing systematic enlightenment and education on religious and social issues.<sup>5</sup>

Yet women hardly attend the mosque in Turkey, nor have they been able to listen to the weekly Friday sermon and participate in the Friday congregational prayer in their neighborhood mosques, due to lack of sufficient space and interest in accommodating them. Assessing this situation, Er remarks:

Turkey's population is seventy-one million. Half of this is female. Until today, [official mass] religious education [outside schools] was provided only to men. We did not have anything for females. When you look at mosques, they address men again. The number of women receiving services from mosques is very small. It is not even one million. About fifteen million men attend mosques. One million in this does not mean much. Who then will carry the message of Islam to the believing women? Men who learn about Islam during the Friday prayer do not go home and tell their families about it.

The Directorate's ability to reach women with the previously available forms of religious services conducted by male officials, Er acknowledges, was extremely limited. Therefore, the idea of employing women through the Directorate of Religious Affairs to reach other women was devised to remedy this predicament.<sup>6</sup>

### *Turkish Socio-cultural Challenges for Female Preachers*

In forging this new model of religious authority in Turkey, female preachers have been gradually overcoming the reputations of the Directorate of Religious Affairs as a male-exclusive institution, the

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<sup>5</sup> İzzet Er, "Religious Services of the PRA," *The Muslim World* 98 (July/August 2008), 273.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Dr. İzzet Er, June 2, 2009.

mosque as male-gendered space, and female religious activities as the domain of informal Islamic groups. When people call the central (*il*) and district (*ilçe*) *muftiates* in Istanbul seeking a religious opinion from one of the institution's qualified religious scholars, many are surprised to hear the voice of a woman answer the phone. As Fatma Bayram, a female preacher since 1990, relates:

So, somebody calls the *muftiate* to ask a question. I take the phone and say "Hello." Since the person hears a female voice, s/he says "Abla [Elder sister], isn't there an authorized/qualified [*yetkili*] person there?" They think I am a secretary. I say, "Go ahead. I am." S/he says: "Ah, I was calling for an authorized/qualified *hoca* [religious scholar]." I say: "Yes, I am. Did you want to ask a question?" Some of them ask for a male *hoca*. Either they want to ask an intimate question or there is a problem of confidence. Therefore, we need to inform people more about this.<sup>7</sup>

Unexpectedly faced with the novelty of contemporary Turkish women assuming positions of religious authority and influence, some Turkish men, including some other male religious officials, revert to familiar familial categorizations of these women as either elder sisters (*abla*) or sisters-in-law (*yenge*) rather than verbally acknowledging their elevated or similar status as a religious scholars (*hoca*). As Bayram further narrates:

Sometimes we go to Anatolia in a religious guidance [*irşad*] team. I went to Kars, Mersin, various cities. We organize programs for a week or ten days and visit different districts [*ilçe*]. In one place for instance, the *muftiate* employee was addressing the men in the team as "*Hocam*" [my educator] and addressing me as "*Yenge*" [my brother's wife]. I find this very strange. They are "*Hoca*," [and] I am in the same status with them, so I should also be addressed as "*Hoca*." But they address me as "*Abla*" [elder sister] or "*Yenge*" [sister-in-law]. It is like that here too [where she was evaluating people's proficiency in the memorization of the Qur'an]. Some of the examinees, the male ones, call me "*Abla*." Some of them have difficulty calling a woman "*Hoca*." Some of them. These are small things. We laugh at them. They will get used to it.<sup>8</sup>

Vice-Director of Religious Affairs Er also acknowledges that the male officials in Turkey's *muftiates* have been going through a period of adjustment in accepting the female preachers as their colleagues,<sup>9</sup> many

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Fatma Bayram, July 8, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Dr. İzzet Er, June 2, 2009.

of whom remain the only one or two women working as preachers in their local branches, institutions overwhelmingly dominated by men. Züleyha Şeker, the Beyoğlu *vaize* since 2003, points out that some of the awkwardness is generational:

Initially, generally we did not have problems with younger [male colleagues] or middle-aged ones.... It is like this in our society. They used not to educate girls. Therefore, girls were always behind the men in religious knowledge. But now, maybe two-thirds of the theology faculties are women [as students].... There weren't any [educated professional women] before, but now there are professors, other educated women in professions. Men also learned that yes, women can also learn something. Therefore, they started to remove us from the status of mothers. Initially this was a problem. They could see us as mothers, as sisters, as potential wives, but the idea of a female colleague was not visibly present among the group of people that we may refer to as the Islamic community. Slowly, maybe in the last five years, this is being overcome—at most [in the last] ten years....<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, other male preachers of this younger generation have been exceedingly welcoming and appreciative of their female colleagues and their assiduous efforts. Broadly speaking, though, the overall tone and atmosphere of support can vary noticeably from one local *muftiate* to another.<sup>11</sup>

Turkish socio-cultural conceptions of the mosque's sanctified and gendered spatiality pose another set of challenges for female preachers who organize sessions there for gatherings of women. One such difficulty is primarily logistical; in contrast to their male colleagues who can preach to a congregation that has already gathered for prayer, whether on Friday or for one of the five daily prayers, women do not typically pray in the mosque in Turkey. Therefore, it becomes more difficult for female preachers to gather a congregation of women who come for the primary or even sole purpose of listening to their religious exhortation. Print-outs placed in the women's section of a mosque can be easily overlooked if and when women stop by to pray. Announcements made by the *imam* to a predominantly or exclusively male congregation depend upon their passing that information along

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Züleyha Şeker, July 2, 2009. I discuss the long-term impact and significance of increased religious educational opportunities for female students in my article "Women at the Intersection of Turkish Politics, Religion, and Education."

<sup>11</sup> Fieldwork and interviews.

to the women in their families. And announcements on the *muftiate* webpages are limited to those with internet access who intentionally navigate their way there. Mostly, however, the women learn by word of mouth from one another after their friends and neighbors attend some sessions, and the congregations gradually grow in size as more women discover the local activities of the female preacher assigned to their district.

The notion of female preachers gathering women in the mosque, however, can also encounter resistance from some *imams*, the women's husbands, and even the women themselves. As Dr. Halide Yenen, the *vaize* in Şişli since 2004, observes:

Male *imams* sometimes do this to the female preachers. They don't want to transfer the duty with the ladies in their mosques to us. It is the *imams* who are already skilled who can gather ladies. Others do not even want to gather the ladies. They do not even announce our activities or open the mosque for us. We really have a problem about this, about the way people look at women among the religious segment of the society.<sup>12</sup>

Domestic expectations of women in Turkish society also tend to hinder women's attendance at these religious sessions, which could be regarded as extraneous leisure activities. Similar to how family responsibilities constrain their engaging in physical fitness activities,<sup>13</sup> Turkish women have to negotiate time for religious learning outside of the home. Thus, Yenen observes:

Sometimes, the men may not allow women. They come despite something, making sacrifices. They have to leave their husbands or kids behind. The men do not have such a problem. Sometimes even the old ladies cannot come because their husbands don't want them to go away [i.e. leave their side]. The men need to become more conscious about the fact that women also need to learn about their religion.

Furthermore, although it is becoming less common, the question of whether women can even attend the mosque remains a residual issue in Turkey, which, Yenen notes, is essentially a problem of misinformation.<sup>14</sup> And as Bayram and Avcı-Erdemli also observe, some Turkish women hesitate to enter mosques while they are menstruating

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dr. Halide Yenen, June 30, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Canan Koca, Karla Henderson, F. Hulya Asci, and Nefise Bulgu, "Constraints to Leisure-Time Physical Activity and Negotiation Strategies in Turkish Women," *Journal of Leisure Research* 41, no. 2 (2009): 225–51.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Dr. Halide Yenen, June 30, 2009.

or if they are not properly dressed in order to listen to the sermons.<sup>15</sup> Yet the female preachers' modes of instruction are not limited to the mosque, and they regularly take advantage of other venues such as the city's cultural centers, conference halls, and Qur'an course centers, where they can reach even wider audiences. "The subject is religion. The location is not important. We can tell it at the cultural center, at the mosque, or at the basement of the mosque," Avcı-Erdemli remarks. "For instance, think about this: the subject is the importance of prayer. The subject does not change where you tell it... If we do it in the mosque, we call it a sermon [*vaaz*]. If we do it in the cultural center, we call it a conference. But the topic is the same."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to embarking upon a profession that has traditionally been the domain of male religious officials in the modern Turkish Republic, state-sponsored female preachers are also entering into the gendered realm of women's religious activities that has been historically dominated by unofficial Islamic groups (*cemaat*) and Sufi orders (*tarikât*). In his *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, Hakan Yavuz discusses how members of the Nakşibendi Sufi order and the Nur movement sought to preserve Islam as "a shared language and practice for a community to have a meaningful life" despite the state's forced imposition of a radical cultural revolution from 1922 to 1950, and how they subsequently developed in the multi-party period, further enriching Turkish society.<sup>17</sup> More recent scholarship elaborates on the intellectual and social activities of several Sufi orders in the early and later republican era.<sup>18</sup> And the work of Catharina Raudvere specifically examines Sufi women's activism in Istanbul in the 1990s, while other

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Fatma Bayram on July 8, 2009, and Dr. Kadriye Avcı-Erdemli on July 9, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Dr. Kadriye Avcı-Erdemli, July 9, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56–58, 133–205.

<sup>18</sup> Recep Şentürk, "Islamic Reformist Discourses and Intellectuals in Turkey: Permanent Religion with Dynamic Law," *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, ed. Shireen Hunter (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2009), 231–32, 242–43; Emin Yaşar Demirci, *Modernisation, Religion and Politics in Turkey: The Case of the İskenderpaşa Community* (Istanbul: İnsan Publications, 2008); Brian Silverstein, "Sufism and Modernity in Turkey: From the Authenticity of Experience to the Practice of Discipline," in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, ed. Martin Van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 39–60; Hülya Küçük, "Sufi Reactions Against the Reforms After Turkey's National Struggle: How a Nightingale Turned into a Crow," in *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Tourak Atabaki (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 123–42.

scholars have examined women's participation in the influential Gülen movement.<sup>19</sup> Given this lengthy history of Sufi and Muslim activist involvement in preserving Islamic faith and practice in Turkey, when the female preachers began their activities in Istanbul, Avcı-Erdemli recalls, people automatically wondered which Sufi order (*tarikât*) or Islamic group (*cemaat*) they came from, not realizing that they were in fact government employees.<sup>20</sup>

The tight networks of women already affiliated with these Islamic groups pose yet another challenge to the activities of state-sponsored female preachers as they attempt to educate the women in their assigned districts. An attitude of exclusive affiliation and social loyalty prevails among many members of Turkish Islamic groups that markedly limits and reduces a female preacher's potential audience. As a result, women already affiliated with Islamic groups are unlikely to attend the sermon of a female preacher employed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. And attendance at mosque sermons in particular neighborhoods where such groups have a strong presence and established following can potentially suffer. As Hafize Çınar, who has been assigned as a female preacher in the conservative district of Fatih since 2006, elaborates:

With regard to the *cemaats* [Islamic groups], perhaps, it would be better if we could improve our relations a bit more, but there is this view in Turkey: if you are in a *cemaat*—I am not saying this for the leaders of *cemaats*—there is this understanding that you cannot come and listen to me if you are following another *cemaat*, as if it is sinful to attend somebody else's lecture or as if the others in the *cemaat* will blame you for this. Breaking this [attitude], it looks like, will take some time. The Directorate of Religious Affairs [*Diyanet*] is a balancing institution in Turkey. Really. While everybody pulls in one direction, the Directorate follows a position that calls for agreement and compromise [*uzlaşmacı bir tutum*]. It, we all try to have an attitude that embraces everybody. This is what I want in my heart: may everybody attend each other's lectures.

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<sup>19</sup> Catharina Raudvere, *The Book and the Roses: Sufi Women, Visibility, and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul* (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2002), and "Knowledge in Trust: Sufi Women in Istanbul," *Social Compass* 50, no. 1 (2003): 23–34; Elisabeth Özdalga, "Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen: Three Women Teachers Tell Their Stories," in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, ed. Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 85–114; Berna Turam, *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 109–33.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dr. Kadriye Avcı-Erdemli, July 9, 2009.

And Yenen expresses her concern over the current situation:

The lacuna that the Directorate left until now is filled by Islamic groups [*cemaats*]. Every house is connected to an Islamic group. There are informal gatherings [*sohbets*] in every house. How qualified are the religious teachers [*hocas*] that attend these informal gatherings? We cannot know. That is why, in a sense, the Directorate entered into this field. But people are already attached to their religious teachers.<sup>21</sup>

The women leading the informal educational and social activities of Islamic groups in Turkey represent an earlier and alternative model of primarily charismatic female religious authority in the country, and one that raises serious concerns in official religious circles about the quality and depth of the Islamic education that women can and do receive through the myriad of widely divergent informal channels available to them.

*Female Religious Authority based on State Certification  
and Education*

By contrast, at the heart of the new model of Turkish female religious authority represented by official female preachers is the extensive education and certification of women through Turkish state institutions, which then entrust these women to edify the Turkish populace at large. In discussing the importance of such government certification, Avcı-Erdemli observes:

Religion is one of the fields that everyone talks about. Everybody has ideas about religion. There were problems about religious education in our society for many years. But authorized institutions of the government now certify you after examining. I am telling [you]. They used to ask me to which Sufi order [*tarikât*] I belonged. One lady would read a bit and start to preach. But having foundational information about religion, internalizing its logic is one thing, [and] learning a few superficial things is something else. Sometimes you receive such questions that you cannot answer without foundational information. They provide what they hear from here and there as the answer. But then you have the wrong information in circulation. This distances people from religion.

The key to the generally warm reception of official female preachers in Turkish society, Avcı-Erdemli finds, is that as graduates of the theology

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Dr. Halide Yenen, on June 30, 2009.

faculties they are “religious scholars [*hocas*] who know the religion and the Qur’ān and who try to teach religion in the right way.” And as Bayram elaborates, employees of the Directorate have undergone “a serious process of elimination” because they have been formally educated as well as professionally examined by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Indeed, the vast majority of female preachers have received their higher education in Turkey’s theological faculties, where they studied general Islamic sciences, foreign languages, and social sciences at the university level<sup>22</sup> (with very few exceptions over the years of women who received other forms of higher education and/or their secondary education in Turkey’s *İmam-Hatip* schools that offer religious subjects in addition to the regular public school curriculum).<sup>23</sup> The most recent search for two hundred additional contractual female preachers in 2008 required that all applicants be graduates of theological faculties and also gave preference to those women who had completed their doctorates or master degrees in the field.<sup>24</sup> In addition, all aspiring female preachers must pass a preaching proficiency examination administered by the Directorate of Religious Affairs as well as a broader civil servant examination (the KPSS or *Kamu Personeli Seçme Sınavı*) on topics such as the Turkish language, mathematics, geography, citizenship, history, and philosophy. Their professional preaching proficiency, however, is evaluated based on their knowledge of such fields as the Arabic language, the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth* literature and methodology, theology, jurisprudence, exegesis, Islamic thought, and Islamic history. Moreover, the applicants must demonstrate an ability to “take a verse or prophetic statement and explain it in accordance with modern [*çağdaş*] life.” As Er explains: “It would be meaningless if they cannot provide such explanations. Their preaching would not reach the point.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Mehmet Pacaci and Yasin Aktay detail the curriculum of Turkey’s theological faculties in their updated article “75 Years of Higher Religious Education in Modern Turkey,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 128–29, 131, 132–34, 137–39.

<sup>23</sup> Based on the annual statistics published by the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Ankara for the years 1990 to 2008.

<sup>24</sup> T. C. Başbakanlık, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Duyuru, Sayı: B.02.1.DİB.0.71.00.01/902.99/6452 06.11.2008, Konu: Sözleşmeli Vaizler, <http://forum.memurlar.net/topic.aspx?id=554779>.

<sup>25</sup> Fieldwork and interviews with Dr. İzzet Er on June 2, 2009 and Hafize Çınar on June 30, 2009.



After their appointments, female preachers also undergo various forms of training through the Directorate of Religious Affairs. In their short-term professional training, the new employees hone their skills in preaching technique. As Çınar recounts:

We were preaching in front of our friends and the teacher was commenting, for example, saying you need these gestures and mimicry here and there. The necessary prayers for preaching, we practiced these. A general overview of exegesis [*tefsir*] and *hadith*: How do you preach using verses from the Qur'an. We had homework for example. They gave us certain verses and we prepared lectures based on them.<sup>26</sup>

Because the Directorate of Religious Affairs wants to deploy these female preachers as soon as possible, however, their training is drastically shorter than the thirty-month specialization training (*ih̄tisas eđitimi*) offered to their male colleagues; the initial batch of contractual female preachers, for instance, underwent a one-week period of practical training (*hizmet ii eđitim*) in Antalya. As Er clarifies,

We did not require this [thirty-month period of training] from women because we would have to wait again if we had such a condition. We need female preachers urgently. There is great demand for this in the society.<sup>27</sup>

Instead, the Directorate of Religious Affairs utilizes an alternative mechanism to compensate for this shorter period of specialization, namely, they prefer to hire female preachers who have already completed advanced degrees at theological faculties and also encourage those who have not done so yet to pursue their master and doctoral degrees while working as preachers. The Directorate also tries to facilitate the graduate studies of such female preachers by offering them time off from their official duties to visit libraries and meet their academic advisers and even by reassigning female preachers to the same administrative region as their university.<sup>28</sup> Job-specific training for female preachers can also entail how to handle natural disasters, such as earthquakes, conducted in conjunction with the Red Crescent, as well as a two-week seventy-hour training course for those preachers who will hold positions in the Directorate's relatively new Family Guidance Bureaux.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Hafize Çınar, June 30, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dr. İzzet Er, June 2, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Fieldwork and interviews with Dr. İzzet Er on June 2, 2009, Dr. Halide Yenen on June 30, 2009, and Hafize Çınar on June 30, 2009.

*The Many Duties of a State-Sponsored Female Preacher*

The duties expected of these female preachers are extensive. They must preach at least three times a week in mosques, community centers, children's reformatories and orphanages, prisons and penitentiaries, almshouses, dormitories, hospitals, and factories, outside of holiday seasons. They may also give lectures on Islam in schools and provide in-service education as needed. During the holy month of Ramazan and on other special religious occasions, though, their preaching responsibilities increase. When Çınar first began preaching in Fatih, for instance, her appointment coincided with the month of *Ramazan*, and she was required to preach daily in the mosque to a congregation of around three hundred to four hundred women. Throughout the year, female preachers are also expected to organize and participate in other meetings, seminars, panels, symposiums, and conferences under the auspices of their central and district *muftiates*. And either once or twice a week, they must also spend the work day responding to people's religious inquiries over the phone and in person at their central and/or district *muftiates*. In Istanbul, female preachers regularly answer around one hundred questions each day during these "fatwa shifts" (*fetva nöbeti*), and during the three sacred months of Rajab, Sha'ban, and *Ramazan*, along with other special days in the Islamic calendar, they may each answer between 150 and 200, or even 250, religious inquiries per day. Additionally, female preachers in Istanbul typically spend one day per week working at their district's Family Guidance Bureau and rotate the responsibility of spending another day per week at the central Istanbul Family Guidance Bureau for six-month terms. There, they answer phone calls and meet people in order to help them understand and deal with the religious aspects of family affairs, such as marriage, divorce, engagement, abortion, child-rearing, one's relations with parents, etc. The female preachers also organize at least one or two events each month at these family bureaus, by either giving a lecture themselves on a pertinent topic or inviting another specialist, such as a physician, lawyer, or psychologist, to discuss a particular issue.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Fieldwork, interviews with Hafize Çınar, Züleyha Şeker, Dr. Kadriye Avcı-Erdemli, Dr. Halide Yenen, Fatma Bayram, Selva Özelbaş, and official job description posted online and translated in Er, "Religious Affairs," 274–75.

Female preachers also regularly join the various examination committees established in their region. Bayram, as a preacher for Üsküdar, for instance, was assigned to the Qur'an Memorization Exam Committee for the Anatolian Side of Istanbul, which examined approximately 470 male and female candidates over the course of eight days from morning to evening in July 2009 to determine if they had satisfactorily memorized the Qur'an in order to merit state certification.<sup>30</sup> More generally, female preachers are also given the responsibility of observing their district's regular and summer Qur'an Courses and are placed in charge of administering final examinations there in order to verify what level the students have attained.<sup>31</sup> In order to improve the services of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, female preachers may also "conduct research on the religious, national, ethical, social, and cultural structure of the area where [they are] employed and provide critical feedback."<sup>32</sup> And lastly, female preachers may also be sent abroad for various periods of time to provide religious guidance and chaplaincy to expatriate Turkish communities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere or to lead and offer these services among Turkish pilgrims traveling to the sacred sites and vicinities of Mecca and Medina. In the course of performing this last duty, another preacher for Üsküdar, Selva Özelbaş, recalls how she would give lectures and sermons to pilgrims at their hotels in Saudi Arabia as well as inside the sanctuaries of the holy mosques.<sup>33</sup>

### *Altering Religious and Secular Assumptions and Behavior*

Through these wide-ranging activities, state-sponsored female preachers are reshaping people's perceptions and understanding of Islam in both self-described 'secularist' and 'devout' circles in Turkey. This potential of female preachers to reach other women, and through them the rest of society, has been an important motivating factor for the Directorate of Religious Affairs. As Er relates:

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<sup>30</sup> There are 91,000 certified memorizers of the Qur'an in Turkey, according to the then Director of Religious Affairs Dr. Ali Bardakoğlu on May 9, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with Selva Özelbaş on May 28, 2009, and Fatma Bayram on July 8, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Er, "Religious Services," 274.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews with Selva Özelbaş on May 28, 2009, and Fatma Bayram on July 8, 2009.

The women have better communicative skills than us, men. They narrate what they hear to their neighbors, kids, relatives, they narrate during their tea gatherings and gold days; they narrate to their friends. Therefore they have a large network, and they are more effective in terms of narrating the tenets of the religion. This was not really noticed until recently. Therefore, we found it very important to inform Muslim women especially with regard to informing the representatives of the future, the children. Thus we started to emphasize guidance [*irşad*] activities addressing women.<sup>34</sup>

And in locating the importance of her work as a female preacher, Şeker concurs that reaching women is essential to transforming society at large:

Women in a sense are the people who give direction to the world. There is a proverb: the hand that directs the world is the hand that rocks the cradle. Who directs the world: the children that we shape. Therefore, it is very important to inform women. Therefore, it is very important to educate women.<sup>35</sup>

Through her work over the past few years in Şişli, Yenen has observed how the women who attend her mosque instruction do indeed convey what they have learned back to their families, to the extent that some of their husbands now want to attend her lessons. Through the influence of their wives, some of the men in her district have started to pray and practice Islam, and others have learned how to recite the Qurʾān.<sup>36</sup>

Serving in the heavily Europeanized and strongly secularized districts of Şişli and Beyoğlu, Yenen and Şeker tend to have smaller audiences than their counterparts working in some of the more conservative districts of Istanbul, yet they still concentrate on teaching and reaching out to their constituents effectively. In comparing notes with other female preachers in Istanbul, Şeker finds that she spends more time emphasizing basic Islamic beliefs and social ethics in Beyoğlu and less on the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>37</sup> In Şişli, Yenen prefers to work closely with the women who attend her activities, noting that “you can reach ten people through one person, but if ten people come and listen to you and do not carry it to anybody, that is

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Dr. İzzet Er, June 2, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Züleyha Şeker, July 2, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Dr. Halide Yenen, June 30, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Fieldwork and interview with Züleyha Şeker, July 2, 2009.

the end of it.” Many of the women who attend her mosque sessions aspire to learn how to read the Qur’ān, so Yenen spends time teaching them the Arabic script and the rules of Qur’ānic recitation, along with having them memorize inspiring and instructional statements of the Prophet Muḥammad and preaching to them based on works of Qur’ānic exegesis and *ḥadīth* commentaries. For Yenen, the positive feedback that she receives, revealing the impact of her preaching, is especially rewarding. As she notes,

When they give you feedback saying that they are putting what they are learning into practice, this is the highest satisfaction for me. Being able to teach people the Qur’ān, being able to make people love God and the Prophet, if I can do this, I feel successful. This is very beautiful.<sup>38</sup>

Bayram, who works in the relatively conservative district of Üsküdar on the Asian side of Istanbul, also finds the positive effect that she has on people’s lives to be particularly satisfying. As she comments:

The thing I like most [about preaching] is receiving auspicious supplications [on my behalf] [*ḥayır dua*]. One thing that I can quote for instance, a lady told me: “I have been following your lectures for—was it—fifteen years. We never have quarrels in our house.” This is very important. She thanks you for this. This is very important, this personal, spiritual satisfaction, receiving supplications [*dua*] from people, helping someone to protect [herself] from an evil or to succeed in something good.

Bayram also sees the beneficial impact of her work as a preacher even among Turks in her district who do not practice Islam. Through the introductions of mutual friends, acquaintances, and others who attend her activities, non-practicing Muslims also come to interact with Bayram, breaking down their deep-seated fears, and some additionally begin to attend her lectures.<sup>39</sup>

The work of female preachers in conservative districts may also be easing another set of prejudices that can exist between some members of unofficial Islamic groups on the one hand and representatives of the Directorate of Religious Affairs as a state institution on the other. The positive interactions between inhabitants of the Istanbul district of Fatih and Çınar, who works there as a female preacher, for example, eventually helped to dissipate the initial challenges that were posed to her authority and position as a preacher affiliated with the Directorate.

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<sup>38</sup> Fieldwork and interview with Dr. Halide Yenen, June 30, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Fatma Bayram, July 8, 2009.

Observing the distinction between serving in Istanbul and her earlier experiences in provincial Kars between March and August of 2006, Çınar remarks:

Istanbul is much different. In Kars, everybody follows you. Here you get opposition. There are many with a claim to right knowledge among our elder women [*teyzes*] here. They first say “I received training from so and so” or “I am a follower of so and so” and then they ask their question here. It is as if they say, “Be careful, answer carefully, or else.” Fatih is different from other regions too. Here, there are many *hacis* and *hocas*. There are many Sufi groups. If I do not serve here, they can easily find another religious study circle to attend. Here, it requires a lot of effort to make people attached to you, to make them attend regularly. But after three years, I can say that I have a loyal group. The inhabitants of Fatih accepted me. We developed friendships, and I hear this from them. I am over that risky period. Now, they accept me.

Through her sermons, Çınar hopes to add something meaningful to people’s lives, to help them fill a missing spot through her words, and to relish that they have come together to remember God and learn from His messenger. She also tries to set a good model for the children who attend her sermons along with their mothers and further narrates,

I try to give them direction; I try to support them to become qualified people, to be successful in their classes, and I do this by bringing religion into the picture: a Muslim does the best in everything, therefore, you should be the most successful in your classes.

For Çınar, this constant process in her profession of “learning more and trying to pass on what you learn to others” is highly rewarding.<sup>40</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Overall, the diverse activities of Turkish state-sponsored female preachers are establishing a new model of religious authority in the country that simultaneously intersects with and diverges from earlier models of male religious officials and charismatic leaders of informal women’s groups. In modeling approachable and interactive means of communication with their female congregations, official female preachers in Istanbul are attempting to alter the popular image of persons of religion as “old authoritative men who put you in your place with

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Hafize Çınar, June 30, 2009.

one stroke" (*kelli felli vurunca oturtturan*).<sup>41</sup> By giving official sermons in mosques, female preachers are also revising Turkish sociocultural conceptions of the mosque's male-gendered spatiality and are engaged in establishing the authority and very existence of contemporary female scholars. In this vein, Şeker recounts how one little girl's impressions were dramatically altered:

Two years ago, the daughter of a friend of mine told me, "I heard that you are a *hoca* at a mosque. How can there be a female *hoca*? It is not possible." I told her to come with her mother and see. Then she made too much noise at the mosque. I told her, "I won't allow you here anymore." She said, "But my father works at the *muftiate*. This is our mosque." I said, "Even your father cannot tell me what to do here. I am in charge in the mosque now." Thus, she understood that I could be a *hoca*.<sup>42</sup>

Realizing the greater authority of the female preacher in the mosque over another male colleague in the Directorate of Religious Affairs was a transformational moment for this young girl, and it is also revealing for the immense discretion given to female preachers in organizing their activities. They are supported and vetted by the state, but the state does not seek to control assiduously the content or format of their instruction. In pondering this model that she and her colleagues are establishing through their preaching and issuing *fetvas*, Bayram contemplates the future and hopes that state-sponsored female preachers will leave a prestigious impression regarding women's religious authority in Turkey for the following generations.<sup>43</sup> Thus far, in contrast to what is characterized by the Directorate as the charismatic sway of unsanctioned religious authority of uneven quality, Turkey's female preachers are promoting an alternative model of the extensively trained, certified, and vetted female scholar combined with the compassionate touch of an interactive and involved chaplain. Within the Directorate of Religious Affairs, these women are gradually changing the institution's internal image and self-perception, as male employees grow increasingly accustomed and even indebted to their female colleagues. And within Turkish society at large, these female preachers are slowly altering the perception of men as the exclusive representatives of official religious authority in Turkey.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Dr. Halide Yenen, June 30, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Züleyha Şeker, July 2, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Fatma Bayram, July 8, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> For analysis of the modern secular state's definition and management of religious domains, see my article "Women Preaching for the Secular State: Official Female

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## CHAPTER 1.4

# FROM QUR'ĀNIC CIRCLES TO THE INTERNET: GENDER SEGREGATION AND THE RISE OF FEMALE PREACHERS IN SAUDI ARABIA

Amélie Le Renard

### *Introduction*

Early in my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, in 2005, I witnessed a scene that demonstrates the significance of gender segregation on women's religious roles. It was Thursday afternoon—the equivalent of Saturday in Europe—and I was attending a lecture in the female-only section of the World Association for Muslim Youth, a religious organization. As the call for sunset prayer began, the female preacher interrupted her lesson. Most of the listeners stood up, put on their *'abāyah* (black overcoats) and headscarves, then went to the carpets and formed lines to pray. As the women knelt in prayer, a beautiful female voice amplified by a microphone rose up from among them. As a foreigner, familiar with other Muslim-majority countries, but still discovering Riyadh, this female voice chanting prayer surprised me. This is not how I had imagined religious spaces in a country where the dominant interpretation of Islam is described as the most strict and austere, and places constraints on all aspects of public life. These constraints impact women particularly, as they face severe restrictions on their public movements. Yet the development of female segregated spaces has created opportunities for female leadership, as women hold significant leadership positions within these spaces. Some prominent and well-known female preachers active in these spaces—who hold lectures, write articles, and organize diverse activities in Islamic associations, Qur'ānic schools, or in their own centers—can be considered religious authorities.

This chapter examines how gender segregation and the exclusion of women from most religious spaces in Saudi Arabia have facilitated—over the last two decades—the rise of female preachers and female-dominated physical and virtual religious spaces. My main argument is that, while these spaces have not necessarily led to contestation of the

dominance of male *'ulamā'* over scholarly authority, they nonetheless create opportunities for relatively autonomous female religious leadership. In other words, the state's policy of gender segregation has been a necessary condition for female initiatives in the religious field, but it has not determined how they emerged, the content of their discourses and activities, and the actors who led them.

In the first section, I explain how women-only religious spaces have developed since the 1990s, and present the prominent female actors, which include both writers and preachers. I show how some of the latter have become well-known 'modern' role models for young women. Their activities in virtual spaces play an important role in their prominence, and must be understood in a continuum with their non-virtual activities. Activities in both types of space reinforce homosocial relations among women. In the last section, I discuss the state's reaction to women's increasingly visible religious initiatives in the context of a reforming Saudi Arabia.

Fieldwork-based research on contemporary Saudi female religious spaces is scarce, though Eleanor Doumato's works provide useful historical information on women's religious practices in the Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> It is important to clarify the conditions under which the material used in this chapter has been collected. I conducted my fieldwork between 2005 and 2009, a period in which international and national pressure led to increased state control of religious activities. Given this context, not all women were willing to work with a foreigner conducting research about women's religious activities, and three major preachers in Riyadh refused to be interviewed. I did my best to overcome these obstacles. In addition to interviewing both prominent and less prominent Islamic writers and preachers, I attended public lectures within women's religious spaces as often as I could, and I interviewed women involved in Islamic universities, associations, foundations, Qur'anic schools, and more informal, home-based religious gatherings. The fieldwork I conducted for my PhD dissertation on young Saudi women's lifestyles provided rich material on how young Saudi women living in Riyadh view preachers and women's religious activities, and enables me to place Saudi female Islamic leadership in wider social contexts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Amélie Le Renard, *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite* (Paris: Dalloz, 2011).

*The Development of Female Religious Spaces: Gender Segregation  
as an Opportunity*

The Saudi state's legitimacy is based on the application of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's doctrine, sometimes called Wahhabism, which argues for the unity of God and opposes other Islamic traditions that venerate saints, such as Sufism. The Committee of Higher 'Ulamā', a state institution,<sup>3</sup> promotes a strict interpretation of Islamic precepts taken from the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* (Islamic tradition). This interpretation places important constraints on women, especially as it considers a woman's whole body to be *'awrah* (intimate, seducing) and therefore requires women to be covered from head to toe and almost completely segregated from men. But the effects of segregation on women's roles, especially in the religious field, are much more complex than mere marginalization within the public sphere. Since the beginning of the 1990s, numerous religious spaces have been opened *for* women, often *by* women.

In Najd, the central region of Arabia and cradle of Wahhabi doctrine, women have long been excluded from mosques, as a consequence of custom and the recommendation of Wahhabi *'ulamā'* that female believers pray at home to avoid mixing with men.<sup>4</sup> However, Qur'ānic circles for girls (*ḥalaqāt taḥfīz al-Qur'ān*) in private homes existed long before the 1960s development of public schools.<sup>5</sup> In these informal groups, girls could learn the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* under the supervision of a female instructor called a *muṭāwī'ah* (a volunteer).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Nabil Mouline, *Les clercs de l'islam: autorité religieuse et pouvoir politique en Arabie Saoudite, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011); Frank E. Vogel, *Islamic Law and Legal System: Studies of Saudi Arabia* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Doumato, *Getting God's Ear*.

<sup>5</sup> Fawziyah Bakr al-Bakr, "Al-ḥayāt al-ta'limiyah li-l-mar'ah fi-l-jazīrat al-'arabiyah mā qabl al-ta'līm al-nizāmī (1319-1380h)" [The historical change of Saudi women's education in a hundred years (1319-1419h)], in *Masīrat al-mar'at al-su'ūdīyah wa-l-tanmiyah fī mā'at 'ām* [Saudi women's path and development in the last hundred years], ed. Research Center in Humanities and Social Science (Riyadh: King Saud University, 2002), 9-63.

<sup>6</sup> The contemporary meaning of this term in Saudi Arabia is a very pious woman calling the others to the strictest application of Islamic principles. In its masculine form, the word also means a member of the religious police, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Repression of Vice (*hay'at al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-naḥī 'an al-munkar*).

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, the Islamic awakening movement (*ṣaḥwah*) combined the official Saudi interpretation of Islamic principles with the more activist line promoted by Egyptian and Syrian immigrants who were close to the Muslim Brotherhood. This trend of thought spread within public institutions (especially education) and led to the stricter implementation of gender segregation. In this period, the rise of oil income made possible the opening of parallel institutions for women, physically separated from men's institutions. All Islamic universities opened female sections in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, an increasing number of Saudi women obtained degrees in religious sciences and entered this field as professors or teachers in female universities and schools.

Interviews with women who worked as teachers in schools or attended the university in the 1980s indicate that most female religious activity in the 1980s took place in schools and on university campuses,<sup>7</sup> though this has yet to be fully investigated by historians. Outside of classes, those involved in the Islamic awakening movement held religious lectures and spread audio tapes containing the discourses of male religious authorities.<sup>8</sup>

In this period, however, some female intellectuals belonging to this trend of thought became well-known for their writings, especially Nūrah al-Sa'd, Fāṭmah Naṣīf, and Suhaylah Zayn al-'Abidīn. Among them, only Naṣīf is now considered as a preacher, but it is difficult to know if she was seen this way in the 1980s when she worked as a professor in the university. Al-Sa'd and Zayn al-'Abidīn are still primarily seen as writers or essayists (*kātibah*), rather than preachers. The breadth of their impact in the 1980s is difficult to assess, as their discourse was spread primarily through newspapers and books, which many Saudi women could not then read. Al-Sa'd and Zayn al-'Abidīn's main role was to intervene in the public debate from a religious point of view.

Zayn al-'Abidīn was well known as a regular contributor to *al-Madīnah*, a daily newspaper known for its orientation close to the

<sup>7</sup> Interviews conducted by the author between 2005 and 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Some Saudi Shī'ah women participated in the political activities that followed the Iranian Revolution, in 1979–80. See for instance the diary of activist 'Aliyah Makkī, *Yawmiyyāt imr'ah fī-l sujūn al-su'ūdiyyah* [Diary of a woman in the Saudi jails] (Damas: Dār al-Safā', 1989).

Islamic awakening,<sup>9</sup> in which she was almost the only woman to sign articles. Al-Sa'd, whose writings conform—then and now—to the male religious establishment's interpretation of Islam with respect to women's issues, is respected by women involved in religious activities.<sup>10</sup> While Zayn al-'Abidīn also conformed to this interpretation in the 1980s and 1990s, her positions have completely changed recently, as she has been reinterpreting religious texts in favor of women's rights.<sup>11</sup> This makes her more controversial in religious environments, as I discuss further below.

To sum up, in the 1980s, the newly emerging alternative religious authorities in Saudi Arabia—such as dissident 'ulamā', activist intellectuals writing in Islamic newspapers, and preachers speaking in mosques, Islamic foundations, and on audio tapes—were almost exclusively male. Some became at least as popular as the official 'ulamā'.<sup>12</sup> Saudi women were less involved in these developments because religious sciences programs in women's universities had just begun and the spaces where women could gather for meetings or lectures were limited to female sections of universities and private homes.

It was in the 1990s that separate spaces dedicated to religious activities for women—either independent institutions or female sections within male religious institutions—spread. Female demand for religious education may have driven the opening of these spaces. In an interview, Salmān al-'Awdah indicated that in 1980s Burayda,<sup>13</sup> female students in religious sciences asked to attend his mosque lessons. The mosque included a segregated space with a separate entrance door, but some of the men who attended the lectures were reluctant to allow

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<sup>9</sup> Some of Suhaylah Zayn al-'Abidīn's articles published in the 1980s are translated in Saddeka Arebi's book about Saudi female writers: see Saddeka Arebi, *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 222–45.

<sup>10</sup> This statement is based on my inquiries among young women involved in Islamic institutions, who knew Nūrah al-Sa'd's work well and quoted it as a reference.

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see Amélie Le Renard, "'Droits de la femme' et développement personnel: les appropriations du religieux par les femmes en Arabie Saoudite," *Critique Internationale*, no. 46 (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Zaman, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Islam*.

<sup>13</sup> Al-'Awdah is a major figure of the 1990s opposition belonging to the Islamic awakening movement. In the 2000s, after his release from jail, he abandoned his confrontational stances and became one of the most important Saudi unofficial religious authorities. Burayda is the capital of Qasim region, in the North of Najd (the region where Riyadh is located). Salmān al-'Awdah originates from there. Interview by the author with Salmān al-'Awdah, Riyadh, April 2007.

women to attend and resisted their inclusion by keeping the door to the women's separate space closed. This attempt to make mosque lectures accessible to both genders seems unusual, but this occurrence hints at the potential for female initiative to have played a major role in the opening of new spaces for female religious education.

The emergence of female sections of religious foundations has required at least implicit financial and regulatory support of male institutional religious authorities, but women, some with Islamic sciences degrees, played an important role in the development of these women-only institutions or sections. In the beginning of the 1990s, women's sections of the World Association for Muslim Youth (WAMY, *al-Nadwat al-'ālamīyah li-l-shabāb al-islāmī*) were created, first in Jeddah, then in Riyadh. Women's sections of other organizations such as the Mecca Foundation (*Mu'assasat Makkah al-Mukarramah*) or the Foundation for Construction and Development (*Mu'assasah li-l-i'mār wa al-tanmiyah*) were created in the subsequent decade. While these female sections are not independent from the larger male-dominated organizations, their daily activities are quite autonomous because of gender segregation. Women do not lead prayer and their prayer space is called a prayer room rather than a mosque. However, women do chant the prayers and—though they may not be considered '*ulamā*'—serve as instructors and preachers.

An increasing number of Qur'ānic centers (*dūr taḥfīz al-Qur'ān*), where girls and women memorize Qur'ān and *Sunnah*, also provide important women-only religious spaces.<sup>14</sup> The principle is similar to longstanding private Qur'ānic circles (*ḥalaqāt taḥfīz al-Qur'ān*), but classes take place in a girls' school after hours or in a building dedicated to this activity. Qur'ānic centers also organize lectures and activities on religious issues as well as non-religious topics such as make-up, sewing, and English.

Women have played a major role in the development of Qur'ānic centers for girls.<sup>15</sup> In order to open a Qur'ānic center for girls and women, a woman applies for permission from the Ministry of Islamic

<sup>14</sup> Interview by the author with Ghādah, April 2007. In 2004, according to the Saudi Press Agency, there were 76,787 students and 7,437 professors in the 677 female Qur'ānic centers the Kingdom counts, while two million girls go to school. This means that among the girls who go to school, about 4% also go to Qur'ānic centers. See <http://www.saudinf.com/main/y7491.htm> (accessed May 18, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Interview by the author with Salmān al-'Awdah, Riyadh, April 2007.



Affairs, a procedure that my informants indicate is simple. Qur'ānic centers are financed by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Islamic charities for the Memorization of the Holy Qur'ān (*jama'iyāt khayriyah li-tahfīz al-Qur'ān al-karīm*) that exist in most neighborhoods, or a private donor such as al-Rajhi Bank, an Islamic bank which finances a lot of Qur'ānic centers.

Magazines targeting women have further expanded the space available for female discourse on religion. These magazines include *Family Magazine* (*Majallat al-usrah*), launched in 1992, *The Exceptional Woman* (*al-Mutamayyizah*) and *Life* (*Ḥayāt*), both launched after 2000. The latter is aimed at young women.

Finally, modern technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones, which are widespread in Saudi Arabia,<sup>16</sup> have played a central role in the development of female religious activities. Given obstacles to women's physical mobility, specifically the ban on women driving, the absence of public transportation and familial responsibilities and other constraints,<sup>17</sup> the Internet is recognized as the easiest way to reach women,<sup>18</sup> as well as a space where women's initiatives meet fewer obstacles.<sup>19</sup> Information about the lectures held by female preachers is spread through websites and text messages on mobile phones. For example, a website called 'the caravan of female preachers' (*qāfilat al-dā'iyāt*) centralizes all information on female preachers' events.<sup>20</sup> These technologies are also used to circulate lists of information on

<sup>16</sup> The Internet was opened to public access in 1999. In November 2005, there were 2.54 million Saudi users. See Albrecht Hofheinz, "Arab Internet Use: Popular Trends and Public Impact," in *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*, ed. Naomi Sakr (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 56–79. According to the High Commission for the Development of Riyadh, 64% of Saudi households had Internet access in 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Responsibilities include caring for children and constraints include protecting one's reputation.

<sup>18</sup> Preacher Ruqayyah al-Mahārib argued this in an interview published online. See "Al-muḥādarāt 'abrā al-nat tuzīl kathīran min al-'awā'iḳ wa tusā'id al-mar'ah 'alā-l-wuṣūl ilā al-saff al-nisā'i dūna kabīr 'inā'" [Lectures on the Internet suppress many obstacles and help each woman to reach the female rank without great efforts]. She was referring to lectures that took place in Tabuk (in the Western part of Arabia). See <http://aldoah.com/upload/archive/index.php/t-7089.html> (accessed July 10, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> It could be compared to other contexts. See Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone, ed., *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005); Deborah Wheeler, *The Internet in the Middle East: Global Expectations and Local Imaginations in Kuwait* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.gafelh.com/new/index.php>.

religious matters. Most importantly, Islamic knowledge is transmitted through websites, especially through articles and contributions by female preachers.

Due to these developments, women's roles in the religious field have increased over the past twenty years. Women are professors of the Islamic sciences in universities, teachers in Qur'anic centers, writers publishing in print or electronically, and volunteers in religious associations and foundations. For some, these pursuits are a profession; for others, they are a personal calling taken on in addition to their family responsibilities. Preachers are present in all of these spaces, and play a major role in lectures held in the female sections of religious associations and foundations, Qur'anic centers, and female university campuses.<sup>21</sup> In the next section, I demonstrate that some of these female preachers have become prominent religious authorities.

*Hierarchies and the Emergence of Prominent Female Preachers:  
Education, Activism, and Charisma*

In the Saudi context, women and men obtain religious authority in different ways. Hierarchies among male figures prominent in the religious field are to a large extent institutionalized because the religious institutions in which they are active, such as the Committee of Higher 'Ulamā' or the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, are run by the state. Even though religious leaders from outside the 'ulamā' have increased in importance in the last two decades, men appointed to official positions dominate religious affairs in Saudi Arabia. Because a woman cannot become an 'ālim, she cannot gain public recognition by obtaining a high institutional position. There are no formal conditions to become a female preacher; any Muslim woman who promotes the strict application of Islamic principles around her could say that she is a preacher.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, even the most famous female preachers are never considered 'ulamā' or muftīs.

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, Ruqayyah al-Mahārib and Asmā' al-Ruwayshid often hold lectures on women's university campuses.

<sup>22</sup> A minimal definition of a preacher, based on how the word is used in Saudi Arabia, would be someone who preaches to persons they do not know. Advising relatives is not sufficient. A preacher gives advice to other Muslim believers so that their lives conform to (their interpretation of) Islamic principles. They may also try to convert non-Muslims. Some Saudis, male and female, preach to foreign, non-Muslim resi-

In the period of my fieldwork, the most famous preachers in Riyadh were Ruqayyah al-Maḥārib and Asmā' al-Ruwayshid. Al-Maḥārib argues that a male or female preacher's legitimacy should be based on his or her 'ability' (*mu'hil*), though she does not specify exactly what she means by this word.<sup>23</sup> Her statement demonstrates the importance of preachers in contemporary Saudi Arabia. If preachers had no authority, lack of oversight over preaching would not be perceived as a problem. The authority and influence that some have, however, means that this lack of control is seen as dangerous. At the same time, defining the 'ability' needed in order to be allowed to preach is difficult, especially because preaching is currently seen as the duty of every Muslim. These dynamics lead us to ask about the hierarchies and reputations on which female preaching is based, how female preachers become well known, and whether knowledge, charisma, network, or familial origin are crucial to being seen as a legitimate authority.

Family background does not seem to play a major role in establishing oneself as a female preacher in Saudi Arabia, in contrast to cases elsewhere in the region.<sup>24</sup> Some prominent female preachers do come from families known for their religious background, such as Naṣīf, yet this does not seem common. For instance, al-Ruwayshid comes instead from a rich family involved in business. Familial involvement in religious activities does not seem to be a condition for the rise of female preachers.

Knowledge, however, is crucial to amassing religious authority. Most well-known preachers hold one or more university degrees, as do Islamic intellectuals and writers. Holding a BA is to some extent a prerequisite, and a PhD is highly valued. A woman who has a PhD will be called a doctor (*duktūrah*) rather than any other title, especially as women cannot be called *shaykh* or other similar religious titles in Saudi Arabia. Among the writers, al-Sa'd received her masters degree from Minnesota University and her PhD from the Islamic University of the Imām Muḥammad ibn Su'ūd, in Riyadh. When I met her in Jeddah, she explained that she was the first scholar to examine the works

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dents, often at specific centers dedicated to this task. Because mobility is very difficult for Saudi women, some also try to preach on the Internet via forums or websites.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://aldoah.com/upload/archive/index.php/t-7089.html> (accessed July 10, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> For instance, in the case described here: Hilary Kalmbach, "Social and Religious Change in Damascus: One Case of Female Islamic Authority," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008), 37–57.

of an Islamic intellectual (Algerian Malek Bennabi) from a sociological point of view.<sup>25</sup> Then, she worked as a professor of sociology in King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz University in Jeddah. Zayn al-‘Abidīn holds a master’s degree in Islamic history from the Egyptian Islamic university al-Azhar.

Similarly, many well-known preachers have spent years studying for university degrees, though not necessarily in Islamic subjects. For instance, al-Maḥārib holds a PhD in *ḥadīth* (*Sunnah*). Moreover, she is said to follow the teachings of Ibn Bāz, Saudi Arabia’s former mufti, and is recognized among women for her religious knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Al-Ruwayshid holds a degree in religious sciences from King Saud University; but none of my informants who worked with her and followed her activities were able to tell me more about her education. Others have followed a non-religious program in the university and simultaneously completed religious education in Qur’ānic centers.

Preachers differ from intellectuals and writers due to their involvement in female religious institutions, which also plays a major role in their recognition as religious authorities. Both al-Maḥārib and al-Ruwayshid launched their own female religious centers and websites, whose daily activities are relatively autonomous from male religious authorities, even though challenging male authority is not their aim. These centers and websites contributed significantly to both preachers’ renown among Saudi women.

The female sections of Islamic foundations and Qur’ānic centers play a significant role in both the education of future generations of female religious leaders and the establishment of networks in which women can construct female religious authority. Most prominent preachers have been active in the female sections of Islamic foundations or Qur’ānic centers since a young age, first as students and volunteers. Working as a volunteer by teaching and running events is highly valued within female religious spaces. During a lecture about “the culture of volunteer work and Saudi women’s role,” Al-Ruwayshid said that women

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<sup>25</sup> Interview by the author with Nūrah al-Sa’d, Jeddah, April 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Interview by the author with Ghādah, April 2007.

have to participate in the development of volunteer work in charities; in the acceleration of social progress and development in a female environment; in solving the specific problems from which women suffer.<sup>27</sup>

Some of these volunteers are able to build upon these experiences to gradually raise their profiles as preachers and activists promoting what they see as the correct application of Islam. For instance, a young preacher working in the female section of an Islamic website, who I will call “Ghādah,” holds a BA in English, yet is recognized as a preacher because she has memorized the whole Qur’ān and an important part of the *Sunnah*, and participated in the creation of new religious institutions for women in her home town.<sup>28</sup>

The networks that al-Maḥārib and al-Ruwayshid have built in the physical spaces available for female religious activities are further reinforced by their websites. These websites, named, respectively, *Lahā Online* (For Her Online) and *Asyeh* (created in 2005 and named after one of the first Muslim women; it exists alongside a physical center of the same name),<sup>29</sup> represent a further attempt to reach out to Saudi women. As will be discussed in the next section, these websites increase the prominence of al-Maḥārib and al-Ruwayshid in diverse ways.<sup>30</sup>

Charisma and eloquence also play a major role in a female preacher’s renown, as I witnessed firsthand at crowded lectures led by al-Maḥārib and al-Ruwayshid. At a January 2009 lecture during a charitable event benefiting Gaza victims run by the female section of WAMY in Riyadh, al-Maḥārib communicated with the audience using an individual and personal style of speech. Throughout the event, she demonstrated a perfect knowledge of the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*, chanted each verse she referred to, and did not look at her notes at all. Her lecture sounded like a *khuṭbah*—the sermon pronounced by an *imām* on Fridays. She also showed her emotions. In the beginning, she smiled, which created

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<sup>27</sup> I attended the lecture in March 2007, in Riyadh. The text has been transcribed in Asmā’ al-Ruwayshid, *Thaqāfat al-‘amal al-taṭawwu’i wa dūr al-mar’at al-su’ūdiyyah* [The culture of volunteer work and Saudi women’s role] (Riyadh: Asyeh Center, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Interview by the author with Ghādah, April 2007.

<sup>29</sup> www.lahaonline.com and www.asyeh.com.

<sup>30</sup> On the rise of intermediate enunciators of Islamic discourses on the Internet, see Jon Anderson, “The Internet and new Islam’s interpreters,” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale Eickelman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 45–60.

a welcoming climate, but the more she spoke about Gaza, the more upset she appeared. In the end, she cried. Male *‘ulamā*’ preaching in Saudi mosques can also express emotion in this manner.<sup>31</sup> During her lecture, al-Maḥārib gave the impression that her knowledge of Qur’ān and *Sunnah* was exhaustive, and that she was deeply touched by what she was telling to the audience.

Therefore, knowledge, activism, and charisma play a major role in building the reputation and authority of a female preacher. The expansion of female religious spaces—physical and virtual—is a *necessary* prerequisite for the construction of networks in which women can demonstrate these qualities. By contributing to the development of these spaces, female preachers have expanded the potential for women to occupy positions of religious leadership among women.

*“Modern” Role Models? The Continuum Between Virtual  
and Non-virtual Spaces*

The reputation and allure of the most prominent female preachers extend beyond the walls of the physical spaces used for women’s religious activities. Two interviewees, who are not involved in women’s religious institutions, told me they liked al-Maḥārib and al-Ruwayshid’s “style” because they found them “relaxed” and not “trying to scare their listeners.”<sup>32</sup> They compared them favorably to teachers of religion in public schools. Well-known preachers’ discourse is not necessarily more progressive than the religious methods taught at school—for instance, they both emphasize women’s roles as mothers and wives—but the subjects they speak about may seem more attractive to their listeners. They deal either with current events (Israeli policies toward Palestinian territories), or, more often, with the daily problems that (ostensibly) concern every Saudi woman, such as becoming more self confident, pursuing their goals, and getting along with their families. As these themes show, it is highly fashionable among preachers—male

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, I saw such behavior during prayers from Mecca’s mosque screened on television during Ramaḍān.

<sup>32</sup> Informal conversation of the author with two female students in their twenties, Riyadh, January 2009.

and female—to borrow concepts from American discourse of self-improvement and simplified psychology.<sup>33</sup>

Other interviewees commented on a particular preacher's elegance, pleasant way of interacting with others, or on her willpower. Rīm, a young interviewee involved in diverse religious activities, described the choices made by a female preacher she particularly admired in glowing terms.<sup>34</sup> According to her, this well-known preacher had “decided not to marry” in order to “devote herself to her cause” and “to be able to work from sunrise to sunset.” Rīm perceived the preacher as both an exception and a role model because she was totally devoted to her religious activities. These mundane remarks about preachers show that preachers have become not only transmitters of religious knowledge but also widely recognized public personalities among women.

This public recognition makes female preaching not only a vocation, but also a prestigious career for a Saudi woman, a status that may be a factor encouraging women to enter this profession. Ghādah, who was thirty years old when interviewed, describes the beginning of her own career as such:

When I was a child, I used to read a lot, and I wondered how I could become a remarkable person [*kif atamayyiz*]. I followed courses and I got committed to preaching activities. I delivered lectures.... My first lectures were in 1416 [1995], in the high school's prayer room, in the Qur'ānic center, and in family meetings. Then, I began supervising events and meetings with other preachers.... My aim in life is to be an active person [*insānah fā'ilah*], to call to the Good, for people to remember me after my death.<sup>35</sup>

This public recognition of female preachers is further reinforced by the organization of outreach events that enable a young audience (some announcements specify fifteen to twenty-five years old) to meet

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<sup>33</sup> I have elaborated on this point in Le Renard, “Droits de la femme.” The best-sellers by Saudi preacher Aaid al-Qarni describe this phenomenon: see Aaid al-Qarni, *The Happiest Woman in the World* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), and *Don't Be Sad* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005). Both were first published in Arabic, in 2004 and 2002 respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with the author, Riyadh, April 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Interview by the author with Ghādah, April 2007.

eminent female religious figures, who explain how to become a well-known preacher and an “accomplished woman.”<sup>36</sup>

Another quality of preachers highlighted by pious young women is their “modernity,” a factor that I see as directly linked to their activism on the Internet. In other words, being active in cyberspace not only spreads female preachers’ ideas and general awareness of their activities, but also makes their discourse more attractive to young women for two main reasons. First, the websites run by preachers differ markedly from other religious education materials in appearance and content. The graphic design of the websites is sophisticated and meant to be feminine. Its colors (pink, red, etc.) contrast sharply with the textbooks studied in school compulsory religious education classes.<sup>37</sup> Islamic websites also include sections on modern technologies, beauty and health that are not covered by these classes.

Second, these websites specifically reach out to Saudi women, especially young ones, and therefore further expand spaces where religious discourses by women, for women are enunciated. All of the content—including articles written by female and male preachers as well as reproductions of pieces by female intellectuals such as al-Sa’d—is aimed at Saudi women. The online presentation of *Lahā*, al-Maḥārib’s website, insists that the articles are intended for “any Arab woman [...including] young teenage women [*al-fatāt al-murāhiqah*], married or single women, and women working outside their home.”<sup>38</sup> Subjects range from Ramaḍān rituals to debates on which professions are “respectable” for Saudi women, the role of women in preaching, or relationships with parents and relatives.<sup>39</sup>

There is a continuity between this discourse by women, for women, on the Internet, and articles and books written by female preachers, which mostly deal with subjects that claim to be specific to women.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> In Riyadh during the period of my fieldwork (2005–9), the Foundation for Construction and Development, previously mentioned, and a particularly dynamic Qur’ānic center called Dār al-sumū regularly organized this type of event.

<sup>37</sup> School programs in Saudi Arabia include a lot of religious matters, such as ‘the Prophet’s life,’ ‘doctrine,’ ‘Islamic culture,’ etc. In the university, every student has to follow courses on ‘Islamic culture,’ ‘the political organization in Islam,’ ‘Islamic economy,’ and ‘Islamic society.’

<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.lahaonline.com/index-aboutus.php> (accessed August 19, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> The opinion articles are located in the section “Lahā’s writers” (*kuttāb lahā*).

<sup>40</sup> For instance, Asmā’ al-Ruwayshid has multiple titles, including *mas’ūliyat al-mar’ah fī-l-dā’wah ilā-llāh* (Women’s responsibility in the preaching for God), *kayf turabbī al-mar’ah dhātahā* (How a woman can educate her essence), and *qaḍyā wa*



In general, these discourses—virtual and written—do not contest the authority of male *'ulamā'*. They do often denounce some gender inequalities as “traditions” that violate Islamic principles; for instance, considering women as inferior to men and contracting marriage without the bride’s agreement.<sup>41</sup> It is important to note, however, that the preachers’ condemnation of these practices scarcely go beyond what official male *'ulamā'* have already said.

Women’s religious websites reinforce homosocial relationships among female believers. In contrast to public spaces, discourses on women are central, rather than peripheral, on these websites. They therefore have the potential to make female readers feel less peripheral within the community of believers. Instead of being marginalized by discourses that for the most part proceed as if all Muslims were men, they are encouraged to think of themselves as a sub-community with specific and legitimate needs and concerns. They have even been used as platforms to fight against women-specific problems. For instance, the Asyeh center has launched a campaign on the Internet and an anonymous hotline, whose number is spread through the Internet, to combat harassment.<sup>42</sup>

The communal aspect of these websites is reinforced by forums where women can discuss different subjects, ranging from religious themes to private life. Particularly important is online advice on religious or personal matters. Female preachers and specialists in psychology or social service work with the website’s administrators to answer users’ questions about personal, familial, and religious problems. Through these dialogues, private matters are made more public, and women who do not know each other discuss personal problems. These exchanges, which are sometimes published on the website, strengthen homosocial links among women. Even when the relationship between the one who asks and the one who answers—who might be a female

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*umūr muhimmah li-l-mar'at al-muslimah* (Important problems and concerns for the Muslim woman). Her curriculum vitae is online <http://www.islamlight.net/asmaa/index2.php?option=content&task=view&id=10114&pop=1&page=0> (accessed 10 July 2009).

<sup>41</sup> See for instance the text by Ruqayyah al-Maḥārib on <http://www.saa'id.net/female/m23.htm> (accessed May 12, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Harassment here refers to a man threatening a woman that he will tell everyone that he had a relationship with her if she does not agree to do whatever he wants. When I conducted fieldwork in this center in December 2008, advisors in social service were already speaking about harassment cases and how they were trying to denounce the perpetrators. The hotline opened in February.

religious authority—is hierarchical rather than equal, these exchanges are characterized by interaction, dialog, and understanding. In different circumstances, al-Maḥārib and the female instructor in Islamic doctrine Fawz Kurdī—who lives and teaches in Jeddah—presented themselves as guides for young women.<sup>43</sup> This supposes a relationship that is both affective and hierarchical. It is important to note the continuum between these online exchanges and events in physical spaces. For instance, there are weekly group meetings with al-Ruwayshid for divorced women in the Asyeh center. Female experts in social services, psychology, and law also attend the meetings. Women can also ask for advice online, by phone, and in person by appointment at the center.

The Internet, therefore, has enabled the creation of new spaces that reinforce female preachers' popularity among young women and contribute to the emergence of new styles of religious authority. Well-known preachers are perceived as modern, pious women able to make the most of technologies, to be devoted to their personal (as opposed to familial) concerns, and to deal with contemporary questions.

The space created by these websites should be thought of as continuous with physical religious spaces for women. Preachers use it to announce their lectures, spread their message, and strengthen their relationships with ordinary believers, especially young women. It enhances the visibility of their activities in physical religious spaces. Furthermore, women interested in religious activities use it to follow debates and stay informed regarding lectures in religious associations and foundations, even when they are not able to participate in activities organized in physical spaces, perhaps due to familial responsibilities or lack of transportation.

*The Quest for Recognition: Female Preachers' Authority  
in the Context of Reforms*

It is important to assess the impact of women's preaching on wider Saudi social and religious contexts, and in particular the extent to which their activities challenge men's hegemony over religious discourse. Saudi female preachers are not considered religious authorities generally, but are instead authorities in a parallel female world. Their

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<sup>43</sup> Interview by the author with Fawz Kurdī, April 2006; for al-Maḥārib see: <http://aldoah.com/upload/archive/index.php/t-7089.html> (accessed July 10, 2009).

recognition by men is limited and they are—by and large—not able to access positions that would institutionalize their religious authority, such as joining the *'ulamā'*. The female religious sphere forged by these women seems to be more autonomous than in less-segregated countries in the region, but its wider impact is limited due to its marginal position. This situation may partly explain the differing political stances of male and female preachers.

Saudi men are generally not aware of female preachers, either as institutional religious authorities or challengers to these authorities. This is unsurprising given that female leadership is virtually invisible due to the constraints placed on women by official Saudi interpretations of Islam. Men are not permitted access to female preachers' image or voice, so women—unlike men—cannot record their lectures on audio or videotapes, or have their own satellite TV programs. This limits their potential audience. Furthermore, much of their (more accessible) material on the Internet is specifically aimed at women and therefore may not be attractive to men. When Saudi men want religious points of view on women's roles and activities, it seems likely that they would turn instead to the work of male *'ulamā'* on these subjects instead of texts written by women.

A handful of male religious authorities—official and opposition—do recognize that female preachers significantly contribute to the spread of the Islamic principles in what is called in Saudi Arabia the “female society” (*al-mujtama' al-nisā'i*). For this reason, they integrate female preachers into different kinds of events as key personalities in the women's religious sphere. For example, when al-ʿAwdah opened a female section of his website, *Islam Today*, he invited Naṣīf to deliver the first speech of the women-only inauguration party.<sup>44</sup> Al-Maḥārib and al-Ruwayshid have participated in different sessions of National Dialogue, a governmental initiative launched in 2005 to discuss questions considered crucial in the aftermath of 9/11 and the wave of domestic bombings that began in 2003.<sup>45</sup> Al-Maḥārib's website, *Lahā Online*, is financed by the Islamic Endowment Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-waqf*

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<sup>44</sup> Al-ʿAwdah told me about this party, which took place in Riyadh, in March 2007, when I interviewed him in April 2007.

<sup>45</sup> For more details on the National Dialog see Amélie Le Renard, “Only for Women: Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 4 (2008), 610–29.

*al-islāmī*), and is supervised by official ‘*ulamā*’,<sup>46</sup> which gives her significant institutional recognition. In fact, in comparison her name is almost absent from *Lahā Online*—present only as signatures at the end of articles—though Saudi women do, in my experience, invariably refer to the site as “Ruqayyah al-Maḥārib’s website.”

Interestingly, female preachers generally do not challenge male political or religious authorities, even on topics addressed by oppositional male Islamist activists in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, such as the incomplete application of Islamic precepts by the government or the lack of rights for Saudi citizens. Addressing these topics is clearly not the objective of female preachers. The contrasting political climates during the emergence of the male and female movements, and the female preachers’ quest for recognition from state institutional religious authorities could help understand this lack of involvement in broader debates. The women’s Islamic awakening spread in the 1990s, a decade after the emergence of the male Islamic awakening movement, in the tense aftermath of the early 1990s government crackdown on the religious opposition’s activities.<sup>47</sup> In general, female preachers only intervene in public debates involving women’s roles and activities, which contributes to their marginality.

The emergence of female religious spaces has required at least implicit financial and regulatory support of institutional religious authorities, and many female preachers want to increase official recognition of their activities. Several women are trying to establish formal cooperation with state institutions, especially the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, where only men are employed until now, as this would give them additional recognition and access to new financial resources.<sup>48</sup> Others are trying to widen their audience beyond Saudi women. Ghādah mentioned that she would like to write a book in order to reach men, aimed at them “as husbands, as sons, and as preachers.”<sup>49</sup> Other preachers want

<sup>46</sup> See <http://www.lahaonline.com/index-aboutus.php> (accessed August 19, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> After the second Gulf war, male opponents belonging to the Islamic awakening trend of thought criticized the regime on religious grounds, especially through the Memorandum of Advice, in May 1991; many involved in this movement were put in prison. See Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> The center owned by al-Ruwayshid, named Asyeh, was applying for such official recognition when I visited it in December 2008.

<sup>49</sup> This is what she told me during the interview. Her expression is interesting, as this kind of enumeration is usually used for women “as mothers, as wives, as daughters,” as if they had no identity outside of their familial status.

to reach the worldwide audiences accessible to men, especially through the translation of their websites into English.<sup>50</sup>

Recent Ministry of Islamic Affairs initiatives have led to the recognition and integration of female preaching in the institutional framework of male religious activities, initiatives that need to be seen in the previously discussed context of increasing state control over religion and promotion of 'moderation,' 'reform,' and 'open-mindedness.' Women have been allowed to preach in some mosques, which are closed to men at these times,<sup>51</sup> an occurrence which has been presented as new.<sup>52</sup> The state is also considering creating a specific diploma whose holders would be classed as 'titular' female preachers and therefore eligible for one of the female preacher positions that may be added to the civil service.<sup>53</sup> Since 2004, a "female preachers' forum" (*muntadā al-dā'iyyāt*) has taken place twice a year in Jeddah. A short book published by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2006 for female preachers explains how to preach 'moderation' in order to avoid both 'Westernization' and 'religious extremism.'<sup>54</sup> With state recognition, however, comes increased control on the activities of female preachers, and the potential for future limitations of their autonomy.

It is noteworthy that one of the writers, Zayn al-'Abidīn, has been the only voice asking for the creation of an institution of female '*ulamā*'. According to her, such an institution, distinct from the Committee of Higher '*Ulamā*', would be responsible for issuing statements on questions related to women. Zayn al-'Abidīn's positions since 2003 are generally closer to the official discourse of moderation and tolerance than other female authorities. She has become a member of the new, government-supported National Association for Human Rights. She

<sup>50</sup> This was also the project of Asyeh center, according to the female employees that I interviewed when I visited the center in December 2008.

<sup>51</sup> The Ministry of Islamic Affairs made this decision: see *al-Arabiya*, April 19, 2006, <http://www.alarabiya.net/Article.aspx?P=23003> (accessed August 19, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Some interviewees involved in religious activities said that there was nothing new about women's lectures in mosques, and that lectures by women and for women had taken place in mosques for a very long time, especially during Ramaḍān. The problem is that there is no way to check such an assertion.

<sup>53</sup> Najah Alosaimi, "Guiding all to the Straight and Narrow," *Arab News*, 24 August 2008, [www.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=113279](http://www.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=113279) (accessed August 24, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Sāliḥ ibn Sāliḥ ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh, *Al-mar'at al-dā'iyyah wa tanwī' uslūb al-khiṭāb al-shar'ī* [The female preacher and the diversity of religious discourses] (Riyadh: Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Preaching and Guidance, King Fahd National Library, 2006).

is also the only female religious figure willing to participate in debates on Saudi satellite channels and has appeared without her face cover for several years. Though she uses her strong religious background to support her claims, these distinguishing factors mean that most female preachers and women involved in the Islamic field do not support her public statements. Religious websites aimed at women do not publish her most recent articles and, in general, their editorial line is much less confrontational than her position.

The contrast between Zayn al-'Abidin and female preachers suggests that preachers who have successfully established themselves as authorities in female religious discourse do not attempt to challenge hierarchies between men and women in the religious field, at least explicitly. Their search for institutional recognition by male religious authorities seems to be a strong incentive to avoid taking up, or being associated with, confrontational political or religious positions. Therefore, they do not question men's exclusive access to high positions in institutional religious hierarchies.

### *Conclusion*

Given its strict interpretation of Islamic precepts and the widespread use of modern technologies, Saudi Arabia is an interesting case to compare with other instances of emerging female religious spaces and leaders. State policies on gender segregation and education have created the conditions—but not direct incentives—for the development of parallel religious spaces for women. State-enforced gender segregation has led to the exclusion of women from many religious spaces. The opening of female campuses of Islamic universities as part of the expansion of higher education for women has increased the number of women educated in Islamic sciences within the Saudi population. Given these conditions, a number of women—most notably preachers, but also writers—have seized the initiative to broaden women's religious activities by creating new physical and virtual spaces for female religious discourse. It is also important to underline that male acceptance has been crucial. Female religious leaders need authorization from male relatives, from state religious institutions, or from foundations run by men for their activities. Because of this institutional constraint and—even more importantly—because of the doctrine they defend, it is unlikely that any of the prominent Saudi female preachers

would adopt confrontational positions such as questioning the exclusive access of men to institutional religious authority.

Despite this non-confrontational position, the development of Islamic physical and virtual spaces for women and the emergence of female preachers as leaders within these spaces represent a significant change in the Saudi religious field and in gender roles, for a variety of reasons. First, in contrast to countries with less gender segregation, it is probable that women would simply be excluded from public religious activities if women-only spaces did not exist. Second, though female preachers' discourse is not revolutionary—it emphasizes women's roles as mothers and wives—preachers have become female public personalities and role models. Their lifestyles are characterized by activism in physical and virtual religious spaces, autonomous initiative-taking and professionalism. Third, women and their concerns are central—not peripheral—in female preachers' discourses and initiatives. Women's private matters are dealt with in public spaces, such as websites, and recognized as legitimate objects of concern and discussion. Female religious authorities, especially preachers, are seen as accessible guides from whom young women can take advice. This raises the possibility that female preachers might innovate further in the forms of religious authority they develop and in the relationships they cultivate with female believers.

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CHAPTER 1.5

THE LIFE OF TWO *MUJTAHIDAHS*: FEMALE RELIGIOUS  
AUTHORITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRAN

Mirjam Künkler  
Roja Fazaeli

A nascent stream of scholarship has brought to light the quite significant involvement of women in the transmission of *ḥadīth*, especially between the tenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Berkey, Muhammad Akram Nadwi, Richard Bulliet, and Asma Sayeed have documented why the field of *ḥadīth* transmission was particularly amenable to women, compared to theology and law.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the role of women in the generation rather than transmission of Islamic knowledge is as yet little documented. Although there are numerous references to individual examples of female scholars, and at times even jurists, their lives and work have hardly been the subject of scholarly inquiry. In the case of modern Iran, we know of more than one hundred women, mostly daughters and wives of influential scholars, who made a name for themselves in fields of Islamic learning, among them dozens who attained the *mujtahid* rank. Yet their presence in the

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of the literature and introduction to some biographical collections, see Mirjam Künkler, “Of *‘Alimahs*, *Wa’izahs*, and *Mujtahidahs*: Forgotten Histories and New State Initiatives,” manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Berkey, “Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikkie Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 144; Muhammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford/London: Interface Publications, 2007); Richard W. Bulliet, “Women and the Urban Religious Elite in the Pre-Mongol Period,” in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. Guity Neshat and Lois Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 68–79; Asma Sayeed, “Muslim Women’s Religious Education in Early and Classical Islam,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 3 (2011): 94–103.

contemporary literature is limited to brief references to their names and origins. Analyses of their works and contributions to Islamic knowledge, as well as the limits thereof, are still wanting.

The present chapter introduces two Iranian female *mujtahidahs*, Nuṣrat Amīn (1886–1983) and Zuhrah Ṣifātī (1948–), who represent like few of their contemporaries the status of female religious authority in twentieth-century Iran, divided by the important cesura of the 1979 revolution. Nuṣrat Amīn is one of the most influential Shī'ah female religious authorities of modern times, who in her own right granted men *ijāzahs* of *ijtihād* and *riwāyat*.<sup>3</sup> Zuhrah Ṣifātī is the most prominent female religious authority of the Islamic Republic and was a long-time member of the Women's Socio-Cultural Council (*shūrā-yi farhangī i'jtimā-i zanān*), where she headed the committee on jurisprudence and law. Both women's work was strongly influenced by the socio-political environment in and against which they defined themselves. Nuṣrat Amīn experienced Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906 in her early twenties, Zuhrah Ṣifātī the Islamic Revolution in her late twenties. While Amīn underwent her formative period as an Islamic scholar at a time when *madrāsahs* were slowly replaced by secular public schools and religious courts by the apparatus of a modern state judiciary, Ṣifātī experienced the reversal of some of these reforms when the 1979 Islamic Revolution sought to Islamicize the entire legal system and expand the status of religious learning.

A comparison of the two women's lives and works reveals the extent to which political circumstances have shaped the opportunities for women to aspire to and acquire religious authority. The theoretical framework this volume adopts between female initiative, male invitation, and state intervention, helps our understanding of the career paths these female scholars chose. In the case of both women, their own initiative was key to propelling them to seek out knowledge and produce scholarship. Male agency played a role in so far as it was Amīn's father who supported her intellectual interests and financed

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<sup>3</sup> *Ijāzah-i ijtihād* is the permission to engage in *ijtihād*, usually appended to a book or other writing, certifying that the one who is granted the permission has studied the materials to the teacher's satisfaction and is fit to interpret the sources. *Ijāzah-i riwāyat* is given to capable scholars who are deemed apt at transmitting *aḥādīth* (sayings of the prophet) and, in the Shī'ah world, the *akhbār* (interpretations of the Shī'ah *imāms*), so as to ensure a reliable chain of transmission. For a detailed discussion of the concept of *ijāzah*, see for example George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 140–48.

her studies even after she was married. For Şifātī, it was male invitation that allowed her to be considered a candidate for the Women's Socio-Cultural Council to which she was eventually appointed. Even though membership in this council does not enhance her access to and engagement with scholarship, it does endow her with a degree of institutional authority that surely helps the dissemination of her works, as well as influencing the media's disposition to interview her on matters of public interest. The state, by contrast, despite its strong regulation of religion and of education both before and after the 1979 revolution, played a surprisingly small role in the scholarly achievements of the two women. It was not state schools or state-funded higher education that furthered these women's scholarly pursuits. When Nuşrat Amīn opened a girls' *maktab* in the 1960s, this was diametrically opposed to the educational policies of the Shah's White Revolution. If anything, she defined herself against the contemporary education project of the state. When the Islamic Republic opened the first women's *hawzah* (Jāmi'at al-Zahrā') in the mid-1980s, Zuhrah Şifātī initially joined it as an instructor at the highest level of instruction (*dars-i khārij*), but left the *hawzah* (Shī'ah seminary) later when she felt a state-initiated curriculum reform had transformed the institution from one of scholarship to one concerned with little more than preparing women for tablīgh (propagation). Today, she still offers private lessons. State intervention, then, in the era of both Muhammad Reza Shah and the Islamic Republic, obstructed rather than facilitated women's theological training and did not offer opportunities for women to specialize in the generation and transmission of religious knowledge. It can be said that both women owe their achievement primarily to their own initiative, not male invitation and not state intervention, although male invitation was often a facilitator.

#### *A Note on Sources*

An examination of female religious scholars in Iran and their status in the field of religious learning entails certain challenges. The scholars' main writings are available in less than five North American and European libraries, and secondary sources are extremely rare. Only a few biographies (*zindagīnāmih*) of Amīn and Şifātī exist in Persian.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The three main biographies of Nuşrat Amīn are Nāşir Bāqirī Bīd'hindī, *Bānū-yi nimūnah: gilwahāyī az hayāt-i bānū-yi mujtahidah Amīn Isfahānī* (Daftar-i Tablighat-i Islāmī-yi Hawzah-i 'ilmīyah-i, Markaz-i Intishārāt, Qom 1382 [2003]); Marjān 'Amū

The present research relies on primary documents, such as the *tafsīr* Amin authored and other writings of the two women, published interviews with the two, as well as scholarly commentaries on Amin's and Şifāti's works, and discussions of the two *mujtahidahs* in Iranian women's magazines and other media. This material has appeared in Persian, French, Spanish, Italian, English, and German. Not a single doctoral dissertation or scholarly monograph seems to have been written on the writings of these women, or for that matter on other female religious scholars in twentieth-century Iran.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, Şifāti has given a number of interviews to the Iranian press and international media that indicate some of her political and theological positions. Amin's life has been the subject of three biographies as well as several short biographical entries.<sup>6</sup> Several of Amin's writings (such as her *tafsīr Makhzan al-'Irfān* and her later mystical works) and two

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Khalilī, *Kawkab-i durri: [sharḥ-i ahvāl-i bānū-yi mujtahidah Amin]* (Tehran: Payām-e 'Adalat, 1379 [2000]); and Nahid Tayyibī, *Zindagāni-yi Bānū-yi Irāni: Bānū-yi Mujtahidah Nuşrat al-Sādāt Amin* (Qom: Sabighun Publishers, 1380 [2001]). Tayyibī's text seems at times to glorify Amin, perhaps because Tayyibī wrote under the supervision of Zinat al-Sādāt Humayunī (b. 1917), Amin's most prominent female student, who later administered the school Amin established in the mid-1960s in Isfahan. The relationship of the other two biographers to their subject is not known. There is a *yādnāmih* that Tayyibī cites, but rather than an autobiographical memoir, it is a booklet published in preparation for the two conferences held in honor of Amin in 1992 and 1993. (On the conferences, see n. 12.) The booklet includes reprints of several 'aṣr-i ḥāzīr ijāzahs that Amin received and issued. See *Yādnāmih-i bānū-yi mujtahidah Nuşrat al-Sādāt Amin: mashhūr bih Bānū-yi Irāni* (Isfahan: Vizārat-i Farhang va Irshād-i Islāmī; Markaz-i Mutālā'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Farhangi, 1371 [1992]). The one biography of Şifāti that we are aware of was only recently published: Faribā Anisī, *Bānū Şifāti Zan-i az Tabar-i Khurshid* (Markaz-i Umūr-i Zanān va Khānivādah, Nahād Riāsat-i Jumhūrī, 1388 [2009]).

<sup>5</sup> Two MA dissertations we are aware of are Shaīsta Nadrī, *Taḥqīq dar Zindagī-yi Bānū Mujtahidah Amin va Barresi Tafsīr Makhzan al-'Irfān* [A research on the life of Lady Mujtahidah Amin and a study of Tafsīr Makhzan al-'Irfān] (Azad University of Tehran, 1998), written under the supervision of Mansūr Pahlavan; and Rāziyah Manīa, *Ravish-i Shināsī Tafsīr-i Makhzan al-'Irfān Bānū-yi Mutjahidah Amin* [The methodology of the Tafsīr Makhzan al-'Irfān by Lady Mutjahidah Amin] (Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, no date). We have not had access to the two theses.

<sup>6</sup> The short biographical entries can be found in Haji Mulla 'Alī Wa'iz-i Hiyabani Tabrizī, *Tarikh-i 'ulamā'-i mu'ashirin* (Tabriz, 1366 [1947] (also 2003)), 311–25; Pūrān Farrukh'zād, *Dānishnāmah-i zanān-i farhangsāz-i Irān va jahān: zan az katībah tā tārikh* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zaryāb, 1378 [1999]); Fakhri Qavīmī, *Kārnāmah-i zanān-i mashhūr-i Irān dar 'ilm, ādāb, siyāsāt, mazhab, hunar, ta'līm va tarbiyah az qabl az islām tā 'aṣr-i ḥāzīr*. (Tehran, Vizārat-i Amūzish va Parvarish, 1352 [1973]); Muḥammad Ḥasan Rajabī, *Mashāhīr-i Zanān-i Irāni va Pārsī'gūyi: az Aghāz tā Mashrūtah* (Tehran: Surūsh 1995); Zabih Allah Mahallati, *Riyāhīn al-sharī'ah dar tarjamah-i dānishmandān-i bānūvān-i Shi'ah* (Tehran: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmīyah, 1364

of Şifātī's books are available in a few university libraries in Europe and North America.<sup>7</sup> Amīn's earlier more sophisticated legal works, by contrast, seem to be available only at Princeton, Harvard, and SOAS. Secondary literature in languages other than Persian mentions both scholars only in passing and hardly ever dedicates more than one or two sentences to their works and socio-political impact.<sup>8</sup> Despite the outstanding position she acquired as the leading *mujtahidah* of twentieth-century Iran, Amīn's work is not widely known and referenced.<sup>9</sup> The few engagements with her scholarly work that do exist in Persian are more of political than scholarly nature.<sup>10</sup>

The present article offers only brief overviews of the two scholars' biographical data, some theological positions they have held, and how they have shaped their environment by virtue of these as well as their public role. Much work is needed to place the scholars' lives and works in their historical context and to illuminate how their works interact with the discourses and socio-political circumstances of their time, to what extent they reflect or challenge predominant religious

[1985]); and Aḥmad Bihishtī, *Zanān-e nāmdar dar Qur'ān, Ḥadīth va Tārīkh*, vol. 1, (Tehran: Sazman-i Tablighat-i Islāmī 1989), 122–26.

<sup>7</sup> Zuhrah Şifātī, *Ziyārat dar partaw-i vilāyat: sharhī bar ziyārat-i 'Āshūrā* (Qom: Mujtama' i 'Ulūm-i Dīnī-yi Hazrat-i Valī-yi 'Asr, 1376 [1997]) and *Pizhūhishī fiqhī pīrāmūn-i sinn-i taklīf* (Tehran: Nashr-i Muṭahhar, 1376 [1997 or 1998]). She also published *Naw Avara-hā-yi fiqhī dar aḥkām-i bānuvān*.

<sup>8</sup> The only exceptions with regard to Nuşrat Amīn here are Roswitha Badry, "Zum Profil weiblicher 'Ulama' in Iran: Neue Rollenmodelle für 'islamische Feministinnen'?" *Die Welt des Islams* 40, no. 1. (March 2000): 7–40 (Şifātī finds no mention in Badry's article) and the excellent article manuscript by Maryam Rutner, *The Changing Authority of a Female Religious Scholar in Iran: Nusrat Amīn*, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Her work is catalogued in western libraries under a myriad of different names and references which can make searching for her works an ordeal. As noted below, she is sometimes referred to as simply "Banoo/Banu Amin," "Lady Amin," "Banoo/Banu (Amin) Isfahani/Esfahani," "Banoo/Banu Irani," or "Nosrat/Nusrat Khanom/Khanum."

<sup>10</sup> Characteristically, the book that seems to be very closely associated with her 'work' is an abbreviated translation she published of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Miskawayh's (d. 1030) *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* [The refinement of character] towards the end of her life. Even the volume that brings together the contributions to two conferences that were held in Amīn's honor in Tehran in 1992 and 1993 is substantively very thin. Few speakers seem to have read any of her works carefully. Interestingly enough, 'Alī Lārijānī, parliamentary speaker since 2008, belongs to those who seem to have concerned themselves more deeply with her work. In particular, he discusses the very last book she published, written in Arabic, *al-Nafaḥāt al-Raḥmānīyah fi al-Vāridāt al-Qalbiyah*. See *Majmū'ah-i maqālāt va sukhānrānīhā-yi avvalīn va duvumīn Kungrīh-i Buzurgdāsh-t-i Bānū-yi Mujtahidah Sayyidah Nuşrat Amīn (rah)* (Qom: Markaz-i Mutālā'āt va Tahqīqāt-i Farhangī, Daftār-i Mutalāat-i Farhangī-i Bānūn, 1374 [1995]).

interpretations, and how far the scholars intellectually venture onto new ground. It is our hope that the introduction provided in this chapter will incite such future work, in particular in the disciplines of history and Islamic studies, and illuminate through informed scholarship—rather than the deferential ways found in many short biographical references to the two *mujtahidahs*' piety and modesty etc.—how they initiated and shaped developments in female religious authority of 20th century Iran.

*Nuṣrat Amīn (1886–1983):  
From the Maktab-Khānah to Maktab-i Fāṭimah*

Nuṣrat Amīn, also known as Hajiyyah Khānum Nuṣrat Amīn Bigum, was born in Isfahan in 1886.<sup>11</sup> Apart from distinguishing herself in the fields of *hadīth* and *fiqh*, she was also a revered mystic and ethicist.<sup>12</sup>

Amīn's religious education began in a local Isfahani *maktab-khānah* (Qur'ān school) where she studied the Qur'ān and Persian literature. Amīn married at the age of fifteen and continued her studies in the Islamic sciences, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), Arabic, *hikmat* (metaphysics), and *falsafah* (philosophy).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Most library catalogues indicate her birth year as 1890 or 1891, although her biographies put it at 1886.

<sup>12</sup> Her most detailed biographies are noted above in n. 4. Magazine articles that shed light on the portrayal of Nuṣrat Amīn in the Islamic Republic include "Pan-jumin Namāyishgāh-i Qur'ān-e Karīm: Jilvī'i Arzishmand az Huzūr-i Bānuvān-i Qadīm-i Qur'ān" [The fifth exhibition of the great Qur'ān: A valuable display of the presence of female servants of the Qur'ān], *Zan-i Ruz*, no. 1641 (January 25, 1998): 8–11; and "Bānū Amīn: Bāyad az Qishr-i Khānum-ha, 'Ālim va Mujtahid Tarbiyat Shavad" [Bānū Amīn: 'ālims and mujtahids should be educated by women], *Zan-i Ruz*, no. 1372 (August 15, 1992): 6–11; as well as the conference publication (see Muavānat-i Farhangī, *Majmūah-i maqālāt*). The conference publication includes papers by Muḥammad Khatamī (then Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance and later President of Iran), 'Alī Ardishir Lārījānī (later parliamentary speaker), Zuhrah Šifātī and others. Obviously, governmental sources need to be treated with care, as some contort Nuṣrat Amīn's biography to depict her as a role model in the current political environment. Indications of this can be found in the numerous official and unofficial websites on the scholar. At the fifth Qur'ān exhibition in Tehran in 1998, an entire room was dedicated to Amīn's writings and Qur'ān commentary. Of note also is the TV series planned in 2004 (but to date not realized) on the "sole woman jurist." The serial had been approved in 2000 under the Khatamī presidency, and would consist of thirteen episodes of thirty minutes' duration each.

<sup>13</sup> Rasūl Tudih Zarih, "Bānū Amīn: Her Life, On the Occasion of the Anniversary of the Death of Mujtahidah Lady Amīn Known as Bānū-i Irānī," *Pāyghāh-i iṭṭilā' rasānī-i Hawzah-i 'ilmīyah-i Khaharān*, 1999, <http://www.hawzah.net/hawzah/Magazines/>

Her main teacher at that time was Ayatullah Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Najafābādī (1869–1943), who, it is said, taught Amīn private classes in her own house.<sup>14</sup> Even after her marriage, it was her father, an Isfahani merchant, rather than her husband who financed her religious education.

Nuṣrat Amīn’s first work, *Al-Arba‘īn al-Hāshimīyyah*, a commentary written in Arabic on forty *hadīth*, was published in the late 1930s and received much acclaim, particularly in Najaf.<sup>15</sup> Shortly thereafter, some of the leading contemporary ‘*ulamā*’ began to post questions to Nuṣrat Amīn in order to probe her knowledge in the various fields of religious learning and her familiarity with the sources. These questions and her responses were later published in the book *Jāmi‘ al-shatāt*. Her teachers and interlocutors included Ayatullah Muḥammad Kazim Yazdī (1832–1919), Ayatullah Ibrahim Ḥusaynī Shirāzī Istahbanatī (1880–1959), Ayatullah Muḥammad Riza Najafī Isfahanī (1846–1943), Ayatullah Abdulkarīm Qumī, Ayatullah Muḥammad Kazim Shirāzī (1873–1948), and Grand Ayatullah Abdulkarīm Ha‘irī Yazdī (1859–1937), the founder of the Qom seminaries (*ḥawzah-i ‘ilmīyah-i Qom*). After mastering the various inquiries, she obtained

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MagArt.aspx?MagazineNumberID=4015&id=22611, accessed 8 August 2008. Nuṣrat Amīn’s husband was her cousin Haj Mirza (also known as Muin al-Tujjār). Her father is known by the name of Haj Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Alī Amin al-Tujjār. His sister Hāshimīyah al-Tujjār is said to have been a *mujtahidah* herself who received *ijtihād* degrees in *fiqh* and *uṣūl*. Further, Nuṣrat Amīn seems to have had a niece, Iffat al-Zaman Amīn (d. 1967 or 1977), also known as Iftikhar al-Tujjār, who received an *ijāzah* of *riwāyat* in Najaf by Ayatullah Sayyid Mahmūd Hashimī Shahrūdī. Nuṣrat Amīn was the wife of the brother of Iffat al-Zaman’s father, Sayyid Ahmad Amīn.

<sup>14</sup> “Bānū-yi ‘Ilm va Taghva” [The lady of knowledge and piety], *Payām-e Zan*, no. 5 (Mordad 1371 [July–August 1992]), p. 34. Also online at <http://www.ḥawzah.net/Ḥawzah/Magazines/MagArt.aspx?id=33228>. See also Sayyid Murtaḥa Abtahī, “Bi Munasibat-i Salgardi dar Guzasht-i Bānū Mujtahidah Amīn” [On the occasion of annual commemoration of Mutjahid Bānū Amīn], *I’timād-i Millī* newspaper, no. 926, (Khurdād 27, 1388 [June 17, 2009]): 10. Abtahī writes that Amīn began her seminary studies (*taḥsil-i ḥawzahvi*) with Shaykh Abulghasim Zufri‘ī (1844–1933), Ḥusayn Nizam al-Din Kuchi, Sayyid Abulghasim Dihkordī (1856–1935), Mirza Aqā Shirāzī (1877–1956), and Shaykh al-Shariya Isfahanī. This is partially mirrored by Rajabī who states that she reached the *muqaddimah* (introductory) level with Abulghasim Zufri‘ī. See Rajabī, *Mashāhīr-i zanān-i Irānī*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> The following website credits Nuṣrat Amīn’s aunt Hāshimīyah al-Tujjār with a work of the same title. We wonder whether it is possible that Hāshimīyah al-Tujjār began the work which her niece later completed. See <http://pr.alzahra.ac.ir/artist-women/333-1389-07-04-11-38-23>, accessed March 30, 2011.

endorsements by an array of senior scholars and became widely recognized as an authoritative *mujtahidah* among Shī'ī 'ulamā'.<sup>16</sup>

By the 1930s, Ayatullahs Muḥammad Kazim Ḥusayni Shīrāzī (1873–1947) and Grand Ayatullah Abdulkarim Ha'irī Yazdī had both granted her *ijāzahs* of *ijtihād* and *riwāyat*.<sup>17</sup> Allamah Muḥammad Taqī Jafaar'ī (1924/5–1998) would go so far as to rank Nuṣrat Amīn among the very few exceptional Shī'ah scholars:

Having read the written works of this lady, I can say without any doubt that she should be named as one of the greatest Shī'ah scholars. Her scientific/scholarly methods are not only fully comparable to the works of other prominent scholars but given her attainment of highest levels of spiritual authority, she should be counted as one of the outstanding scholars.<sup>18</sup>

Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Ḥusayn Burujirdī (1875–1961) is said to have held her in highest regard and considered her on a par with the leading Shī'ah scholars of her time. Allāmah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981) and Ayatullah Murtaḏa Muṭahharī (1920–79) are recounted as some of her revered visitors, and the contemporary Ayatullah Yūsuf Ṣānī'ī (b. 1937) would go so far as to rank Amīn as one of the most accomplished Shī'ah scholars of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Such endorsements would usually take the form of an authorization to represent the interpretations of an established religious authority (the author of the *ijāzah*). For example, Ayatullah Muḥammad Riza Najafi-Iṣfahānī stated "I permit to this learned and noble Sayyidah, follower of the Holy Lady Fatimah al-Zahra (S.A.) to narrate from my side whatever I accept from the books of *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, and *ad'iyah* [prayers]." Quoted in Hamid Abdus, "Bānū Amīn, Ālgū-i Zan Musalmān" [Lady Amīn, the model of a Muslim woman] (Markaz-i Asnad-i Inghilāb-e Islāmī [The Islamic Revolution documentation center] Khurdād 23, 1386 [June 13, 2007]), <http://www.irdc.ir/article.asp?id=1044>.

<sup>17</sup> Other 'ulamā' from whom she obtained both *ijāzahs* of *ijtihād* and *riwāyat* include Ibrahim Ḥusayni Shīrāzī Estahbanatī (d. 1958), Ayatullah Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alī Najafābādī (1877–1939), and Ayatullah Murtaḏa Mazahirī Najafi-Iṣfahānī. In addition, she received an *ijāzah-i riwāyat* from Ayatullah Muḥammad Riza Najafi-Iṣfahānī (Masjid Shahī). Several *ijāzahs* are printed in the biographies by Tayyibī and Baqīrī Bidhindī as well as in the *yādnāmih*, including those by Ayatullah Muḥammad Riza Najafi-Iṣfahānī (1846–1943), Ayatullah Kazim Shīrāzī, Ayatullah Istahbanatī, and Ayatullah Murtiza Mazahirī Najafi-Iṣfahānī.

<sup>18</sup> Muḥammad Taghī Jalilī, "Bānū Amīn," article from the series *Shakhṣiyatihā-yi Ḥawzahvi* [Personalities of the seminaries] (Markaz-i Mudiriāt-i Ḥawzahā-i 'ilmīyah-i Khaharān [Center for the management of women's seminaries], 1999), <http://www.kowsarnoor.net/index.php?action=article&cat=113&id=646&artlang=fa>.

<sup>19</sup> See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 159–160.



Amīn herself granted *ijāzahs* of *ijtihād* and *riwāyat* to her contemporaries,<sup>20</sup> including *ijāzahs* of *riwāyat* to Ayatullah Sayyid Shāhab al-Din Mar'ashī-Najafī (d. 1990), and to Zina al-Sādāt Humayunī (b. 1917), her most prominent female student who translated her first Arabic work (*al-Arbaʿīn al-Hashimīyyah*) into Persian.<sup>21</sup>

In 1965, Amīn opened an all-girls Islamic high school (Dabīrīstān-i Dukhtarānih-i Amīn) in Isfahan as well as an introductory Islamic studies seminary exclusively for women, called Maktab-i Fāṭimah.<sup>22</sup> This was the first such institution on Iranian soil, and as such perhaps in the Shīʿah world.<sup>23</sup> In the *maktab*, which counted around 600 attendees in its hey day, students were trained in Persian, Arabic, *fiqh*, *hikmat*, *ʿirfān*, *tafsīr*, *uṣūl*, *falsafah*, *manṭiq*, and English. Students attended classes for three hours in the afternoon and could reach the end of the *muqaddimah* (introductory) cycle of a *ḥawzah*

<sup>20</sup> That women used to grant *ijāzahs*, and used to do so for both men and women, was also common in medieval Islam. Goldziher writes for instance of “the learned Zaynab bint al-Shaʿri (d. 617) [thirteenth century] of Nisabur... whose *ijaza* in turn was sought after by men like Ibn Khallikan.” And “in Egypt learned women gave *ijazat* to people listening to their lectures right up to the Ottoman conquest. Amongst the learned members of the Zuhayra family there is a woman Umm al-Khayr whose *ijaza* is asked for in 938 by a visitor to Mecca.” Ignaz Goldziher, “Women in Ḥadīth Literature,” in *Muslim Studies*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Aldine Publications Co., 1966). See also the overview in Künkler, “Of ‘Alimahs, Waʿizahs, and Mujtahidahs.”

<sup>21</sup> See Muhsin Saīdzadīh (written under the name of his wife Mina Yadigar Azadī), “Ijtihād va Marjaʿiyyat-i Zanān” [Ijtihād and marjaʿiyyat of women], *Zanan Magazine* 8 (1992): 24. See also Ḥasan Najafī, “Kitāb Shināsi Bānū Amīn,” *ʿItimād-i Milli*, no. 946:10; and Sayyid Murtaẓa Abtahī, *Bi Munasibat-i Salgardī*. Fischer claims (perhaps based on Rajabī) that Nuṣrat Amīn was granted an *ijāzah* by Ayatullah Mar'ashī-Najafī rather than the other way around. However, all her biographies and other sources insist that Amīn granted an *ijāzah-yi riwāyat* to Mar'ashī-Najafī. See Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 250. As students who received their *ijāzahs* from Amīn, Ruter also lists Hujjatulislam Zuhayr al-Husūn, Sayyid ʿAbbas Ḥusayni Kashanī, Sayyid Muḥammad ʿAlī Ghazī Ṭabāṭa bāʿī, Sayyid Muḥammad ʿAlī Ruzatī, Shaykh ʿAbdul Ḥusayn Aminī, Shaykh ʿAbdullah Sabiyatī, and Sayyid Muslih al-Din Mahdavi. Ruter, *The Changing Authority*.

<sup>22</sup> Hamid Abdus, *Bānū Amīn*, and Muḥammad Taghī Jalilī, *Bānū Amīn*. Sources suggest that she also founded a mosque, the Fāṭimah Khānum Mosque, which is now used for prayers and religious instruction. It is located not far from her tomb at the Takht-i Fūlād.

<sup>23</sup> We know of women’s sections in the *ḥawzah* at least since the early nineteenth century, such as the prestigious women’s section of the Salihīyah seminary in Qazvin, and later the women’s section of grand Ayatullah Sharīʿat-Madārī’s *ḥawzah* Dar al-Tablīgh in Qom. See Künkler, “Of ‘Alimahs, Waʿizahs, and Mujtahidahs.”

education.<sup>24</sup> This presented a unique opportunity for women—who otherwise hardly had access to the *hawzah* education—and as such probably laid a ground stone for the women’s *maktabs* that were set up a decade later in Qom and then in other cities of Iran, and subsequently around the Shī‘ah world.<sup>25</sup> From the beginning, until 1992, Maktab-i Fātīmah was directed by Amīn’s most prominent student, Zinat al-Sādāt Humayunī.<sup>26</sup> Some of Amīn’s students later became teachers in the *maktab*, while others opened their own schools.<sup>27</sup>

Both the high school and the *maktab* carried particular importance as they were set up at a time when the Shah had established in 1963 the so-called Literacy Corps (Sipah-i Dānish), and in 1970 the Religious Corps (Sipah-i Dīn) whose long-term goal was not only to extend literacy across the country, but also to replace *madrasahs* and theological seminaries as important centers of learning by state-run secular high

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<sup>24</sup> The *hawzah* is a complex of religious seminaries. A typical *hawzah* education comprises three levels of about four years’ duration each. The first is the level of *muqaddimah* (introduction), broadly equivalent to secular secondary school. Here students learn grammar, syntax, rhetoric, and logic. The second cycle, *suṭūh* (surfaces of the texts), comprises an intermediate phase and an upper phase. Students learn the deductive methodology of jurisprudence and the principles of juridical understanding, *uṣūl al-fiqh*. The second level is broadly equivalent to undergraduate university studies. *Dars-i khārij* is the third cycle (‘graduate’ or ‘outside study’), comparable to doctoral studies. Students are trained through chiefly discursive means and debate. At the end of this cycle, students should obtain from one or several scholars the certification (*ijāzah*) that they are able to engage in *ijtihād*. Yet many students graduate as *muḥaṣṣil* (literally student/learner, someone trained in reproducing existing arguments) rather than *mujtahid* (someone trained to engage in *ijtihād*, and generate novel theoretical arguments). For an overview of a classical *hawzah* education, see Fischer, *Iran*, 63, 247–48; also Roy P. Mottahedeh, “Traditional Shī‘ite Education in Qom,” in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Routledge, 1998), 451–57.

<sup>25</sup> See Roja Fazaeli and Mirjam Künkler, “New Opportunities for Old Role Models? Training Female ‘ulamā’ in Jāmi‘at al-Zahrā’,” paper presented at the workshop Clerical Authority in Shī‘ite Islam: Knowledge and Authority in the Ḥawza, held at the University of Exeter, December 9, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Beside translating one of Amīn’s works, Humayunī is also the author of *Shakhṣiyat-i Zan* [The personality features of woman] (Tehran, 1369 [1990]), *Zan mazhar-i khallaqiyat-i Allah* (Tehran, Daftar-i Intishārāt-i Islāmī, 1377 [1998]), and further a translation of the book *Asrār al-āyāt* by Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Tehran, 1984). When Humayunī retired in 1992, Hajj Aqa Ḥasan Imāmi, a relative of Humayunī’s, took over the directorship. See Tayyibī, *Zindagāni*, 124; ‘Amu Khalilī, *Kawkab-i durri*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> For instance in Najafabad and Qom. See Tayyibī, *Zindagāni*, 130f. Tayyibī notes that Amīn’s student Zahra Mazahirī taught religious studies to girls in Qom, “where [later] Maktab-i Tawhīd was founded,” the predecessor of Jāmi‘at al-Zahrā’. For details, see Fazaeli and Künkler, *New Opportunities*.

schools and Islamic Studies programs in the universities.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it was nearly impossible for women to gain access to sophisticated training in Islamic sciences in the *hawzah*. The fact that Amīn decided to establish the *maktab* and the all-girls high school at this time indicated her political independence, as well as her determination to ensure continuation of the tradition of female religious scholarship in Iran threatened by a secularizing state.<sup>29</sup>

Amīn's scholarly career was accompanied by personal hardship. During her lifetime, she lost seven of her eight children, mainly due to illness, and outlived her husband by nearly thirty years.<sup>30</sup> Nuṣrat Amīn died four years after the 1979 revolution at the age of ninety-seven and her grave at the ancient cemetery of Isfahan, Takht-i Fulād, continues to be a site of pilgrimage.

### *Nuṣrat Amīn's Writings*

Nuṣrat Amīn distinguished herself by numerous works in theology, mysticism, ethics, and poetry, and proved by example that women can advance their education and levels of theological qualifications to reach a level of theological (if not sociological or institutional) authority equal to men. We understand 'sociological authority' here in the sense of social perceptions towards a female religious leader. Even if Amīn may have compelled due to her theological expertise, sociologically the influence of that expertise was circumscribed by her identity as a woman. Male believers would be unlikely to consult her on questions of religious ritual, for instance. By 'institutional authority' we refer to authority due to the networks and discourses one is part of.

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<sup>28</sup> George W. Baswell, "Civil Religion in Contemporary Iran" in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol 21 (1979), pp. 223–246.

<sup>29</sup> Both institutions seem to have been exclusively funded by Amīn, perhaps from her deceased husband's fortune. See *Yādnāmiḥ-i bānū-yi mujtahidah Nuṣrat al-Sādāt Amīn*. Moreover, the all-girls high school presented an important alternative to the state-run coeducational schools and withdrew from those parents reluctant to let their daughters study in the company of men any justification to deny their girls access to education. Rutner writes that due to a lack of female teachers for the high school, "only Persian literature was taught in the beginning. Later, male teachers were hired to cover other fields." See Rutner, *Changing Authority*.

<sup>30</sup> Only her son Sayyid Muḥammad Ali Muīn Amīn survived her. See [http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news\\_detail.php?ProdID=252803](http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news_detail.php?ProdID=252803) and <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?id=1384159>. He and his wife, Furūgh al-Sādāt, took care of the house after Amīn's husband passed away.

As a woman, she lacked the institutional access to ‘*ulamā*’ networks and opportunities to engage in day-to-day discussions with her male colleagues.

Amīn wrote works both in Persian and Arabic. Her first work was the mentioned *Al-Arba‘īn al-Hāshimīyyah*, which she completed in 1936 at the age of fifty.<sup>31</sup> *Al-Arba‘īn al-Hāshimīyyah* was later translated into Persian by her student Zina al-Sādāt Humayunī.<sup>32</sup> A second work published in Arabic was *Jāmi‘ al-shatāt* [Collection of small pieces], the compilation of her responses to questions on *fiqh* and *kalam* posed by scholars of the *ḥawzah* mentioned above.<sup>33</sup> It was on the basis of these two books that Amīn received her first *ijāzahs* of *ijtihād* in the 1930s. The third book Amīn published in Arabic was *al-Nafaḥāt al-Raḥmānīyah fi al-Vāridāt al-Qalbiah*.<sup>34</sup> Apparently, it was only translated into Persian in 2009.

Amīn’s first publication in Persian was *Sayr va Sulūk dar Ravish-i Awliyā’-i Allāh* (The spiritual journey of God’s saints), published in 1944, in which she describes paths towards spiritual fulfillment.<sup>35</sup> Notably, the book was first published under a man’s name, “Muḥammad ‘Alī Amīn Nuṣrat,” at a time when Amīn was already known in some circles as a *mujtahidah*. Perhaps she had chosen a pseudonym in deference to her husband.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, none of the works published during

<sup>31</sup> Published in Iran by al-‘Alawīyah al-Amnīyah, 1959 or 1960, and in Damascus by Dar al-Fikr, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> The Persian translation was published as *Tarjamih-i Arba‘īn al-Hāshimīyyah* (Tehran: Huda, 1365 [1986]).

<sup>33</sup> Published in Isfahan by al-Matba‘ah al-Muḥammadiyyah in 1344 [1965], but probably available as a manuscript much earlier. The collection of questions and answers was probably compiled by Ayatullah Murtaḏa Mazahiri Najafi-Isfahani, who granted Amīn an *ijāzah-yi riwāyat* and is also listed as an ‘author.’

<sup>34</sup> Re-printed in Isfahan by Intishārāt Gulbahār in 1376 (1997), but probably first published in 1369 AH/1329 AP [1950], and finished, according to Tayyibī (p. 92) in 1319 AP (1940). It is not clear whether *al-Nafaḥāt* was an ongoing work or whether it was completed by 1940. A Persian translation appeared in 2009: Mahdi Iftikhār, trans., *Nasimhā-yi Mihrabānī: al-Nafaḥāt al-Raḥmānīyah fi al-Vāridāt al-Qalbiah*, *Tarjumah va Sharh* [Translation and commentary] (Ayat Eshraq Publication, 2009). Tayyibī mentions an Iraqi journalist who came to visit Amīn in 1950 (1329 AP). According to Tayyibī, the story of his meeting with Amīn was published as a preface in a later edition of *al-Nafaḥāt*.

<sup>35</sup> Published in Tehran by Chapkhānah-i Islami, 1323 [1944].

<sup>36</sup> Sources also indicate that Amīn’s husband was unaware of her scholarship and was indeed surprised when he learned she had been awarded permissions of *ijtihād*.

her lifetime appear under her name, but usually under the authorship of “*yek bānū-yi Īrānī*” (an Iranian lady).<sup>37</sup>

Her second book published in Persian was an abbreviated translation of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Miskawayh’s (d. 1030) *Tahdhib al-Akhlāq* (The refinement of character) from Arabic. It was first published in 1949 under the title *Akhlāq va rāhī sa’ādat: Iqtibās az ṭahārat al-Īrāqī Ibn Maskuyih/Miskawayh*,<sup>38</sup> and is still used as a text of instruction in moral philosophy in many universities and *ḥawzah*. Several of our interviewees associated Nuṣrat Amīn’s name most closely with this book (and it seems to be a book frequently possessed by female and male *ḥawzah* students), without necessarily realizing that it is a work of translation.<sup>39</sup>

Her next book, *Ravish-i Khushbakhtī va Tawsīyih bih Khāharān-i Imānī* (The way to happiness and advice for sisters in faith), published in 1952, was written in response to what she perceived to be the cultural ills of the societal elite of the time.<sup>40</sup> It is her only work explicitly directed at a popular and predominantly female audience.

After the death of her husband, the first volume of Amīn’s principles of *tafsīr*, *Makhzan al-‘irfān dar ‘ulūm-i Qur’ān* [Source of knowledge: Interpretations of the Qur’ān], appeared in 1956 and fourteen other volumes followed during the next fifteen years.<sup>41</sup> The *tafsīr* was originally published as *Kitāb-i kanz al-‘irfān dar ‘ulūm-i Qur’ān*.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Similar patterns can be observed with regard to the work of other female religious authorities, such as Aisha Abdurrahman of Egypt (b. 1913). The Egyptian female Qur’ān scholar published as “Bint al-Sati” in consideration of her conservative father, it is said, who would not have approved of a public presence, including publications, by a female member of the family.

<sup>38</sup> Published in Isfahan by Ṣāqafī, 1328 (1949) as *Bi-qalam-i yakī az bānūān-i Īrānī*; later also published in Tehran by Nahzat-i Zanān-i Musalmān, 1360 (1981). Beside her translation it contains her commentaries and explanations on the text. In 1990, a new translation appeared, which may have replaced her translation in the *ḥawzah* of Iran.

<sup>39</sup> These interviews were held in conjunction with our research on women’s *ḥawzah*.

<sup>40</sup> Published in Tehran in 1331 [1952] as *Bi-qalam-i yakī az bānūān-i Īrānī*, and later in Isfahan by Ṣāqafī, 1347 [1968], under the name *Yek bānū-yi Īrānī*, also with an introduction by Mustafa Hādavī in Isfahan: Markaz-i Pakhsh, Anjuman-i Himāyat az Khānvādahā-yi bī Sarparast, 1369 [1990], and in Qom: Amir Publishers, 6th edition, 1369 [1990].

<sup>41</sup> Published in Isfahan by Chap-i Muḥammadi, 1376– [1956–].

<sup>42</sup> Princeton owns three editions of the *tafsīr*. There is the original edition, of which the first volume was published in 1956. Princeton owns volumes 1–5, 7, 9, and 12. Then there is the edition from 1982 in nine volumes published by Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Īrān: Nahzat-i Zanān-i Musalmān (Tehran), 1361 [1982]. In both the 1956 and 1982

Fischer lists Nuṣrat Amīn's *tafsīr* as the key text used in an introductory course on rules of conduct and Islamic law in the Islamic Studies Program at the University of Tehran prior to the 1979 revolution.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, to the extent that it is available, the *tafsīr* hardly seems to be consulted today in Iran or outside. Except for two MA dissertations on the *tafsīr*, recently defended at Islamic Azad University, we have found no scholarly commentaries and analyses of it in any languages.<sup>44</sup>

Other works in Persian include her *Makhzan al-laālī dar faẓīlat-i mawlā al-mawālī ḥazrat-i Alī ibn Abī-tālib* (The treasure of the night in virtues of prophet 'Alī ibn Abi Tālib) in 1961<sup>45</sup> and *Ma'ād, yā Ākharīn*

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edition, there is a jump between the second and third volume to the thirtieth *juz*, which Amīn herself undertook, as she was not certain she would be able to complete the *tafsīr* in her lifetime. From the third volume onwards, the *ajīza* are then presented in reverse. Finally, there is the edition of 1989/1990, again in fifteen volumes, which reversed the original order of volumes, so that the volumes correspond to the order of the *ajīza*. Different editions of her *tafsīr* are available in about ten libraries in North America. According to WorldCat, Princeton is the only library worldwide that owns a copy of the newest (1990) edition. Against this background it is all the more striking that the 1956 edition, and, with the exception of volume one, the 1982 and the 1990 editions, had never been checked out from the Princeton library before we started to read her work.

<sup>43</sup> See Fischer, *Iran*, 250. Amīn even gets a mention in *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, as the first woman known to have authored an entire *tafsīr*. See Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39. Nevertheless, none of her texts is included in the bibliography of Hossein Modarressi's *Introduction to Shī'ī Law*, which calls into question the contributions she made to the field of law and jurisprudence. See Hossein Modarressi Tabataba'i, *An Introduction to Shī'ī Law: A Bibliographical Study* (London: Ithaca Press, 1984). On the other hand, Amīn's *Al-Arba'in al-Hāshimīyyah* is indeed included in Āqā Buzurg Tihirānī's *Al-Dharī'ah ilā taṣānīf al-Shī'ah*, which lists authoritative Shī'ah commentaries and annotations. Tihirānī in turn is of course included in Modarressi's *Introduction* (p. 8).

<sup>44</sup> Shaista Nadrī, *Tahqīq dar Zindagi-yi*, and Rāzīyah Manīa, *Ravish-i Shināsī*. The state-funded Iranian Quran News Agency attempts an overview of the *tafsīr* in *Bud-i Akhlāqī; Ruh-i Hakīm bar Tafsīr-i Makhzan al-'Irfān* (The moral dimension, the essence of interpretation of Makhzan al-'Irfān), in particular the second article in the series *Ashnāyi bā Tafasīr, Iranian Quran News Agency*, Khurdād 4, 1387 (May 24, 2008), [http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news\\_detail.php?ProdID=253427](http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news_detail.php?ProdID=253427). Amīn does not always present her own interpretation, and instead often rather summarizes viewpoints that past scholars haven taken on a given verse. Her own interpretations often appear to mirror those of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'i, without any accreditation.

<sup>45</sup> Published in Isfahan: Ṣaqafī, 1380 [1961] under the name "Yakī az Bānūan-i Irānī."

*Sayr-i Bashar* (The resurrection or human's last journey) on eschatology in 1963/64.<sup>46</sup>

Amīn's early works in Arabic are considered to be of greatest importance from the viewpoint of Islamic jurisprudence, whereas her later Persian publications are predominantly concerned with *akhlāq* and *'irfān*. The only work that deals explicitly with gender relations is *Ravish-i Khushbakhtī*, directed at a non-expert audience, where Amīn lays out ways to a pious life for women.<sup>47</sup> Although delineating women's emotional, intellectual, and physical qualities and abilities, the image Amīn devises of a proper Muslim woman rests on domesticity. Women's greatest responsibility is the peace of the family and the moral education of the children. To fulfill this task, women need to be well educated themselves, in the sciences and in religious knowledge. The fact, however, that out of nine works (two of which were extremely comprehensive and must have taken her two decades to write) only one deals more explicitly with women's issues and is addressed to women, indicates that women's issues with the usual focus on questions of maturity, hygiene etc. were not Amīn's primary intellectual pursuit. More important to her were her studies in theology, mysticism, and ethics, which kept her intellectually preoccupied.

*An Interview with Nuṣrat Amīn Six Years after the Opening of Maktab-i Fāṭimah*<sup>48</sup>

The excerpts below contain some of Amīn's responses in an interview conducted in 1971 by members of the Scientific and Educational Society of the World of Islam (Kānūn-i 'ilmī va Tarbiyatī-yi Jahān-i Islāmī). Amīn's answers elucidate the *mujtahidah's* view on gender roles. She underlines the necessity of a woman's *hijāb* and female piety, and condemns women's indulgence in this world's materialism, to which, she believes, they fall prey more easily than men due their "innate vanity". The man is seen as the caretaker, attracted by the woman's vanity and

<sup>46</sup> Published in Isfahan: Ṣāqafi, 1342 [1963 or 1964]. Note that this website credits Amīn's paternal aunt with a work by the same title: <http://pr.alzahra.ac.ir/artist-women/333-1389-07-04-11-38-23>, accessed March 30, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> For a closer analysis of *Ravish-i Khushbakhtī*, the conservative viewpoints on gender expressed therein, and how they compare to Murtaṣa Muṭahhari's teachings on gender, see Maryam Rutner, *Changing Authority*.

<sup>48</sup> The interview was first published in *Furṣat dar Ghurūb* publications, and reprinted on the official weblog of Eshrat Shayegh, a member of the seventh Majlis Shūrā-yi Islāmī (Parliament), <http://shayegh.ir/1387/08/23>, accessed November 13, 2008.

beauty (which should be exposed only to the husband). In general, the interview reflects the very conservative viewpoints Amīn also expresses in her book *Ravish-i Khushbakhti* published in 1952, but her emphasis on domesticity seems to have receded. To the simplistic question of the interviewer “Can you say that men are better than women?” Amīn replies

You cannot under any circumstances say that men are in general better than women. We have women like Fatimah (pbuh), Khadijah, Maryam, and many others who were better than men. The superiority that God has granted men in some issues is a general matter not an individual one. The deficiency mentioned in the Qur’ān regarding women is only in one *aya* [verse] which states that women cannot settle disputes [*fasl-i khusumāt*]...and if they are asked to arbiter, they will not be capable of convincing the parties or imposing their judgment. The other deficiency of a woman is that she has a tendency to want to be vain and pays less attention to the perfection of her soul. This is, of course, a characteristic which God has given her, and obviously the reason behind the *ḥijāb* is based on this principle. However, these are generalized issues as there are women who are void of such deficiencies and *therefore these points are not true of all women*.<sup>49</sup>

With regard to the relations between the sexes, Amīn suggests they are “partners in humanity,” but believes “the foundation of the creation of man and woman differs regarding their cerebral, bodily, and emotional strengths.”<sup>50</sup> Notably, this difference does not translate, in her understanding, into inequality in women’s and men’s suitability for public life. Citing several revered Islamic scholars, she declares that men and women are equal in *ibādāt* (spirituality) and uses this fundamental observation to deduce the equality of men and women with regard to their social rights: women and men have equal rights and duties in most aspects of society, including earning, working, business,

<sup>49</sup> Scientific and Educational Society of the World of Islam, *Furṣat dar Ghurūb* (emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> *Bud-i Akhlāqī*. To support her argument on gender relations, she cites a *ḥadīth* from al-Tirmidhī narrated by Abū Hurayrah: “The best of the men of my nation is the one who is even better to his wife and the best of the women of my nation is one who is better towards her husband. The best of the women of my nation is the one who obtains her husband’s consent in what is not sinful. The best of the men of my nation is the one who treats his wife with kindness and understanding, like a mother treating her child, this man has the same rewards as a martyr who has died in the path of God.”



farming, teaching, learning, and even, significantly, defense in the face of an enemy.<sup>51</sup>

Her views on the ability of women to resolve disputes reflects the dominant opinion of her male colleagues.<sup>52</sup> Although Amīn does not believe in women's principal incapability to serve as judges, for the sake of public order she believes women could only perform such functions in the confined space of their families. To have women serve as arbiters of disputes outside their homes could lead to moral decay, because women in such visible public roles would attract the attention of men, which in turn would inhibit their ability to function as and be regarded as neutral arbiters. "[For women to serve as judges] is good [acceptable] with those who are *maḥram* and *ḥalāl* to her [i.e. her husband and immediate family], but with others this characteristic should be contested as this attribute could lead to digression and bring about lust [*shahvat*]. There is a reason behind God's granting to women such a trait [i.e. beauty], this is so that men will desire them and this desire will lead to marriage and offspring. Consequently, women will be taken under the leadership and care of men." Amīn insists, however, that certain women such as the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah or Jesus' mother Maryam have taken their public role, in particular their service to the community, very seriously, and that their examples must be invoked to counter conservative voices that wish to exclude women from the public sphere, in particular from commerce, production, and scholarship.<sup>53</sup>

Asked what the most important struggle (*jihad*) was for women at the time (1971), Amīn returned to the perils of materialism.

What is important for today's women is to fight their desires for gold, jewelry, different clothing items and to avoid wanting to become [fashion] models [i.e. objects to be looked at]. Although this may prove difficult, it will direct them at a speedier rate to spiritual perfection. Therefore, the best *jihad* is for women to dress modestly [*hifz-i pushish zanān*]. . . . True happiness is based on virtue. True happiness will be achieved through faith, belief in one God, and piety. If you seek happiness in this world and in the next, if you follow the Qur'ān and step toward justice and truth, it is only then that you will feel happiness [*khushbakhti*].<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> On the views of Shī'ah scholars regarding female judgeship, see Mirjam Künkler, "Of 'Alimahs, Wa'izahs, and Mujtahidahs."

<sup>53</sup> See *Bud-i Akhlāqi*.

<sup>54</sup> Scientific and Educational Society of the World of Islam, *Furṣat dar Ghurūb*.

*Zuhrah Şifātī: From Maktab-i Tawhīd to Jāmi‘at al-Zahrā’*

In many ways, the life of Zuhrah Şifātī contrasts with that of Nuşrat Amīn. While the former witnessed the emergence of the modern state in Iran with the transfer of judicial and educational functions from the religious and clerical sphere to the state, Şifātī lived through the opposite: the attempted Islamization of the legal system and state initiatives to strengthen rather than marginalize institutions of religious learning, including those of women.

Zuhrah Şifātī was born in Abadan in 1948. In an interview, Şifātī portrays Abadan before the revolution as a ‘secular’ city with low religiosity, which she links to the considerable presence of western workers in Abadan’s oil industry.<sup>55</sup> After attending a local *maktab khānah* for two years and then public elementary school, Şifātī was home-schooled during her secondary education.<sup>56</sup> It was during this time when Şifātī read an interview with Nuşrat Amīn in the journal *Nūr-i dānish* that she was inspired to follow in Amīn’s footsteps. Şifātī began her study of Islamic sciences in 1966 in the Center for the Study of Islamic Sciences (Markaz-i Ulūm-i Islāmī) in her hometown, founded by a student of Ayatullah Khū‘ī’s (1899–1992).<sup>57</sup> After gaining some training in the Islamic sciences, including *fiqh*, she moved to Qom in 1970 together with four other female classmates to further her Islamic education.<sup>58</sup> Şifātī describes their move to Qom as difficult due to the opposition they faced from the clergy. The classes took place in a house which Şifātī and her four companions had rented. While students had faced the teacher during lectures in her hometown Abadan, in Qom the lecturer would come to the female students’ house and teach from behind a curtain (she notes without comment).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Şifātī’s family hails from Dezful and her full family name is Şifātī-Dizfuli. See Muḥammad Badii, “Guftugū ba Faqih Pajuhandeh Bānū Zuhrah Şifātī” [Interview with the researcher jurist, Lady Zuhrah Şifātī], *Kayhān-i Farhangī*, no. 199 (April 2003): 6. Available online at <http://www.noormags.com/View/Magazine/ViewPages.aspx?numberId=1131&ViewType=1&PageNo=8>.

<sup>56</sup> Badii, “Guftugū.”

<sup>57</sup> The student was Sayyid Ḥusayn Maki. See *Zindaġināmih* [Biography], <http://www.sefaty.net/Index.asp?HoorRobot=Biography.asp>; see also Badii, “Guftugū,” 7.

<sup>58</sup> There is no indication that Şifātī and Amīn ever met. One wonders why Şifātī, if indeed inspired by Amīn, would never have attempted to meet her in Isfahan.

<sup>59</sup> Badii, “Guftugū,” 8.

Among Şifātī's more noteworthy teachers during that time were Ayatullah Mishkinī (1922–2007) with whom she and her companions studied *akhlāq*,<sup>60</sup> as well as Ayatullah Shahīdī and Ayatullah Haqī who taught them *fiqh* and *uṣūl*.<sup>61</sup> Like other members of her family, Şifātī spent time in prison under the Pahlavī dynasty.<sup>62</sup>

Since it was difficult to find scholars in Qom willing to teach women, Şifātī and her companions from time to time found themselves without teachers.<sup>63</sup> The women's group soon took matters into their own hands and began to offer classes for female students. According to Şifātī, hundreds of young women flocked to their classes, including Mrs. Muṣṭafavī, the daughter of late Ayatullah Khomeini. Most women came from clerical households that were reluctant to let their daughters study at the secular universities and welcomed the opportunity for their daughters to study with female teachers. Şifātī recalls that at the beginning these lessons took place in the house where she lived, but once the group of students grew beyond one hundred, in 1974 she and her companions conceived of Maktab-i Tawhīd, as Qom's equivalent to Amīn's Maktab-i Fātīmah.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ayatullah 'Alī Mishkinī (also known as 'Alī Mishkinī Ardabilī) was one of the founders of the Islamic Republic. He was the chair of Majlis Khubriḡan (Assembly of Experts) until his death in 2007 and in this position succeeded Ayatullah Muntazārī. Mishkinī was also the head of Jāmi' Madaressin-i Ḥawzah-i 'Ilmiyah-i Qom (Society of seminary teachers of Qom) and the Friday prayer *imām* of Qom.

<sup>61</sup> Şifātī later married one of her teachers, Ayatullah Muḥammad Ḥasan Ahmādī Faqīh (d. 2010). Şifātī has four daughters and two sons and in 2006 had three grandchildren.

<sup>62</sup> Şifātī's brother Ghulamḥusayn Şifātī-Dizfuli (1952–77) is known to have been a member of a radical anti-capitalist group Mansurān (after leaving the Mujahidin-e Khalq) in the late 1970s. The group, to which Muhsin Riza'ī and 'Alī Shamkhanī also belonged, assassinated businessmen in the oil industry. Ghulamḥusayn was involved in the bombing of the headquarters of the American firm ATT in Tehran. He died in the late 1970s and is referred to in the Islamic Republic as a *shahīd* (martyr). It is possible that Zuhrah Şifātī was imprisoned due to Ghulamḥusayn's political activities under the Shah. A biographical note on her reads, "Şifātī actively participated in Islamic propagation against the Pahlavī regime." Her other brother, Iraj Şifātī-Dizfuli (b. 1940), represented the city of Abadan in the first and fifth Majlis and was a member of the Majlis' Supreme Audit Court.

<sup>63</sup> Badii, "Guftugū," 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ayatullahs Qudūsi and Bihishtī were two known supporters of this institution. According to Şifātī, soon after the inception of Maktab-i Tawhīd in 1974, another *maktab* for women was opened, called Qudūsiyyah (following a suggestion by Ayatullah Qudūsi). Both of these institutions are now under the umbrella of Jāmi' at al-Zahrā'. Şifātī also speaks of Ayatullah Qudūsi's views on the level of studies women could undertake at Maktab-i Tawhīd. In her words, the ayatullah, unlike some other scholars who think women need only some familiarity with Islamic sciences in order to engage

Today, Şifātī is one of the most visible high-ranking female religious authorities, although she has not attained a status comparable to that of Nusrat Amin. While the latter was a scholar independent from political institutions, Şifātī owes some of her status to her political activities as well as her connections to regimist clergy through her family and her husband. While she is considered to have a solid training in the Islamic sciences and few would doubt her rightful status as a *mujtahidah*, she has published relatively little and may see her calling to be more in public engagement and teaching than in a secluded scholarly life.<sup>65</sup>

Among Şifātī's publications are *Pizhūhishī fiqhī pīrāmūn-i sinn-i taklīf* (A jurisprudential inquiry on the age of maturity) (1997), and *Naw Avara-hā-yi fiqhī dar aḥkām-i bānūvan* (New jurisprudential rulings on women's sentences).<sup>66</sup>

Şifātī received her first permission of *riwāyat* from Ayatullah Aqā Aslī 'Alī Yarī Gharanī Tabrizī in 1996 and subsequently from Muḥammad Fāzil Lankaranī (1931–2007).<sup>67</sup> She claims that after having read her book *Ziyārat dar partaw-i vilāyat*, Ayatullah Luṭf Allāh Şāfi Gulpāyigānī (1919–2010)<sup>68</sup> granted her permissions of *riwāyat* and *ijtihād*.<sup>69</sup> According to Şifātī, she herself has given *ijāzahs* of *riwāyat* to more than forty male scholars. Until their assassinations, she is said

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in *tabligh*, was of the opinion that they should study at the highest level of understanding of the Islamic sciences. Fazaeli and Künkler, *New Opportunities*.

<sup>65</sup> Her proximity to the regime may also be indicated by the fact that Şifātī received (and accepted) a plaque of honor from Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in October 2006 as one of 3,000 'exemplary women.'

<sup>66</sup> See Şifātī's official website: <http://sefaty.net/Index.asp?HoorRobot=Books.asp>, accessed July 25, 2009; *Pizhuhish-i Fiqh-i Piramūn-i Sin-i Taklīf* (Tehran: Nashr-i Muṭahhar, 1376 [1997 or 1998]) and *Naw Avara-hā-yi Fiqhī dar Aḥkām-i Bānūvan*. Another publication is *Ziyārat dar partaw-i vilāyat: Sharḥī bar ziyārat-i 'Ashūrā* [Pilgrimage under the rays of guardianship] (Qom: Mujtama'-i 'Ulūm-i Dīnī-i Ḥazrat-i Valī-i 'Aṣr, 1376 [1997]). See also her "Sinn-i Bulūgh-i Shari-yi Dukhtarān" [The legal age of maturity for girls], in *Bulūgh-i Dukhtarān*, ed. Mahdī Mahrizī (Qom: Daftar-i Tablighāt-i Islāmī-i Ḥawzah-i Ilmiyah-i Qom [Islamic Propagation Office of the Religious Seminars Qom], 1997), 379–90; and "Juluyihā-yi Ijtihād-i Zan dar Fiqh-i Shī'i" [The effects of women's *ijtihād* in Shī'i fiqh], *Gulistāni Qur'ān*, no. 30 (1379 [2000]): 32.

<sup>67</sup> Badii, "Guftugū," 6.

<sup>68</sup> Badii, "Guftugū," 6.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.sefaty.net/Index.asp?HoorRobot=Biography.asp>. Following Gulpāyigānī's *ijāza*, Şifātī received another permission of *ijtihād* from Ayatullah Muḥammad Ḥasan Aḥmadī Faqih, her husband.

to have enjoyed strong intellectual links to Ayatullah Bihishti (d. 1981) and Ayatullah Murtaza Muṭahharī (d. 1979).<sup>70</sup>

Zuhrah Şifātī taught *fiqh* and *tafsīr* at Jāmi‘at al-Zahrā’, the largest women’s theological seminary in Iran, which was officially founded after the revolution in 1985 as an extension of Maktab-i Tawhīd.<sup>71</sup> However, since the seminary’s curriculum was simplified in 1993/1994 and the course of study changed to a four-year degree, the *dars-i khārij* (the third and highest level of the *hawzah* education) which Şifātī taught were no longer offered,<sup>72</sup> and Şifātī increasingly taught private lessons since.<sup>73</sup>

In 2006, rumors suggested that Şifātī would run in the elections for the Assembly of Experts, a council of eighty-six clerics who in turn elect and theoretically oversee the actions of the Supreme Leader, the highest political office in the Islamic Republic. Şifātī pointed out in a public interview that there were no objections against women running for the Assembly elections. However, she did not submit her candidacy.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> According to Şifātī, Ayatullah Muṭahharī used to stay with Şifātī and her family on weekly visits to Qom and offer lectures on Western and Islamic philosophy in their house. She states that these lectures in her house were frequented by Ḥasan Tahīrī Khurām Abadī, Ḥusayn Mudarressī, Mustafa Muhaghigh Damād, and Aḥmad Khumaynī.

<sup>71</sup> See Faẓaeli and Künkler, *New Opportunities*.

<sup>72</sup> Badī, “Guftugū,” 18. Perhaps so that her position is not taken as a critique of the curriculum change which was introduced by Rahbar Khamenei, she emphasizes that she agrees with the simplification of the curriculum, as not everyone would have the time or the ability for advanced study.

<sup>73</sup> Şifātī’s states that her private classes are designed to prepare women to become *mujtahids*. She teaches the books of Allamah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭā bā’ī, Yūsuf Bahrānī’s *Al-Ḥadā’iq al-nāḍirah fī aḥkām al-‘itrah al-ṭāhirah*, and other works of classical and contemporary Sunnī and Shī‘ah scholars.

<sup>74</sup> The women’s organization Jāmi‘at-i Zaynab headed by Maryam Bihruzī nominated six women candidates for the Assembly of Experts election in 2006, among them Munir Gurjī. None of the women were ultimately included in the list of candidates, however, because the Guardian Council found them insufficiently qualified for the post. Şifātī observed that the number of women who meet the qualifications for candidacy set by the Guardian Council was small. “I personally have not made a decision with regard to running for the Assembly of Expert elections. So far, no political parties or factions have proposed that I nominate myself either.” The scholar did not, however, rule out the possibility of putting forward her name for the upcoming elections, stating “I might decide to take part in the elections.” She is of the opinion that men and women intending to stand for the elections of the Assembly need to be renowned *mujtahids* with a relatively long record of instruction in the *hawzah*. “We should stay away from sloganeering about women’s candidacy for the Experts

*Şifātī's Views on Politics, Religion, and Women in the Public Sphere*

In the sections below, we survey Şifātī's views on some critical topics such as the relationship between Islamic law and government, women's possibilities in the Islamic Republic, and women's access to theological training.

*On Government*

Şifātī believes that the *vilāyat-i faqih* (the guardianship of the religious jurist), on which the government of the Islamic Republic is based, needs to operate in full attention to political, social, and economic matters of the society. In delineating political rule from *fiqh* and *ijtihād*, principles of governing should be extracted from the sources and enacted contextually. By this, Şifātī suggests that when *fiqh* is used to justify *ḥukūmāt* (government), as is currently the case in the Islamic Republic, *ḥukūmāt* has to be undertaken in the framework of exigency and context rather than strict adherence to Islamic jurisprudence. Her position very much reflects the dominant approach to the question of *vilāyat-i faqih* in Iran today, one based on exigency and context rather than strict deductions from the classical sources. After Ayatullah Khomeini underlined the centrality of exigency in rule in 1988, including Islamic rule, this pragmatic approach to what Islamic rule precisely entails, from a legal and exegetical perspective, has become the *modus operandi* in the Islamic Republic.<sup>75</sup>

*On Possibilities for Women's Participation in the Islamic Republic*

Şifātī's commentary on women's participation in the affairs of government suggests a decisive critique of women's opportunities in the politics of post-Khomeini Iran. "In the present situation, women's participation in some spheres has become impossible and this is far from Ayatullah Khomeini's teachings," Şifātī suggests in an interview in July 2008.<sup>76</sup> Ever since Ayatullah Khomeini incepted certain transforma-

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Assembly elections since the female scholars have to endeavor for many years to attain such scientific level," Şifātī commented.

<sup>75</sup> On the place of exigency in law-making in Iran, see Said Amir Arjomand, "Shari'a and Constitution in Iran: A Historical Perspective," in *Shari'a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Frank Griffel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> See the interview "Women's Participation in Some Realms has been Transformed to the Forbidden Tree," *Ayunih-Tehran* (Servis-i Madhābiḥ-i Andīshahā), July 12, 2008, <http://www.ir-women.com/spip.php?article5833>.

tions in the women's domains that effectively empowered women in the 1980s, progress in this direction, according to Şifātī, has stalled and there need to be more decisive changes in this realm. For example, Şifātī points out that "When he [Khomeini] sent some ambassadors to the ex-Soviet Union, there was a woman included<sup>77</sup> and when there were discussions over the drafting of the constitution, he saw no obstacles in the inclusion of women."<sup>78</sup> Şifātī bemoans that the politics of the Islamic Republic today little reflect the visions of Ayatullah Khomeini. "These are pains which need to be cured by referring to the opinion and philosophy of the Imām... Unfortunately, today we witness a certain narrow-mindedness towards women at a time when the number of educated and able women is much higher than ever before.... One of the expectations of women in the society is that since we have women parliamentarians, women should also be better represented in the executive. However, this has not yet happened."<sup>79</sup>

But, as if not to provoke the resentment of the current Supreme Leader, Ayatullah Khamenei, in response to her criticism, Şifātī is quick to suggest that "I feel that not only are we in practice far from the Imām's thoughts and opinions on women, but in some instances the views of the current Leader [Ayatullah Khamenei] who follows Imām Khomeini's line of thought is not put into practice...."<sup>80</sup> In other words, Şifātī proposes that the current situation is not a reflection of Ayatullah Khamenei's views on women in the public sphere either, but rather the result of a lack of implementing the true wishes of the current leader.

Şifātī bemoans the gap between the demands of women's rights advocates on the one hand and the unresponsiveness of the system on the other, which has contributed to discrediting Islam.

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<sup>77</sup> This is a reference to Marziyyah Dabbagh who was part of a delegation sent to Russia to convey Ayatullah Khomeini's message to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989. The message was an invitation to Gorbachev to study Islam, as Communism, in Khomeini's assessment, had lost its appeal.

<sup>78</sup> Munir Gurjī was the sole female member of the Assembly of Experts at that time.

<sup>79</sup> See *Ayunih-Tehran*, "Women's Participation."

<sup>80</sup> This argument is frequently invoked in all sorts of critiques against governmental policies. The one who critiques establishes that his or her position on a given topic is a reflection of Ayatullah Khomeini's position on this topic, that this perspective would lead to specific governmental policies different from those currently enacted, and that current policies are suboptimal in tackling the challenge.

We are at a time of extravagance and dissipation, meaning that, on the one hand, some women's rights advocates are branded 'feminists' and, on the other hand, some of the shortcomings in women's realms have provided the basis for objections to Islam.... Feminists believe in total equality of genders but the Imām believed in gender justice not equality.... When Imām Khomeini considered gender justice, it is clear that in his view everything is motioned on justice and on their rightful place and neither the man nor the woman is allowed to oppress the other.<sup>81</sup>

Asked whether she thought it was possible for a woman to become president of the Islamic Republic, Şifātī responds, "our choice is Islam and in Islam it is not forbidden for a woman to become president."<sup>82</sup> In fact, Şifātī suggests that it would contribute to the deterioration of society if women were excluded from public life. "Decadence is the result of a society where the level of thought and culture of people is in decline. It is when women in a society are unemployed and feel that they have little to offer, it is then that they will be drawn to decadence."<sup>83</sup>

#### *On the Question of Maturity and the Legal Age of Marriage*

In the year 2000, a bill was passed by the reformist-dominated Iranian Majlis (parliament), which raised the marriage age for girls and boys to eighteen years in accordance with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to which Iran is a signatory.<sup>84</sup> The parliament passed the bill with the provision that a girl of fifteen years who wished to marry could acquire a permit from a local court in order to do so. The conservative Guardian Council (Shūrā-yi Niğahbān) vetoed the relatively progressive bill and the Majlis sent the bill on to the Expediency Council (Majma'-i Tashkhiş-i Maşlahat-i Niżām), which functions not unlike a mediation council between parliament and

<sup>81</sup> See *Ayunih-Tehran*, "Women's Participation."

<sup>82</sup> One of the more telling public interviews Zuhrah Şifātī has ever granted appeared in the Spanish newspaper *El País* in 2006. See "Zoreh Sefaty—Ayatolá. 'El islam no hace diferencias entre mujeres y hombres'" [Zuhrah Şifātī—Ayatullah: "Islam does not differentiate between women and men"] *El País*, June 12, 2006, [http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/islam/hace/diferencias/mujeres/hombres/elpporint/20060612elpepuint\\_1/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/islam/hace/diferencias/mujeres/hombres/elpporint/20060612elpepuint_1/Tes).

<sup>83</sup> See *El País*, "Zoreh Sefaty."

<sup>84</sup> Article 1 of the CRC states "For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." Iran ratified the CRC on July 13, 1994, with no reservation. See the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.



the Guardian Council.<sup>85</sup> In 2002, the bill became a law and included the provision that “marriage of a girl younger than thirteen or a boy younger than fifteen years of age is dependent on the consent of their guardian and also contingent on the court” (*bi shart-i rāyat mašlahat bā tashkhīš-i dādghāh-i salih*).<sup>86</sup> The final version dramatically fell short of the standards set in both the original draft of the Majlis and the CRC. The law was finalized after the Expediency Council consulted Şifātī on this matter, whose first book explicitly deals with the question of the age of maturity.<sup>87</sup> In the book as well as her statement to the Expediency Council, Şifātī differentiates between the age of *taklīf*—when one is required to oblige by the religious instructions such as *hijāb*—and the age of marriage. She criticizes some scholars who have mixed these two definitions, which she regards as factors leading to unwarranted social ills. According to Şifātī the age of *taklīf* should not be changed and should remain nine years for girls and fifteen for boys based on her knowledge of numerous *riwāyat* that exist on this issue.<sup>88</sup> To ascertain the difference between the age of *taklīf* and the age of marriage, one should use ‘*aql* (reason) and the ‘*urf* (custom) of the society one lives in. Having studied “the statistics” and the *riwāyat*, Şifātī concludes that the minimum marriage age ought to be thirteen years for girls and fifteen for boys. Şifātī also highlights that in her studies she took into consideration the age of growth and puberty of girls both in Iran and elsewhere in the world. Şifātī adds that the age of marriage is also contingent on the ability and consent of the person.

The fact that Şifātī, as a woman, was consulted by the Expediency Council as a religious authority on the issue is remarkable, and certainly a path foreclosed to her predecessors. At the same time, her interpretation indicates that while some high-ranking male Islamic

<sup>85</sup> If the Guardian Council, which reviews every law passed by the Majlis for its “compatibility” both with the 1979 constitution and its interpretation of Ja’fari jurisprudence, rejects the law, the Majlis has the choice of revising it in line with the Guardian Council’s commentary, or to vote with a two-thirds majority to pass the bill on to the Expediency Council. The latter council may pass the law as the Majlis devised it, or with the changes the Guardian Council demanded, or in a third version of its own.

<sup>86</sup> Shirin Ebadi, *Huqūq-e Zan Dar Qavānin-e Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-i Irān* [Women’s rights in the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran] (Tehran: Ganje Danesh Publication, 2002).

<sup>87</sup> Badii, “Guftugū,” 8.

<sup>88</sup> Note that she does not cite these *riwāyat*.

jurists have developed arguments that buttress the more progressive legal standards set in the CRC, she occupies a much more conservative position—which rendered her a useful resource for the conservative Expediency Council in this case.<sup>89</sup>

### *On Women in the Islamic Seminaries*

In an interview with *El País*, Şifātī narrates her experience and motivations for following a religious education. Significantly, she attributes the scarcity of influential female religious authorities in Iran today to women's lack of interest in the profession and commitment to religious studies, rather than socially induced or legal obstacles.

I started my studies at the time of the Shah. While studying for the final high school exams, I also started to go to a *madrasah*. Why? I noticed that women did not know Islam, and going to the *madrasah* seemed the best way for me to get to know my religion better. It requires many years of study to understand the Islamic religion. My parents were both religious, but there were no religious scholars [*ulamā'*] in my family.

At this time, Abadan was a city full of foreigners who worked in the oil industry and the atmosphere was not very Islamic. It was precisely this absence of religion which motivated me to choose the path [of Islamic studies] with the goal of helping women understand Islam, first Iranian women and then women around the world. If you allow me a short excursus: since the birth of Islam and during our entire history, there were always exceptionally accomplished women in religion, in philosophy, in literature, even women poets. And as a *mujtahidah*, I want to draw attention to Bānū Amīn, who was outstanding in philosophy and Islam at the time of the Shah.<sup>90</sup>... About 10,000 women have gone through the seminary in the last couple of years. Why are there not more? No Islamic law and no restriction [in Islam] keeps women from entering the seminary. It is a lack of will and interest.<sup>91</sup>

### *Can Women become Sources of Emulation (marāja'-i taqlīd)?*

Şifātī explains that although Islamic schools are engaged in educating female students, they are facing a shortage of female scholars

<sup>89</sup> Note also her rejection of the positions of Ayatullahs Bujnūrdī and Şānī'ī on the question of blood money. While the latter have developed arguments for the equalization of blood money between men and women, Şifātī continues to argue that a man's blood is more valuable as he continues to be in most cases in Iran the supporter of the family.

<sup>90</sup> Badii, "Guftugū." Şifātī suggests in the same interview that there are only 3–4 *mujtahidahs* in Iran today.

<sup>91</sup> Badii, "Guftugū."

who are inclined or sufficiently qualified to theorize authoritatively in Islamic matters. “The number of female scholars capable of making a legal decision through independent interpretation of legal sources, the Qur’an and *sunnah*, is very small.” Women should study for years at the *hawzah* before they meet the necessary qualifications, she stresses. “Many female scholars argue that reaching the degree of *ijtihād* has no use for them as long as they cannot be a source of emulation.” In response to this view, Şifātī exclaims that the responsibilities of a *mujtahid* are not limited to those of a source of emulation. *Mujtahidahs* could serve society by helping Muslims interpret Islamic principles, she adds. She highlights that there is controversy among Islamic scholars with regard to whether women can become sources of emulation [*marja’-i taqlīd*—the highest level of Shī’ī authority]. “A number of renowned Islamic scholars believe Islam does not ban *mujtahid* women from becoming sources of emulation.”<sup>92</sup>

[The] *marja’-i taqlīd* is a person of great knowledge.... We need someone on the religious level to illuminate our doubts and ignorances and dark spots. This is what the *marja’-i taqlīd* is for, and in Islam there is no difference between man and woman. What counts is one’s qualification [for this title].... The training [to become a *mujtahidah*] is identical to that of men. We undertake the same course of studies. What counts are our achievements and publications.<sup>93</sup>

In light of the force of Şifātī’s position on the question of a female *marja’*, she is quick to emphasize that men have encouraged her throughout her career. “I have to point out that men helped me achieve my goals. When I proposed to open a school for women, male ‘*ulamā*’ supported me.”<sup>94</sup>

It is noteworthy how explicitly Zuhrah Şifātī criticizes perceptions among certain ‘*ulamā*’ that exclude women *a priori* from the *marja’iyyat*. Similarly, her critique of social policies in the post-Khomeini era which do not provide sufficient opportunities for women, and her suggestion that women could run for the presidency

<sup>92</sup> For instance, Ayatullah Yousef Sane’i declared that women were equal to men in all aspects of political and social life and that a woman could even become the Supreme Leader, the highest political office in Iran, which must be staffed by a *mujtahid*. See *Ayunih-Tehran*, “Women’s Participation.”

<sup>93</sup> *El País*, “Zoreh Sefaty.”

<sup>94</sup> *El País*, “Zoreh Sefaty.” Şifātī also suggests “the West does not recognize that Islam does not discriminate between men and women. A woman can attain the same levels of knowledge and distinction as men.”

and the clerical Assembly of Experts, indicate her political independence despite the fact that she is a member of the Islamic Republic's Women's Socio-Cultural Council. Compared to Nuşrat Amīn, Şifātī is much more concerned with equal opportunities for women than questions of how to preserve healthy gender balances and how to ward off the encroaching cultural influence of materialism. When Şifātī speaks of decadence, she locates its root in unemployment and psychological depression, not in immorality induced by foreign cultural influences. One may make the conjecture—but it is merely this: a hypothesis—that the difference in emphasis between Amīn's and Şifātī's accounts of the roots of social ills is symptomatic of a larger transformation in worldviews which Iranian societal elites have undergone since 1979: the fears of moral decay due to 'Westoxification' have been gradually replaced by the conviction that it is the incapacity of the Iranian state, coupled with a lack of political will on the part of unaccountable elites, that is primarily responsible for the persistence and resurgence of social ills.

*Female Religious Authority in Iran: Between Female Agency  
and State-Induced Stagnation*

With the high involvement of women as transmitters and as scholars of religious knowledge from the classical period through medieval Islam and the Safavid, Qajar, Pahlavi dynasties, Iran exhibits a strong tradition of female religious authority in the Middle East.<sup>95</sup>

Nuşrat Amīn and Zuhrah Şifātī are two female *mujtahidahs* who are both products of the pre-revolutionary system of Islamic learning. Until today, Nuşrat Amīn's path remains unrepeated. No woman since has published so prolifically in the realms of *fiqh*, *falsafah*, and *akhlāq*, received as many endorsements by senior colleagues, or granted *ijāzahs* to male '*ulamā*' of such high authority.

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<sup>95</sup> For a survey of female religious authorities in modern Iran, see Künkler, "Of '*Alimahs*, '*Wa'izahs*, and '*Mujtahidahs*." In twentieth-century Iran, we know that beside Nuşrat Amīn and Zuhrah Şifātī, Ma'sumih Izzat al-Shar'ī (1891–1951), Hashimīyyah Amīn (n.d.), 'İffat al-Zaman Amīn (1912–67 or 1977), Zinat al-Sādāt Humayunī (b. 1917), Zahra Mazahiri (n.d.), Fatimih Amīni (b. 1933), Azam Tālaqāni (b. 1940), Munir Gurjī (b. 1940s), Maryam Bihruzī (b. 1945), Ma'sumih Gulgirī (b. 1940s), Ma'sumih Muhaqiq-Damad, and Fariba Alasvand (b. 1967), made a name for themselves as women learned in Islamic sciences.

Both women owe their careers predominantly to their own agency. They sought distinguished teachers with whom to study, published on specific realms of Islamic knowledge, and later opened schools and seminaries for women in order to overcome the difficulty in women's access to the *ḥawzah* education. The *maktabs* they founded, in Isfahan and Qom respectively, allowed women to complete the *muqaddimah* cycle, the first of three cycles of learning in the *ḥawzah* education, and both scholars offered private lessons for those wishing to study in the advanced *sutūḥ* and the *dars-i khārij* cycles. Male invitation facilitated Amīn's and Şifātī's studies in the sense that both of their families permitted, supported, and funded the course the two female scholars had chosen. The openings of the *maktabs* also benefited from the support of male clergy, and both *mujtahidachs* emphasize that along their path, male colleagues helped them at critical junctures. Meanwhile, state intervention, the third explanatory framework put forth in this volume, accounts little for the furthering of these women's distinction. The effects of the pre-revolutionary Pahlavī regime and the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic, although diametrically opposed on most policy realms, are surprisingly similar in their effect on religious education opportunities for women. Nuşrat Amīn opened her *maktab* at a time when the Shah sought to shift religious education out of the *ḥawzah* into the Islamic studies programs of the state-run universities, where the curricula would be subject to state oversight. The opening of the high school and *maktab* in Isfahan were hence in direct contrast to the state education policies at the time. A decade later, still prior to the 1979 revolution, Zuhrah Şifātī and her colleagues initiated the opening of the Maktab-i Tawhīd in Qom with objectives not unlike those of Nuşrat Amīn. After the revolution, the Islamic Republic transformed the Maktab-i Tawhīd into a full-fledged women's *ḥawzah* called Jāmi'at al-Zahrā', which henceforth became the primary theological seminary for women in the Shī'ī world. However, while it was initially devised to offer all three levels of the *ḥawzah* education to women, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei ordered the simplification of the curriculum in the mid-1990s which demoted Jāmi'at al-Zahrā' to an institution that prepares women for *tablīgh* (Islamic propagation) rather than scholarship. Zuhrah Şifātī, who had taught *dars-i khārij* at Jāmi'at al-Zahrā', henceforth concentrated on private classes to instruct women at the highest level.

While Jāmi'at al-Zahrā' had initially been incepted to facilitate the training of women up to the *dars-i khārij* level, so that they could

acquire *ijāzahs* of *ijtihād* and *riwāyat*, the simplification of the curriculum once again closed that window of opportunity. Like its predecessor, therefore, the current political regime *de facto* makes for the stagnation of female religious scholarship in Iran by not facilitating and supporting the necessary training opportunities for women to emerge as *mujtahidahs*. Accordingly, although more than 20,000 women have started a *hawzah* education over the past thirty years, Iran today counts only a handful of *mujtahidahs*.

Apart from lacking training opportunities, there are also few incentives for women to strive towards religious authority. With the revolution, the standards to evaluate religious authority have shifted and today political personalities surround themselves with titles of ‘Ayatullah,’ or even ‘Grand Ayatullah,’ who previously may only have been considered a *hujjatulislam*. A scholar’s authority—once dependent on theological and legal competence (as recognized by peers and illustrated in publications received by the ‘*ulamā*’), the number and quality of *ijāzahs* collected from other *mujtahids*, as well as the clerical networks and institutional locations of which one is part—today is much more difficult to establish. Both recognition and reputation remain important constituents of religious authority, but access to political office and state funds has tainted recognition criteria. Today, regimist newspapers and a state-sanctioned association in Qom (the *Jāmi‘ah-i Mudarrisīn-i Ḥawzah-i ‘Ilmiyah-i Qum* [Society of seminary teachers of Qom]) have greater say over who counts as an ‘Ayatullah’ as opposed to a ‘*hujjatulislam*’ than one’s peers who may recognize one’s expertise in the Islamic sciences. Formal authority has become a question more of state recognition than theological and legal expertise or peer recognition (although the old criteria are still recognized by those unimpressed by the political proliferation of clerical titles). Formal religious titles today open doors to political patronage and state-funded positions that offer a secure salary. Most of these positions are *de facto* off limits for women, who even if trained as a *mujtahidah* have no chance of being appointed a Friday prayer leader, a judge, a member of any of the political clerical councils, or to attain the level of *marja‘-i taqlīd*, where they could collect *khums* (religious tax) and re-invest it in *hawzah*, student stipends, or social services (which in turn reproduce one’s authority).

Further, while it is widely accepted that women can attain the *ijtihād* degree and become *mujtahidahs*, the position of *marja‘* is out of reach. Courageously, Zuhrah Şifāti publicly argues that no theological or

jurisprudential justifications exist that legitimize the exclusion of women from the *marja'iyat*, a position also taken by several of her highest ranking male colleagues. Yet, the unspoken truth is that the reasons are political. The *marja'iyat* is only available to male clergy who are politically conformist.

Nevertheless, in contrast to most female religious authority in other parts of the Muslim world, Iranian *mujtahidaha*s may have legal competence that is publicly invoked, as the example of Zuhrah Şifâti illustrates. The final law that was adopted in 2002 concerning the age of marriage reflected Şifâti's recommendations. The fact that it set the marriage age much lower than the reformist parliament and women's rights activists would have hoped highlights the instrumental use of the state in jurisprudential opinions. Where jurisprudential commentaries reflect the preferences of the clerical councils which in this case passed the law, the regime invokes such opinions. Şifâti is no exception: had she recommended the marriage age of sixteen or eighteen, her scholarly opinion would have been disregarded.

Compared to the demands of contemporary women's rights activists in Iran, the viewpoints on gender of both Nuşrat Amîn and Zuhrah Şifâti are very conservative. Yet when contrasting the two, revealing nuances emerge. While both scholars affirm women's rights to education, women's right to enter marriages only by consent, and the sharing of responsibilities between wife and husband, Nuşrat Amîn emphasizes the proper place of women at home. Her views on gender are defined by the axiom of domesticity: women hold nearly full responsibility for the domestic sphere, while men do so for all public matters. Her writings are defined by binaries (inside versus outside the home, religiosity versus irreligiosity, a morally corrupt West versus a morally upright Islamic world, etc.) with few possibilities for shades of grey. Zuhrah Şifâti by contrast is hardly concerned with the vices of materialism and moral corruption, or the vanity of women, which in Amîn's eyes is women's greatest predicament. Şifâti instead speaks of women lacking "will and interest" to advance in Islamic scholarship. Mirroring the conviction of her fellow citizens involved in women's rights advocacy (with whom she otherwise shares little), Şifâti highlights that it is women themselves who are first and foremost responsible for their destiny. To improve their situation they should not wait, in the terminology of this volume, for male invitation or state intervention. If anything, it is their own agency that will open new doors. Despite their conservative viewpoints on gender questions, then, Amîn's and

Şifātī's lives underscore the same insight. Even if domesticity characterized Amīn's earlier writing about women, she hardly lived by that standard towards the end of her life. She published widely, and on issues not specific to women and gender questions. She opened schools for female *talabih*, and did so in defiance of the *Zeitgeist*: against a clerical environment that did not accommodate women, and a political environment that sought to eliminate religious learning outside the state altogether. She became a public figure and a role model that motivated an emerging generation to follow in her footsteps. Religious authority and domesticity only go together so far. The extent to which female religious authority can profess domesticity is limited, because religious authority has an inherently social component. Amīn's and Şifātī's lives are the best illustrations of this tension. Where they act as religious authorities, the image of female domesticity retreats and female public agency takes its place.

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THE QUBAYSĪYYĀT: THE GROWTH OF  
AN INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM WOMEN'S REVIVALIST  
MOVEMENT FROM SYRIA (1960–2008)

Sarah Islam

*Introduction*

The Qubaysī movement is one of the largest Sunni Muslim women's revivalist and pietist movements in the world. Originating under the guidance of Munīrah al-Qubaysī, the movement is estimated to have several hundred thousand adherents within Syria,<sup>1</sup> and sources confirm their presence in at least twelve other countries.<sup>2</sup> Their publications, which include writings for the general public on religious topics of popular concern, as well as multi-volume scholarly commentaries and works on *sīrah*, *fiqh*, Qur'ānic sciences, and *ḥadīth*, have reached an audience of millions in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Ibrāhīm Ḥamidī, "Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysiyyāt yubāsharna fi-yhām inkhīrāt al-nisā'a fi-al-da'wah al-Islāmiyyah bi-muwāffaqaṭ al-sulṭah," *Al-Hayāt Daily*, March 5, 2006. Also see "Al-Qubaysiyyāt... ḥarakah Islāmiyyah nisā'iyyah ghāmiḍah 'aḍawātuha yazidna 'an 70 alfan," *Al-Waṭan*, March 5, 2006; "Bada'na min Sūriya wa yatamayyizna bī-al-hijāb al-kuḥlī... al-Qubaysiyyāt ḥarakah Islāmiyyah ghāmiḍah 'aḍawātuha yazidna 'an 70 alfan," *Al-'Arabīyyah*, March 5, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See *fatwā* issued by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amin (student of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā'ūt), "Fatwa munṣifah tafsilīyyah ḥawl jamā'ah al-Qubaysiyyāt," [http://www.ibnamin.com/rad\\_qubaisi.htm](http://www.ibnamin.com/rad_qubaisi.htm), accessed May 2, 2009. Also see Joshua Landis, "Islamic Education in Syria: Undoing Secularisms" (paper prepared for the conference Constructs of Inclusion and Exclusion: Religion and Identity Formation in Middle Eastern School Curricula), available at <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/Islamic%20Education%20in%20Syria.htm>, accessed June 1, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Tāriq al-Sūwaydān, email message to author, April 24, 2009; corroborated by Tāriq al-Sūwaydān, comment on weblog: [www.suwaidan.com/vb1/showthread.php?t=5326](http://www.suwaidan.com/vb1/showthread.php?t=5326), accessed April 1, 2009. As for viewership, see: <http://www.thedohadebates.com/output/Page29.asp>, accessed April 1, 2009. Al-Sūwaydān is one of the leaders and ideologues of the Islamic Reform Society in Kuwait which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood. He is also the general manager of al-Resalah TV Channel owned by Saudi billionaire Prince HRH al-Walīd ibn Ṭalāl. He is most well known as one of the Middle East's most popular televangelists; his programs are consistently among the highest ranking on Middle East television, and appear on MBC, Abu Dhabi TV, Orbit Dream, Iqra, and al-Resalah TV.

The religious authority of the leaders of the Qubaysī movement in Syria is based on three factors: their mastery of different fields of religious knowledge as traditionally trained female *'ulamā'*, their strict religious practice, and their possession of successful professional careers. Many revivalist and pietist movements prescribe attainment of the spiritual and sacred by an abandonment or rejection of the material and secular. In contrast, Qubaysī religious activities have largely promoted women's upward socioeconomic mobility and participation in Syrian civil society through their emphasis on pursuing all forms of useful knowledge, both sacred and secular, and through their strong religious networks which provide significant mutual support for members in pursuing both spiritual and material goals.

The success of the movement in Syria can also be attributed to the greater level of religious freedom they enjoy in comparison to potential religious competitors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafī groups. Facing little religious competition due to state crackdowns on movements which appear to be more politically threatening, the female-led apolitical Qubaysī movement has been able to enjoy a monopoly over female religious education. In addition, the fact that the movement invests in producing Arabic teaching texts which target *multiple audiences* among both the lay and elite populations has contributed to their unmatched popularity.

Their local impact is apparent in Damascus by the fact that they currently manage—according to the *2006 Survey of Islamic Education in Syria* published by the pan-Arab daily *Al-Ḥayāt*—fifty percent of the city's female *madrasah* provision with a total local student population of 75,000; they also organize public sermons in major mosques with a total lay audience of an estimated 25,000, and run numerous charity projects, state-condoned secondary schools, and a publishing house, using their own financial resources.<sup>4</sup>

Their controversial nature is evident by the variety of public figures who have commented on them, including Shaykh Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), the Saudi Permanent Committee on Fatāwa and Research, Usāmah al-Sayyid from the Aḥbash of Lebanon, and the late *muftī* of Syria Aḥmad Kufṭārū (d. 2004).<sup>5</sup> The impact of their texts is

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<sup>4</sup> See Katherine Zoepf, "Islamic Revival Led by Women," *New York Times*, August 29, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> An audio lecture of al-Albānī on the Qubaysīyyāt has been in distribution in Damascus and is discussed in Muḥammad al-Amīn's statement on the Qubaysīyyāt.

clear not only from the endorsements they have received as “the best works of their kind in the modern period,” from well known religious personalities like staunch Sunnī traditionalist Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, prominent Kuwaiti Islamist Ṭāriq al-Sūwaydān, and al-Ḥabīb ʿAlī al-Jifrī of the Bāʿalawī *ṭarīqah* of Yemen, but also by their increasing appearance as teaching texts at Islamic universities, and alongside the works of Nūḥ Ḥā Mīm Keller and Sayyid Sābiq (d. 2000) on popular reference websites like [muhaddith.org](http://muhaddith.org).<sup>6</sup>

This movement has largely gone unnoticed in academic literature despite its influence in the Middle East. In terms of religious authority in Syria, while studies have been conducted on Sufi orders, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and modernist intellectuals, very little attention has been paid to Syrian traditionalist *ʿulamā*—let alone female *ʿulamā* like the Qubaysiyyāt.<sup>7</sup> In terms of literature on female traditionalist

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See [http://www.ibnamin.com/rad\\_qubaisi.htm](http://www.ibnamin.com/rad_qubaisi.htm), accessed May 2, 2009. The *fatwā* of the Saudi Permanent Committee on Fatāwa and Research can be found on their website as well as at <http://www.islamweb.net/aqeda/alsofiya/1.htm>, accessed May 1, 2009. Usāmah al-Sayyid, a spokesperson for the Aḥbash and a signatory of the Amman Message, wrote a book on the Qubaysiyyāt entitled *Dirāsah shāmilah ʿan al-tanzīm al-nisāʾi al-sirrī al-khaṭīr* (Damascus: n.d.); Kuftārū's statement can be found in Ibrāhīm Ḥamīdī's article in *Al-Ḥayāt*. See Ḥamīdī, “Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysiyyāt.”

<sup>6</sup> Ṭāriq al-Sūwaydān, email message to author, April 24, 2009; corroborated by Ṭāriq al-Sūwaydān, comment on weblog. For al-Būṭī, see Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, “Muqaddimah,” in *Al-Jāmiʿ fi-al-sirah al-nabawiyyah*, ed. Samīrah al-Zāyid (Damascus: al-Maṭbaʿah al-ʿilmīyyah, 1987). For al-Ḥabīb ʿAlī al-Jifrī, see for example <http://www.ghrib.net/vb/showthread.php?t=10188>, accessed May 2, 2009; there are countless other blogs like this one which discuss al-Jifrī's comments on his television programs.

For important secondary literature on al-Būṭī and traditionalist religious authority in Syria, see Andreas Christmann, “Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: A Portrait of Muhammad Saʿīd Ramadan al-Buti,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 9, vol. 2 (1998): 149–69; Andreas Christmann, “Ascetic Passivity in Times of Extreme Activism: The Theme of Seclusion in a Biography by al-Buti,” in *Studia Semitica: The Journal of Semitic Studies Jubilee Volume*, ed. Philip S. Alexander et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Very little has been written thus far on traditionalist religious authority figures in modern Syria. For analyses on Sufi brotherhoods and religious authority in Syria, see Itzhak Weismann, “Sufi Fundamentalism between India and the Middle East,” in *Sufism and the “Modern”*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Howell (London: Tauris, 2007), 115–28; Paulo Pinto, “Sufism and the Political Economy of Morality in Syria,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 15 (2006), 103–36; Itzhak Weismann, “The Shadhiliyya-Darqawiyya in the Arab East,” in *La Shadhiliyya—Une Voie Soufie dans le Monde*, ed. Eric Geoffroy (Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 2004); see also Annabelle Böttcher, “Official Islam, Transnational Islamic Networks, and Regional Politics: The Case of Syria,” in *The Middle East and Palestine: Global Politics and Regional Conflict*, ed. Dietrich Jung (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 125–50. For an overview of the history of Islamism and political violence in Syria, see Annabelle

religious authorities, while attention has been paid to women who have played such roles in the premodern period, studies on the modern period have usually focused on women as participants in Islamist-activist movements or as modernist intellectuals.<sup>8</sup>

### *Origins of the Qubaysiyyāt*

While the exact date of the movement's emergence is not known, the earliest records of the movement's rapid growth begin after the Ḥamāh Massacre in Syria.<sup>9</sup> In 1982, in response to an attempt on the Syrian president's life by a splinter group of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian government massacred an estimated 38,000 civilians in the city of Ḥamāh, a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold.<sup>10</sup> The Ḥamāh massacre—and the brutal government crackdown on all religious groups that followed—changed the face of religious expression in Syria for the next twenty-five years. Following the massacre, groups of a religious nature in Syria were either outlawed or brought under stringent state control. Surviving leaders of the Brotherhood were either jailed or exiled, and other religious leaders were also persecuted and forced to operate in secret. Such was also the case for the Qubaysiyyāt.

While followers of the movement call themselves *ānisāt* of the *jamā'ah*, external observers have long referred to them by the name of the group's founder—Munīrah al-Qubaysī. Al-Qubaysī's rise to

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Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad* (Freiburg: Arnold-Bergstrasser-Institut, 1998), and *Official Sunni and Shi'i Islam in Syria* (San Domenico: European University Institute, 2002); see also Hans Günter Lohmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1995); Johannes Reissner, *Ideologie und Politik der Muslimbrüder Syriens: Von den Wahlen 1947 bis zum Verbot unter Adib aš-Šiṣakli 1952, Islamkundlich Untersuchungen* (Freiburg: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1980); and 'Umar F. 'Abd Allāh, *Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Two important pieces in the Syrian context in particular regarding women's involvement in traditionalist modes of religious authority as opposed to activist or modernist modes are Annabelle Böttcher, "Islamic Teaching among Sunni Women in Syria," in *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Donna Lee Bowen et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 296; and Hilary Kalmbach, "Social and Religious Change in Damascus: One Case of Female Islamic Authority," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (2008): 37–57.

<sup>9</sup> Ḥamīdī, "Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysiyyāt"; "Al-Qubaysiyyāt...Ḥarakah Islāmīyyah nisa'iyyah," *Al-Watan*; see also "Bada'na min Sūriya," *Al-'Arabīyyah*.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the history of Islamism and political violence in Syria, see Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik*; Lohmeyer, *Opposition*; Reissner, *Ideologie*; and 'Abd Allāh, *Islamic Struggle*.

prominence began at approximately the same time as violent clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government erupted in the early 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

Munīrah al-Qubaysī, now seventy-six years of age, was born in Damascus in 1933 to a middle-class family of twelve. While al-Qubaysī's brothers entered trade professions, she was the only one among her sisters to complete her secondary and university education. Obtaining a bachelor's degree in natural sciences from Damascus University, she thereafter began teaching in al-Muhājirūn neighborhood public schools in Damascus. According to state-condoned reports, al-Qubaysī began her religious studies in the early 1950s under the tutelage of the head of the Abū Nūr mosque and late Syrian Grand Muftī, Aḥmad Kuftārū. Known for his quietist stance and his advocacy of Naqshbandī Sufism, Kuftārū maintained high favor with many officials within the Syrian government.<sup>12</sup> Al-Qubaysī's ties with Kuftārū enabled her to begin preaching to the public in the 1960s within the confines of the mosque. For reasons unknown, al-Qubaysī was soon after prohibited from teaching in the public schools in which she had originally been employed. She thereafter returned to Damascus University and attended the Islamic Sharī'ah College where she obtained a second degree in Islamic Law.<sup>13</sup>

While state-condoned reports emphasize al-Qubaysī's relationship with Kuftārū, unofficial sources have suggested that she maintained strong ties with other individuals and groups as well, including the traditionalist scholar Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, followers of Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī, public individuals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood,

<sup>11</sup> This biographical information on al-Qubaysī is drawn from Ḥamīdī, "Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysīyyāt"; "Al-Qubaysīyyāt...Ḥarakah Islāmīyyah nisā'īyyah," *Al-Waṭan*; see also "Bada'na min Sūriya," *Al-'Arabīyyah*.

<sup>12</sup> For additional secondary literature on Kuftārū and the role his activities have played in the Syrian landscape, see Leif Stenberg, "Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society," in *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1999), and "Young, Male and Sufi Muslim in the City of Damascus," in *Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Jørgen Bæck Simonsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005); Paul Heck, "Religious Renewal in Syria: The Case of Muhammad al-Habash," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 (2004): 185–207, and "Muhammad al-Habash et le dialogue interreligieux" [Muhammad al-Habash and inter-religious dialogue], in *La Syrie au Présent*, ed. Baudouin Dupret (Paris: Sinbad/Actes Sud, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Ḥamīdī, "Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysīyyāt."

and followers of the late Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Rifā‘ī.<sup>14</sup> The strong endorsement of al-Qubaysī’s activities and scholarly work by prominent traditionalist religious figures like Kuftārū and al-Būṭī has played a pivotal role in the legitimacy she has attained among religious authorities and elites in the Middle East. It is her ability to address the everyday issues of lay women in accessible language that makes her an authority with Syrian women.

Al-Qubaysī eventually moved her activities outside the mosque, into local Damascene homes. Some sources have speculated that this may have had to do with a rivalry between al-Qubaysī and members of the Kuftārū family, however it would be impossible to determine the accuracy of this claim.<sup>15</sup> While no single narrative of her life exists, most reports concur that soon after al-Qubaysī commenced her religious studies, she began recruiting other women to study alongside her as well. According to “Amal,” a young German woman who has studied with Qubaysī teachers, “it was only in Ānisah Munīrah’s generation, in the 1970s, that it started to become more commonplace for women to obtain university degrees in Syria.” She continues, “religious studies could only be pursued with male teachers at that time, and society was incredibly hostile to religious studies, but more so to women studying with men.” This gender barrier was a deterrent to promoting social change, thus, according to Amal, al-Qubaysī started her own study circles for women.

Thus, numerous reports attest, al-Qubaysī recruited a small number of women to commence religious studies with her.<sup>16</sup> They each

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<sup>14</sup> The late Shaykh ‘Abd-al-Karīm al-Rifā‘ī school is today run by his children Sāriyah and Usāmah in the Kafr Sūsa neighborhood. Very little has been written thus far on religious authority figures in modern Syria. For analyses on Sufi brotherhoods and religious authority in Syria, see Weismann, “Sufi Fundamentalism,” “The Shadhiliyya-Darqawiyya”; and Pinto, “Sufism and the Political Economy.” On Sunni traditionalist authority in Syria, see Christmann, “Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader”; Böttcher, “Official Islam.”

<sup>15</sup> Some speculate that the rise of Wafa’a, the daughter of the late Muftī Kuftārū, as a preacher at the Abū Nūr Mosque, and the sharp rivalry between the two women, forced Munīrah to leave the mosque, establish her own path, and gather her followers independently. However, one member of the Kuftārū family is recorded to have said: “on the contrary, Wafa’a was a student of Munīrah and there was a difference in age, exceeding twenty years between the two, and this rules out any rivalry.” Fieldwork and interview with Amal Akbar, December 15, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> This and subsequent details on the early institutional structure of the Qubaysiyyāt is drawn from Akbar, interview with author, December 15, 2009.



specialized in a specific Islamic science—some in Islamic law, others in *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth* studies, and *tajwīd*. Reports state that Ānisah Munīrah herself spent approximately ten years studying under various *shaykhs* in Damascus. However, rather than continuing to invite more students to study with the same teachers, she encouraged her students to begin teaching other women once they completed their studies. Thus, while there were initially four women under her guidance studying Shāfiʿī *fiqh*, the number increased to four hundred studying under her network of teachers. Creating a similar system for every major Islamic science, this had a domino effect, spreading Qubaysī study circles throughout Damascus. Among these students, those women who continued to pursue higher religious training would receive *ijāzah* certifications from their female teachers. While teachers would instruct students of varying levels, al-Qubaysī would designate two or three of her students to continue to study in order to become masters in their disciplines. These masters would move on to write religious textbooks, which would also be funded and published by the movement itself.<sup>17</sup>

From 1982 to 2006, the Qubaysiyyāt taught primarily within the homes of members, using teaching texts they had written and published themselves. Through these study groups, the movement was able to develop small, close-knit networks of committed students who would monitor each other's behavior in terms of maintaining religious, behavioral, and clothing norms, as well as provide spiritual and social support for each other.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, this type of structure not only increased members' commitment to the revivalist movement due to the services they were able to offer on a personal level, but also helped to develop and cultivate future female leadership for the movement. It is the characteristics of the Qubaysiyyāt's organizational structure, leadership, doctrine, and proselytism techniques that I now turn to in order to explain their rise in Syria over the past twenty-five years.

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Amīn, "Fatwa Munṣifah tafsiyyah"; see also al-Sayyid, *Dirāsah shāmilah*; Landis, "Islamic Education in Syria."

<sup>18</sup> On cell-like structures and close-knit groups, and the efficiency they cultivate within Islamist movements, see Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 94.

*The Organization and Operation of the Qubaysīyyāt*

*The Hierarchical Structure of the Qubaysīyyāt*

Similar to Sufi orders, the Qubaysī teaching structure is hierarchical.<sup>19</sup> Each local study circle is placed under the authority of one *ānisah*, or Qubaysī female teacher. This *ānisah* is subordinate to the instructions of an *ānisah* superior to her in authority. According to “Abbās,” a prominent businessman who is a major financial contributor to Qubaysī activities and has met Munīrah al-Qubaysī herself, the Qubaysī organizational structure is similar to a corporation. “Twenty people sit under al-Qubaysī and she gives them instructions,” he says; “each of these twenty individuals has students who in turn have students; like any company that has thirty to forty thousand employees, they have six or seven top managers who recommend the top employees for promotion.”<sup>20</sup> It is the efficient managerial structure and effective results of the Qubaysīyyāt, followers claim, that encourages numerous wealthy donors to contribute repeatedly to the various charitable activities run by the movement.

The growth of the Qubaysīyyāt has not been confined to Syria.<sup>21</sup> When a student leaves Damascus or Syria due to marriage or for other reasons, she can stay in touch with her *ānisah* and through her find members in her new city or country. This connection often facilitates new friendship networks and also allows her to continue her participation and studies without interruption.<sup>22</sup> This global network has also enabled the Qubaysīyyāt to reach out to non-Syrian women, leading to its growth in at least eleven other countries.<sup>23</sup> Sources suggest that while many such outgrowths are directly connected to the Syrian Qubaysīyyāt, other outgrowths may often be known by alternative names. Thus sources speculate that the Siḥriyyāt in Lebanon—

<sup>19</sup> On the efficiency of hierarchical structures especially in terms of their ability to lend support to political movements, often seen in Sufi brotherhoods but also in some Islamist movements, see Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ḥamīdī, “Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysīyyāt.”

<sup>21</sup> On transnational movements such as the Jamāʿat al-Tablīgh, and the political instrumentality of transnational linkages, see Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Akbar, interview with the author; al-Amīn, “Fatwa munṣifah tafsīliyyah.”

<sup>23</sup> Al-Amīn, “Fatwa munṣifah tafsīliyyah”; see also al-Sayyid, *Dirāsah shāmilah*.

followers of Saḥar Ḥalabī—and the Ṭibbiyāt in Jordan—followers of Fādia Ṭabbah—are part of the larger Qubaysī movement.<sup>24</sup>

The growth of the Qubaysiyyāt in Syria is due not only to the movement's hierarchical organizational structure, which enables large and small-scale centralized coordination, but also to their ability to recruit, cultivate, and supply a large number of committed *ānisāt* to run, manage, and promote their *da'wah* projects. It is the recruitment and cultivation of Muslim women leaders as *ānisāt* that I shall discuss next.

### *The Female Preachers of the Qubaysiyyāt*

Unofficial reports claim that many of the higher ranking Qubaysī teachers and preachers come from the elite religious classes of Damascene society, including the wives of traditionalist *shaykhs*. Many observers state that in Syrian society, the strong gendered nature of the local culture creates norms in which women of religious elite status are able to relate to and communicate with women of lower classes, due to their shared conservative religious practices. For Muslim women of middle and elite status, the Qubaysī movement provides the unique and perhaps only opportunity of studying with female religious scholars who hold a similar if not greater level of religious training than their male counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

As one Australian member, “Sahlah,” explained when comparing her experiences studying with male and female teachers:

I used to feel this invisible barrier when I would study with male teachers—I have been taught that even looking into one's teacher's eyes is a form of worship to God. But if you think about it, as a woman, I'm really not allowed to do that because men and women are supposed to lower their gaze and be modest with each other. I mean, do you look at him, or do you not look at him since he's a man? It's so ambiguous—it becomes an impediment to the learning process because, while you are trying to learn, all of these other thoughts are running through the back of your mind. It's hard to learn, and to concentrate, when you're not sure if what you're doing is right or wrong.<sup>26</sup>

According to Sahlah, it wasn't the fact that her teachers were male that was problematic for her, but the fact that being a different gender

<sup>24</sup> Al-Amīn, “Fatwa muṣīfah tafsiyyah.”

<sup>25</sup> Hamidī, “Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysiyyāt”; Khān, interview with the author.

<sup>26</sup> Fieldwork and interview with Sahlah Azīz on February 15, 2009.

confused the learning process. She felt that she was unable to interact openly with or become close to her teachers in the same way that many other male students could. Studying with the Qubaysiyyāt was Sahlah's first experience of being with female teachers who held equally illustrious religious educational backgrounds as her former male teachers.

The opportunity to study with and be mentored by Qubaysī teachers is also appealing to many young Muslim women due to the fact that high-ranking members of the movement are not only perceived to be accomplished in the field of Islamic religious education, but more often than not are also married with children and hold professional degrees in various secular fields of knowledge. As Sahlah emphasized, "these women are not just religious scholars—they are also doctors and engineers."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to this, one of the most unique and striking aspects of the Qubaysiyyāt is the movement's strong encouragement of its members to pursue marriage, as well as secular education and religious knowledge. As one young student relates, "What I found appealing was the fact that they encouraged me to pursue both a religious and secular education. I could be a doctor and I could still retain my traditional certifications in *fiqh*."<sup>28</sup> For many women, the comparative advantage of studying with these female scholars is the ability to relate to their teachers in a way that is not possible with male teachers, and to view their female teachers as role models in not only their scholarship and personal spirituality, but also in their ability to be successful mothers and professionals.<sup>29</sup>

Though not a requirement for membership or leadership in the Qubaysiyyāt, the movement places strong emphasis on religious doctrine encouraging marriage and child-rearing. According to one interviewee, in terms of spouse selection Qubaysī teachers had often stated to her that it would be perfectly fine for women to marry men with less religious knowledge than themselves, as long as their potential husbands observed daily prayers, fasted in the month of Ramaḍān, and aided in the raising of children. The movement also places strong emphasis on being an obedient wife as long as the husband follows the dictates of Islam and provides financially. When asked about

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<sup>27</sup> Azīz, interview with the author.

<sup>28</sup> Fieldwork and interview with Habiba Ahmad on February 16, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Aḥmad, interview.

the possibility of husbands prohibiting wives from continuing their involvement with the movement, the young student mentioned above responded: "if at home you are nice and kind, and if you honor him, and you make him feel like he is the man of the house... your husband will allow you to do whatever you like." For many Qubaysī teachers, observers claim, this is the attitude and method they advocate for obtaining spousal support for their religious activities.<sup>30</sup>

While originating in Syria, the spread of Qubaysī outside Syria, and the international reputation many of their teachers hold, has recruited a diverse group of Arab and non-Arab young women into this growing transnational movement. Most reports state that most non-Syrian Arab students are either Jordanian or Lebanese, while most non-Arabs originate from either Malaysia or Indonesia. Westerners tend to be US, Canadian, or British citizens, the majority being children of Middle Eastern or South Asian immigrants.<sup>31</sup> More recently, the loosening of Syrian government regulations on the Qubaysīyyāt has led to the establishment of secondary schools run by the movement. Sources claim that the Qubaysīyyāt currently run the majority of private secondary schools in Damascus. Many of these schools educate a significant percentage of non-Syrian students as well.<sup>32</sup> The movement has also recently opened a post-graduate *hadith* school for women—approved by the Ministry of Religious Endowments—which runs a six-year program enabling women to memorize the canonical collections of *hadith* and to study advanced Islamic sciences.<sup>33</sup>

The success of the Qubaysīyyāt in Syria is due not only to their hierarchical organizational structure and their surplus of lay female Muslim teachers, but also to their accessible, apolitical message emphasizing spirituality, the acquisition and teaching of religious knowledge, and an investment in charitable activities dedicated to bringing their understanding of Islam to other Muslim women.<sup>34</sup> The fact that Qubaysī teachers have attained high levels of formal religious education in addition to achieving success in their professional careers, and the fact that they have demonstrated a means of actualizing conservative religious practice in public settings, plays a significant role in

<sup>30</sup> Aḥmad, interview.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Amin, "Fatwa muṣṣifāh tafsilīyyah."

<sup>32</sup> Zoepf, "Islamic Revival."

<sup>33</sup> Al-Amin, "Fatwa muṣṣifāh tafsilīyyah"; Zoepf, "Islamic Revival."

<sup>34</sup> Ḥamidī, "Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysīyyāt."

bolstering their religious authority among women of all backgrounds. It is the uniqueness of their message of pursuing “both *dīn* and *dunya*” that I discuss next.

*The Message of the Qubaysīyyāt*

One of the primary reasons why the Qubaysīyyāt have been able to survive within the Syrian political climate, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafī movement, is due to an emphasis in their teachings on individual religious worship and spiritual devotion, as opposed to overt activism. Many students describe practices which would be typical of devotional practices espoused by the government-condoned Naqshbandīyyah-Kuftariyyah Sufi order. More importantly, however, students in the early stages of their training, as well as the lay public audience which many Qubaysī instructors teach, are constantly encouraged to focus on the perfection of Qur’ānic recitation and mastery of basic manuals emphasizing the laws of ritual worship before progressing with more advanced studies. Thus, Faizah, a student of the Qubaysīyyāt, explains that the first text she studied under her Qubaysī teachers concerned Qur’ānic pronunciation and recitation, *Al-Itqān fi-l-Tajwīd al-Qur’ān*.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, she studied Shāfi’ī *fiqh* using the text *Fiqh al-‘Ibadāt* by ‘Ayta Durīyyah, a Qubaysī master instructor in Islamic law.<sup>36</sup> Other students studying from the other four schools of law would use corresponding texts also written by Qubaysī authors. In studying theology, students would study *‘Aqīdat al-Tawhīd min al-Kitāb wa-al-Sunnah*, by Su‘ād Maybar, also a senior Qubaysī teacher and professor at the Ma‘had al-Fath Institute in Damascus.<sup>37</sup>

However, unlike many Sufi orders which advocate the adoption of a purely ascetic lifestyle, according to many students the Qubaysīyyāt emphasize devotion to God through what they consider to be a proper fulfillment of duties to both God and society. Their encouragement of the pursuit of high levels of secular education as well as of religious knowledge is justified on the grounds that both are to be used in the service of God and humanity. Their seemingly apolitical approach to bettering society results in the movement’s public arm primarily

<sup>35</sup> Many of these texts can now be found on websites such as [www.muhammadith.org](http://www.muhammadith.org).

<sup>36</sup> See [www.muhammadith.org](http://www.muhammadith.org).

<sup>37</sup> Ḥamīdī, “Al-Ānisāt al-Qubaysīyyāt.” See also al-Amin, “Fatwa munṣifah tafsilīyyah”; and [www.muhammadith.org](http://www.muhammadith.org).

emphasizing personal worship, *da'wah*, as well as charity and service towards the poor.

The claimed balance struck by the Qubaysīyyāt between religious and secular duties is perhaps best illustrated by an experience related by “Barakah Johnson,” a British-Pakistani student, in her attempts to study *ḥadīth* with a Qubaysī teacher in Syria during her summer vacation from university studies in the UK, while at the same time looking after her three children and visiting family members in northern Syria. According to Barakah, upon informing her *ānisah* of the city in which she would be residing while in Syria, she was placed in contact with a specific teacher in that city, Ānisah Maryam. According to Barakah:

I would call her to set up an appointment. Ānisah Maryam was very young—perhaps thirty or thirty-one. But she was a pediatric surgeon and had already established her own private practice. I would go into her clinic and while she would be looking at patients, she would schedule my appointment for *ḥadīth* study with her. In the same room in which she had been receiving patients earlier in the day, she would teach me using classical *ḥadīth* sources. This young woman was not only a surgeon—she had also memorized the entire Qur’ān as well as the *ḥadīth* collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Ānisah Maryam, in my point of view, had the best of both worlds—*dīn* and *dunya*.

### *The Da'wah of the Qubaysīyyāt*

According to the leadership of the Qubaysīyyāt, the movement’s primary goal is to provide religious education and *da'wah* to Muslim women; their *da'wah* efforts and recruiting strategies have also been a large factor in their success in Syria. The movement’s strong advocacy that its followers pursue both religious and secular education promotes greater financial independence among its membership; this allows members not only to contribute to funding the movement’s activities using their personal financial resources but also enables teachers to teach free of charge in poorer neighborhoods in Damascus. The use of informal networks as the primary means of teaching and learning, instead of the establishment of formal institutions, is an additional asset which allows the Qubaysīyyāt to expand into neighborhoods and enclaves which would otherwise not have access to religious education. In view of women’s reduced access to educational institutions, this also helps them to expand their teachings to women who would otherwise not have attended educational programming. The movement, according to students, also offers services to the poor and disadvantaged by

providing free literacy programs, and helps unemployed women find employment opportunities.<sup>38</sup>

The Qubaysīyyāt also make religious education accessible to the masses and wider public by publishing works for differing audiences.<sup>39</sup> One set of texts, written by senior level teachers like Samar al-‘Ashā’, ‘Ayta Durīyyah, and Samīrah al-Zāyid, consists of multi-volume and encyclopedic scholarly works in the areas of *sīrah*, *qirā’āt*, *ḥadīth* commentary, and *fiqh*; these are accessible primarily to advanced students of religious knowledge as well as religious scholars and specialists.<sup>40</sup> An example of such a work is Samīrah al-Zāyid’s *Al-Jāmi’ fi-al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, a six-volume encyclopedic work which al-Būṭī and others have claimed is the most comprehensive reference text on *sīrah* literature written in the modern period. The second set of texts are works in the areas of *sīrah* and *fiqh* that are less detailed in nature, and which are aimed as teaching texts in Islamic universities, secondary schools, and for the secular educated elite.<sup>41</sup> The final set includes short pamphlets on areas of popular interest or daily practice for the masses on topics like weddings, beautification, marriage, and child-rearing.<sup>42</sup>

The movement’s ability to reach out to multiple audiences using a variety of media contributes to the widespread usage of their texts and resources in Damascus and elsewhere. Their texts can be found online for mass consumption as reference texts on sites like [muhaddith.org](http://muhaddith.org), and for use as instructional texts in institutes like Maḥad al-Fath, a

<sup>38</sup> This information on the reach of the Qubaysīyyāt is drawn from interview and fieldwork with Barakah Johnson, January 2, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*; and Jack Goody, ed. *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). As these authors argue, print has created new forms of community and has transformed authority and social boundaries, defeating conventional assumptions of a great divide separating the literate and nonliterate, and the tribal and urban nonliterate. Print has had a transformative value in the development of national and religious transnational identities; the means by which the Qubaysīyyāt have employed it in order to reach broader audiences, particularly women who often do not have access to formal learning, is an example of this.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Amīn, “Fatwa munṣifah tafsilīyyah.”

<sup>41</sup> Al-Amīn, “Fatwa munṣifah tafsilīyyah”; an example of this would be: Su‘ād Maybar, *Aqīdat al-tawḥīd min al-kitāb wa-al-sunnah* (Damascus: al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Ilmīyyah, 1987). A *mukhtaṣar*, or summary of Samīrah al-Zāyid’s *Al-Jāmi’ fi-al-sīrah al-nabawīyyah* has also been published as a two-volume set for wider audiences.

<sup>42</sup> An example of this would be *Al-Manhal* (no author, n.d.), which is a small book outlining the basics of the Prophetic biography and important basic *ḥadīth* and supplications for daily life.



branch of al-Azhar University in Damascus. Most importantly, however, their multi-volume works are consistently used as resources on television programs and as reference texts in educational institutions in various parts of the Middle East. While the claims regarding the quality of their scholarship as articulated by religious authorities are clearly normative in nature and come with religio-political agendas, such endorsements do point to the widespread usage of their works and the relative legitimacy they hold within the wider network of Sunnī traditionalist and Islamist religious authorities in the Middle East.

*Tacit Political Bargaining, the Syrian State, and Syria's Religious Actors: The Success of the Qubaysīyyāt in the Public Sphere*<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, the Qubaysī movement has as many critics as it does supporters. Modernist intellectuals often point to the seemingly religious conservative practices which the movement propagates among its constituents as working against women's societal and economic emancipation and mobility. Condoning strict conservative dress codes and gender-segregated religious education, critics argue, only discourages women from actively participating in the public sphere. Thus they are viewed by some as a threatening force promoting a new kind of Islamism. In contrast, others state that their close affiliation with government-condoned institutions makes the Qubaysīyyāt an additional group, among others, which uses religious rhetoric to propagate an apolitical, pacifist Islam that can be easily controlled by the state.

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<sup>43</sup> In *Muslim Politics*, Eickelman and Piscatori suggest understanding relations between religious groups and state actors as being more than merely relations of confrontation and protest. Rather, "competitors, including the government, engage in tacit bargaining; governments prefer to obscure the fact that they are dealing with Islamist groups in this way, but there is no denying that they do so; the implication is that tacit bargaining with Islamist groups, particularly if such a group is highly influential, as opposed to a policy of constant repression, creates a form of short term stability, even though this may not be desired ultimately" (134). As I explain in this section, the Syrian state has proceeded with such a relationship of tacit bargaining with the Qubaysīyyāt in order to maintain legitimacy and authority among the increasingly religious masses. See also C. R. Mitchell, *The Structure of International Conflict* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Ghād Auda, "The Normalization of the Islamic Movement in Egypt from the 1970s to the Early 1990s," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, ed. Martin E. Marty et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 374–412. In this section I also draw from theoretical literature on theories of religious markets in the context of religious liberty and repression. See Anthony Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Despite normative claims of support or criticism, what is clear is that the Qubaysiyyāt have been able to expand their operations vastly in Syria over the past three decades. The Syrian state's strict repression of religiously oriented activities and movements from the 1980s onwards increased the costs of many religious movements to function within a public context. Forced to operate in secret, many movements eventually restricted the size and breadth of their activities. Fear of government crackdown, as well as an increasingly limited supply of financial and human capital also led to such movements' decreasing member recruitment.

However, as the Syrian political regime gained increased stability and security in its political tenure, government officials demonstrated varying treatment towards religious movements. Religious movements demonstrating themselves to be a clear political threat to the regime were prioritized in the state's policies on religious repression. Thus, movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, often faced the brunt of government crackdowns due to their overt activist and political agendas.<sup>44</sup> In addition, individuals propagating Salafism within the Syrian borders were often repressed as well, due to their critiques of 'Alawī Shī'ism, their powerful regional connections to other Arab states, and their potential to garner immense financial and human resources in an effort to mobilize the masses.

In comparison, the women-led, apolitical Qubaysī movement, according to many observers, has largely been viewed as a low priority threat in less need of government surveillance. Qubaysī teachers seemingly encouraged religious study that was not overtly threatening in nature. Encouraging students towards the study of Qur'ānic recitation, ritual worship, and ascetic practices, the Qubaysī curriculum—at least the parts geared toward lay Syrian audiences—has often been described as avoiding anything which would suggest an overt political agenda. This, combined with the movement's emphasis on development and charitable activities, such as offering literacy programs and social services, reduced financial pressure on the state to offer similar services to its citizenry.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the movement's hierarchical

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<sup>44</sup> For background on the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, see Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik*; Lobmeyer, *Opposition*; Reissner, *Ideologie*; and 'Abd Allāh, *Islamic Struggle*.

<sup>45</sup> In *Muslim Politics*, Eickelman and Piscatori discuss the emergence of social welfare activism as becoming an integral part of *da'wa* activities sponsored by religious

structure allowed for efficient control of members deemed to be exhibiting behavior that could be a threat to the movement's survival within the Syrian political climate. Such activities, and the seemingly apolitical nature of the Qubaysī message, contributed to their ability to avoid state repression of their religious activities.

The fact that the state did crack down on other religious movements and groups, however, allowed the Qubaysīyyāt a distinct advantage in meeting the demand for religious educational instruction and publications of the Syrian female Muslim population. This context gave the Qubaysīyyāt an opportunity to capture a large share of the Syrian population, many of whom may have joined other groups had the religious market been more competitive.

Along with government support, the fact that the movement invested in developing *da'wah* literature which engaged *multiple audiences*, made use of a variety of proselytizing techniques, encouraged its members to develop their own financial and human capital by pursuing secular education, and developed small interconnected support networks offering a variety of social services for its members, has allowed the movement to enjoy rapid global expansion without heavily relying on external material or financial resources. Such a structure has also led to a strong sense of commitment by members, perhaps encouraged by the high return in material and nonmaterial incentives that members receive by being part of the movement.

State pressure has indeed impacted the way the Qubaysīyyāt developed in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the fact that the movement was able to garner support among the masses has also given them the power to negotiate a space within the public sphere. While for three decades Qubaysī activities were largely conducted in private homes, in 2006 the state changed many of its policies, permitting the Qubaysīyyāt to preach in public spaces including Damascene mosques. The regime, seeking to entrench its position with respect to a population that is increasingly religious, decided to try and obtain ideological compliance by officially recognizing the Qubaysīyyāt as a legal religious entity, rather than rely on political repression. The

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movements and political parties. This can be an important way for such movements to garner authority among the masses, especially in cases in which the government is unable to provide equivalent resources. This also gives governments incentives to partake in negotiative relations with such groups given the resources they are offering their citizenry. See Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 33.

impact of such “tacit political bargaining” has been greater visibility and rapid expansion of Qubaysī operations throughout Damascus:<sup>46</sup> they are now largely considered to be the most visibly influential religious movement in Damascus.

*The Qubaysīyyāt beyond Syria*

The involvement of Syrian women in Damascus with the Qubaysīyyāt can be understood even outside a religious context: while they may be perceived to be propagating conservative religious practices, they are also offering religious goods and services which contribute to members’ upward economic mobility. Literacy programs, social services, social networks, and effective religious education catering to multiple audiences allow women who join the movement greater potential to actively participate in the public sphere. A woman’s acquisition of skills for the purposes of employment, or access to support networks encouraging her own educational advancement, can increase her overall ability to take advantage of resources previously accessible to those of more elite status.

The Qubaysīyyāt in many Western countries, however, have had a seemingly opposite impact. Women who may have had such secular opportunities open to them—ones which Syrian women in Damascus are being trained to take advantage of through the movement’s activities—have largely turned away from such options in the process of inducting themselves into the movement. In addition, as opposed to their participation increasing their chances of re-introducing themselves into the public sphere as individuals who are even more qualified to take advantage of elite opportunities, North American women who have joined the Qubaysīyyāt have largely disengaged from the public sphere and have left behind their affiliations with religious organizations propagating an agenda of pluralism and civic engagement.

Due to changes in immigration policy, the 1980s witnessed increasing immigration from the Muslim world to the United States, particularly from the Middle East and South Asia. This population influx, among other factors, was part of a chain of events which led to the rapid growth of Muslim religious institutions and organizations in the

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<sup>46</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 33.

United States in an attempt to meet the varying needs of the national Muslim community. The leaders and members of these organizations were often able to appeal to governments, organizations, and endowments in their countries of origin to finance these institutions. Such generous funding allowed these organizations to invest in the infrastructural capital and human resources required to manage their affairs. Thus, young men and, in very few cases—young women—who were recruited to lead and participate actively in these organizations in the 1980s had at their disposal vast resources and staff to manage the events which their organizations hosted.

After the Persian Gulf War, however, changes in US foreign and domestic policy led to the prohibition of foreign funding for such organizations. In attempts to continue to meet the needs of thousands of constituents in terms of social services, political advocacy, and religious education, many of these organizations faced the daunting challenge of continuing to operate despite fears of bankruptcy. In light of this, many internal offices and branches which had previously provided support staff were cut due to lack of funding. Volunteer support in terms of finances and management became one of the primary means by which many of these groups maintained their existence. Often barely escaping bankruptcy, many of these organizations increasingly relied on volunteer leadership, often untrained, in order to manage their affairs.

The post-9/11 climate brought further challenges. Put in the situation of responding to an elevated state of emergency in terms of demonstrating support for US policies on terrorism while at the same time meeting the needs of their constituents, the resources of such organizations often became even more depleted. At the same time, in response to increased scrutiny regarding Muslim religious practices, many of these organizations found themselves responding to elevated attacks regarding alleged Muslim American links to terrorist groups. Along with this came attacks on, among other things, Islam's discriminatory treatment towards women.

"Some of these organizations have always encouraged civic engagement and the need to advocate for religious pluralism and tolerance," Sana, an interviewee, told me. "But after 9/11, this agenda became even more important; organizations which had previously only touched upon these issues now made them front and center; organizations which advocated against civic engagement increasingly moderated towards this agenda, or lost so much membership due to

fears of deportation or accusations of terrorism that many actually did shut down.” “But,” she explains, “this meant that other issues of high importance became minimized.”

The issue of women’s participation in religious leadership was one issue among others that often became sidelined, according to Sana. While organizations did expend energy to respond to attacks regarding Islam’s position on women on a *rhetorical* level, many of these organizations were unable or chose not to expend resources in investing in the necessary infrastructural support required to support female religious leadership. This, some claim, was due to the fact that resources were being invested into responding to claims regarding links to terrorism at large. The issue of women, from the perspective of many leaders, was important enough to be addressed rhetorically; it was also important to the degree that many organizations felt pressure to accelerate plans to integrate women into leadership positions. However the issue was not enough of a priority, comparatively speaking, to also invest in the infrastructure required to support new female leaders.<sup>47</sup>

Young women were at times brought into leadership positions within such organizations. While many continued to work within the organization and describe having had largely positive experiences, dozens left or resigned, because of the extreme pressures they faced due to lack of infrastructural support within their organizations. According to “Hibah,” another young female activist, joining the Qubaysiyyāt became one of the most common alternatives among her colleagues:

For so many women even though the Qubaysiyyāt advocated for what others perceived to be an extremely conservative lifestyle, they offered a certain type of open access to all those things you had been told growing up were virtuous and worthy of having in a religious context. Those were some of the very same things that as women, we had less access to or were told we should not do, or at the very least, were extremely difficult to access even in many of our own religious communities and associations. For the first time, I for example was able to study with religious teachers who were as trained as the ones my male colleagues have had access to. But I didn’t have to worry about the ambiguity that often came with interacting with Muslim men, nor did I have to deal with the pressure of isolation and lack of support. For a lot of women who have wanted to pursue religious education, the best option was to study with the Qubaysiyyāt simply because at that time *there were no*

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<sup>47</sup> Hūd, interview.

*other options.* The benefits in light of what she wanted to pursue in life, far outweighed the costs.<sup>48</sup>

Financial resources, foreign affairs, and domestic policy all had an impact on the way many of these organizations transitioned and progressed. The sheer force of the lack of infrastructure took its toll on both men and women who participated. While young men had a variety of options from which to choose, the Qubaysiyyāt, despite the controversy surrounding its members, became the best option for women seeking mentorship and religious education.

### *Conclusion*

The religious authority that the Qubaysī movement has been able to garner in the Middle East can be attributed to a number of factors. The fact that Qubaysī religious authority figures have been able to demonstrate their strong competence in traditionalist tracks of advanced religious sciences both in their publications and educational programs, promote higher secular education for women, and adhere to relatively conservative modes of outward religious practice, are all factors which have contributed to their ability to maintain authority among both the female masses and the scholarly traditionalist elite in Syria and beyond. While many revivalist movements prescribe an attainment of the spiritual by an abandonment of the material and secular, Qubaysī religious activities have largely promoted women's upward socioeconomic mobility and participation in Syrian civil society through their emphasis on pursuing all forms of useful knowledge, both sacred and secular, and through their strong religious support networks.

The success of the movement in Syria can also be attributed to the greater level of religious freedom they enjoy in comparison to potential religious competitors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups. Facing little religious competition due to state crackdowns on movements which appear to be more politically threatening, the female-led apolitical Qubaysī movement has been able to enjoy a monopoly over female religious education. In addition, the fact that the movement invests in producing Arabic teaching texts which target

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<sup>48</sup> Fieldwork and interview with Hibah Nāz on January 30, 2009.

multiple audiences among both the lay and elite populations has contributed to their unmatched popularity.

What works to mobilize women in Syria, however, does not necessarily function in a similar manner in other countries. As has been seen through research and interviews, participation in Qubaysī activities has often led to an opposite reaction among young Muslim women in terms of stimulating upward mobility and participation in the public sphere. Nonetheless, due to the lack of opportunities for Muslim women in many Western countries to pursue higher levels of religious education, participation in Qubaysī activities—due to the open access that women are given through the movement to higher levels of traditionalist training in the Islamic sciences—has proven to be an attractive option for many young women in the past decade.

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SECTION II

ESTABLISHING FEMALE AUTHORITY:  
LIMITATIONS, SPACES, AND STRATEGIES FOR  
TEACHING AND PREACHING



## INTRODUCTION TO SECTION II

Section II explores how Muslim women expand upon the opportunities highlighted in the previous section to establish themselves as religious authorities. The chapters in this section reveal the limitations put on female teaching and preaching in many contexts, as well as the ways in which female leaders take advantage of alternative spaces, new institutions, and shifts in historical memory to overcome some of these limitations.

As argued in the volume Introduction, the relatively decentralized structure of Islamic leadership presents both opportunities and challenges to women seeking religious authority. On the one hand, the lack of a single arbiter controlling entry to the field—at least in many Sunnī contexts—raises the possibility of creating alternative paths to authority, a potential further increased by the emergence of new types of Islamic leadership throughout the twentieth century. On the other hand, this decentralization increases the importance of being seen as a qualified, legitimate authority by other religious leaders, students, and the general public, a process that often relies on apparent conformity to the status quo.

As a result of these dynamics, female Islamic leaders can find themselves expected to conform to the teachings of prominent male authorities, to behave and dress differently from men in public, and to limit their teaching and preaching to female-only audiences; they are often also excluded from the formal and informal bodies that oversee religious teaching and institutional administration. Core religious spaces, such as the mosque and *madrasah*, and the leadership positions associated with them, can be especially intertwined with maintenance of this status quo.

The chapters in this section explore the decisions made by women and female leaders in the face of these constraints. Several chapters discuss women who have circumvented the limitations of core religious spaces or official religious positions by developing new spaces, platforms, and roles. Other chapters discuss who takes the lead in the absence of highly trained female leaders, especially in Muslim-minority communities in Europe where the needs of female students can contrast sharply with the teachings of male scholars trained abroad.

The first chapter in this section provides an example of how gendered social norms impact the ability of women to exercise authority as Islamic teachers. Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey discuss the *ustānīs*, or female instructors, teaching in the girls' sections of a rural *madrāsah* in Bijnor district in north India, and their subordination to their male colleagues. *Ustānīs* successfully exercise authority in the classroom due to their knowledge of relevant bodies of knowledge, although only one of their subjects had studied the Islamic sciences, Arabic, and Farsi at a high level. The men—due to their higher educational qualifications and the strict gender separation inherent in the *pardah* norms of the region—solidly control the administration of the *madrāsah* and direct more of its resources towards male sections, with the result that the *ustānīs* are compelled to teach their female students in overcrowded and inferior classrooms. Finally, the *ustānīs*—as a minority within a minority—are not in a position to improve the marginalized status of the Indian Muslim community.

The authors note further that the teachers' goal was not to prepare their female students to be Islamic experts, but to imbue in them a basic education and the polished manners of the urban middle classes which could, in turn, increase their prospects on the marriage market. The *ustānīs* themselves modeled these norms by maintaining *pardah* norms, unobtrusive body language, and deferential language in front of men and older women. When successful—and the gap between village and urban lifestyles and priorities made success difficult—the end result was the substitution of unrefined rural patriarchy for a more genteel version, and the perpetuation of significant knowledge gaps between genders in the religious sphere.

The next chapter continues our discussion of the limitations placed on female Islamic leaders, albeit in the very different context of the Netherlands. Nathal Dessing's survey of Dutch Muslim women's activities—organized through mosques, local women's organizations, and larger national groups—suggests that the ability of Dutch Muslim women to establish themselves as religious authorities is inherently limited, even though many are very active religiously. Their activities focus not on establishing female authority, but instead on what Saba Mahmood describes as "the realization of the pious self." Female religious activities provide Dutch women with access to knowledge, a chance to socialize, and the opportunity to integrate Islamic activities into their routine.

With the exception of one explicitly feminist group, the subjects profiled in the chapter remain reluctant to take responsibility for determining the parameters of their individual practice of Islam through *ijtihad*, or application of independent reasoning. Instead they sought opinions from scholarly specialists, which left them dependent on the interpretations of men. However, the wide variety of interpretations of Islam available makes it necessary for women to decide which interpretation to follow—a process that is done on an individual basis, often based on either the degree of support from the Qurʾān and *sunnah*—and whether the interpretation is sufficiently moderate to allow participation in wider Dutch society. Dessing argues that future study of European Islam should focus on the processes through which individuals choose between the wide range of available interpretations to determine the parameters of their individual practice of Islam.

The next two chapters shed light on how choosing to be active inside or outside of male-dominated religious establishments affects the limitations placed on the authority and impact of female Islamic leadership. First, Nick Micinski illustrates how official leadership positions provide both advantages and limitations to female Muslims by contrasting the authority, activities, and impact of two female leaders in Kazan, Russia. He uses the concepts of ‘invited’ and ‘invented’ space to differentiate between the official position offered to Nalia Ziganshina by the Tartarstan Islamic Spiritual Board to run the Union of Muslim Women, and the unofficial space created by Almira Adiatullina for her civil society association, the Social Organization of Muslim Women. The chapter discusses the similarities and differences in how they establish and protect their authority, specifically the importance of their religious education, social standing, charisma, and personal fulfillment of religious piety and cultural traditions. Both women base their social authority as national advocates for Muslim women on religious authority amassed as mosque instructors and further reinforced by their pious dress and demeanor.

Ziganshina’s official position provides her with a platform to promote issues important to her—for instance, the Miss Muslim pageant, which aims to promote explicitly Islamic models for female beauty and activities. But this position means that she is not free to dispute the male-dominance of religious interpretation and administrative affairs at the Spiritual Board. Adiatullina’s lack of official position means that she must work hard to mobilize grassroots support in mosques and the wider community for her initiatives and activities. Her lack

of affiliation, however, means that she is able to publicly challenge the decisions of government and religious authorities. She has campaigned for the right for women to wear headscarves in identification photographs and to ban billboards with scantily clad women, a beer festival, and rock concerts from the area surrounding Kazan's main mosque. Micinski's study further documents the role played by Muslim women leaders in rebuilding Muslim communities across the former Soviet Union.

Next, Catharina Raudvere's chapter presents an overview of the changing conditions for Muslim women's religious activism in Bosnia since the 1990s. She contrasts the instruction given by formally trained women in mosque spaces controlled by the national Islamic Community with the activities of local associations and networks that focus on basic religious instruction and social welfare programs. Women rarely achieve influential positions in the former, but successfully assert themselves against the hegemony of conservative Islamic interpretations within the latter. A training manual produced by a local NGO provides a window into efforts to provide theological arguments in support of gender equality. Also part of the picture are women who fulfill more traditional female leadership positions—for instance, *bulas*—in private and semi-private spaces. Raudvere notes that the complex role religion plays in Bosnia today has made pious women stand out as both keepers and transmitters of religious knowledge as well as active agents formulating expressions of contemporary spirituality. Muslim women with leading roles within their networks navigate between stagnated traditionalism and despised innovation, and between private and public spaces.

The final four chapters discuss how female religious leaders have been able to leverage factors such as space, unique qualifications, and shifts in historical memory to overcome some of the limitations described above. The first three chapters also address the authority—social, religious, or a blend of the two—exercised by women without extensive Islamic education or a formal religious leadership position.

Petra Bleisch Bouzar's chapter reveals how a Swiss women's association has distanced itself from the limitations of male control by establishing itself as a legally independent association. Her study presents an innovative, interaction-centered approach for the study of leadership in European female Islamic associations that accounts for the fact that their leaders are often self-taught, yet their members do not automatically accept the authority of male scholars.



The women of this association—despite their lack of formal religious training—judge the male scholars invited to teach them not only on their religious qualifications, but also on how they treat Muslim women personally and interpretively. Significant parts of the association's basic instruction in religious thought and practice are run by women presenting knowledge they have acquired through self-study or experience. These leaders exercise 'informal authority' based on knowledge from a wide variety of sources, including various media, institutions, and individuals. The women in the lessons recognized as authorities not only those women with knowledge of basic beliefs and skills (for instance, knowing the Qur'ān and *sunnah* in Arabic), but also women who understood more practically how to live as a Muslim in Switzerland.

The male domination of Swiss mosques meant that access to non-mosque space—generally a flat rented by the association—was an important part of maintaining independence from the mosque and male interpretations of Islamic texts. The ability of women to register legally as an association assists greatly in their efforts to play a role in the surrounding community, especially in their ability to act as mediators between Muslims and the rest of Swiss society.

Els Vanderwaeren's chapter further develops the concept of informal female Islamic authority in her study of educated young Muslim women of Moroccan descent in Flanders and their construction of female Islamic authority during living-room meetings. Her informants, all of whom self-identified as "emancipated," feel that the established version of Islam is a cultural artifact that has diverged from an earlier, more just (*'adl*), form of Islam. These women have realized accordingly that their search for religious knowledge cannot rely solely on established religious authorities.

The chapter analyzes the mechanisms through which these women establish female religious authority during small meetings held in participants' homes where they formulate and disseminate religious interpretations on very practical daily life issues. The chapter explores how the respondents create Islamic knowledge by using Islamic instruments (like *ijtihād* or *qiyās*) to back up their ideas about a more 'just' Islamic way of life. Significantly, these women insist they have the right to individually choose and develop their own interpretations of Islam, often based on their knowledge about how Islam is practiced locally in diaspora communities. Therefore, these women contribute to the pluralization and democratization of European Islamic authority.

This development points towards the potential for social change at the grassroots level and re-conceptualization of religious authority by young female Muslims.

The next chapter, written by Petra Kuppinger, presents studies of three public women leaders in Stuttgart, Germany who blur the line between social and religious authority and leadership. These women contribute considerably to the construction of the Muslim public sphere through their work as mediators in mosque and non-mosque spaces, the wider Muslim community, and especially in the larger urban public sphere.

Kuppinger's first case involves a woman who runs, on a volunteer basis, large mosque programs for women and children. This woman was invited by an Arabic-speaking *imām* to translate in mosque lessons for German-speaking women, an activity that leads to her mediating between the culture of the male *imām* and that of the German Muslim women, and that is an example of the blurring of the lines between social and religious leadership. Next, she discusses a young pious woman who runs a discussion group on Islamic topics for her female peers, yet specifically chose to run this group outside the mosque because of the restrictions the mosque space would place on what they could discuss and do, and the difficulty they would have attracting young Muslimahs who were not already knowledgeable about Islam. The final case looks at the social and religious authority of a university student formally asked by the mosque to co-coordinate, along with the mosque *imām*, a mosque-based lesson group for girls. The girls looked to her for counsel and saw her as a role model, though she would refer complex theological questions to the *imām*.

In this chapter, Kuppinger argues that studies of women who lead and mediate need to take into account their activities in a variety of settings, and that examining female leadership both inside and beyond mosques illustrates the roles that women take in negotiating and maneuvering within a public sphere that is often hostile to their concerns. These cases show the ways in which female Muslims in Europe have developed a variety of spaces and platforms where they can forge their own ways to practice their religion and take part in wider European society.

In the final chapter of this section, Matthew Pierce discusses a case of historical reinterpretation that supports religious leadership for Muslim women, and demonstrates how constructions of authority can be based not only on knowledge of Islamic texts, but also on ref-

erence to the example set by historical figures. Pierce discusses how the memory of Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' has undergone a discursive shift from the reserved, obedient domestic figure that appears in classical accounts to the proactive, self-confident figure in contemporary Shī'ī accounts. He traces this shift to the 1970s and specifically to the work of 'Alī Shari'atī, who presents Fāṭimah as a role model for women who did not identify entirely with either modern or traditional models of womanhood. Shari'atī's redefinition not only casts Fāṭimah as a strong woman in control of her destiny, but also defines Fāṭimah not as a daughter, wife, or mother—that is in terms of her relationships with men—but specifically in terms of her own qualities and attributes. Since Shari'atī's account, numerous other Shī'ī scholars have expanded upon this account of Fāṭimah's life, with some using her example as evidence that women can hold significant religious authority. Most notably, Pierce explains how contemporary legacies of Fāṭimah inspired the religious scholarship and leadership of Aminah al-Ṣadr (Bint al-Hudá), one of the most significant Shī'ī female scholars of the late twentieth century.

The chapters in Section II demonstrate that many female Islamic leaders have been able to mitigate the impact of constraints placed on their leadership through use of alternative spaces and roles, and deployment of particular historiographies. However, the significance of these limitations in many contexts, especially Muslim-majority ones, must not be underestimated. As the chapters in Section III demonstrate, the impact and influence of Islamic leaders is linked to the audiences which recognize the legitimacy of their claims to authority and accept their ideas and practices.



## CHAPTER 2.1

### LEADING BY EXAMPLE? WOMEN MADRASAH TEACHERS IN RURAL NORTH INDIA

Patricia Jeffery  
Roger Jeffery  
Craig Jeffrey

And it is also written in the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*, these are the words of the *pāk Qur'ān*: “*Tālīmūl Qur'ān ta'ālam, Alāmūl Qur'ān ta'ālam.*” Its meaning is that whoever has read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* themselves, they should certainly teach it to others. You also obtain *ṣavāb* [reward] from teaching. You will receive as much *nekī* [reward for virtue] according to the number of times the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* will be recited and taught. . . . We can obtain *nekī*, without any hard work, without doing anything. Whenever we read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*, then we shall speak these *harfe-muqatta'at* [separate letters, that is *alif-lām-mīm* at the beginning of the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*]. When we teach, then we ourselves shall also say them. In that way, we can obtain *nekī* many times. We shall teach others while we read. That is why it is necessary to learn goodness and to teach goodness. Whoever has read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* themselves should teach others to read it too. (Aisha, Begawala *madrasah* teacher, March 20, 2002)<sup>1</sup>

#### *Introduction*

Muslims are contemporary India's largest religious minority, comprising about 13 percent of the total population in 2001.<sup>2</sup> They are unevenly distributed geographically, and in some areas—especially Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar and West Bengal in the north, and Kerala in the south—Muslims are a substantial minority. About a quarter

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Urdu by the first author. All personal names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The Economic and Social Research Council (Grant R000238495), the Ford Foundation, and the Royal Geographical Society funded research by all three authors in 2000–2002. None of these agencies bears any responsibility for what we have written here. The first two authors have conducted research in the district since 1982. We thank our research assistants, Swaleha Begum, Shaila Rais, Chhaya Sharma, and Manjula Sharma, and those in Bijnor who have helped us over the years. We also thank participants in the Muslim Women Leaders workshop, especially Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

of India's Muslims live in UP, where they accounted for around 18 percent of the population in 2001 (over thirty million). Within UP, too, Muslims are unevenly spread: several districts in western UP have Muslim-majority towns and sizeable numbers of rural Muslims. As with the population at large, regional and rural/urban differences are notable: the large metropolitan cities—such as Mumbai and Delhi—contrast markedly with Lucknow, UP's state capital and the historical centre of urbane elite Muslim culture in South Asia, and even more so with the *qaṣba* towns of western UP and their rural hinterlands where we conducted our research. Our project in Bijnor district (some 160 km northeast of Delhi) explored parents' educational strategies to enhance their children's prospects. The research was largely qualitative and based mainly on semi-structured interviews with villagers, and with teachers and managers in secondary schools and in twenty *madrasahs* in Bijnor town and nearby villages. Ethnographic observations were also employed.

This paper focuses on the *ustānīs* (women teachers) employed by a *madrasah* in rural Bijnor district, where a central aim of the *madrasah's* educational regime was to inculcate habits of bodily cleanliness, demure manners, and refined speech appropriate to the good Muslim. As they tried to transform their pupils from illiterate and uncouth villagers (*jāhil dihātī*) into young people able to perform the social graces and courtesies (*adab*) of the urbane (*kḥush akḥlāq*), the *ustānīs* and their male colleagues alike deployed contrasts that were heavily freighted with value judgments: between the cultured poise and well-bred polish of the urban middle classes and the ill-bred and coarse vulgarity of loutish rustics devoid of civilization. Similar imaginaries are common among north Indian urbanites—indeed, they figured prominently in our interviews with schoolteachers, who were mostly upper-caste Hindus. The rustic is not associated with charming rural idylls: rather, it is devalued, and even perceived as dangerous and in need of eradication.

The *ustānīs'* task was also deeply gendered and they dreamed of cultivating in their rural pupils forms of femininity compatible with genteel domesticity—in other words, of replacing rustic patriarchy with urbane patriarchy. Through the *ustānīs'* own demeanor, the girls in their charge could observe embodied examples of urbane female behavior to supplement the texts they studied in the formal curriculum. In this sense, the *ustānīs* were trying to 'lead by example.' Yet, we argue, the *ustānīs'* authority was severely delimited. The male *madrasah* staff generally had higher formal qualifications—especially

in Islamic subjects—and *purdah* practices further circumscribed the *ustānīs*' capacity to influence how the *madrasah* was run. And the *ustānīs*' efforts to reform the girls in their charge were continually challenged by their pupils' young age and poor rural backgrounds, and by large class sizes.

The vast majority of UP's population lives in the rural areas, and issues germane to Muslim girls' education elsewhere in the state are similar to what we describe here. Nevertheless, our paper explores a specific context, and should not be read as representative of the situation throughout India or South Asia more generally. Islamic practices are socially embedded and profiles of gender differentiation are regionally specific. In some places in South Asia, boarding *madrasahs* for girls have enabled women teachers to attain positions of moderate authority.<sup>3</sup> Equally, women sometimes play significant roles in the Tablighī Jamā'at.<sup>4</sup> More informally, women also lead all-women study groups.<sup>5</sup> And some women play more publicly visible roles, for instance in relation to the reform of Muslim Personal Law in India.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005), 214–23; Mareike Jule Winkelmann, *From Behind the Curtain: A Study of a Girls' Madrasa in India* (Amsterdam: ISIM/Amsterdam University Press, 2005); Mareike Jule Winkelmann, "Everyday Life in a Girls' Madrasah in Delhi," in *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India: Essays on Education in a Changing Global Context*, ed. Radhika Chopra and Patricia Jeffery (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 160–77.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Daly Metcalf, "Women and Men in a Contemporary Pietist Movement: The Case of the Tablighi Jama'at," in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (New York: Routledge, 1998), 107–21. The Tablighi Jamā'at is a missionary movement founded in 1926 in north India that directs most of its preaching and proselytizing at Muslims considered in need of self-reformation and renewal. See Barbara Daly Metcalf, "Living Hadith in the Tablighi Jama'at," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (1993): 584–608; and "'Remaking Ourselves': Islamic Self-Fashioning in a Global Movement of Spiritual Renewal," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 706–25; Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at, 1920–2000: A Cross-country Comparative Study* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Farzana Haniffa, "Piety as Politics amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 347–75; Maimuna Huq, "Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh: The Politics of 'Belief' among Islamist Women," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 457–88; and Elora Shehabuddin, "Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh: Women, Democracy and the Transformation of Islamist Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 577–603.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Vatak, "Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim Women Activists and the Reform of Muslim Personal Law," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 489–518.

In some contexts, then, Muslim women achieve positions of greater influence and authority than the *ustānīs* whom we discuss here.

### *Madrasahs in North India*

The *ustānīs* and their apparently cloistered *madrasah* workplaces must first be located within the wider context of UP, of gender politics, communal politics (or the politics of religious community), and of education provision in general.

Northern India is characterized by a gender politics that is heavily inflected by differences of class and rural/urban residence. Aside from the 'modern' urban elites in large metropolitan cities, prestigious and respectable forms of gender politics—'urbane patriarchy'—are most readily practiced by the relatively wealthy, especially in urban areas: the male breadwinner supporting his dependent wife and children, with women based in the home, fulfilling their domestic duties. There are some differences between religious communities, especially in dress codes. Muslim women generally wear *shalwār* (loose trousers), *qamīṣ* (knee-length dress), and *dopaṭṭā* (large headscarf) covering their head and chest (rather than *sarī*); the most conservative also wear *burqa*<sup>7</sup> (full covering) when they go outside.<sup>7</sup> Muslim men wear *kurta* (over-shirt) with *pājāma* (loose trousers) or *lungī* (sarong-like garment popular among villagers and poor urbanites), often with a prayer cap. Yet, as a package of hegemonic ideals, certain general features of 'urbane patriarchy' impinge in some measure on all women. Female employment outside the home is widely regarded as shameful. This is linked to greater investments in the education of sons than of daughters and the tendency to withdraw girls from formal education at puberty, if not earlier. The gender division of labor is intimately tied to practices that are generally glossed as *pardah*—the physical separation of space for men and women within the homes of the wealthy, and the bodily concealment and lowered gaze that women should adopt when they go outside. Public places are male-dominated space in much of the region, and women and girls who have reached puberty should (ideally) minimize the occasions when they go outside their homes, in order to avert the dangers of sexual harassment and dishonor. All but

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<sup>7</sup> The normal school uniform for Hindu and Muslim girls is also *shalwār-qamīṣ* and *dopaṭṭā*.



two of the *ustānīs* who feature in this paper were small-town women, reared in religious households in which such behavior was accepted as normal and respectable. But poverty is endemic and—like marital breakdown or having a husband who cannot work—may require women to seek paid employment. Nearly 80 percent of the UP population lives in the rural areas, most in some way or another dependent on agriculture. There are marked inequalities in respect of landowning, with small or marginal farmers predominating. Many households own no land, and land is rarely owned by women. Rural women, especially those from the poorest sectors, cannot readily meet the requirements of urbane patriarchy, as rural livelihoods generally entail caring for livestock or working in the fields as family workers or employees, at least for some women.

It is also crucial to understand the position of Muslims in UP as a religious minority. In 2006, the government-sponsored Sachar Report provided a damning account of independent India's failure to remedy Muslims' disproportionate concentration in the lowest economic positions and their poor showing on social indicators such as literacy, particularly in the north.<sup>8</sup> Distinctive clothing might simply signal piety in Muslim-majority contexts; but in contemporary UP, with its climate of often pernicious communal politics, it also highlights difference. Indian Muslims have often been vulnerable to high-profile hate-speech and sometimes to physical violence emanating from Hindu nationalist circles. Indian Muslims have been unwarrantedly demonized for their purported lack of loyalty to the Indian nation and accused of an excess of loyalty to neighboring Pakistan. They have been the focus of vicious physical attacks on their persons and property, most notoriously after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, and (with state support) in Gujarat in 2002 (and in Bijnor town itself in 1990). Not surprisingly, Muslims in rural Bijnor have often portrayed themselves to us as an embattled minority.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rajindar Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India* (New Delhi: Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, 2006); see also Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey, "Investing in the Future: Education in the Social and Cultural Reproduction of Muslims in UP," in *Living with Secularism: The Destiny of India's Muslims*, ed. Mushirul Hasan (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), 63–89.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery, *Confronting Saffron Demography: Religion, Fertility and Women's Status in India* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006); Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery, *Population, Gender and Politics: Demographic*

UP's extremely fragmented provision of education both reflects and sustains its marked social and economic inequalities of gender, class, and religious community, and of rural and urban residence.<sup>10</sup> Children with different social origins access very different kinds of education facilities and enjoy very different education outcomes. Rural areas are particularly poorly served by government-funded schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, caste/class elites ensured that government schools (and other facilities such as clinics) were built in locations most convenient for them. In the early 2000s, school buildings could not accommodate all the children entitled to attend, and investment in teaching materials was inadequate. Teachers' salaries absorbed the bulk of the education budget yet teacher absenteeism was notoriously high. Problems in recruiting women teachers (especially for rural schools) persisted and girls' enrollment and attendance lagged behind that of boys.<sup>11</sup> For decades, and increasingly since the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, the urban middle classes (including Muslims) have sent their children either to better-quality urban government-funded schools (where entry is highly competitive and may also require paying bribes or admission fees), or to the more recently established private schools (which are mainly located in urban neighborhoods with sufficient concentrations of relatively wealthy families to ensure their viability). Good-quality schooling, whether government or private, is beyond the pockets of rural and urban poor alike, while even rural elites face problems in educating their children because of transport difficulties.<sup>12</sup>

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*Change in Rural North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). This sense of vulnerability is evidenced elsewhere in South Asia. In "Piety as Politics," Haniffa comments that Muslims in Sri Lanka feel "beleaguered as a socially, politically and economically weak minority" (352), while Huq notes that Muslims involved in study groups consider themselves a 'besieged minority,' threatened from one side by insincere Muslims and from the other by the forces of Westernization ("Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh," 486).

<sup>10</sup> Caste differences are also important but we cannot address them here.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Drèze and Haris Gazdar, "Uttar Pradesh: The Burden of Inertia," in *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, ed. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33–128; PROBE Team, *Public Report on Basic Education* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); P. Jeffery and R. Jeffery, *Confronting Saffron Demography*, 83–122.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Jeffery, Patricia Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey, "Social Inequalities and the Privatisation of Secondary Schooling in North India," in Chopra and Jeffery, *Educational Regimes*, 41–61; "The Privatisation of Secondary Schooling in Bijnor: A Crumbling Welfare State?" in *Education and Social Change in South Asia*, ed. Krishna Kumar and Joachim Österheld (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 442–74; Roger Jeffery, Craig Jeffrey, and Patricia Jeffery, "Paṛhā'i kā Māhaul? An Educational Environment

Disproportionately, villagers and the urban poor send their children to poorly resourced government schools, despite their limitations. Muslim parents rarely object in principle to sending their children to school—although some disapprove of the co-education in government primary schools—and financial constraints are the main reason for low school enrollment.<sup>13</sup> The educational experiences of Muslim children in UP, and most especially of Muslim girls, are characterized by low levels of enrollment, high levels of early drop-out, and low levels of literacy, especially in poor and rural populations.<sup>14</sup>

In parts of western UP with substantial numbers of Muslims, *madrasahs* are filling some gaps in education provision, generally for small children from rural and poor urban backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> Bijnor district is a case in point: the old town of Bijnor is numerically dominated by Sunnī Muslims. The hinterland has one of the largest proportions of rural Muslims in UP (about 35 percent in 2001). Bijnor town and the surrounding villages are dotted with *madrasahs*, some catering to a handful of small children, others with rolls of several hundred including teenagers. Bijnor's *madrasahs* mostly operate within the ambit of the renowned Daru'l 'Ulūm seminary in Deoband, some 60 km away. Many staff were recruited there or from seminaries linked to Deoband, staff from Deoband sometimes visit Bijnor *madrasahs* to ratify their teaching standards, and some able boys obtain entry to Daru'l 'Ulūm for higher studies. Bijnor's *madrasahs* are not funded or controlled by the Indian state: rather they reflect community initiatives and rely on agricultural tithes from local farmers, *candā* (donations), and the sale of donated animal hides after *Baqar-'id*. Often, their funding is precarious and their facilities meager. Nevertheless, during our research in the early 2000s, many Muslim parents in rural Bijnor favored the free

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in Bijnor, UP," in *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*, ed. Geert de Neve and Henrike Donner (London: Routledge, 2006), 116–40.

<sup>13</sup> Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47–75; *Educating Muslim Girls: A Comparison of Five Indian Cities* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2005). See also Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status*.

<sup>14</sup> Hasan and Menon, *Unequal Citizens*, 47–75; *Educating Muslim Girls*.

<sup>15</sup> There are many *madrasahs* elsewhere in India. See Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers*, and "Voices for Reform in the Indian Madrasahs," in *The Madrasah in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, ed. Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand, and Martin van Bruinessen (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009), 31–70; Jan-Peter Hartung and Helmut Reifeld, eds., *Islamic Education, Diversity, and National Identity: Dīnī Madāris in India Post 9/11* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).

or low-cost education and the diligence of the *madrasah* staff. Many also believed that spending scarce resources on sending their sons to school was futile, given the importance of contacts or bribes for accessing good jobs. And alongside their sense of hopelessness about this-worldly economic prospects, Muslim parents emphasized the importance of living in ways that would ensure a good afterlife. Their children, they argued, could learn this by attending a *madrasah*.<sup>16</sup>

One outcome of the soul-searching sparked by the events of 1857 was the focus on individual Muslims' responsibility for self-improvement and self-fashioning. In this, the Daru'l 'Ulūm in Deoband (founded in 1867) was central.<sup>17</sup> Among the numerous advice manuals that were published, one of the most famous was *Bihīṣṭī Zewar*, containing cameos of the Prophet Muḥammad and one hundred exemplary women who acted as role models for believers (particularly women), as well as commentaries on correct religious practice.<sup>18</sup> In the push for reform, women were crucial for the inter-generational transmission of knowledge about the good Muslim life, about the requirements of Islam, and about the need to eradicate unacceptable Hindu accretions (such as extravagant weddings or visiting Sufi shrines). As Robinson notes, however, relying so heavily on women posed problems for achieving self-improvement.<sup>19</sup> The constraints of patriarchy meant that few Muslim women had acquired learning, but how could this be remedied without breaching *purdah* norms?

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<sup>16</sup> See P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery, and C. Jeffrey, "Investing in the Future"; R. Jeffery, P. Jeffery, and C. Jeffrey, "Social Inequalities", "Privatisation of Secondary Schooling"; Craig Jeffrey, Roger Jeffery, and Patricia Jeffrey, "School and *Madrasah* Education: Gender and the Strategies of Muslim Young Men in Rural North India," *Compare* 38, no. 5 (2008): 581–93; Craig Jeffrey, Patricia Jeffrey, and Roger Jeffery, *Degrees without Freedom? Education, Masculinities, and Unemployment in North India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Francis Robinson, "Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 259–81. Reetz discusses the contemporary situation in Deoband: after the unrest in 1857—variously termed the First War of Independence, the Sepoy Revolt, and the Mutiny—Muslim elites were particularly targeted for retribution; see Dietrich Reetz, "Change and Stagnation in Islamic Education: The Dar al-'Ulum of Deoband after the Split in 1982," in Noor, Sikand, and van Bruinessen, *The Madrasa in Asia*, 71–104.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar; A Translation with Commentary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992). Definitions of 'correct' practice were, of course, hotly contested.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Robinson, "Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 259–81.

This dilemma continued into the 2000s: rural mothers in contemporary north India were unlikely to be the mothers idealized in the reform literature, while there were few sufficiently educated Muslim women able or willing to take up teaching posts. Since the 1980s or so, a few residential *madrasahs* for girls have opened in various parts of India, though not in Bijnor district (one has, however, been established in neighboring Rampur district). Girls' *madrasahs* teaching advanced Islamic studies could give women some religious authority—yet such women were still expected to stay mainly at home, transmitting Islamic knowledge to their own children.<sup>20</sup> Some girls' boarding *madrasahs* continued to employ male teachers and had elaborate procedures to ensure that *purdah* was preserved, although others employed their own graduates as teachers.

In Bijnor town and its hinterland, however, most of the *madrasahs* we visited in the early 2000s had only very young girls in their student bodies, if any at all, and no female teachers. One exception was the *madrasah* in Begawala, about 5 km northwest of Bijnor town. The *madrasah* comprises an extensive compound created piecemeal since its opening in 1958: a large central courtyard surrounded by a mosque, classrooms, and quarters for some of the male staff and those boys who boarded. It had a roll of over 1,100 pupils, about 600 of whom were girls (day-pupils only) being taught by the *ustānīs*. There were eleven classrooms for girls, but only five to six *ustānīs* during the period when we were doing our research.

#### *Ustānīs and their Male Colleagues*

The principal at Begawala *madrasah* in the early 2000s had been there since its creation. He was trained at the Mazāhir-i 'Ulūm seminary in Saharanpur (an offshoot of Daru'l 'Ulūm which opened within a year of the Deoband seminary's foundation). Under him were some fifteen *maulavīs* and one 'master' (schoolteacher). All the *maulavīs* had some training in advanced Islamic studies and most were at least *Hāfiẓ Qur'ān* (having memorized the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*) or *qārī* (trained to recite the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*). They had been recruited from Deoband, Saharanpur, or other smaller *madrasahs* linked to Deoband. The 'master'

<sup>20</sup> Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers*, 214–23.

taught boys Hindi and mathematics; he had graduated with a BCom from the degree college in Bijnor town.<sup>21</sup> Shortly before we began our research in late 2000, two visiting *molvīs* recommended that pupils should learn to recite the *Qurʾān Ṣarīf* in *qawāʿid* style (a guttural style that is uncommon in South Asia). Since *qawāʿid* recitation was unfamiliar to the Begawala staff, the *madrasah* management committee sent two *maulavīs* to spend a couple of months at another *madrasah* in Bijnor district to learn it. They then provided in-service training to their colleagues, including the *ustānīs*. Until that point there had been eleven *ustānīs* at the *madrasah*—but six apparently failed to adjust to the *qawāʿid* style and were sacked.

Most of the remaining *ustānīs* in Begawala had not studied advanced Islamic subjects, although two had BAs. They had learned to read the *Qurʾān Ṣarīf* and Urdu, either through private tuition at home or by attending a *madrasah* as young girls. Of these *ustānīs*, Farida Khatun, the oldest and most longstanding one, had been born in Deoband and had learned to read the *Qurʾān Ṣarīf* and Urdu at a girls' *madrasah* there; her father's premature death had curtailed her education, as she had to contribute to the household income by doing sewing and embroidery at home. Another, Asmat, had learnt to read the *Qurʾān Ṣarīf* and Urdu (which she also taught privately to girls who came to her home); she had completed a BA at the women's degree college in Bijnor town and an Urdu-medium teaching qualification (*muʿallim*, equivalent to BEd). Imrana had studied to Class 8 at school and had learned the *Qurʾān Ṣarīf* at home, and had qualifications in Urdu called *māhir* (about Class 12) and *kāmīl* (roughly equivalent to BA). Hanisa had been encouraged to study for a BA and a BTC (Basic Teaching Certificate) after her marriage by her husband's grandfather. Shabnam, one of two younger *ustānīs*, had studied under Farida Khatun in the Begawala *madrasah*, and knew a little Hindi. The other young *ustānī*, Aisha, was appointed during our fieldwork and was the exception.<sup>22</sup> She had studied in an English-medium school in Kashmir before attending a residential girls' *madrasah* in Gujarat for seven years and achieving

<sup>21</sup> Hindi is UP's official language and the medium of instruction in most schools and colleges. Orally, Hindi and Urdu are similar (Urdu has more vocabulary from Farsi and Arabic), but Hindi's script is Devanagiri, while Urdu uses the Farsi script.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey, "Aisha, the Madrasah Teacher," in *Muslim Portraits: Everyday Lives in India*, ed. Mukulika Banerjee (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008).

*‘ālimah fāzilah* through studying Arabic, Farsi, and advanced Islamic studies (although she was not *Hāfiẓ Qur’ān*). Her studies cost some Rs8000 per annum: her father was from a relatively poor family in Qaziwala (a village near Begawala) but had improved his family’s fortunes by running a ‘cosmetic shop’ in Kashmir.<sup>23</sup> Aisha described him as a *jamā’atī* (involved with the Tablighī Jamā’at). In terms of formal qualifications in Islamic subjects, then, most *ustānīs* were at a disadvantage compared to their male colleagues.

The *ustānīs* were mainly appointed through personal links. In the mid-1970s, the principal recruited Farida Khatun’s husband, from a family of ‘masters’ in Deoband, to teach at the Begawala *madrasah*. Shortly after this, the principal invited Farida Khatun to teach girls in the *madrasah* because he was so concerned about rural women’s ignorance of the principles of Islam. The other *ustānīs* were recruited gradually. Asmat was appointed because she was Farida Khatun’s daughter. Imrana’s brother worked for the Muslim Fund Bank in Bijnor town and had put in a word for her with the *madrasah* management. After being widowed when she was twenty-seven, Hanisa had a lengthy career as a schoolteacher in Saharanpur and Dehra Dun, finally being recruited through recommendations from her employers at a Muslim-run school in Bijnor town. Shabnam had been taught in Begawala by Farida Khatun and her father knew the *madrasah* manager. Aisha was the only *ustānī* appointed primarily because of her qualifications—but she, too, had been a Begawala pupil in her early childhood.

Over the course of some two decades, then, the principal’s initial invitation to Farida Khatun had resulted in the recruitment of several women. In this, Farida Khatun was crucial. She assessed the abilities of candidates referred to her (for instance, listening to them reciting the *Qur’ān Sharīf*), before conveying her final recommendations to the principal. Yet Farida Khatun always met him (and other male colleagues) wearing her *burqa’* with the veil over her face. Prospective *ustānīs*—only those whom Farida Khatun considered appropriate appointees—were similarly concealed when they went through their paces before the male interview panel.

The *ustānīs’* presence in the *madrasah*, indeed, revolved around the continual performance of *purdah* norms by *ustānīs* and male staff alike. Neither *ustānīs* nor female pupils entered the mosque. Boys and

<sup>23</sup> At that time, a laborer might be able to earn Rs2500–3500 per month.

girls were taught in separate spaces, with the more senior girls' classrooms located on the second storey along a broad veranda overlooking the courtyard. Female pupils briskly traversed the courtyard to their classrooms with their heads bowed, wearing white *ṣalwār*, simple light blue *qamīṣ*, and white *dopaṭṭā* covering their head and chest. The *ustānīs* arrived wearing a black *burqa* which they removed only in their classrooms, where they would hang them on a peg, ready for when they needed to go outside. Male staff normally had no cause to approach the girls' classrooms; but if they did, they announced their imminent arrival by calling out loudly to give the *ustānīs* time to don their *burqa*. Until Aisha's appointment, senior girls learnt Farsi from a *maulavīs* who stationed himself outside Farida Khatun's classroom window with his back against the wall, so that she could chaperon his pupils while maintaining *pardah* herself. As Shabnam put it, this was *majbūri men* (out of necessity), because there was no suitable *ustānī* to teach them.

Farida Khatun was the routine intermediary between male staff and the *ustānīs*, always signaling appropriate respect and distance by addressing her male colleagues as *āp* (the most respectful form of 'you'). The other *ustānīs* rarely exchanged any words with their male colleagues. Aisha said that some of her male colleagues were probably unaware of her presence. Indeed, when we tried contacting her by telephone, the *maulavīs* who answered knew of no-one called Aisha working in the *madrasah*. Aisha herself was not allowed to speak to us on the phone because this would have entailed holding a conversation in the main courtyard.

Shabnam and Aisha lived nearby in Qaziwala, Shabnam with her in-laws and Aisha with members of her natal family, and they walked to the *madrasah* each day. The other *ustānīs* travelled from Bijnor town daily. Riding in overcrowded public transport and working with male colleagues, however, threatened the *ustānīs*' honor (*'izzat*)—although teaching in a largely gender-segregated environment was less hazardous than other employment. Significantly, all the *ustānīs* employed a rhetoric of *ṣavāb* (religious merit) to justify their teaching, as Aisha insists in the quote that opens this chapter. When we first met them, Asmat, Shabnam, and Aisha had fewest domestic responsibilities and the least need for paid employment: their main reason for teaching was their desire to transmit important knowledge to village girls. Asmat



had no children and her husband was a *Ūnānī* doctor in Bijnor town.<sup>24</sup> Both Shabnam and Aisha taught in the *madrasah* for only a couple of years, however. Shabnam's husband ran a small grocery shop in Qaziwala and sold milk in Bijnor town; her father-in-law insisted that Shabnam stopped working when villagers began gossiping about her employment. Aisha had doggedly continued with her studies as a way of delaying her marriage, but her father was explicit that women's earnings were abhorrent to him, and she had to resign when he arranged her marriage. For Imrana, Hanisa, and Farida Khatun, however, their income was crucial. Imrana's husband had abandoned her when their son was a toddler, and Hanisa was a widow, while Farida Khatun's husband earned very little and they had two Down syndrome children.

Within the *madrasah*, repeated re-enactments of conventional *pardah* norms served to protect the *ustānīs*' honor and enabled them to avoid disrupting the gender order any more than they were doing already by virtue of being employed. But the everyday practices that this entailed undercut the *ustānīs*' capacity to influence how the *madrasah* was run. They did not make rounds of their local neighborhoods collecting *chandā* (donations) for the *madrasah*, unlike the male staff, who even spent the entire month of Ramaḍān touring places as distant as Delhi and Surat. The *ustānīs* did not participate in the management committee meetings, and the male staff—especially the principal—often made decisions that impacted on them. Due to her seniority, Farida Khatun could raise issues with the principal, but generally the *ustānīs* simply accepted the men's rulings—as Imrana put it, the men made judgments *soch samajh kar* (having thought and understood). Usually the male staff did not interfere in the *ustānīs*' teaching practices—although during our research, the *ustānīs* had coached the girls to recite stirring patriotic speeches for India's Republic Day ceremonies, and were dismayed to be chastised for wasting time on irrelevancies, a response perhaps reflecting the men's wish to keep the *madrasah* disengaged from the agendas of the Indian state.

Some aspects of the *madrasah* organization were far from satisfactory for the *ustānīs*. In the early 2000s, there was repeated talk of

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<sup>24</sup> *Ūnānī* (or *Yūnānī*) medicine is a system of medical practice particularly associated with Muslims in South Asia.

building separate new premises for girls (including a hostel for boarders); but by 2011 nothing had transpired. Meanwhile, the girls' classrooms were smaller than the boys'—yet the girls' class sizes were much larger and the girls had to sit cheek-by-jowl. Similarly, some seventeen male staff were teaching boys, but there were only eleven notional posts—about half of them vacant during our research—for the larger number of girls attending the *madrasah*. And the *ustānīs* were paid less than the male staff.

### *Ustānīs and their Female Pupils*

While the marking of gender distancing and inequality was always foremost in the *ustānīs*' dealings with their male colleagues, they shared urbane value judgments about the task at hand: to enlighten and reform rural children. And if the *ustānīs* wielded little authority in relation to the male staff, perhaps they had more prospect of doing so over their pupils. As women teaching girls, the *ustānīs* could engage directly and openly with their pupils. As adult women they had age on their side, given that they were teaching girls—most of whom had not yet reached puberty—trained to respect their elders. The *ustānīs* also had a range of skills—in Urdu, Hindi, English, reciting the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*, and in prayer—that the little girls lacked. Several were experienced teachers, whether in school teaching or instructing small groups of children in Bijnor town to read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*. Moreover, their demeanor was inflected with urbane gendered characteristics that marked them off from villagers—and the urban/urbane generally trumped the rural/rustic. But how much authority could the *ustānīs* marshal?

In the first class, girls began learning Urdu using the *ibtidā'ī qa'ida* (introductory Urdu primer) under the guidance of Imrana and Shabnam. They learnt to sight-read (*nāzira*) the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*, beginning with the first two *sipāra* (with the meaning translated orally without delving into disputed interpretations) and gradually adding further portions to their repertoire. They also learned the correct preparation and postures for their prayers as well as what and how to recite. Farida Khatun instructed girls in the next classes in religious education and Urdu, partly through a five-year Urdu course, the 'Islamic Course for Girls' (*Larḳiōn kā Islāmī Course*), which covers themes from the

narrowly theological to more ‘this-worldly’ topics.<sup>25</sup> Older girls read simple glosses of portions of *Bihīṣṭī Zewar* and a few committed the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf* to memory. Girls rarely continued attending the *madrasah* long enough to learn the advanced refinements of textual exegesis and theological debate. The few who attended the *madrasah* after puberty learnt Farsi and Arabic from a *maulavī* (or from Aisha for the short period she taught at the *madrasah*), rather than being engaged in theological debate. The girls, then, did not approach the situation described by Alam, of boys attending a *madrasah* elsewhere in UP being taught how to argue and debate.<sup>26</sup> The girls’ command over religious texts was largely a matter of sight-reading the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf*, with some basic understanding of the meaning of what they recited. In addition, the *madrasah* was registered with the UP Board of Education and Asmat and Hanisa taught ‘worldly’ subjects such as Hindi, English, and mathematics up to Class 5. ‘Transfer Certificates’ issued to children passing the Class 5 exams enabled them to transfer into mainstream schools (although hardly any girls attending the *madrasah* did so).<sup>27</sup>

Within the classroom, the *ustānīs*’ demeanor and the behavior they expected of their pupils generated a calm and studious atmosphere. Mostly, the *ustānīs* talked both gently and genteelly, avoiding shouting, marking their speech with clear breaks between words and using Farsi-derived Urdu rather than more everyday speech. The regime of bodily discipline entailed sitting cross-legged on rush matting for *ustānīs* and girls alike, with the girls supporting their books and slates either in their hands or on low racks. Girls were required to focus on their work, murmuring as they recited the texts they had been allocated, swaying gently back and forth especially when reading passages from the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf*.<sup>28</sup> Several *ustānīs* had a stick for threatening

<sup>25</sup> See Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey, “Islamization, Gentrification and Domestication: ‘A Girls’ Islamic Course’ and Rural Muslims in Western Uttar Pradesh,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 1–53.

<sup>26</sup> Arshad Alam, “The Enemy Within: Madrasa and Muslim Identity in North India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 605–27.

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, and Craig Jeffrey, “The Mother’s Lap and the Civilising Mission: *Madrasah* Education and Rural Muslim Girls in Western Uttar Pradesh,” in *In a Minority: Essays on Muslim Women in India*, ed. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (New Delhi and New Jersey: Oxford University Press and Rutgers University Press, 2005), 108–48; and “The First *Madrasa*: Learned *Mawlawīs* and the Educated Mother,” in Hartung and Reifeld, *Islamic Education*, 227–51.

<sup>28</sup> When we interviewed Shabnam at home, her baby swayed and murmured baby-talk while clutching a piece of paper, imitating what she had seen in the *madrasah*.

the disobedient (though we never saw one used). In class, the *ustānīs* always wore clean and simple *ṣalwār-qamīṣ* and *dopattā* and they expected similar standards of decorum and cleanliness from their pupils. The *ustānīs* regularly checked their pupils, reprimanding girls whose fingernails were uncut and lined with grime or whose hair was uncombed, un-oiled, or infested with head lice, and sending girls whose uniforms were dirty home to change.

*Madrasah* teachers, including the Begawala *ustānīs*, often portrayed children as *tabulae rasae* and they talked proudly of their creative capacity to mold children into civilized products like potters mold clay before firing it. Indeed, the *ustānīs* described their teaching as a religious obligation to spread enlightenment to rustic children whom they considered *jāhil* (illiterate, uncivilized, ill-mannered, uncouth) in matters related to prayer and *Qurʾān Ṣarīf* recitation and the niceties of urbane sociality connoted by *adab* and *aḵhlāq* (courtesy, refinement, affability, virtue, and morality).<sup>29</sup> Like many of the *maulavīs* to whom we talked, the *ustānīs* often commented that boys used their education selfishly (for instance, to obtain employment). The *ustānīs* had no ambition to coach girls for paid employment—which few rural parents would want—but they considered that educated girls contributed to the greater good by instructing a whole family (*khāndān*). Moreover, a *madrasah* education plays well for girls in the contemporary marriage market. Prospective in-laws often seek demure and obedient young women who have learned at least the basics of Islam—who are *roza namāz lāʾiq* (capable of fasting and praying)—without being corrupted by mixing with boys or traveling far to obtain their education; and young Muslim men have begun to ask their parents to arrange their marriages to educated brides. A *madrasah* education offers young women the possibility of marriage into somewhat more affluent but nevertheless still patriarchal marital homes, where they would be respected for their capacity to instruct their children while being just as economically dependent as their uneducated peers.

As embodied examples of urbane female behavior, the *ustānīs* were to make a crucial contribution to this long-term project. In place of the rustic manners of potentially wayward village girls, they trained

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<sup>29</sup> Focusing exclusively on the *Islamic* character of *madrasahs*, however, can obscure the urban and middle-class bias of rural educational provision in general: schoolteachers, especially those in rural postings, had similar ambitions to civilize uncouth rustic children.

girls in the feminine behavior required by urbane patriarchy—the gender separation entailed in *pardah* practices, the body language of concealment (such as head covering and avoiding eye contact), the courteous speech forms that would instantly flag their respect for male authority and for older women. The *madrasah* pupils were continually exposed to verbal and visual messages to this effect: the *ustānīs* dealing with male colleagues, their use of their *dopattā* and *burqa'* to signal distance from men, the chaperoning of the *maulavī* entrusted with teaching the senior girls, the girls' smaller classrooms and larger class sizes, the lack of boarding facilities for girls, and the cessation of Aisha's employment because her marriage had been arranged. We can only conjecture about the understandings that girls imbibed regarding their entitlements as girls and women—but they probably tended to reinforce rather than undermine conventional understandings of gender differences and gender inequalities.

But how successful could the *ustānīs* realistically expect to be in replacing rustic patriarchy with urbane patriarchy? Often, indeed, they and the *maulavīs* talked of the stiff challenges they faced in achieving their 'civilizing mission.' Like the schoolteachers we interviewed, the *ustānīs* were acutely aware that anything they managed to convey to their pupils could all too readily be subverted once the girls went back to their village homes. Their male colleagues also lamented how hard it was to teach village children who returned to environments in which speech fell far short of the standards of refined Urdu and was often replete with swearing. Most pupils were from village homes. Most of their mothers (if not their fathers too) had attended a school or *madrasah* only for a short time (if at all) and could read neither Urdu, Hindi, nor the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* themselves. The girls entered the *madrasah* unfamiliar with writing and reading, and the formal teaching began with teaching the girls to recognize letters and form them on their slates. But the *ustānīs* could not rely upon parental support to ensure that the girls revised their work at home—the classic problem of 'first-generation' students. Meanwhile, within the *madrasah*, the *ustānīs* were hampered by the gender inequalities encoded in the large class sizes and the small classrooms. It was hard to provide individual attention, for instance hearing girls reciting passages they had memorized or checking their written work. Academically, the *ustānīs*' aspirations and achievements were quite modest, although Farida Khatun felt she had contributed to some small changes in village ambience, and she and the other *ustānīs* also mentioned a few success stories. Most girls

attending the Begawala *madrasah* attained only limited (and possibly rather impermanent) literacy, however.

The *ustānīs* often emphasized the importance of beginning to teach girls when they were very young, before bad habits had become ingrained, and of encouraging their parents to allow them to continue attending after puberty. Yet it is unclear that even this could solve the problems perceived by the *madrasah* staff. The text of the 'Islamic Course for Girls' was laden with urban middle-class presumptions about cleanliness, household budgeting, and rationalized genteel domesticity that were seriously out of kilter with the compulsions of rural life.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the *ustānīs* were often enacting demeanors that contrasted sharply with the everyday realities of village life. Reiterating the importance of cleanliness could not help mothers without the time or resources to ensure that their children had clean sets of clothing. Indeed, village women's workloads often required them to delegate childcare to older children, generally girls, whose ability to study was thereby jeopardized. Exhortation alone would not prevent children from playing in dusty alleyways or families from living in close proximity to their cattle. Instructing girls on the importance of careful household budgeting would not enable them to escape the seasonality and unpredictability of most rural incomes. In other words, the *madrasah* teachers' didactic agendas promoted lifestyles that could not readily be adopted by poor villagers.

It is instructive to contrast the Begawala *ustānīs* with Muslim women elsewhere in South Asia who are involved in Islamic education. Recently, several scholars have examined all-women study groups, in which instruction and discussions were led by women.<sup>31</sup> These cases all focused on adult volunteers motivated to engage in projects of self-realization and debate. In Begawala, however, the *ustānīs* were dealing with young girls whom they considered needed disciplining, not with voluntarily self-disciplining adults. This made for weak links in the chain: the girls might not be committed to learning and they might not see the relevance to their own lives of what they were being

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<sup>30</sup> P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery, and C. Jeffrey, "Islamization, Gentrification and Domestication."

<sup>31</sup> See Haniffa, "Piety as Politics" (on Sri Lanka); Huq, "Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh"; Shehabuddin, "Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh"; cf. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

taught. Indeed, some village women told us that as children they had sometimes hidden in the sugarcane fields all day instead of going to the *madrasah*. Girls would return home each evening to family and village environments that were often not conducive to sustaining behavior attuned to the *madrasah* ethos. The impact of the *ustānīs*' instruction was further compromised during vacations (particularly during the month-long break for Ramaḍān), and because most girls were withdrawn from the *madrasah* around or even before puberty.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the principal commented that once girls left off studying, they all too easily relapsed into illiteracy because the village environment gave so little opportunity for reading, and mothers could not support their children's efforts to achieve the niceties of speech or the skills of literacy. The prospect of rustic recidivism was ever-present.

### *Leading by Example?*

Aside from Aisha, the *ustānīs* could not claim significant authority based on formal textually based qualifications in advanced theological studies. Moreover, the *ustānīs*' participation in the *madrasah* was premised on their upholding conventional *pardah* norms: separation of male and female space, concealment, self-effacement, the effective silencing of the *ustānīs* (even the well-qualified Aisha) in relation to male colleagues, and the *ustānīs*' need to be constantly mindful of the threats their paid employment posed to their respectability. In combination, these severely limited the *ustānīs*' impact on the organization of the *madrasah*. Yet the *ustānīs* at the Begawala *madrasah* shared many of their pedagogic styles and ambitions with the *maulavīs* teaching there and in the other *madrasahs* we visited. In relation to their pupils, the *ustānīs* aimed to 'civilize' the girls in their charge, not challenging conventional gender norms so much as to trying to supplant rustic styles of gendered behavior with urbane ones. To some degree, many rural parents bought into this vision—even if they were unable to provide the supportive home environments that the *ustānīs* (and the *maulavīs* too) considered vital for this endeavor to succeed. Indeed, the *ustānīs* had a rather limited capacity to alter the lives of most of

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<sup>32</sup> P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery, and C. Jeffrey, "The Mother's Lap", "The First *Madrasa*." Boys tended to drop out earlier than girls to enter an apprenticeship or paid employment, an indication of the economic conditions of most pupils' families.

the girls in their charge, precisely because their agenda was inflected with gendered urban middle-class assumptions that did not map well onto village realities. Thus, within the cloistered *madrasah* spaces, and in relation to the *maulavīs* and their female pupils, the authority that the *ustānīs* could exercise was extremely circumscribed.

As we have argued elsewhere, *madrasahs* in contemporary UP constitute a rather ambiguous kind of education institution.<sup>33</sup> While they may plug a gap in UP's education provision, they do so in ways that reflect and also perpetuate the fragmentation of provision that reproduces inequalities of educational and occupational outcomes. Many boys graduated from the Begawala *madrasah* with limited literacy skills, especially in Hindi. Aside from the handful of boys who went on to attend advanced theological seminaries, few left equipped to compete in the labor market on favorable terms. And girls were not being prepared to enter the labor market at all. Educational segregation constantly replicates Muslims' economic and social exclusion and heightens their vulnerability to discrimination. From this broader perspective, the *ustānīs* and the *maulavīs* had much in common—for none of them wielded such authority in the wider world that they could disrupt or transform the marginalized position of poor rural Muslims in UP.

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<sup>33</sup> P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery, and C. Jeffrey, "The Mother's Lap", "The First Madrasa."



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## CHAPTER 2.2

### THINKING FOR ONESELF? FORMS AND ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN DUTCH MUSLIM WOMEN'S GROUPS

Nathal M. Dessing

Muslim women in the Netherlands organize in many ways. They come together in mosques or community centers for religious lessons or social-cultural activities, and at times they hold meetings in their homes. Their reasons for organizing and attending these meetings are various: to acquire knowledge about Islam, to meet like-minded people, or regularly to devote time to their religion. Two features of these Muslim women's groups are particularly relevant to our understanding of the forms and elements of female religious authority in the Netherlands. First, their concern to attain "the realization of the pious self," to use a phrase of Saba Mahmood;<sup>1</sup> second, their reluctance to exercise *ijtihād*, which Mandaville defines as the effort to interpret the religious sources on an individual basis.<sup>2</sup> The meetings often constitute a source of religious inspiration and help remind participants of the importance of religion in their daily lives. Women in these groups actively seek religious knowledge and ways of realizing Islamic virtues. Yet, rather than emphasizing the permissibility and importance of performing *ijtihād*, these women, with the exception of members of Al Nisa, a Dutch Muslim women's organization, continue to ascribe this right to a small group of religious experts. Many of these women would say that their knowledge of Islam is too limited, and that one must consult reliable sources for authoritative viewpoints.

Based on fieldwork among Dutch Muslim women's groups, this chapter argues that even though Muslim women in the Netherlands organize in many ways and are arguably more active today than ever before, their scope for obtaining and exercising religious authority

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<sup>1</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 128.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London: Routledge, 2001), 176.

is limited. This claim will be substantiated by looking at the various approaches that the women's groups take toward sources of religious inspiration and interpretative authority. We will see that the role of the individual in assessing authority claims has become progressively more important. However, this trend should not be explained as a turn toward subjectivity: traditional sources of authority transcending the individual remain important for the majority of Muslim women. The enormous demand for 'objective' knowledge of 'true' Islam among women attending these groups has as yet not created much following for alternative voices, such as Al Nisa's, that emphasize drawing on inner sources of authority.

### *Muslim Women's Organizations in the Netherlands*

Many organizations of and for Muslim women in the Netherlands organize religious lessons or meetings on topics related to religion. The organizations vary in reach from women's groups based in local mosques, to local initiatives attracting a somewhat wider variety of Muslim women living in a particular city, to national network organizations of and for Muslim women. They represent forms of participation for women both inside and outside the traditional institution of the mosque. The religious lessons and meetings of these organizations constitute sites where the variety of women's views on and approaches toward religious authority come to the fore.

Mosques in the Netherlands are generally organized on ethnic lines, and are further divided according to religious affiliation. There are, for example, Moroccan, Surinamese Hindustani and Surinamese Javanese, and Turkish mosques, with differing religious orientations within each group. Most mosques in the Netherlands have women's groups, which display varying degrees of activity and serve different age groups: there may be a group of young women gathering for religious lessons or for discussions on religious and societal issues or for singing religious songs (*anāshīd*), and a group of older women congregating for (lessons in) Qur'an recitation (*tajwīd*). For example, a Dutch Moroccan mosque where I conducted participant observation from 2007 to 2009 provided *tajwīd* lessons and religious lessons on Sundays. The *tajwīd* lessons were attended mainly by women of between forty and sixty years of age; the religious lessons were meant for younger women, approximately between fifteen and thirty years. The majority of the women attending the religious lessons were Dutch Moroccan, but

there were also some Dutch converts. The number of women attending the meetings depended, among other things, on whether they found the theme of the meeting interesting, and varied between fifteen and forty women per meeting. The group was run by a board consisting of approximately ten women, who decided on the themes of the meetings. Four or five board members took turns to act as speaker. The usual plan of these meetings included an introductory prayer followed by a talk lasting about an hour, which was read aloud from paper. Sometimes, the meeting was also marked by a conversion. The women attending the meetings were mostly secondary-school pupils or students at institutes for higher professional education, but also included university students and young professionals. The group had no formal representation on the mosque board; if an issue had to be taken to the mosque board—for example, when the room that the group used was occupied—the father of one of the female members of the group would advance their concerns to the board.

Mosques constitute spaces that are not necessarily inviting to women: women have no obligation to attend the Friday prayer in the mosque, nor are they represented on the board. As a consequence, women seek alternative forms of participation. In some cities, women's groups attached to different mosques have joined forces, in some cases in cooperation with women's centers funded by the municipal authority, in order to attract a more diverse group of women. In Rotterdam, for example, an association called Dar al Arqam organizes monthly lectures. Dar al Arqam was founded in 1992 by a group of Dutch women "die voor de islam als geloof en levenswijze hebben gekozen" (who had chosen Islam as their faith and lifestyle). The aim of Dar al Arqam is to contribute to the process of emancipation and participation of Muslim women while preserving their identity.<sup>3</sup> Dar al Arqam's meetings are in many respects similar to the meetings of mosque groups, but they attract a greater number of women, mostly Dutch Moroccan women and Dutch converts.

Further examples of local groups are al Amal, an organization for Moroccan women in the Kanaleneiland neighborhood of Utrecht, and Nisa4Nisa in the Slotervaart neighborhood of Amsterdam. Themes treated in the meetings of many of these groups are the life of the

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<sup>3</sup> Website of Dar al Arqam, <http://www.moslimainrotterdam.nl/wie-zijn-wij/>, consulted May 17, 2011.

Prophet, the six articles of faith (belief in Allah, angels, books, messengers, the last day, and *qadr* or fate), and the five pillars of Islam. Less common themes are, for example, *akhlāq* (good manners), *wuḍū'* and *ghusl* (partial and complete ritual ablution), *du'ā'* (supplication), love of Allah, education according to Islam, the evil eye, the life of the first four caliphs, and friendship.

In addition to meeting in the mosques or forming associations of women belonging to different mosques, a third platform for Muslim women is provided by women's groups organized according to project, theme, or interest, attracting participants from across the Netherlands. Al Nisa is an example of this. It was founded in 1982 by a group of newly converted Muslims in Amsterdam. During the first twenty years, the main aim of the organization was to provide information on Islam to Muslim women and society at large. In 2002, a second, more emancipatory, aim was added, namely to stimulate women and young people to gain knowledge about Islam and about the position of (Muslim) women in Islam and in Dutch society. Al Nisa portrays itself as a national network organization for local and regional Muslim women's groups, but also for individual (Muslim) women and children, and young people who are not attached to any mosque. It explicitly aims to overcome ethnic, cultural, social, and religious boundaries. Al Nisa's membership consists mainly of converts, but the organization also attracts an increasing number of people born into Muslim families. The latter now constitute 30 percent of Al Nisa's membership, and this is a group which, like the majority of Muslim converts in Al Nisa, is interested in developing new forms of Islam, separate from the often patriarchal cultures of their countries of origin.<sup>4</sup> Since 2007, the chair of the organization has been Leyla Çakir, a woman of Dutch Turkish origin.

Al Nisa organizes, on average, two national-level meetings per year. In some events—such as training programs, debates, and symposia—social issues are discussed from an Islamic perspective. Al Nisa, for instance, organized a symposium on women's authority in the Dutch political, social, and religious sphere, entitled “Aan de poorten van het gezag” (At the gates of authority) in October 2007. In the morning

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<sup>4</sup> Margot Badran, “Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories,” in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 212.

session, the then chair of Al Nisa, Ceylan Pektaş-Weber, explained why they had chosen this title: it referred to the historical process of the closure of the gates of *ijtihād* at the beginning of the tenth century, when independent reasoning in Islamic law came to an end.

In Pektaş-Weber's view this was, seen retrospectively, a rather crude exercise of authority: an important and vital element of the faith was thereby shut down, namely, the right of each generation of Muslims to find its own interpretations and applications of the holy texts. Pektaş-Weber argued that the call for real equality of women will lead to a reopening of the gates of *ijtihād*, and therefore to fundamental changes in the practice of faith—a viewpoint closely associated with Al Nisa.

Other meetings of Al Nisa are meant to exchange knowledge and experiences. An interesting example of this was a meeting entitled “Ik eis mijn plek” (I claim my place), held in April 2006. In this meeting, Pektaş-Weber gave an introduction to her book, *Moslima's: Emancipatie achter de dijken* (Muslim women: Emancipation behind the dykes);<sup>5</sup> Zarqa Nawaz's 2005 documentary film “Me and the Mosque,” on the role and place of Muslim women in Canada, was also aired. This was followed by a discussion among the participants.

The views on and approaches toward religious authority thus vary among Muslim women's groups in the Netherlands. Mosque and local groups operate mainly within the authoritative discourses of learned male interpreters, be it the local *imām* or internationally known religious scholars; by contrast, groups like Al Nisa, inspired by scholars like Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud, seek to develop an alternative discourse that encourages women to think for themselves independent of the interpretations provided by established male authority.

### *Sources of Religious Inspiration and Views on Ijtihād*

Al Nisa can best be understood as an Islamic feminist project, in which emancipation, the attainment of freedom, and gender equality constitute important discursive elements. As in some other geographical settings, the approach chosen to achieve these goals is, first, taking the

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<sup>5</sup> Ceylan Pektaş-Weber, *Moslima's: Emancipatie achter de dijken* [Muslim women: Emancipation behind the dykes] (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2006).

Qur'ān as a central text, and, second, the performance of *ijtihād*.<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of the Qur'ān is considered to be open to all and not only to specialists who meet specific requirements such as having specialist knowledge of Arabic. Al Nisa's views have generally been well received in Dutch government circles, and the organization has been successful in securing funding for its activities. The discourses within most mosque and local women's groups, however, differ greatly from those of Al Nisa. The themes of the meetings of these groups might be similar to those of Al Nisa, but there are significant differences in how these subjects are treated.

I attended the meetings of three different Dutch Moroccan women's groups on the life of the Prophet. One mosque group devoted a series of lectures to this theme, closely following the television series of the Egyptian preacher Amr Khaled; in fact, the speaker acknowledged preparing her talk by consulting Amr Khaled's website.<sup>7</sup> The lecture dealt chronologically with some important historical episodes, such as the death of the Prophet's wife Khadijah, his stay in Taif, and his return to Mecca. The speaker of the second group, a local group with a following among a wide variety of Muslim women in the city, did not mention her sources. She spoke about the high status of the Prophet with God in comparison with other creatures and other prophets, and focused on highlighting his features such as his rosy face, dark black eyes, long eyebrows, pointed nose, and the vein between his eyebrows which became visible when he was angered. She spoke about his attitude and character, saying, for example, that the Prophet talked only about things that concerned him and describing how he made other people feel important. The speaker thus concentrated more on the appearance and behavior of the Prophet than on the chronology of important events in his life.

The speaker of the third group, a Dutch Moroccan mosque group, used a Dutch translation of *al-Raḥīq al-makhtūm* (The sealed nectar) by the Indian scholar Ṣafī al-Raḥman al-Mubārakpūrī as her source. This biography of the Prophet Muḥammad was awarded first prize by the Muslim World League in 1979. The lecture formed part of a series. This speaker discussed the topic by following the chronological order in which Qur'ānic verses were revealed to Muḥammad and

<sup>6</sup> See also Badran, "Feminism and Conversion," 200.

<sup>7</sup> Website of Amr Khaled, [www.amrkhaled.net](http://www.amrkhaled.net).



by recounting which of his contemporaries converted to Islam at the time these verses were revealed. Even though the women of this group might have had a liking for Amr Khaled's television series, they were aware that he was not a religious scholar; they therefore preferred the work of al-Mubārakpūrī, whom they considered to be more authoritative. On another occasion, the group watched *al-Risālah* (The Message), an epic film about the birth of Islam.

Speakers and leading figures belonging to different Islamic groups thus take quite different approaches toward interpretation and the sources that they consult. What they have in common is a demand for religious knowledge, for reasons ranging from a wish to live according to Islamic prescriptions, to a search for Islamic arguments legitimizing their viewpoints or behavior. However, since there is no centralized authority providing directions on how to live as a Muslim, each group develops its own conceptions of true Islam. Leading figures of the third mosque group often refer to scholars such as al-Albānī, Ibn Bāz, al-Munajjid, al-'Uthaymīn, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, and Sayyid Sābiq,<sup>8</sup> and consulted the website associated with the as-Soennah mosque in The Hague,<sup>9</sup> as well as al-Munajjid's websites.<sup>10</sup> There is heavy emphasis in their lectures on the principle of *tawhīd* (unity of God), and an explicit rejection of *shirk* (associating partners to God) and *bid'ah* (innovation), and the leaders of this group advocate strict views on appropriate dress code and gender segregation. These elements are evidence of the Salafi orientation of this mosque group. Family members of women belonging to this group sometimes label them as Salafi—a label that the women themselves were keen to disown, fearing it might discredit them and their group's activities.

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<sup>8</sup> Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914–99) was a famous scholar of *hadīth*; the mosque group in question used his book *A Description of the Prayer of the Prophet* in their lessons. Ibn Bāz (1910–99) was grand *mufī* of Saudi Arabia from 1993 to 1999. Muḥammad Šālīḥ al-Munajjid was a student of Ibn Bāz. Al-'Uthaymīn (d. 2001) was a *fiqh* scholar who taught at Muḥammad Ibn Saud University. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1291–1350) was a Hanbalite scholar. Sayyid Sābiq (1915–2000), a graduate of al-Azhar University, was an academic and activist, and author of *Fiqh al-sunnah*, which he wrote at the request of Muslim Brotherhood leader Ḥassan al-Bannā (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 80 n. 80); *Fiqh al-sunnah* was used by the mosque group in question for the lesson on *wuḍū'* and *ghusl*.

<sup>9</sup> www.al-yaqeen.com. The as-Soennah mosque is considered to be Salafi-oriented.

<sup>10</sup> Islam Question and Answer site, www.islam-qa.com; and www.fatwaislam.com, an online *fatwā* guide with *fatwās* from, among others, Ibn Bāz, al-Albānī, and al-'Uthaymīn.

Providing evidence or *dalīl* is central to religious discourse within this group and among Salafi activists in general. ‘Evidence’ here means referring to the foundational sources, mainly the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*, through which one can learn how the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims lived—a model that Salafis strive to emulate.<sup>11</sup> What this approach actually entails might differ between individuals. One of the central figures in the Salafi-oriented group, who was proficient in Arabic, indicated that, for her, the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah* (the collections of Buchari and Muslim) were the most important sources. According to her, a reliable *ḥadīth* will return in many ways. The aforementioned scholars take second place, but, she believed, al-Albānī is one of the most trustworthy. She indicated, however, that the most important of all sources for her was her father: “my father reads a lot, knows what he is talking about and if he doesn’t know something, he will tell you.” She also expressed appreciation for Amr Khaled, even though she noted that he was not a scholar.

In her view, *ijtihād* was a right reserved only for scholars, since one must know the chronology of the Qur’ānic verses, know all the sources, and have wide-ranging knowledge of Arabic in order to engage in it. She argued: “Almost every scholar will substantiate his explanation. If his explanation is logical and firmly based in the sources, then I will follow his explanation. I wouldn’t perform *ijtihād* myself. That is too much responsibility. I do not have enough knowledge.” In making the case for assigning interpretative authority only to scholars, she also noted a difference between more important issues, such as what is *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, and less important issues, for example the position of the finger during prayer. In the latter cases, she found it appropriate to decide for herself.

For another central figure of the same group, providing evidence from foundational sources is also crucial to religious discourse; but for her the practice took a different form. She does not speak Arabic and is therefore unable to consult the sources in the original language. She therefore draws a lot on “sheikh Google and sisters in Islam.” She liked, for example, the websites of the as-Soennah mosque and of al-Munajjid because, she said, these websites give the sources, which can

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<sup>11</sup> Carmen Becker, “‘Gaining Knowledge’: Salafi Activism in German and Dutch Online Forums,” *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* 3, no. 1 (2009): 79–98.

be checked. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah and Ibn Taymiyyah are, she held, very precise. In her view, it was permissible to perform *ijtihād* by engaging with existing knowledge on the subject. She understood *ijtihād* to mean ascertaining what scholars say—for example on the *niqāb* or on female circumcision—and then checking their evidence; one's decision would then be based on the most convincing explanation. She emphasized the importance of asking an *imām* for his evidence too. Both women thus noted the limitations of scholars, but at the same time held the opinion that one should rely on them.

Whereas the Salafī-oriented group's discourse was rationalistic, emphasizing the importance of providing the sources on which a particular viewpoint was based, the approach of the second group was much more spiritual and placed less emphasis on providing the sources. The meetings of this second group attract over one hundred women of different ages and ideological orientations. This group strives to keep young people from radicalization and delinquency: some leading members are employed in social work and some of the group's activities are organized in close cooperation with local authorities. Partly for this reason, I will label this the 'community-spirited' group. Whereas fear of God is central to the teaching of the Salafī-oriented group, a leading figure of the community-spirited group emphasized that people should not be made frightened of hell. In her view, you achieve better results by rewarding and offering positive encouragement than by punishment. According to her, only scholars should interpret the sources: only they can offer sound and safe interpretations for a specific group, keeping in view the context in which it has to operate. While noting the dangers of radicalization, she also warned against making things too easy for oneself and thus creating chaos. She pointed out that many good scholars who have visited the Netherlands or other European countries appear on the satellite channel *Iqrā*. She also noted *fatwās* given in response to questions put by television viewers as an important source for securing knowledge. She remembered, for example, a question from someone in Italy on the permissibility of taking out a mortgage in order to buy a house.

One of my Turkish interlocutors, with no strong association with any mosque or women's group, showed a similar ambivalence toward the performance of *ijtihād*. On the one hand she reserved this task for scholars. It should, she averred, be based on the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*, and she felt that she lacked the knowledge to interpret the texts for herself. However, she also emphasized that she found it important

to develop her own opinion. For example, according to Islamic law men are allowed to marry someone of the *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the book), whereas this is not allowed for women. She expressed her disagreement with this. She argued that you can advise women against marrying a non-Muslim man, but that this act is not wrong. Similarly, she argued that she had not yet formed her own opinion on Islamic banking and taking out a mortgage. In general, for her, Ḥanafī *fiqh* manuals constituted an important source. She argued that they incorporate the schematized *Sunnah* and tradition of a country and that she therefore trusts them.

By way of an interim conclusion, before discussing the forms and elements of religious authority in the women's groups, it is appropriate to acknowledge that Islam forms an important force for these groups and that the women in them actively strive to establish for themselves what true Islam is. Their sources of inspiration are various. Television was an important source for all groups. In addition, the Salafī-oriented group made use, above all, of the internet and publications by scholars whom they considered authoritative, while the community-spirited group made much more use of classical *fiqh* and *tafsīr* works and regularly consulted the *imām* for an authoritative opinion. Unlike the position advocated by the leadership of Al Nisa, however, members and leaders in all the mosque-based groups expressed hesitation toward exercising individual *ijtihād*, and reserved this right only for scholars.

The interpretation of the process of *ijtihād*, as expressed by these women's groups, comes close to that of Tariq Ramadan, who, in a debate with Asma Barlas, warned against extending the right of *ijtihād* to everyone.<sup>12</sup> According to him, interpreting the Qur'ān is difficult and should therefore be done only by knowledgeable people. By contrast, Barlas argued that "the Qur'ān must remain open to many interpretations." According to her, "providing a new framework for formulating laws that are more in harmony with the Qur'ān's best and egalitarian meanings" requires new interpretations. She emphasized that the interpretation of the Qur'ān cannot be vested in a handful of experts. Ramadan articulated the majority position of Muslims in the

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<sup>12</sup> "Muslims in the West: Between Tradition and Modernity," debate between Tariq Ramadan and Asma Barlas, organized by the student association AviCenna, Rotterdam, June 13, 2008; see [www.tariqramadan.nl](http://www.tariqramadan.nl), under the link 'Lectures.'

Netherlands, whereas Barlas's viewpoint has been well received among women of the national network organization Al Nisa, but has had limited currency elsewhere.

*Forms and Elements of Religious Authority*

In the beginning, when I was sixteen or somewhat earlier, I was searching for answers. What is forbidden and what is allowed and why? Nowadays, this has grown less important and I only search if I have particular questions. For example, with regard to music or if one hears someone saying that studying law is *ḥarām*, or with regard to shaking hands.... People want clarity. I had this too when I was eighteen concerning the headscarf. What must I do? We cannot see the wood for the trees. (Interview with a Dutch Moroccan student of law)

This quotation, taken from an interview with one of my interlocutors, is a good representation of the general responses. It conveys a great demand for religious knowledge and a wish for clear answers. Many women whom I interviewed expressed similar viewpoints. This quotation presents a good starting point for our exploration of the forms and elements of religious authority.

Scholars have offered various perspectives on changing conceptions of religious knowledge and authority in Muslim majority and minority societies. Many have noted that in pre-modern societies a sharp distinction existed between religious scholars, who claimed the right to define the form and content of Islam on the basis of their knowledge of and access to the religious sources, and the uninformed and non-specialists who were obliged to seek their opinion in all questions necessitating *sharī'ah* knowledge. This power relationship has changed in modern times: interpretative authority no longer rests in the hands of religious scholars alone. More people are now familiar with and have knowledge of Islamic arguments and practices. Interpretative authority has shifted to, among others, national legislatures and specialized committees.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 4 (1992): 643–55; Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995); Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick, and David S. Powers, "Muftis, Fatwas, and Islamic Legal Interpretation," in *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and their Fatwas*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick, and David S. Powers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3–32.

Many scholars have noted the changes engendered by greater accessibility of religious knowledge and new forms of communication. As noted by Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori,<sup>14</sup> mass education and mass communication have transformed the style and scale of Muslim discourse. Eickelman and Piscatori introduce the concept of the 'objectification of Muslim consciousness' to capture the process of consciously questioning one's religious tradition and systematizing it. They point, for example, to the wide availability of Islamic books, the popularity of catechisms and manuals, and the increase in the number of believers engaged in discourses about Islamic belief and practices.<sup>15</sup> To describe a process similar to objectification, Lara Deeb introduces the concept of 'authentication.' Using the words of pious Shi'ah in Lebanon, she describes authentication as "a process of establishing the true or correct meaning, understanding, or method of various religious and social practices and beliefs."<sup>16</sup> She emphasizes, however, contrary to what Eickelman and Piscatori seem to suggest, that these processes of conscious engagement with religious questions and concepts are not entirely new.<sup>17</sup> Saba Mahmood's critique of the notion of the 'objectification of religion' follows similar reasoning. According to her, the focus on Islamic arguments and practices should not be analyzed in terms of a universal process of modernization leading from unreflective observance in earlier times toward conscious religious deliberation and debate today. Rather, she encourages us to study changes in notions of reflexivity at the level of micro-practices and in terms of subject formation.<sup>18</sup>

Other narratives are less focused on the systematization of religious tradition, but take the argument further by highlighting the increased importance of using one's own faculties in assessing religious arguments. "The politics of authenticity which inevitably ensues from this," Peter Mandaville writes, "also serves to further fragment traditional sources of authority such that the locus of 'real' Islam and the identity of those who are permitted to speak on its behalf become ambiguous."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 37–45.

<sup>15</sup> Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 37–45.

<sup>16</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 21–22.

<sup>18</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 55–56.

<sup>19</sup> Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics*, 176.

Referring to Olivier Roy,<sup>20</sup> he argues that in this situation every Muslim is empowered to undertake *ijtihād*. This kind of analysis links the arguments about the fragmentation of religious authority in modern-day Islam directly to the right of every individual to engage in *ijtihād*, but pays no attention to the precise ways in which individual believers assess authority claims.

The women I worked with all seek knowledge and try to establish for themselves what is true Islam. At the same time, there is a proliferation of people and institutions claiming religious knowledge and authority—religious scholars, Sufi *shaykhs*, television personalities, websites, legislating bodies, *fatwā* councils, and intellectuals with no specialized religious training. In this context of personal knowledge-seeking, where there are many contenders for religious authority, the individual believer's decision in assessing whose authority to follow becomes all the more important. As Frédéric Volpi and Bryan S. Turner put it, "authority is to an ever-increasing extent purposefully mediated by the individual."<sup>21</sup> In Europe, even more than in Muslim-majority countries, much depends on the willingness of the individual to accept particular regulations. For example, if the family law in a Muslim country is based on Muslim regulations concerning marriage and divorce, this law applies to all Muslim nationals of that country. By contrast, if the European Council for Fatwa and Research issues a *fatwā* concerning marriage or divorce or any other topic, every Muslim in Europe can decide for him- or herself whether he or she will follow the council's advice. For Muslims living in Europe there is thus even more space to make a conscious choice about which religious authority to follow.

However, in the case of the mosque-based women's groups discussed in this chapter, even in a Western context, where the individual believer has much more choice, certain authoritative discourses become very influential. As we have seen, 'using one's own faculties,' for most of the cases presented in this chapter, meant "actively seeking knowledge through authoritative discourses,"<sup>22</sup> and not extracting knowledge on the basis of one's own understanding of the Qur'an and

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<sup>20</sup> Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>21</sup> Frédéric Volpi and Bryan S. Turner, "Introduction: Making Islamic Authority Matter," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 13.

<sup>22</sup> Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*.

*Sunnah*. The difference is thus not so much whether the women in these groups are exercising their individual right to engage in *ijtihad*; rather, the distinguishing feature of the discourses of these different women's groups is the dimension of the religious ethic that they prioritize.

The Salafi-oriented group's ethic appeared to be directed at worshipping God or unconditional submission to God. For example, the group made use of a development program that every participant of the group could employ to monitor and evaluate one's own religiosity each month. It was distributed at one of their meetings and bears Qur'anic verse 51:56 as its motto: "And I created the *jinn*s and humankind only that they worship me."<sup>23</sup> The central goal expresses itself also in the first and sixth recommendations of the introduction to the development program: "Make sure that Islam is your goal in your life, that you always think of Allah, and that the Prophet—*saws*—is your greatest example in worship and code of conduct [*achlacaq*]" and "Regularly ask yourself 'Why am I doing this?' in order to remind yourself why you do the things you do. While doing so, work toward the answer: for the sake of Allah." The program allows the believer to monitor her devoutness under the headings 'purification of your heart and intentions,' 'good manners/*achlacaq*,' 'worship/*ibaadah*,' 'Islamic appearance,' 'social environment,' and 'other.' Examples of recommendations under 'good manners' are 'think before you speak, and do not talk with men unnecessarily'; under 'Islamic appearance,' instructions include 'do not use perfume or wear make up in public and wear the correct *hijab*'; under 'social environment,' 'help your parents (for example with housekeeping), be friendly to your neighbor, and greet your sisters with '*al-salamu 'alaikum*.'

The community-spirited group placed primary emphasis on improvement of the self or becoming a better person through Islam, as opposed to focusing on unconditional submission to God as prioritized by the Salafi-oriented group. One of the leaders of the community-spirited group told me how she and her sisters used to hold sessions in which they discussed the weaknesses and strengths of each of them. The person under discussion sat in the middle. She was not allowed to react

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<sup>23</sup> This is a translation of the Dutch translation of this verse used in the progress program: "En ik heb de Djinn's en de mens slechts geschapen om Mij te dienen."



when the others identified her bad points. She had to listen carefully and let the criticism sink in. She further argued that she herself reflects on her own behavior every day before going to sleep. If she feels that she has hurt someone, she determines to talk it over and put it right within a few days. In comparison with the Salafi-oriented group, the community-spirited group feels greater responsibility for the image of their community, and particularly their young people, and invests a lot of energy in trying to keep them away from radicalization and delinquency.

The groups thus emphasized in different degrees the importance of vertical and horizontal relationships. The women of the Salafi-oriented group emphasized that everything should be done because of God. By contrast, members of the community-spirited group concentrated to a greater extent on horizontal relationships. Islam, for them, is a way of conduct vis-à-vis God, but also—or to begin with—vis-à-vis fellow humans.

What one aims to achieve has implications for one's approach toward engagement with religious sources. Unconditional submission to God requires precise knowledge of the divine rule that every believer is obliged to follow. The improvement of the self does not necessitate a similar level of detailed knowledge of God's plan for humankind. On this account, Islam is a tool that helps the believer to become a better person, and does not ask her to live life only in order to meet God's guidelines. Different aims lead to different ways of judging the merits of religious arguments and practices. Validation in the Salafi-oriented group is procedural in its orientation toward providing scholarly evidence based on the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*. The other group judges to a greater extent on the basis of the moderateness of the terms and their contribution to the wellbeing of the Muslim community in Dutch society. For example, one of the leaders of the community-spirited group referred women for religious advice to a particular *imām*. She argued that he is the best guide for people who want to integrate into Dutch society since he is a scholar and also knows Dutch society: thus his advice would enable an individual both to keep their faith and to take part in society. Similarly, validation of authority among the leading figures of Al Nisa is based on the contribution of the arguments and practices to emancipation, freedom, and gender equality.

In this chapter, I have argued that authority is mediated by the individual and I have sketched the discourse of authority among the

women I worked with. In doing so, the chapter has also attempted to show the limited extent to which individual *ijtihad*, as advocated by Muslim scholars such as Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud (see Hammer, Chapter 3.5, this volume), is exercised by Muslim women in the Netherlands. Women have limited scope to obtain and exercise religious authority. The majority of the female leaders in the mosque-based groups in the Netherlands exercise authority on the basis of their traditional training, knowledge, and expertise. These women might be respected within the community at large, but their authority remains limited to women only, and often depends heavily on male interpreters. A second category of female leaders operates mainly outside the mosques. They might explicitly call for gender equality and the reopening of the gates of *ijtihad*. These women can mainly be found in the circles of the national network organization Al Nisa. Their views have not yet been widely accepted among Muslims in the Netherlands.

To conclude, it is fitting to return to the quotation at the beginning of this section, which conveyed a young Muslim woman's desire to do the right thing. The women of the mosque and local groups that I studied feared that setting one's own standards could lead to making it too easy for oneself, to radicalization, or to not complying with God's wishes. All therefore sought knowledge through authoritative discourses and were hesitant about using their own reasoning in deciding what is appropriate Islamic behavior. However, because of the growing diversity of voices claiming knowledge and authority, the role of the individual in assessing these authority claims has become more important. To study notions of religious authority among Muslims in Europe we should therefore shift our attention from the multitude of voices to the way individual believers assess authority claims and decide how to draw their conclusions on what it means to be a good Muslim. This chapter distinguishes two ways of judging the merits of religious arguments and practices in mosques and local groups: one is oriented toward providing evidence on the basis of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, while the other is based on the moderateness of the interpretations that allow one to combine being a good Muslim with taking part in Dutch society.

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## CHAPTER 2.3

# CELEBRATING MISS MUSLIM PAGEANTS AND OPPOSING ROCK CONCERTS: CONTRASTING THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP OF TWO MUSLIM WOMEN IN KAZAN

N. R. Micinski

### *Introduction*

While Russia is not popularly known as a center for Islamic activity, Muslim civil society organizations in Kazan, Russia's third largest city, have grown in strength and number since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recently, Muslim women's civil society organizations in Kazan have emerged as significant actors at the regional and national level.

Traditional understandings of Islamic authority have excluded women in many Muslim majority countries because religious authority was confined to *imāms* and '*ulamā*' who received formal religious schooling in mosques and *madrasahs*. The situation in Tatarstan differs from other Muslim minority communities because Tatar Muslims are not a recent immigrant population. Tatars are a Turkic people, who emigrated from Siberia from the tenth to thirteenth century, and converted to Islam over 1,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Tatars are the largest ethnic minority in Russia with over five million people. In Tatarstan, 39 percent of the population is Russian and 53 percent is Tatar, numbering over two million.<sup>2</sup> Russians and Tatars have had a long period of engagement since the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan in 1552. Muslim women in Tatarstan have been claiming religious authority for centuries by performing special cultural and religious rites through female religious figures called *abystay*. The most recent claim comes from women activists who are part of a growing

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<sup>1</sup> Yahya G. Abdullin, "Islam in the History of the Volga Kama Bulgars and Tatars," *Central Asian Survey* 9, no. 2 (1990): 1–11.

<sup>2</sup> From 2002 census data. For a thorough discussion of Muslim demographics in Russia, see Thomas Heleniak, "Regional Distribution of the Muslim Population of Russia," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 47, no. 4 (2006): 426–48.

women's movement in Tatarstan that asserts Muslim women's rights and defines how they want to be viewed by society.

In this chapter, I examine how experience as religious instructors in mosques equipped two Muslim women—Naila Ziganshina and Almira Adiatullina—to become prominent leaders and activists in Kazan, Russia. In the first section, I will lay out a theoretical framework for understanding Muslim women's authority within invited and invented spaces. Second, I will place each case study within the historical and cultural context of Tatarstan and Russia at the beginning of the new millennium. Third, I will analyse the religious and social authority of Ziganshina and Adiatullina as two examples of Muslim women in positions of leadership in a Muslim minority country.

Building on interviews with Adiatullina and Ziganshina, I argue that Tatar Muslim women have asserted authority within the informal structures of civil society organizations and the formal structures of the Islamic Spiritual Boards. The authority and voices of women within the formal structure of the Spiritual Board have been limited to issues constructed as the Muslim women's domain, such as wearing the headscarf or caring for children. In contrast, Muslim women within civil society organizations have asserted their authority on issues ranging from public drinking to rock concerts. While religious education and teaching experience are necessary credentials for Muslim women to become leaders and activists within the Muslim community in Russia, the type of impact Muslim women's organizations have is largely dependent on the way they are created and where they draw their legitimacy.

### *Invited and Invented Spaces*

Religious authority is an important lens for analysis because it examines how individuals and organizations construct and claim their right to speak for Islam. This becomes more complex when considering the interaction between religious authority and social authority, in respect to both men and women leaders within Muslim communities. Particularly in Kazan, formal religious education and experience as a mosque instructor built the social capital and legitimacy of Adiatullina and Ziganshina that later allowed them to act as social leaders for their communities on issues related to religion.

Throughout this chapter, I also use the analytic frameworks of formal and informal authority in order to highlight overlapping and

ambiguous cases that do not fit exclusively into the categories of formal and informal or religious and social authority. In addition, the lens of formal and informal authority is useful when applied to religious authority because it allows us to see the intersection of religious authority and state authority: both state and religious authorities negotiate mutually beneficial relationships that reinforce their legitimacy. These relationships extend beyond the state and religious institutions to social and community groups, developing further legitimacy for those involved.

The sharp lines drawn between formal and informal are contested by Miraftab, who asserts that informal politics should be conceptualized as invited and invented spaces, which overlap and interact with each other. Miraftab defines invited spaces as:

occupied by those grassroots actions and their allied non-governmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions. 'Invented' spaces are defined as occupied by those collective actions by the poor that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction is significant because, at their heart, invited spaces “cope with systems of hardship” while invented spaces are defiant and “resist...the status quo.”<sup>4</sup> The case studies used in this chapter show how invited spaces give immediate legitimacy while insuring loyalty and reciprocity. Invented spaces, however, build legitimacy over time through the growth of grassroots support but are not restricted by large institutions. Invented spaces often challenge tradition but, as I will discuss later, invented participation can also challenge progressive formal authorities to be more conservative.

Adiatullina and Ziganshina represent both invited and invented forms of women's participation in Islamic governance in Tatarstan. Neither case is exclusively invited or invented, rather Muslim women define their power and participate in overlapping spheres, invited one day and invented the next. By using the invited/invented lens, I join Miraftab in challenging these dichotomies and critiquing the

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<sup>3</sup> Faranak Miraftab, “Feminist Praxis, Citizenship and Informal Politics: Reflections on South Africa's Anti-eviction Camp,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 2 (2006): 195.

<sup>4</sup> Miraftab, “Feminist Praxis,” 195.

processes by which nation-states sanction which parts of civil society are 'authentic' by defining, inviting, and limiting participation.

### *Historical Context*

#### *Tatar National and Religious Identity*

Throughout the five-hundred-year relationship between Russia and Tatarstan, Tatar independence movements have waxed and waned. The most recent surge came in March 1992 when the Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiev refused to sign the Federation Treaty, President Yeltsin's attempt to unite the Russian Federation. With the collapse of the USSR, many people in Tatarstan began pushing for sovereignty by asserting a distinct Tatar national identity and calling for independence. This identity emphasized Tatars' heritage as Turkic people who speak a different language, celebrate a distinct culture, and practice a separate religion. These efforts have shown themselves through establishing bilingual education, opening a second Tatar theater, and building mosques and *madrassahs*.<sup>5</sup> After careful negotiation, President Shaimiev signed a bilateral treaty with Russia in 1994 that lay the basis for relative autonomy, which has allowed his administration to further establish Tatar national identity and institutions.

Key to Tatarstan's recent nation-building project has been the Islamization of 'Tatarness' through the reconstruction of the Kul Sharif Mosque and the relatively fast pace of building Islamic schools, such as the Russian Islamic University.<sup>6</sup> The reconstruction of the Kul Sharif Mosque in 1996 was seen by Tatars as a symbolic act of repossessing Kazan from Russian imperialists and physically changing Kazan's skyline to include four prominent minarets.<sup>7</sup> While the majority of Tatars remain secular, some scholars characterize current trends as an Islamic revival with nearly a quarter of young Tatars performing

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<sup>5</sup> Goldberg provides a compelling and insightful case study of Tatar national identity about a 1917 Tatar play that was reproduced in 1992. See the fifth chapter of her dissertation: M. Goldberg, "Russian Empire—Tatar Theater: The Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 91–116.

<sup>6</sup> Galina M. Yemelianova, "Islam and Nation Building in Tatarstan and Dagestan of the Russian Federation," *Nationalities Papers* 27, no. 4 (1999): 611.

<sup>7</sup> For an extended discussion of the significance of the rebuilding of the Kul Sharif Mosque, see Helen M. Faller, "Repossessing Kazan as a Form of Nation-building in Tatarstan, Russia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2002): 81–90.



Islamic rites and almost 40 percent identifying with Islam without performing the rites.<sup>8</sup> The Tatar government and Tatar Islamic authorities have created a dominant narrative in Tatarstan that placed Islam at the center of Tatar national identity.<sup>9</sup>

### *Islamic Authority in Russia*

Islamic governance in Tatarstan has evolved since the Russian conquest in 1552 when Russian invaders attempted to force conversion, persecute believers, and dismantle Islamic institutions. Open hostility toward Muslims ended in 1788 when Catherine II permitted the creation of the first Muslim Spiritual Assembly in Ufa (also referred to as a *muftiāte*). This new administrative body acted as a tool for state control and regulation of Muslim communities through the intermediaries of the Muslim religious elite. Following the 1917 revolution, the *muftiāte* was retained and expanded to four *muftiātes* in order to better control Soviet Muslim populations during World War II. The Soviet Union used Islamic governance to push propaganda from the atheist state and restrict the number of *imāms* and mosques in Muslim communities.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the *muftiātes* were not dissolved, but multiplied with many new Islamic Spiritual Boards emerging across Russia.<sup>10</sup> Such large expansion of Islamic governance was spearheaded by a new generation of leaders, sometimes called ‘young *imāms*,’ who had not been part of the Soviet *muftiātes* or colluded with the KGB. The ‘young *imāms*’ contested the authority of the old *muftiātes*, specifically the supremacy of the original *muftiāte* in Ufa and its Muftī Talgat Tajutdinov. One group of ‘young *imāms*’ established a competing *muftiāte* based in Moscow called the Council of Muftīs of Russia.<sup>11</sup>

The resulting power struggle between Muftī Talgat Tajutdinov and the ‘young *imāms*’ of Tatarstan has been intertwined with the

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<sup>8</sup> Irina Kuznetsova-Morenko and Leissan Salakhhatdinova, “The Changing Face of Islam in Tatarstan,” *Kultura* (2006): 6.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of Tatar identity and Islam, see Azode-Ayse Rorlich, “History, Collective Memory and Identity: The Tatars of Sovereign Tatarstan,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999): 379–96.

<sup>10</sup> Kimitaka Matsuzato, “The Regional Context of Islam in Russia: Diversities along the Volga,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 47, no. 4 (2006): 451.

<sup>11</sup> Galina M. Yemelianova, “Russia’s Umma and its Muftīs,” *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 2 (2003): 139–50.

geopolitics of the region. Since 1992, President Shaimiev has pushed for the separation of Tatar Islamic governance from all federal Islamic governance (particularly Tajutdinov's *muftiate*). Shaimiev's politics coincide with his negotiations for Tatar independence and the separation of Tatar Islamic governance was an initial step toward overall Tatar sovereignty.<sup>12</sup>

The structure of Islamic governance in Tatarstan between 1992 and 1998 consisted of two competing parallel spiritual boards: one loyal to Mufti Tajutdinov based in Ufa and the other loyal to the Council of Muftis of Russia based in Moscow. Local mosques were registered with one or both of the spiritual boards. This created confusion at the local level for rural *imāms* not involved in the regional power struggle.

In 1998, President Shaimiev and the Tatar government organized a Unifying Islamic Congress and elected Gusman Iskhakov as Mufti of Tatarstan. The formation and establishment of the Muslim Religious Board of the Republic of Tatarstan (MRBRT) and Iskhakov's authority is closely linked to the power and authority of Shaimiev and the Tatarstan government.<sup>13</sup>

The current Islamic governance in Tatarstan consists of the MRBRT, which is subordinate to the Council of Muftis of Russia. This Spiritual Board, discussed later in this chapter, is based in Kazan and led by Iskhakov. The Spiritual Board employs the *mufti*, *qādi*, *imāms*, and administrators as well as organizing work in mosques and *madrasahs* throughout Tatarstan.

### *Women's Islamic Authority in Tatarstan*

The MRBRT has never formally included women within Islamic governance in Tatarstan. Until 2005, the Spiritual Board did not plan or organize events for women. Historically, Tatar Muslim women participated in Islam in informal ways, such as the position of *abystay*. Literally meaning 'older sister,' *abystay* describes a "female religious figure or a mullah's wife, who would give religious instruction to girls."<sup>14</sup> During interviews in Tatarstan, many people were confused about what qualifies a woman to become an *abystay*: some suggested

<sup>12</sup> Galina M. Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 154.

<sup>13</sup> Matsuzato, "Regional Context of Islam in Russia," 451.

<sup>14</sup> Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam*, xvi.

*abystay* had to be the wife of a *mullā*, while others thought old age and experience would be enough.<sup>15</sup>

*Abystay* are similar to *otin-oyi* in other parts of Central Asian such as Uzbekistan or western China.<sup>16</sup> *Abystay*

taught in the women's *maktab* in a similar way to the Central Asian *otin-oyi*. Moreover, like the *otin-oyi*, before the 1917 Revolution, the *abystay* were learned women from wealthy milieus who educated children and also conducted rituals among women.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, Tatar women hold special pride that *abystay* are allowed only in Tatarstan to read an important prayer to begin their national festival.

Below are two case studies based on fieldwork conducted in Kazan, Tatarstan, in July 2007 and June 2009, to explore the changing nature of Muslim women's authority in Islamic governance in Tatarstan. The case studies are a compilation of interviews with Ziganshina or Adiatullina and other members of the Muslim community in Kazan. All quotes cited in the text are from my personal interviews with Ziganshina or Adiatullina unless otherwise stated. There were many barriers during our interviews, including communication through a translator, limited amounts of time, and lack of trust in part because of my identity as a white American male researcher.

#### *Naila Ziganshina and Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan*

Naila Ziganshina is a thirty-nine-year-old Tatar Muslim woman—mother of two children, wife, and leader of Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. When I first met Ziganshina in 2007, she was dressed conservatively—covering her head, wrists, and ankles—but wearing a fashionable silk tunic and matching hijab. I was not surprised to later discover her passion for Islamic fashion and the Miss Muslim Pageant that her organization started.

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews by author, Kazan, Russia, June 2009.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion on *otin-oyi*, see Habiba Fathi, "Otimes: The Unknown Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam," *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 1 (1997): 27–43.

<sup>17</sup> Habiba Fathi, "Gender, Islam, and Social Change in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 307.

The Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan is an association of Muslim women's clubs, which works to improve Muslim women's lives in Tatarstan. Much of their work occurs on a grassroots level by volunteering in the community with youth or responding to the needs of individual families, but their work reaches the international community through the Miss Muslim Pageant. In the four years following the organization's founding, Ziganshina has emerged as a leading figure for Muslim women in Tatarstan.

*Creating Space: Invited Participation*

In 2005, an organizing committee of *imāms* headed by Dr. Valiulla Yakupov, Deputy of Muftī of the MRBRT, arranged the first meeting of the union and found an appropriate leader. The organizing committee was started after Yakupov noticed the prevalence of women's clubs around Tatarstan within local mosques and saw a need to connect their work. Yakupov explained that

After the [era of Soviet] Atheism, the majority of people attending mosques were women and continue to be today... [the union was established] as centralized support [for the local women's clubs].<sup>18</sup>

On December 5, 2005, representatives from forty-eight local women's clubs gathered to establish the union. The attendees voted for a republic-wide structure and chose Naila Ziganshina as the first leader of the group. Following the meeting, a constitution was written and filed with the Tatarstan Ministry of Justice by a male lawyer from the Spiritual Board. The union is registered as a social organization because the purpose of the group is to improve the lives of Muslim women in Tatarstan, not work in a religious function. The collaboration between the two groups blurs the legal line: Ziganshina is a salaried employee of the Spiritual Board, has an office on the second floor of the Spiritual Board's building, and participates in other activities within the Spiritual Board. Additionally, the Spiritual Board holds the union's finances and both organizations have received money from the Fund of Support for Islamic Science and Education based in Moscow. On paper, Ziganshina represents herself as a social leader within a religious community. In practice, Ziganshina operates as a religious leader by

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<sup>18</sup> Valiulla Yakupov, interview with author, June 2009.

providing one-to-one counseling and religious advice to women and writing and delivering radio addresses about Islam to the public.

The MRBRT, while legally separate from the union, in reality controls both its physical and financial resources. The union operates within an invited space for women's participation. The Spiritual Board carefully selected Ziganshina as the ideal woman to lead and represent Muslim women of Tatarstan. Ziganshina claimed that the Spiritual Board searched for over four years for the ideal woman to be the leader of the union but "they could not find the right woman who could deal with issues of family, social, and education." Ziganshina was invited by the Mufti of the MRBRT to organize *ḥalāl* food for the mosque's kindergarten classes and work on several charity projects. After volunteering at the Spiritual Board, she was recruited (and later elected) to be the leader of the union.

As with other invited spaces, the union's mission came with limitations. While the office building of the MRBRT is not segregated by gender, the Spiritual Board limited women's full participation in the wider organization by creating a separate organization for women, restricting their voice and authority to issues directly related to women, family, and children. The Spiritual Board designated the purpose of the union, selected their leader, and provides and controls their resources. The legitimacy of Ziganshina and the union comes from the Spiritual Board's close association. Most overtly, the organizing committee set the terms for legitimate participation of women through the representative of the union, Ziganshina, to the Spiritual Board.

### *Basis of Authority*

Ziganshina's religious authority in her community ranges from explaining passages of the Qur'an to playing matchmaker for young Muslim men and women. For many years, Ziganshina taught Qur'an lessons for women at the mosque and, in 2009, produced a weekly radio show during which she gave speeches on various religious topics. Ziganshina explained, "God has given me this authority." The basis of her authority and power is rooted in three points: her formal religious education and experience as an instructor in the mosque, her personal accomplishments and charisma, and her position as an employee within the formal institution of the Spiritual Board.

*Authority from Religious Education*

Ziganshina attended *madrakah* in Kazan, Tatarstan, where she studied the Qur'an, Islamic law, and Arabic language for two years. After studying journalism at university, she began teaching in her local mosque. Ziganshina taught lessons on Islam and Tatar and Russian language for other women and children. It is from her formal religious education that Ziganshina draws her knowledge of the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, and Islamic law. She emphasizes her religious education as a foundation of her religious authority. Ziganshina explained that just as "it is hard to work in law if you do not know the law," so she must be knowledgeable about Islam in order to teach.

Ziganshina stopped teaching while her children were young, but after they had grown up, she wanted to do more for her community. Ziganshina grew frustrated because no one took her seriously and instead saw her as just another mother. She began to volunteer with the Spiritual Board and eventually became the leader of the union. Ziganshina used her religious education and experience as a mosque instructor as a stepping-stone to greater leadership within the community. Without her religious education, the Spiritual Board would not have considered her qualified for her position. Her teaching experience has played a factor in her rise to power because it demonstrated her ability to work directly with women and children.

When I asked Ziganshina if she considered herself an *abystay*, she chuckled, responding that maybe someday she would be considered an *abystay*, but she was not an old woman yet. While religious education is an important factor for younger women to claim religious authority in Tatarstan, older women who are considered *abystay* are respected for their religious knowledge without formal education.

*Reputation from Personal Accomplishments and Charisma*

Ziganshina's personal accomplishments have built her reputation as a strong leader and virtuous Tatar Muslim woman. As a journalist, Ziganshina's newspaper articles were popular across the republic. During the 1980s—while Islam was still officially banned—Ziganshina produced several television programs on Tatar religion and culture. In 1989, Ziganshina started an organization for youth to discuss their problems in the Madovia republic (east of Tatarstan) where she was living at the time. Because most of the participants were Muslim, they would hold their meetings during the week and on Friday gather for

prayer in the same space. During this time, mosques were banned and most had been destroyed. Ziganshina gathered support and wrote a letter to the president of the republic asking for permission to build the mosque, which was later granted.

Ziganshina's experience of fighting for one of the first legal mosques in Russia is representative of other Muslim women leading in the rebuilding of their religious communities. Ziganshina explained that "Because there are not many active men, women must organize to build mosques." This void in leadership presented an opportunity for Ziganshina and other women like her to take up religious leadership within their communities.

In her public role, Ziganshina emphasizes the characteristics that exemplify virtuous Tatar Muslim women. She gushes about choosing to be a good wife and mother over her career in journalism; she volunteers regularly at her mosque and in community; she dresses conservatively wearing a headscarf and always covers her wrists and ankles. Ziganshina could lose some of her authority if she did not choose to personally fulfill a conservative conception of female piety.

#### *Formal Legitimacy from the MRBRT*

Ziganshina's authority is also based on her employment at the Spiritual Board, whose own legitimacy comes from its formal relationship with the Russian and Tatar governments. The Spiritual Board's organizing committee selected Ziganshina after she met their criteria and completed volunteer work in the mosque. Ziganshina is seen as a formal representative of Muslim women in Tatarstan and thus a legitimate leader within the community.

Before Ziganshina was employed, there were no women in positions authority within the MRBRT. Ziganshina filled a void at the top level of leadership for women, providing a voice and representation as a social leader of Muslim women at the regional level. While Ziganshina's role is officially administrative, her activities are often in the realm of religious leadership. Women's participation in other parts of the Spiritual Board is in a service capacity, such as secretaries, cooks, and cleaners. Ziganshina is the only women employed at the Spiritual Board with substantial authority or input into the management of the organization; however, the union is not seen as threatening to the Spiritual Board's authority because it was invited to participate in sanctioned and limited ways.

### *Limitations of Religious Authority*

The limits of Ziganshina's authority are threefold: the structural limitations set up by the Spiritual Board and the union's constitution, the personal limitation of authority based on her knowledge of Islam, and the cultural limits of traditional Tatar society. Ziganshina claimed that she never steps outside the limits set up by the union's constitution, which she explained as not challenging the Tatar state and not supporting radical extremists. Outside of these restrictions, she claimed that nothing was off-limits. Another male official at the Spiritual Board said that Ziganshina could achieve any position within the Spiritual Board except an *imām*.

Ziganshina later went on to explain the personal limitations she puts on her own authority based on her knowledge of Islam. When Ziganshina gives a speech or teaches a lesson, she does not necessarily quote from the Qur'an but tries to explain it in her own way. Ziganshina explained that "the idea must be the same but it is in my own words... *Imāms* and *Hazrats* [honored judges] judge the global problems connected to politics but simple problems like divorces or someone needing money—they come to me and my organization to solve these problems." In her understanding, larger political issues are handled by male religious authorities, while Ziganshina and her all-women organization are responsible for the personal interpretation of religion affecting the daily lives of Muslims in Tatarstan. Ziganshina explained these limitations in terms of the limits of her own knowledge:

I always give answers by myself because I know the rules and the answers from my religious education. I use the Qur'an and the *sunnah* to answer their questions and if that is not enough, I ask the *qādī*.

Although Ziganshina has the authority to answer these questions, she may not have the specific knowledge or expertise on a subject. Male religious authorities, in Ziganshina's eyes, are considered higher religious authorities with overriding power; Ziganshina suggested: "I am just the helper of the *imāms*."

Some people in the Muslim community in Kazan question Muslim women's religious authority to teach or instruct men and boys. Ziganshina rejects this assertion, saying,

I have asked the *imām* if I am allowed to give a speech about morality and Islam to men and [the *imām*] said, "Yes, if you speak about morality, mercy, and Islam."



While Ziganshina defends her claim to religious authority, she supports her claim using the opinion of male religious authorities. Ziganshina's religious authority is defined and patrolled by male religious authorities within the Spiritual Board and their superiority is reinforced by Ziganshina when she defers to the opinions of male religious authorities.

Several men within the community suggested that women should only exercise leadership with respect to women's issues but Ziganshina firmly asserts that she has the authority to teach on all subjects to women and children, including both boys and girls. She also reaches adult male audiences through public speeches and radio programs. Ziganshina ended with a challenge for male leaders to help the women in their community:

If [a man] does not believe a woman should be a leader, then he should be a leader himself [and help the women]... The Qur'an does not ban women from leadership positions.

While this assertion suggests that women's leadership in Tatarstan is simply a pragmatic measure, it is especially poignant in central Russia, where the majority of attendants at mosque are women and some of the mosques in Russia have been rebuilt because of the leadership of women.

### *Celebrating Miss Muslim Pageants*

The main impact of Ziganshina's work has been through the union's annual Miss Muslim Pageant. Begun in 2006, the Miss Muslim Pageant aims to encourage more women to wear a headscarf and to construct an alternative image of beauty for Muslim women. The head of the jury deciding the pageant said,

They see their Muslim peers who wear *hijāb* as beautiful, well-educated and religious... We want to show that beauty has nothing to do with nudity and obscenity.<sup>19</sup>

The Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan uses the Miss Muslim Pageant to celebrate and encourage Muslim fashion and beauty in a non-confrontational way within informal politics.

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<sup>19</sup> Damir Ahmed, "Brains Not Body Criteria for Tatarstan 'Miss Muslim,'" Islam-Online.net, January 21, 2006, <http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2006-01/21>.

Over fifty young women participated the first year in a range of activities including cooking and sewing competitions, Qur'ān memorization and recitation tests, and questions on Tatar history and culture. In the following years, additional competitions were added such as flower arrangement, modeling Tatar national dress, writing and performing a lullaby, and racing for the fastest to put on a headscarf, and fastest to put on a baby's diaper. Miss Muslim 2008 explained:

This contest is to show society that Muslim women are not obedient. We don't sit at home all day. We can do all of this stuff.<sup>20</sup>

While Miss Muslim 2008 suggested that the contest presents Muslim women working for society, at the same time the pageant reinforces traditional Tatar and Muslim gender roles. Young Muslim women are judged on the extent to which their personal religious piety matches that of an ideal Muslim woman.

The Miss Muslim Pageant takes the Western idea of beauty pageants and attempts to invert its purpose. While the pageant reinforces Muslim values and denounces scantily clad women, it does so by constructing and celebrating a particular ideal of Muslim womanhood. The Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan covertly asserts its religious authority by interpreting its ideal of Muslim womanhood and constructing this ideal through the competitions and judging criteria of the pageant. The organization's understanding of Muslim womanhood does not stray far from conservative ideals; rather the pageant pushes back against non-religious Russian society to assert alternative images of beauty. Ziganshina and the union have overlapping sources of their authority and tools of power: Ziganshina has the formal authority associated with the Spiritual Board, but can use the informal tools associated with the pageant to influence society without issuing a formal ruling.

In my interview with Miss Muslim 2008, she concluded that "Of course Muslim women want to be beautiful but by showing off [their] personality"<sup>21</sup>—and, I would add, one's piety.

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<sup>20</sup> Gulina, interview by author, June 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Gulina, interview by author, June 2009.

*Almira Adiatullina and Social Organization of  
Muslim Women of Tatarstan*

Almira Adiatullina is a seventy-year-old Tatar Muslim woman—former journalist during the Afghan war, community leader, and the founder of the Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. Before my first visit to Kazan, I had read about Adiatullina and her organization in BBC news articles.

The Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan is a group of Muslim women in Kazan working with the goal of raising the spiritual level of Tatar people. Adiatullina initiated a campaign for Muslim women's right to wear a headscarf in national ID photos, which grew into a nationwide movement taking their case to the Supreme Court of Russia. Through this campaign, Adiatullina and her organization have become well known throughout Tatarstan and Russia. One interviewee described her as the most famous Muslim woman in Russia; another person said, "She is like our Mother Teresa."<sup>22</sup>

*Creating Space: Invented Participation*

The Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan was founded after Adiatullina went on *hajj* and experienced a life-changing revelation. When she returned from *hajj* she explained, "I understood that I lacked some knowledge about Islam, that is why I entered Muhammadiya"—a historic Islamic university in Kazan—at the age of fifty-nine.<sup>23</sup> During the mid-1990s, many people were organizing professional unions for lawyers and doctors and Adiatullina explained, "I began to think why should not we Muslim women unite?"

On November 25, 1995, women from her university and a women's study group situated in a mosque founded what was then called the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. Adiatullina explained that, "there was not an election...I organized it, so I am the leader." At the group's founding, the MRBRT was supportive and encouraged their work but, in 2005, when the Spiritual Board started its own women's group, they stopped working closely together. Because the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview by author, July 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammadiya is a historical *madrasah* associated with Jadidism that was founded in 1881 by Galimzhan Barudi, a famous Tatar theologian and leader.

new women's organization was associated with the Spiritual Board, it became known as the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan and Adiatullina's organization was forced to change its name to the Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan.

Adiatullina's organization was started as an invented, rather than invited, form of participation. Adiatullina identified a need in her community and gathered people and resources while working outside the formal structure of the MRBRT. Although the Spiritual Board was sympathetic to the organization, they never formally supported her. The two women's groups organize around similar goals, but compete for membership and resources. Both organizations offer competing claims of being the legitimate representatives of Muslim women in Tatarstan.

In contrast to the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan, Adiatullina's organization has often confronted authorities, both government and religious, by challenging the status quo. One of the ways in which the organization has invented new participation is through publishing a newsletter called *Muslima* (Muslim woman) that highlights events and issues in the Muslim community in Tatarstan for a female readership. Adiatullina is the editor-in-chief, authoring most of the articles and appearing in almost every photo within the newsletter. While seeming to be Adiatullina's bully pulpit, the newsletter was the first publication in Tatarstan addressing women's issues and targeted at Muslim women. Adiatullina works closely with a younger woman, a sociologist, who contributes to the leadership of the organization. Beyond the leadership, the organization draws about sixty women at each meeting.

The campaign to wear headscarves in national ID photos emerged in May 2002 when several members were denied government IDs because they refused to remove their headscarves for pictures. The organization made numerous appeals to the government to allow Muslim women to be photographed in their headscarves. Judicial hearings were held at both the Supreme Court of Tatarstan and a federal court of Russia but both appeals were denied. After one negative ruling against their case, women from the organization promised to appeal to the Russian Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>24</sup> Adiatullina

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<sup>24</sup> Nikolai Gorshkov, "Tatar Women in ID Headscarf Row," *BBC Online*, August 3, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2169683.st>.

personally wrote to the President of Tatarstan and the Mayor of Kazan to have her voice heard. Adiatullina used spaces not traditionally led by women, especially women with a dissenting opinion, such as collecting signatures for petitions and reading letters with demands in the mosque. On May 15, 2003, the Supreme Court of Russia issued a ruling allowing Muslim women to be photographed in headscarves based on the Russian constitution's right to religious liberty. Adiatullina and her organization police the passport officials' actions by supporting Muslim women who are denied their rights and enforcing the court's ruling. This role was not invited or appointed. Adiatullina invented and defined the position for herself and in the process claimed leadership within the Muslim community where little previously existed for Muslim women in Tatarstan.

### *Basis of Authority*

Adiatullina's religious authority is transmitted in her roles as a teacher in the mosque, as a judge and organizer of an annual Qur'ān recitation contest, and as editor-in-chief of *Muslima*. Within each issue of the newsletter, Adiatullina uses her editorial authority to campaign against what she defines as immoral, including public drinking, advertisements with nude women, and, most recently, a rock concert. Adiatullina explained her belief that, "God created me so that I could explain to people that we must fight for beauty and purity." The basis for Adiatullina's authority is rooted in three areas, including her religious education and teaching experience, her personal reputation and charisma, and her claim to represent the Tatar people and ancestry.

### *Authority from Religious Education*

Adiatullina's advanced religious education began after she went on *hajj* in 1993 and enrolled at Muhammadiya in 1997. Adiatullina is respected for completing *hajj* because most Muslims in Kazan have not or are not able to go, due to past visa restrictions by the Soviet government, and the fact that *hajj* is prohibitively expensive for most Muslims in Russia today without funding from foreign sponsors. In addition, Adiatullina retells her experiences in mystical language about how her soul united with her fellow pilgrims and how God spoke directly to her. These claims of mystical experiences and direct communication from God cement Adiatullina's credibility within her religious community.

The religious education from Muhammadiya equipped her with a more detailed knowledge of Islam that enabled her to teach in mosques, but Adiatullina had higher aims. She explained,

Yes, I studied in university. I can do more than this. I ask all the mosques to bring up our children. I think I can do more for Muslims in Tatarstan [than teach in the mosque].

While it was important for Adiatullina to first teach in the mosque, she was seeking to have a wider impact on her community. Adiatullina used her religious education and teaching experience to advance to regional and national leadership.

*Reputation from Personal Accomplishments and Charisma*

Adiatullina emphasized that her personal accomplishments have built her legitimacy within her community in Tatarstan. Adiatullina was also a journalist by trade, covering the Great Patriotic War and traveling to Afghanistan in the 1980s to write dispatches from the warzone. Adiatullina claimed:

That's why people knew that I'm a leader... everyone knows me. All the streets know me. All the markets know me... because I'm a fighter.

While not literally a soldier, Adiatullina's commanding presence, assertive personality, and strong communication skills have helped her fight for Muslim women's rights in Russia.

While Adiatullina does not claim to be a religious scholar, she does act with religious authority. She explained that "I have very little knowledge compared to scientists but I know the problem and I write about it." Adiatullina's legitimacy comes from first-hand knowledge about a problem and writing and speaking convincingly about the issue, aided by her charisma and journalistic skills.

Adiatullina's influence was broadened as the issue with the headscarves caught the attention of national and international press. Others in the community said, after Adiatullina was interviewed by numerous newspapers, that "journalists talk with her because they like what she says."<sup>25</sup> It is true that Adiatullina's identity fulfills what many in the press want to hear: she is a feisty elderly Muslim woman wearing a headscarf demanding Muslim women's rights. This image, paired with statements like "Until I am arrested, I will continue..." have made

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<sup>25</sup> Interview by author, July 2007.

Adiatullina a poster woman for the Muslim women's movement in Tatarstan.

*Informal Legitimacy from the Tatar People and Ancestry*

Part of Adiatullina's claim for authority is her connection to the general public of Tatarstan and her attempt to position herself closer to Tatar ancestors. Adiatullina repeatedly stressed her connection with the general populace, stating, "I couldn't work for just a few privileged people... I work, not for myself, but for all the people of Tatarstan." By putting herself in opposition to "a few privileged people," Adiatullina claims to be closer with the people of Tatarstan than those in power, like the MRBRT or the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. Adiatullina has established grassroots appeal in order to compensate for lack of formal power and status within the Spiritual Board.

In claiming religious authority, Adiatullina connected God and her personal knowledge of history, stating: "God gives me my authority. He speaks to me...because of my experience—I know history." Adiatullina's emphasis on Tatar history positions her as a more legitimate representative of Tatar people than others. Adiatullina stresses her personal knowledge of Tatar history, which is aided by her age. In contrast to Soviet times when Muslim women were encouraged to publicly take off their headscarves and burn them, Adiatullina makes a pointed statement by wearing her headscarf and encouraging other Muslim women to do the same.<sup>26</sup> Adiatullina's simple, conservative dress stands in contrast to Ziganshina's fashion-conscious outfits and stylish headscarves.

*Limitations of Religious Authority*

Although Adiatullina asserts that her authority is not limited, Adiatullina is most confined by the informal nature of her organization. While the organization has a strong national reputation because of the court cases concerning the headscarves, it has not built up a formal membership or organizational structure. When Adiatullina writes a letter to the mayor or pens an article for the newsletter, she is speaking only for herself. She is not an elected representative of the group and does not hold any formal power within the Spiritual Board. Each

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<sup>26</sup> Dave Crouch, "The Bolsheviks and Islam," *International Socialism* 110, April 6, 2006, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=181&issue=110>.

campaign requires gathering new support by collecting signatures for a petition. Once she has collected a significant number of signatures, Adiatullina's stature in the community is greater, but each campaign requires a new referendum on her authority.

Part of Adiatullina's success is based on her claim that there are no limits to her authority. Because she did not acknowledge constraints, she was able to create a new organization and invent a new form of women's participation in her community. Because she did not believe her voice should be limited, she was willing to confront the leadership of the Spiritual Board, the Tatarstan government, and the Russian government.

Adiatullina, in contrast to Ziganshina, does not use male religious authority to defend her leadership, rather she said, "OK, then the men should solve this issue... Where are the Muftis? They are all sleeping." Typical to Adiatullina's personality, she used her charisma to make a scathing critique of male religious authorities.

### *Opposing Immoral Rock Concerts*

The impact of the Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan has been achieved mostly through campaigns against specific social issues that Adiatullina and others have deemed immoral or un-Islamic. Each campaign focuses on the spiritual purity of the people of Tatarstan and prescribes more conservative, religious behavior in its place. These campaigns have taken the form of petitions, community meetings in mosques, articles in newspapers, letters to the Mayor of Kazan and the President of Tatarstan, formal court cases, and participating in the actual destruction of 'immoral' objects. The organization's campaigns have been successful at 'purifying' and 'protecting' the public space surrounding mosques in Kazan, particularly the Kul Sharif Mosque.<sup>27</sup>

Following the headscarf campaign, Adiatullina began a campaign to tear down billboard advertisements with pictures of nude women that were located near the Kul Sharif Mosque. The organization also arranged protests asking that "advertising [boards] displaying naked

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<sup>27</sup> The Kul Sharif mosque was rebuilt in 1996 and was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. Both Tatar government and their people take great pride in the mosque's history and restored beauty.



female flesh be removed off the streets.”<sup>28</sup> Adiatullina commented, “It was a humiliation to the women of the city. We wrote a letter to the mayor and asked for the ads to be taken down.” Eventually, over seventy advertisements were removed. Another campaign aimed to stop a beer festival that was to be held next to Kul Sharif and to tear down a pub situated nearby. After organizing a petition with over 1,600 signatures, Adiatullina convinced the Mayor of Kazan to call off the beer festival and shut down the pub. When I spoke with Adiatullina, she proudly showed a photograph of her standing over the rubble of the demolished pub with a shovel in hand.

Most recently, Adiatullina has begun to campaign to prevent any future rock concerts being held next to the Kul Sharif Mosque. On August 25, 2008, the Creation of Peace Festival held a rock concert near the mosque with musicians from around the world, bringing together different religions and cultures to celebrate and encourage peace. Kazan was chosen for the festival because Muslims and Orthodox Russians live together peacefully, and Kazan’s Kremlin contains both the Annunciation Cathedral and the Kul Sharif Mosque. Because of this symbolic unity, the festival selected Kazan and the Kremlin for the site of the concert.<sup>29</sup>

On the night of the concert, Adiatullina was returning from town when she passed the Kremlin and could not hear the call to prayer from the mosque. Adiatullina wrote another letter to the President of Tatarstan asking him to not allow the concert to be near Kul Sharif. She explained, “We asked them to do it some other place. We should not laugh at our history and our people. The founders of Kazan died on this place.” Adiatullina is opposed to the concert because the noise disrespects Tatar history and disrupts the public’s ability to hear the call to prayer. Adiatullina asserted her authority by presenting herself as interested in preserving Tatar history and respecting past generations.

In May 2009, over one hundred people gathered with Adiatullina to sign another letter to the President requesting the concert not be stopped but be moved to another location away from the mosque. Adiatullina explained:

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<sup>28</sup> “Women Campaign Against Nudity in Ads in Russian Muslim Republic,” *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, July 9, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> “Tatarstan Creation of Peace Festival,” *Euronews.net*, July 1, 2009, <http://www.euronews.net/2009/07/01/tatarstan-creation-of-peace-festival>.

This is not a radical stance. We are not going to the extremes. We just want to [conduct ourselves] in a civilized manner.... People's bones are buried there. This could lead to a tragedy because of their souls.

Adiatullina repeatedly stressed her concern for Tatar history and ancestors as signifiers of her authority.

In opposing the rock concert, Adiatullina is challenging the religious authority of the Mufti of the Kul Sharif Mosque, because he gave permission the previous year for the rock concert to take place near the mosque. Adiatullina's challenge to the Mufti's religious authority comes as a plea for respect for Tatar history and ancestors, not as a religious disagreement. This distinction does not negate that Adiatullina, the leader of an informal Muslim women's organization, is challenging the decision made by one of the highest *muftis* in Kazan. Adiatullina is operating in invented space through which she is using collective action to challenge the status quo of the Spiritual Board.

### *Conclusion*

Communal accounts of the Muslim women's movement in Tatarstan have fallen into two narratives—one in which the Spiritual Board responded to the demand from women in Tatarstan to have more say in an organization that represents them and another narrative which sees their women's movement being co-opted by the traditional institutions of power and limited to superficial issues, such as fashion and beauty contests. While these two narratives appear oppositional, the resulting women's organizations provide an insightful comparison regarding the abilities and constraints of operating within invited and invented spaces.

Both organizations were responding to the same need in their community (women's participation in Islamic governance), but were created in different ways. Both women used their religious education and experience as mosque instructors as stepping-stones to greater leadership and activism within their community. While their religious education was a necessary credential to be able to operate in higher religious circles, it was not their only basis for religious authority and legitimacy.

Ziganshina's impact was accomplished through *celebrating* Muslim women's beauty, while Adiatullina's impact was through *opposing* what she deemed 'un-Islamic.' Both women's positions of authority enabled

and constrained their contributions to a discussion about what is or is not Islamic. Ziganshina was constrained because she could not act in opposition to the policies of her employer, the Spiritual Board; Adiatullina was constrained because she did not have the formal support of the Spiritual Board to provide her legitimacy. Adiatullina was enabled to act because she had the freedom to challenge policies through her invented space and was unconstrained by formal politics of the Spiritual Board; Ziganshina was enabled to act because she had financial and physical support, as well as formal legitimacy, from the Spiritual Board. Invented spaces can circumvent or challenge older formal institutions by creating new forms of authority or new forms of participation. Invented spaces often afford the luxury of being able to oppose rather than propose policies but do not come with the financial or physical support of invited spaces.

The lives of Ziganshina and Adiatullina show the complicated relationship between the invention of new participation, their multiple bases of authority, and the impact they have on their community and their nation. While religious education and teaching experience are necessary credentials for Muslim women to become leaders and activists within the Muslim community, the type of impact Muslim women's organizations have is largely dependent on the way it is created and where it draws its legitimacy. Rather than Muslim women being portrayed as passive recipients of religion, Ziganshina and Adiatullina are two Muslim women who are actively shaping and defining their community through different forms of authority and participation.

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## CHAPTER 2.4

### TEXTUAL AND RITUAL COMMAND: MUSLIM WOMEN AS KEEPERS AND TRANSMITTERS OF INTERPRETIVE DOMAINS IN CONTEMPORARY BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Catharina Raudvere

Over the last twenty years, Muslim women's access to formal religious education in general—and their opportunities to implement the knowledge acquired into new theological thinking—have had an impact far beyond women's circles. The presence of women in interpretive domains has its obvious gender aspects, but it is also a symptom of the substantial changes in the features of authority and access to theological discussions apparent in all world religions today—at least within the educated middle classes—and certainly not only among Muslims. Even in periods of backlash it is hard to imagine that the processes that have brought forward visible Muslim female leadership are anything but irreversible.

Religious leadership is always based on authority and legitimacy, and it differs from other forms of leadership as it draws weight from transcendental references and often monopolizes access to interpretation. Authority could briefly be defined as the consequences of certain speech acts and certain social interaction; authority is definitely performative.<sup>1</sup> The special importance of authority in religious contexts has not only theological but also institutional implications, as new demands of authority, such as those of women,<sup>2</sup> challenge group cohesion.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Lincoln describes authority as: “the capacity to perform a speech act that exerts a force on its hearers greater than that of simple influence, but less than that of a command.” He underlines the significance of “the effect of a posited, perceived, and institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention...but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make the audience act *as if* this were so.” See Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2. In a later study, Lincoln has also pointed out the intricate relationship between institutions and communities in relation to discursive and ritual domains; see his *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Women's religious leadership in Bosnia and elsewhere has traditionally been executed in domestic and semi-public spaces. Through the various modernization processes in the Muslim world, women have become apparent in the public sphere, which puts the issue of women as independent intellectuals in focus. Access and presence are the first steps that can be promoted by reform and legislation, but the acceptance of arguments in broader circles is a subtler issue of legitimacy.

Legitimacy could be defined as a locally understood lawful right (for example, to organize prayers or provide community counseling) that in this case involves being able to demonstrate lawful authenticity, credibility, and validity in forms acceptable to a local community or group. The step from legitimacy to implemented power is often quite short. If power is understood as impact and control within certain religious institutions, as possibilities to have access to certain discursive arenas, and as how the relation between ability and capability is locally defined, then Muslim women's leadership, like all religious leadership, is definitely a political issue. Additionally it may be noted that Muslim female leadership today is almost always mobilizing, in the sense that it has consequences for other women's lives. Few, if any, examples can be provided where women's theological interpretations, interests, and visions are put forward to a larger audience without having implications for regional and national politics—not only at local level (where we usually find discussions of women's activities).

The conditions for women's presence in public religion and the features of a female history of Muslim learning and ritual responsibilities in present-day Bosnia have an obvious background in the socialist federation of Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, women's access to the educational institutions was promoted and women held prominent positions in terms of learning and leadership. On the other hand, this was not the reality in religious circles, as Belgrade pursued a hostile policy against religion (especially against Islam) and the few public Muslim authorities were men. Toward the end of the Tito era, religious discourse became an apparent vehicle for opposition all over the federation, often with an ethno-national angle, and the religious institutions (Muslim and Christian alike) were deeply involved in defining these new positions. But neither the secular modernists nor the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Maria Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Muslim traditionalists have promoted the image of a women's Islamic heritage as a constructive platform for contemporary activities. The conventional image of Muslim women's roles was petrified during the war in the Balkans in the 1990s and remains the chief prism through which any public contemporary Islamic activity is regarded.

*Muslim Women, Leadership, and Theological Authority in  
Contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina*

The topic of Muslim women in command of religious activities from Bosnia emphasizes groups rather than individual leadership. The conditions for Muslim women's religious activism have radically changed during the last twenty years, but for reasons different than in most other parts of the Muslim world.<sup>4</sup> Experiences of authoritarian secularization campaigns during the communist era and the aftermath of the war in the Balkans in the 1990s have made religion a tense issue. The close link between identity politics and ethnicity defined in religious terms leaves little space for any public theological interpretation that challenges religious convention; theological statements are—or are interpreted to be—part of political agendas. It is not unusual that women taking public initiatives on Muslim matters face antipathy from many directions: from within their (larger) families and local communities, and from established religious institutions with considerable influence and power. Undoubtedly, this has silenced many women and closed down activities, but it has also stimulated ingenuity in terms of organization and new modes of communication.

The following is a discussion of the dual analytical perspectives that can be applied to the issue of (contemporary) interpretive activities: whether to underline the obstacles that prevent Muslim women from moving from more domestic and semi-public spaces into the public sphere; or to throw more light on the opportunities women have seized, and to some extent fashioned, in order to have their voices heard in the formulation of contemporary Islamic theology. The Bosnian material presented in this chapter gives arguments for both perspectives; and, perhaps most importantly, both these perspectives are

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<sup>4</sup> Xavier Bougarel et al., *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

used by women when defining arguments for various strategies of how to move on when claiming the right to religious leadership.

To some extent women with formal Islamic training are hired by local communities (sing. *medžlis*) that organize mosque activities and educational programs under the auspices of the national Islamic Community (Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini) to serve as teachers, though rarely in influential positions as men carry out most local instruction. Other women choose instead to be engaged in smaller associations and networks, focused on basic religious instruction and social-welfare programs. These frameworks appear to be more attractive possibilities when defining projects in a flexible mode and serve to protect more theological and intellectual activities from conservative criticism. Therefore the mosque is not primarily the place where women's religious leadership is executed in contemporary Bosnia.

Muslim women's engagement in public religious causes can be discussed from three angles: access, visibility, and mobility.<sup>5</sup> All three of them indicate changing political and social conditions, new economic opportunities and forms of religious expression, and entrepreneurship. The complex role religion plays in public today has not made pious women stand out as keepers and transmitters of religious knowledge (*ilm*), nor as legitimate agents formulating expressions of contemporary spirituality. Even if it is also a common trope today in conservative circles, when hailing women as keepers of tradition, to say that they kept Islam alive during the communist era with their domestic prayer meetings and maintenance of the hymn and *mevlud* tradition, taking the step to accept Muslim women's leadership is another thing.

In the midst of these national and local debates that demand standpoints in terms of theological interpretations, ritual behavior, and lifestyle symbols, Bosnian Muslim women with leading roles within their networks navigate between stagnated traditionalism and despised innovation, between private and public space, and between stress on women's experiences of contemporary nationalist politics and late modern conditions with access to the global world. The paths to access are determined in large measure by historical power structures and the established religious institutions. Muslim life in the Balkans and

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<sup>5</sup> Catharina Raudvere, *The Book and the Roses: Sufi Women, Visibility, and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul* (Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul/I. B. Tauris: Stockholm/London, 2002), 69ff.; cf. Elizabeth Fernea, *Guests of the Sheik: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (New York: Anchor, 1965).



Southeastern Europe, with its long Islamic history in the border zone of various imperial interests,<sup>6</sup> has over the last thirty years been in the focus of global Islam of a more or less radical character.<sup>7</sup>

It would not be correct to regard the various modes of activism as part of one general trend as they vary greatly in terms of influence and vision, yet neither are their leaders necessarily trendsetters with numerous followers. Rather they are examples of how spaces have been constructed with shifting strategies. These modes include women executing some form of Muslim leadership in domestic or semi-public domains, independent individuals organizing new forms of women's activism, and those following the educational path of the Islamic Community. They all represent the options for choices, and to some extent the mobility, within groups. Management, instead of leadership in the strict sense, is the key concept.

During fieldwork in Bosnia over the past four years, I have observed several initiatives resulting from discussions among women about the need to establish spaces where spirituality can be developed under female control and in line with *edeb*. When asked why this is a necessity, they have almost always answered that there is a need for a place, a specific room. Meeting places such as local mosques, Sufi *tekije*, or the classrooms of the local Islamic community are apparently not an option for any of the parties.

### *Women's Ritual Responsibilities in Private and Semi-private Spaces*

The first mode of organizing women is the least visible, and follows conventional norms to the extent that it melts into the category of "traditional." These are the domestic spaces where ritual leadership, informal education, and theological interpretation through genres like oral narratives, hymns, poetry, and sermons or teachings are prevalent. Leadership in this form is obviously less visible or vocal in public life, if it appears at all. Nevertheless, it has a substantial impact on daily life,

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<sup>6</sup> Amila Buturović and Irvin Cemil Schick, ed., *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture and History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Catharina Raudvere, "Between Home and Home: Sufi Heritage in Bosniak Diaspora," in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 49–64; "Between Nations and Global Islam: Sufi Activities and Community Building among Bosnian Muslims in Southern Sweden," in *Sufis in Western Society: Global Networking and Locality*, ed. Ron Geaves, Markus Dressler, and Gritt Klinkhammer (London: Routledge), 162–79.

especially among women with little or no formal Islamic education. These meetings and activities are inscribed webs of established textual genres (for instance, teaching, preaching, songs, legends) and ritual genres (for instance, *mevlud*, *tevhid*, and *tespih* gatherings, local pilgrimage) that can constitute a basis for further outreach than a group of family and friends or the immediate local community. References to tradition form the basis for authority/legitimacy in these contexts.

In Bosnia, a *bula* has traditionally been a woman held in great respect because of her religious learning and performative skills. In the past *bulas* rarely had any formal Islamic education, but their contributions in terms of rituals, teaching, and preserving poetic traditions were needed. A *bula* was not employed by any administration, which gave her some freedom both in relation to the Islamic Community (installed by the Austro-Hungarian regime in 1882 as a means of national organization and thus cutting the links to Istanbul in favor of a 'European' administration of religion) and, being so clearly connected to the private realm, in relation to any secular administration. Women from families with learned traditions gained their reputation from a locally acknowledged repertoire of hymns and legends as well as established forms of women's prayer gatherings. The singing and the recitations from the Qur'an were mostly accompanied by a sermon (*vaz*) by means of which the *bula* acted as a women's teacher and in the role of an accepted interpreter of Islam. The *bulas'* skills were appreciated not only for the prayer gatherings, but also for practical religious obligations such as washing female bodies in preparation for funerals.

During the war in the 1990s, however, the term was taken up by Serbs and used in a most pejorative way about Bosnian Muslim women in general. In everyday language—and with a condescending tone—the term is used today by nonpracticing Muslims to indicate a covered woman. The *bula* institution could have been a platform for further development of Muslim female leadership, but the term is now to some extent contaminated and, moreover, the activities are associated with 'popular' or 'rural' Islam by many representatives of the Islamic authorities. Women with the ambition to formulate new angles of theology must to a large extent find new spaces to start from. The earlier, less formalized, training of the *bulas* and the cultural heritage of their repertoire is now to a large extent 'folklorized,' and women's Muslim education today is closely tied to institutions dominated by more conservative theology. Women's training is not only more

formalized, but women also verbalize it in public to a lesser extent. To the long-term historical traits of how interpretive and ritual authority has been gained, a spatial dimension must therefore be added that identifies where these settings for training and transmission take place. The picture is twofold, with the parallel development of globalization (and its many options to encounter new modes of thinking that point toward complexity) and an apparent neo-conservative trend (pointing toward greater conformity).

These forms of meetings with a long regional history are taken up by some of the more recent groups as a way of hailing female tradition and uncovering a concealed history of women's management of learning, prayers, and aesthetic creativity, as well as identifying and deploying traditional genres as tools of empowerment. It is therefore possible to argue that the first and second modes of Muslim female leadership meet when it comes to the ambitions to cultivate a female heritage, despite all other differences.

#### *Individual Initiatives and Women's Exegesis*

As for the second type of activism, the new women's activities are highly, if not solely, dependent on the enthusiasm of individual women, their hard work, and ability to organize; these women have also more or less given up attempting to make their voices heard within the established communities, although some of them have formal education in theological matters. They are also women with a marked gender-conscious understanding of religion, several of them with secular academic training and solid grounding in gender theory. These women are in many senses forerunners and in touch with international trends among prolific Muslim women—which also makes them a bit out of place in their local contexts. With their consciousness of what sex and gender imply in theological interpretation and organization of religion, the concept of authority is highly relevant to these women and has served as a fruitful theme during interviews, whereas among representatives of the two following modes of activism, leadership is not an explicit issue.

The following example of attempts to train women for leadership highlights some specifically Bosnian features that contrast with the other cases provided in this volume. The activities of these women draw on the long multireligious history of the region as well as the wounds from the recent war, and the ossified positions of the various

religious communities. It is also a very conscious attempt to bridge the gap between secular women's organizations and women activists within the religious communities.

TPO is an NGO engaged in democratic civil society work with a special focus on gender equality and intercultural dialogue.<sup>8</sup> Its activities are almost solely dependent on international funding. In 2009, TPO produced a seventy-four-page training manual to be used in workshops training local leaders;<sup>9</sup> it closely follows the monograph produced by the same network entitled "Both Believers and Citizens."<sup>10</sup> Behind the initiative stand independent Muslim and Christian women who are not in any way official representatives of their communities, but who find negative criticism of the institutions unproductive. Their strategy has instead been to bring forward what they consider positive examples of women's initiatives from canonical sources that cannot be rejected as secular innovations.

The training manual is a distinctly exegetic project, as the arguments provided in favor of women's dignity and reconciliation are based on readings of canonical texts. The theological point of departure is the mutual conviction that the three Abrahamic religions share the same basic conceptions of human relations, along with an urge to show that this message is compliant with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The theological platform should not, however, be regarded solely as an interfaith project. Equally important in the Bosnian context is the effort to bridge the gap between secular and religious women; convincing the former of the potential of religion to support social change and inspiring the latter to interpret tradition beyond convention.

The textual references and their interpretations provide a narrative tool for the local leaders to be used in their grassroots work. Part of the authority and the strength in the argumentation in the manual come from the identification of the failure of rhetoric and politics without implementation; instead it draws on the everyday life realities

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<sup>8</sup> The foundation Transkulturalna psihosocijalna obrazovna [Intercultural Psycho-Social Education], TPO, presents its activities on the website <http://www.tpo.ba>.

<sup>9</sup> Zilka Spahić-Šiljak and Marija Grujić, *Uputstvo za trening: Modifikacija društvenih i kulturnih obrazaca ponašanja žena i muškaraca u Bosni i Hercegovini* (TPO Fondacija: Sarajevo, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Zilka Spahić-Šiljak and Rebeka Jadranka Anić, *I vjernice i građanke* (TPO Fondacija: Sarajevo, 2009).

of women and—as the manual puts it—uses the channels they recognize: culture, custom, and religion.

The manual is designed to be part of a process undertaken in several steps during workshops and an aid to educate women from local organizations. It offers them a methodology for exegesis and arguments to bring forward in individual analyses of current conditions and the meaning of holy texts. The suggested lessons are not aimed at promoting the personal convictions of the future instructor, but at finding tools for the implementation of human rights in everyday life. This strategy of using religious discourse outside of the traditional domains of interpretation, emphasizing both individual interpretations and interfaith perspectives, is considered controversial by the religious institutions. As an example of how to develop female religious leadership it is, therefore, not intended to stand out as representative, but rather as a symptom of locally identified needs in post-war Bosnia.

The manual follows an outline that presents the secular declarations of human rights in parallel with interpretations of Islamic and Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) traditions. Equal emphasis is put on the conceptualization of the five selected themes and on the support of the teacher in terms of methodology and group dynamics. The graphic design of one lesson (up to three hours) is clear-cut, with a central piece making space for an introduction of the theme of the lesson, presentation of a core text, group discussions, and plenary summing up the various understandings of the text. On either side, pedagogical advice, further reading, and supplementary quotations are given.

The Islamic section approaches the theme of women's dignity through a discussion on the relation between the concepts of human being (*insan*) and unbeliever (*kafir*). The teacher is guided to introduce the relevant Qur'ānic quotations and their links with secular human rights concepts. The monograph's references follow up with short summaries of two contrasting interpretations of the matter: Ibn Abbas and Amina Wadud. The universalistic understanding of human rights is connected to the Ḥanafī tradition, in contrast to the communalistic perspective of other law schools; this reasoning is followed up by an introduction of the academic positions of universalism and cultural relativism. Confessional, normative secular, and academic perspectives are thus introduced in compact form as—in an almost Lévi-Straussian mode—tools with which to think.

*Access to Formal Islamic Education*

The attempt to formulate theology outside the institutional domains can be contrasted to women's access to formal theological training. *Bulas*, the women maintaining the reciting and devotional traditions mentioned above, did not traditionally have any formal religious education and were mainly engaged in rituals outside the mosque of (semi-)private character. Today, women teachers have to a great extent replaced the *bulas*' mostly ritual activities. The key issue for women getting a position within 'mainstream' Islam in Bosnia is education at high school level (*medresa*) and at university level at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences (Fakultet Islamskih Nauka, FIN). Formal education gives access to teaching positions, but not necessarily to religious leadership in the way it is discussed in this volume. Formal Muslim education prepares for 'interpretive voices' and the ability to take theological stands, but the platforms for public performance and institutional influence still have to be constructed.

In contrast to other parts of the Muslim world, Bosnian women do have a comparatively long history in schools and universities as students as well as teachers. As in most state-run modernization projects, women's position within the educational system was promoted as an icon of modernity. But in socialist Yugoslavia there was little understanding of how modern educated women could want to be a part of Islamic learning.

In 1978, women gained access again to *medresa* education in the Yugoslav Federation.<sup>11</sup> To a large extent this was a concession to the religious revival that had begun to become noticeable in Yugoslavia at the end of the Tito era, and the number of male students was also steadily increasing during this period.

Women had already been accepted to *medresa* education once in the 1930s. The council of *ulema* at the school in question—the Gasi Husrev-beg Medresa—decided to admit women in 1932. It is an early European example of formal Islamic education for women, and during this period the school was the only *medresa* for women in the region. A preparatory year was offered to the young women, and the first generation started their studies at the women's *medresa* in October 1933. The first generation of female students—eighteen young women—

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<sup>11</sup> Mahmud Tralijć et al., *Gazi Husrev-begova medresa u Sarajevu: 450 generacija* (Sarajevo: Gazi Husrev-begova medresa, 2000).

graduated in 1938, with a diploma declaring them *bula* and *muallima*. At that time, the school was located a bit away from the city center, apparently to avoid exposing the young women to too much attention and with a keen eye on the importance of location. The *medresa* offered a boarding school, but it appears from the graduation lists as if the majority were Sarajevans. The *medresa* institution was shut down in 1947 and remained closed to women for thirty years.

The first new generation of young women graduated from the Gazi Husrev-beg Medresa in Sarajevo 1982, and it was not until during and after the war in the 1990s that *medresa* schools were opened throughout the region (Traljić 2000). All these schools train young women as well as men.<sup>12</sup> After the war, *medresa* schools (re)opened in Cazin (Bihać), Mostar, Travnik, Tuzla, and Visoko in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and in Zagreb (Croatia) and Novi Pazar (Serbia). In the beginning, the re-opened *medresa* schools were exclusively under the auspices of the Islamic Community, but today are they also under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, and are considered like any private high school. The *medresa* schools receive financial support from the Bosnian state, as the Catholic schools do.

In urban areas such as Sarajevo, Visoko, and Zenica, *bulas* to some extent had early *medresa* training and some were also qualified as a *hafiza*, but in general their authority was based on local traditions and social settings. As a kind of reminiscence of more traditional authority structures, there are also women known as *hodžinica* who accompany their *hodža* husbands on visits to private homes where prayers and recitations are needed for the commemoration of the dead. The expression “female *tevhid*” (*ženski tevhid*) does not necessarily indicate a female ritual leader (*bula* or *hodžinica*), but can just as well be a man heading a prayer gathering for women or a group of women gathering to mourn a man. Commemoration rituals are religious and social gatherings that are as important for women as the (male-only) public funeral ceremony (*dženaza*) is for men.

In the former Yugoslavia, a diploma from a *medresa* was not valid for university studies in general, but only for the Faculty of Islamic Sciences that was established in its present construction in 1977. Since 1991, however, a *medresa* exam has given access to the universities

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about the *medresa* education, see the website of the Islamic Community: <http://www.rijaset.ba> (with a short version in English).

of Bosnia. From 1978 onward, more than one thousand women have graduated from *medresas* in the region, but this does not mean that they all hold professional positions within the Islamic Community or have continued with religious studies. Of those who have continued to university, most have chosen other disciplines than Islamic theology. It is therefore important to identify the *medresa* education as an instrument for social mobility. Of those who graduate today and continue with a professional life within the field, most serve as religion teachers at all levels of the school system, and only a minority serve as teachers (sing. *muallima*) in the local Muslim communities.

In present-day *medresa* schools, young men and women have the same curricula. Their education is emphasized as identical and equal, but they are enrolled in separate branches and study in separate classrooms. However, differences appear not only in the way young men and women make use of their education after graduation, but also in what their diplomas reveal. Until 2004, the *medresa* diploma named men as an *imam* and a *hatib* (authorized to give a Friday sermon), whereas the female was named a *muallima*, religious teacher (and no *bula* is mentioned anymore). In private *mevlud* and *tevhid* gatherings, the woman invited to recite is still informally called a *bula*, despite the misuse of the honorary name. In everyday language, the title *muallima* is restricted to women with formal education. In terms of career in the theological field, a diploma can lead in two principal directions for a young woman: either to a teaching position in a local Muslim community or as a confessional instructor in a secular school. Since 2004, a degree from the Islamic Faculty's three-year program for *imams* and *hatibs* is required in order to be installed as a local *imam* in Bosnia.

Completing a *medresa* education not only gives formal access to studies at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences (associated with Sarajevo University and with the first woman graduated in 1981), it also provides a platform for developing interests in theological disciplines.<sup>13</sup> More and more women are enrolled in this faculty, which has female teachers, but no female full professors. The Islamic Community controls the Faculty's budget, appointments, and theological orientation. A few years ago, a *fetva* was pronounced requiring the Faculty to keep within

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<sup>13</sup> The Faculty of Islamic Sciences was established in 1977 and is a confessional educational institute with close links to the Islamic Community of Bosnia Herzegovina ([http://: www.fin.ba](http://www.fin.ba)).



the Ḥanafī tradition, which has implications for the understanding of female leadership and females serving as *imams*. Today a complementary educational program (Islamski pedagoški fakultet) with two campuses in the provinces (Bihać and Zenica) has been established for the pedagogics of confessional instruction. Women in Bosnia have a long tradition as teachers in public schools, and the trained *mualimas* could be claimed to be a continuation of that as they take part in an ambitious educational project formulated by the state, but now defined by the Islamic Community.

Yet another example of the interface between academia, NGO activism, and the confessional institutions is a survey made by some Sarajevo students who wanted to investigate the position of female theologians within the religious communities in Bosnia. When presenting their results at a public seminar in November 2009, they also invited three women with theological competence from the communities to comment on the situation. The Muslim representative was the editor of *Novi muallim*, a journal published by the Islamic Community, and therefore one of the very few women who have a position within the institutional structures. Senada Tahirović, who has graduated from the Islamic Faculty and is working on her MA thesis, published her presentation in the journal, where she gave additional statistics.<sup>14</sup>

Since the reopening in 1977, only one woman has achieved an MA from the theological section of the faculty, and the number of women in influential positions within the Islamic community is negligible, Tahirović writes. The two educational alternatives at the faculty stand out as a double-edged sword: on the one hand the teaching positions are highly professionalized, and on the other women seem not to continue with their theological education as there are no relevant jobs. The majority of women with a BA degree in theology who continued in the field end up as Islamic studies instructors in primary or secondary school. So far there has not been any official reaction to Tahirović's article, which was the first to identify the absence of women with interpretive authority as an issue for the Islamic Community to deal with.

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<sup>14</sup> Senada Tahirović, "Muslimanska teologinja u BH. društvo pozicija i uloga," *Novi muallim* 40 (2009): 26–35.

*The Construction of Theological and Ritual Domains*

In the Bosnian examples cited here, leadership of the groups is to a large extent collective rather than focused on charismatic leaders. Individual women's enthusiasm, hard work, and skills most often constitute the engine of the initiatives. Acting collectively can be seen as less provocative, as certain programs can be provocative enough for some; they serve as a protection for the most active women, as they do not pinpoint an individual leader, and they appear to be attractive with their variety of activities that do not only emphasize teaching and interpretation. This conscious strategy has made it possible to mobilize in broad strata. Leadership in these circles consists of taking on organizational responsibilities as much as claiming authority in explicit interpretation.

This type of collective leadership is demonstrated further by the largest Muslim women's NGO in Bosnia: Nahla.<sup>15</sup> It defines itself as an educational center for women that aims to improve quality of life and promote positive values. The Arabized name is translated through the logotype of the group, a beehive for the diligent. Women's issues are a high-profile aspect of Nahla, and it is well known for its campaigns against domestic violence and offers of shelter for women. Islamic instruction in this group is embedded in offers of general education and life skills. The role of women as Islamic teachers or leaders is not emphasized, and the focus of the activities is the improvement of individual women rather than analyses of structure and prevailing conditions in women's lives.

Summarizing the Bosnian cases, it can be noted that the theme of female Muslim leadership principally goes in two directions.

On the one hand there are women, albeit very few, with an outspoken gender-conscious orientation who aim for change and try to organize alternative spaces for female religious activities. Issues of female leadership are crucial to them. It is not only a question of leading mono-gendered meetings and prayer; the whole cluster of issues has an even more controversial side: the authority of women's theological interpretations and the role of Muslim women as public intellectuals. But it is more the work of individuals than structure or

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<sup>15</sup> The organization presents its activities on the website <http://www.nahla.ba>.

institutional support that have highlighted Muslim female leadership in a more qualified sense of the term.

On the other hand, there is the growing group of women with *medresa* education and graduation diplomas that fill positions as teachers within the school system. With the growing number of women in these positions, the presence of women is increasingly apparent at *medresa* schools and in the national educational system, and the spread of women with Islamic education over the country—and not only in urban areas—is also notable. All these features must be inscribed in the ‘new’ developments and with increasing speed over the past two decades. Generalizing the attitudes of such a large group is of course debatable. Nevertheless, an increasingly critical attitude to the Islamic Community can be noted in debates as well as in informal conversations. Domains dominated by the Islamic Community are hardly known in Bosnia to promote liberal theology, but rather for their generally nationalist and conservative stand. The impact of the increasing number of women in teaching positions all over the country is therefore hard to judge. Many women have taken a social traditionalist stand and are part of a major trend on the conservative side.

In present-day Bosnia, some divergent theological and ritual trends are quite successful when it comes to mobilizing and engaging women in activities that to some extent involve religious teaching—most of them though at local level and in nonpublic spaces. Both the ‘Vehabis’ (in Bosnia today there is a tendency to use the term very broadly, indicating all kinds of groups with a conservative orientation, from Salafis to traditionalists) and Sufi-oriented groups attract men and women alike, and these groups are both thriving among younger people especially.

The ‘Vehabi-oriented’ groups with their high-profile missionary strategies are known for their Arabization tendencies and conservative lifestyle and social ethics, which leave very little space for female leadership. The exception is mono-gendered activities that remain under male authority. Nevertheless, these groups are attractive to young women who, when asked, praise structure and authenticity in contrast to corruption, moral decline, and blurred roles in contemporary society.

A second successful trend is the activities organized by the Sufi orders and Sufi-oriented groups. These are not necessarily the established Sufi orders of Bosnia that have played such a vital part in the Islamic history of the Balkans. Rather, the most successful groups tend

to be the more recently established branches of the traditional orders (particularly Nakšibendi) and altogether new constellations (some of which fall under the category 'neo-Sufis'). The traditional hierarchies within the Sufi orders have been male, but ritual life and the devotional customs cultivated in Sufi milieus have had their spaces for female ritual guidance, although traces of these are rarely seen today. Only a few of these groups show any openness to the border zone between classical Sufism and neo-religiosity. The global and transnational groups could perhaps have been expected to transfer different attitudes to gender roles, but this is not the case. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, some debaters want to construct a dichotomy between the more purist groups and the Sufis, ignoring the apparent conservative traits in many Sufi groups—not least when it comes to gender issues.

*Keepers of Tradition and Women Engaged in the Formulation  
of Theological Discourse*

Much ethnography of women's Islam underlines women's absence from the mosque as a highly mono-gendered space. Despite the traditional male dominance, the mosque is a coveted area (the alternative is to establish completely new female spaces). It is a prime location for Muslim leadership as it is the site of the canonical worship, and the issue over who has the right to lead the prayers is here to stay. The mosque has by tradition been an important scene for the exercise of local religious authority; and it has long served as a meeting place for its regular visitors and constituted a nexus for local (male) networks.

The contemporary challenges of the mosque are manifold; it is not only women claiming space. Other places are now competing with the mosque as locations for devotion, transmission of knowledge, and guidance. There are new meeting grounds for new generations (for example at educational institutions or in leisure areas, which often can be gender-mixed spaces, with or without regulations) that can serve as environments for religious instruction, for mobilization of groups of varying inclinations, for building up civil society groups that run parallel with the established religious institutions. There is the Internet with its innumerable virtual meeting places, where the most unexpected encounters occur. The appearance of female Muslim leaders and other forms of gender-conscious interpretations of Islam constitutes both a

move into the mosque and a redefinition of its spatial structure, as well as the construction of new, alternative spaces.

The mosque *is* still an important site for Muslim leadership—for mobilization, education, politics, and social networking—in what is conventionally recognized as the Muslim world as well as in Muslim diaspora. But it has started to lose some of its local dominance in many Muslim contexts.

Conventionally, religious authority is conceived as emanating from the interpretation of canonical texts—spaces from which women have been excluded in most religions. The search for women's command in pious contexts in a long-term perspective must therefore lead to other modes of expression. Bosnian Muslim women's authority to interpret faith has traditionally been based on ritual expertise in connection with the performance of *mevluds*, celebrating joyous events and commemorative *tevheids*, personal piety, and on the execution of traditional genres. It is still quite rare to find women formulating theological issues in the public debate and being accepted as intellectual voices. However, authority in newly established religious groups is derived as much from conventional sources as from competences valued in other fields of contemporary professional life.

Related to the ambitious activities performed by the groups discussed above is the issue of how authority is accepted as a practical matter as much as a formal one. In order to achieve success, female spaces that meet the requirements of *edep* have to be established. Meeting places are therefore crucial. Most of the programs offered to Muslim women in the major cities in Bosnia today aim for broader audiences than those addressed by the intellectuals of the public sphere, and they are performed on arenas difficult to define as they are typical of late modernity in their lack of dependence on traditional institutions. Thus, from a gendered perspective it may be noted that the most successful groups manage to navigate between references to heritage and utilizing the commodities of late modernity. The activities bear features of both traditional gatherings and global conditions in that they combine accessible spaces and worldwide connections. The specific Bosnian background with its authoritarian secularization over several decades on the one hand, and mass education with high levels of literacy and state policies on gender issues on the other hand, has both promoted and restrained women's participation in post-war religious life.

If female religious leadership (or management of activities) is defined in terms of women being in charge of formal prayer, preaching, or

executing public Qurʾān exegesis, it will only be found to a limited extent in contemporary Bosnia. Instead, other genres stand out as women's tools: oral narratives, songs, informal spiritual charge, not to mention networks with the focus on social interaction and welfare. These expressive genres may at first sight seem so basic that they also serve as shields for women's interpretive ambitions to give women's perspectives on theological matters. The question can be raised, however, whether these expressions are based on female authority or if they function as the inside of a male-dominated domain, secluded from any external gaze and only in a few cases when this is reflected upon as an interpretive activity.

Women's presence as teachers of confessional religious instruction in the school system is a major change in comparison with the Yugoslav era when the very few visible Muslim teachers were men (almost always *imams* or theologians). This professionalization has undoubtedly been a vehicle for women, but the roles are given within the areas dominated by the Islamic Community, which holds a position within the state administration that could be compared to Diyanet in Turkey. The first paragraph of its statutes defines the community as "the sole and united community of Muslims in Bosnia, of Bosniaks outside their homeland, and of other Muslims who accept it as their own." In practice this means that no organization or group that calls itself Islamic can be recognized by the authorities unless approved by the Islamic Community. Women's activities outside the Islamic Community or outside other strong organizations, such as the (neo-)Sufi orders, are less likely to stand out as public matters.

Many of the changes that have affected Bosnian Muslim women's access to interpretive domains can be claimed to be consequences of globalization and in many respects typical of the broader urban middle classes. The new social movements that have emerged during the last twenty years have had a decisive impact on Muslim women,<sup>16</sup> both generally and in Bosnia. Religious training for women is part of mobilizing women for various causes (social welfare, health, general education). These new conditions call for a special kind of leadership: ability to deal with more than the traditional interpretive issues. As indicated

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<sup>16</sup> Janine A. Clark, "Islamist Women in Yemen: Informal Nodes of Activism," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 164–84.

in the brief examples above, traditional religious education is not the sole way to authority and leadership; it is as much connected with forms of organization in which social activities are embedded.

The fact that religious affiliation has been an argument in the recent ethnic and political atrocities leaves little space for nuances in theological debates which affect everyone equally: men and women; atheists, agnostics, and religious thinkers; and Christians and Muslims. The established institutions hold their grip on religious education as well as places of worship.

The few women who have entered the public debate with distinctly theological arguments and with the explicit aim of making a difference in terms of gender issues have been almost completely ignored. This leaves us with the conclusion that, besides authority, education, and legitimacy in fairly democratic societies (which point at substantial differences within the category of women), recognition must be added as a fourth feature when it comes to having an impact on a mixed-gender Muslim assembly (going beyond the women-only gatherings). The issue of recognition also points at the structures that define the places and spaces for female management beyond discourse and difference.

It is in this emerging sector—between discourse and structure, between hierarchies and community loyalties—that we find both the options and the limitations for Muslim women's leadership in contemporary Bosnia.

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## CHAPTER 2.5

### “SHE IS ALWAYS PRESENT”: FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND INFORMAL AUTHORITY IN A SWISS MUSLIM WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION

Petra Bleisch Bouzar

In Switzerland, as in the world in general, female leadership and religious authority within mosques is rare and research on this issue is virtually nonexistent.<sup>1</sup> All of the approximately three hundred prayer rooms established in this small country are guided by men, though most contain a separate space or room for women. Therefore, some Muslim women gather in associations in accordance with Swiss civil law (usually founded by Swiss converts) or in discussion circles (usually run by Muslim women from Bosnia, Kosovo, Turkey, or North Africa), both of which are more or less attached to a mosque. One common goal of these groups and associations is to be centers of religious education that host classes—such as the study of the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*, or introduction to prayer—according to their members’ needs. This transmission of religious knowledge is intimately linked to religious authority and leadership. The groups and associations usually lack their own officially trained religious (female) leader, and even the mosques themselves are not always able to engage an *imām*.<sup>2</sup> This prompts the following questions: Who is teaching these classes? Who is seen as a religious authority within and outside the association? and Which religious questions or problems are answered or solved by different religious authorities and leaders?

To explore these questions, I present a case study of one women’s association. Between February and August 2009, I participated in

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<sup>1</sup> For their comments and assistance, the author would like to thank Dr. Nadine Weibel and Dr. Patrick Meier.

<sup>2</sup> As literature on *imāms* in Europe and the US emphasizes, the role of the *imām* has changed recently. He is no longer ‘only’ a prayer leader, but also potentially a teacher, mufti, mosque administrator, mediator with the state, or even ‘chaplain’ or ‘therapist.’ See for example Franck Frégosi, “L’Imam, le conférencier et le juriste: retour sur trois figures contemporaines du champ religieux islamique en France,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 125 (2004): 132–37.

various kinds of gatherings with this association (e.g. coffee parties, picnics, discussion groups, and lessons) and conducted ten episodic interviews,<sup>3</sup> four in 2004, and the rest in 2009. Eight of the interviewees are converts, one immigrated at the age of nineteen from Macedonia, and one was born in Switzerland to a Swiss convert mother and a Moroccan father.<sup>4</sup> This distribution reflects the composition of the association: most members are Swiss converts and the rest are either immigrants or children of Swiss Muslims.

It is argued here that the most recent converts experience Islamic education and authority differently from other Muslims, as they are preoccupied with following at least some Islamic rules in order to be identified as an 'authentic' Muslim. This is why they need access to authoritative figures. However, most take the initiative and make use of Islamic classes, books, and websites, without necessarily being aware of the contrasting ideological approaches of the sponsoring groups.<sup>5</sup> As Tina Jensen puts it, they "express a peculiar and ironic relationship between authority and autonomy."<sup>6</sup>

In most of the recent studies on Islam in Europe, authority is defined as a relation to religious specialists and movements who mediate interpretations of scripture and thus authorize beliefs and practices.<sup>7</sup> Some studies use leadership as a synonym for authority but refer only, as Franck Frégosi puts it, to the "*opérateurs islamiques*"<sup>8</sup>—for example, the *imām*, the orator, the *ṣūfī-shaykh*, the *muftī*, or the *marabout*. Applying this approach to women's associations is problematic for two reasons. First, more 'democratic' definitions of authority and leadership are needed due to the lack of trained *opérateurs islamiques* in these associations. Second, it is incorrect to assume that male specialists are

<sup>3</sup> Uwe Flick, *Qualitative Sozialforschung* (Reinbeck: Rowolt, 2002), 158–67.

<sup>4</sup> All names have been changed and the quotations translated from the original Swiss German. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined: The Case of Converts to Islam in Denmark," *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 652–55.

<sup>6</sup> Jensen, "Religious Authority," 655.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Jensen, "Religious Authority," 643; Frank Peter, "Leading the Community of the Middle Way: A Study of the Muslim Field in France," *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 707–36; Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 617–42.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Frégosi, "Nouvelles figures ou mutations du leadership religieux musulman dans un espace laïque. Le cas de la France," in *Les transformations de l'autorité religieuse*, ed. Martine Cohen, Jean Joncheray, and Pierre-Jean Luizard (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 169–85.

automatically acknowledged as authorities for all aspects of women's lives, because important Islamic beliefs and practices are gendered.

In this paper, a distinction between authority and leadership will be made. In their simplest form both can be represented as a triangle with a leader and a follower at two of the points: but they differ over what lies at the third. Authority focuses more on a specific issue, whereas leadership focuses on a "common goal they want to achieve."<sup>9</sup> In this definition, both authority and leadership exclude the notion of coercive power. Neither leadership nor authority is a person's natural property but rather is constantly negotiated. In this paper, leadership is limited to group contexts, where an individual holds a formal position which has the capacity to structure or restructure "the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members" through interaction with the group.<sup>10</sup> Authority, on the other hand, refers to any interaction between two persons where one person acknowledges the accuracy of a statement made by the other on a specific topic.<sup>11</sup> The person seen as a (religious) authority can be formally trained or self-taught. Self-taught individuals are referred to as informal authorities. These definitions permit us to examine the relationships between women (and men) inside and outside the religious groups, associations, and organizations that transmit Islamic knowledge in the absence of formal authorities.<sup>12</sup> It also permits us to shift away from the 'leader-centered' approach that has dominated inquiries into Islamic authority in Europe in recent years,<sup>13</sup> and use instead an 'interaction-centered' approach that emphasizes the active role of followers.

After a very general overview of the situation of Muslims in Switzerland, the article describes in detail the chosen association, its leaders,

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<sup>9</sup> Warren Bennis, "The Challenge of Leadership in the Modern World: Introduction to the Special Issue," *American Psychologist* 62 (2007): 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard M. Bass, *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Peter, "Leading the Community," 709; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge," 638.

<sup>12</sup> In a similar attempt to make women visible as actors, Gerdien Jonker introduced the category of the 'religious muslim expert.' See Gerdien Jonker, "Vor den Toren: Bildung, Macht und Glauben aus der Sicht religiöser muslimischer Frauen," article on personal website, 2003, <http://www.gerdien-jonker.de/pub8.pdf> (accessed June 30, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17 (2006): 111; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, *Knowledge*, 618.

and its relationships with the mosque and other institutions. Throughout, the paper highlights a variety of strategies for knowledge transmission and validation in order to identify holders of informal authority. I argue that female converts attribute authority mainly to informal role models in the form of other female converts who possess both (self-trained) significant Islamic knowledge and who have broad experience of living as a Muslim woman in Swiss society.

*Muslims in Switzerland: A Very General Overview*

Currently, Switzerland is home to an estimated 400,000–500,000 Muslims, which is about 4–5 percent of the total population.<sup>14</sup> The Muslim population is primarily composed of immigrants from Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey, and North Africa, and their Swiss-born offspring. Muslims from southern European countries and Turkey prefer to settle in the German- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland, whereas Muslims from North Africa are more likely to live in the French-speaking region. The Muslim population is very young: almost half are under the age of twenty-five. The institutionalization of Islam through the founding of mosque associations and prayer rooms took place relatively late in Switzerland, because the first Muslim immigrants in the 1960s and early 1970s were mainly young men from Turkey or the former Yugoslavia with temporary labor contracts.<sup>15</sup> Many associations were not founded until 1990. Several umbrella organizations were launched thereafter, primarily since 2000.<sup>16</sup> Many Muslim groups have created associations according to Swiss Civil law, which therefore enables them to rent or buy flats and houses, open bank accounts, and send representatives to social and political institutions. An estimated 15 to 30 percent of Swiss Muslims belong to an association,<sup>17</sup> though

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel M. Behloul and Stéphane Lathion, “Muslime und Islam in der Schweiz: viele Gesichter einer Weltreligion,” in *Eine Schweiz—viele Religionen. Risiken und Chancen des Zusammenlebens*, ed. Martin Baumann and Jörg Stolz (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), 197–98.

<sup>15</sup> Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, “Sociographie de l’islam en Suisse,” in *Musulmans d’aujourd’hui. Identités plurielles en Suisse*, ed. Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, Matteo Gianni, and Magali Jenny (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2009), 24–25.

<sup>16</sup> Behloul and Lathion, “Muslime,” 202.

<sup>17</sup> Christoph Rüegg, “Vereins- und Stiftungsrechtliche Organisationsformen im Islam in der Schweiz,” in *Muslime und schweizerische Rechtsordnung*, ed. René Pahud de Mortanges and Erwin Tanner (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 2002), 336; Behloul and Lathion, *Muslime*, 201.

this depends whether only official, dues-paying members are counted (in that case 15 percent seems to be too high), or if it includes everyone who attends the *ʿid* prayers organized by the mosques. Regardless, all Muslims living in minority contexts—whether in Switzerland or elsewhere—navigate between private practice and public visibility, as well as between recognition of needs and open hostility.<sup>18</sup>

### *A Women's Association*

The association presented in this article—one of the oldest in Switzerland—is located in one of the bigger towns in the German-speaking part of the country. The vast majority of its members are Swiss female converts, but it also includes young women born in Switzerland to Muslim immigrants from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Turkey, and North Africa. There are also ethnic groups from Somalia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka who are attached to the association, which gives them access to its premises. The association offers a wide range of activities for its members, such as a prayer course for new converts, lessons in recitation of the Qurʾān and Islamic knowledge (*dars*), language classes,<sup>19</sup> informal meetings, recreational outdoor meetings, and even haircuts.

The exact number of members is uncertain. The association regularly sends mailings with information about its activities to one hundred women, but not all of these women are Muslims or participate regularly in the association's activities. However, a large percentage of the women—those who participate fairly regularly—can be described using Nadine Weibel's term "les musulmanes-actives" (the active Muslim women).<sup>20</sup> Religiosity constitutes the most important part of these women's identities and they are deeply concerned with what Saba Mahmoud calls "the realization of the pious self."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For example, open hostilities occurred due to a right-wing popular initiative banning the construction of new minarets, which was approved by the Swiss people on 29 November 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Classes include Arabic for German-speaking women and German for immigrant women.

<sup>20</sup> Nadine Weibel, "De l'autorité du père à celle de Dieu. Ou comment les 'musulmanes-actives' d'Europe se réapproprient l'autorité religieuse," in *Les transformations de l'autorité religieuse*, ed. Martine Cohen, Jean Joncheray, and Pierre-Jean Luizard (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 139.

<sup>21</sup> Saba Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: University Press, 2005), 128.

*History*

In the early 1990s, several young Swiss female converts started to meet regularly in their private flats. Nasreen—the wife of Wasim, the Pakistani *imām* who was then employed by the Arab mosque—as well as Emine—an immigrant from Macedonia—joined them. Irene, one of the association's co-founders, explained that these meetings turned out to be more of a coffee party than a religious discussion group. Therefore, they decided to meet instead in the Arab mosque where they could use the prayer room and a small classroom. Irene notes, however, that they did not feel at ease in the mosque because it was not easy to supervise their children. They also felt that they were disturbing the men who stopped in occasionally to pray.

In 1994, they established themselves as an independent association based in a privately owned basement room. As Dorothea, another co-founder, wrote later on in an annual report, they received furniture and money from the Albanian and Turkish mosques. The leading members of the Arab mosque disapproved of these relationships with other mosques, and interpreted it as an attempt by the association to break away. However, after a shift in the committee of the Arab mosque, relations improved and they started to support the women. Soon after the association's foundation, Angela, the president at that time, found an apartment more appropriate for the women's needs. Over the next three years, the women organized and institutionalized activities and classes including Arabic and Islamic lessons for children, Qur'ān recitation, calligraphy, cooking, and sewing. They contacted the women's prison and the university hospital to offer their services for chaplaincy and washing dead bodies. Due to growing conflicts concerning religious interpretations, smaller groups split away, but there is no evidence of them having survived. In 1997, Dorothea was elected as president. She was a middle-aged, university-educated woman who had time available because, unlike the other women, she was not responsible for a family. Her availability, she wrote in an annual report, had been decisive for her election. In the meantime, the Arab mosque had hired an Egyptian *imām* trained at al-Azhar, whom the women then invited to provide *dars*. In 2004, the association joined a new umbrella organization of Muslim associations in their canton,<sup>22</sup> but the women did not

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<sup>22</sup> A canton is a member state of the federal state of Switzerland.

feel equally accepted in this organization's discussions. In 2007, the association co-founded a different umbrella organization called *Muslimische Frauenorganisationen der Schweiz* (Muslim women's organizations in Switzerland). After Dorothea's unexpected death in the same year, Irene assumed the presidency until Alina, another Swiss convert, was elected in March 2009.

### *Formal Leadership*

Administratively, a board composed of four women leads the association: Alina, the current president, is about thirty years old and converted nine years ago. She organizes the board meetings and the general assembly, and has the right to sign contracts in the association's name. She acts as the association's head, coordinates the finances and activities, and stays in contact with the mosque. Irene, the vice-president, supports the president in all her duties. She is about fifty years old and converted approximately thirty years ago. Sonja, the treasurer, and Michaela, the secretary, ensure the association functions administratively. Both are about thirty-five years old, converted about two years ago and hold master's degrees in social sciences. The board members meet regularly with a wider group called the Committee, made up of women responsible for the attached groups and other regular activities.

When board members wish to stand down, the board discusses potential replacements and approaches someone they see as a suitable candidate. Members who are active, help organize activities and are a board member's friend are more likely to be asked to join the board. Irene states that it is convenient when a new board member "knows about Islam" but that this is not a precondition because knowledge can always be acquired. She appreciates very much that Sonja and Michaela are "university educated" and interested in politics and law. She hopes that this knowledge will help the association to assert its rights and be respected by the state.

### *Relationship with the Mosque*

Most of the women in the association are linked through marriage to the Arab mosque. Many learned about the women's association through their husband's contacts at the mosque. In order to describe the relationship between the women's association and the mosque, one has, first, to distinguish between the leaders of the mosque association

and the mosque's religious authorities, and, then, differentiate between the relations of the individual members and the association itself.

On an individual level, some women attend the Friday prayer at the mosque fairly regularly. They talk of touching prayer experiences or warm-hearted encounters with other women who do not belong to the women's association. Others do not feel at all comfortable at the mosque. They mention being stared at by men or being severely criticized by other women (called 'moral watchdogs' by one interviewee) for not dressing correctly.

On the associational level, as mentioned above, the leaders of the mosque association were initially unhappy with the women's independence. The mosque association began to support the women's association once Anwar, a Pakistani man, became a leading voice within the mosque. During my fieldwork, smooth relations between the mosque and the women's association had been assured by the seemingly very friendly relationship between Anwar and Alina, the current president of the women's association. Dorothea and Irene, the two former presidents, kept more of a distance from the mosque. Irene, referring to her predecessor Dorothea, argues that the women need independence to do what they want. Furthermore, if they became too close to the mosque, they worry that the men would use them as secretaries, a job they refuse to do. In spring 2009, when the women had to look for a new flat, one of the options discussed was to move temporarily into the mosque. Only Alina and a few women were in favor of this. In addition to the independence argument, the women noted that the mosque lacks a kitchen, making it necessary to abandon their much-appreciated shared meals, and argued that they would not have enough space to conduct meetings and classes.

In 2008, the religious education classes for German-speaking children moved from the women's flat into the mosque. Alina and her friend Karin, a trained kindergarten teacher, teach the children above the age of four the basics of ritual practices, stories of the prophets from Adam till Muḥammad, the Arabic alphabet, and moral rules. The integration of these classes into the scholarly program of the mosque points to a growing recognition of the women's skills.

The mosque is not able to engage an *imām* permanently. In the early days of the women's association, Wasim, a Pakistani who worked at the university in town, provided minimal services. For some years, they used *imāms* who had been trained in Egypt at al-Azhar. During Ramaḍan, the mosque usually invites an Arabic-speaking *shaykh*. The



women's association has regularly invited these *imāms* and *shaykhs* to their flat for *dars*. One of the '*ramadān shaykhs*' was much appreciated for his excellent capacity in recitation, but the women complained that he was not able to answer any of their questions. However, the women's view of the religious authority of these men is ambivalent and takes into account factors such as their sense of humor and pragmatism, and their teachings regarding women's role in Islam. Two of the interviewees stated that they no longer viewed one of the *shaykhs* as an authority because he stated that good Muslim women must only do three things: pray, fast, and obey their husbands. Whenever possible, the women preferred *dars* given by a woman, for instance the *imām*'s wife. These findings are similar to Weibel's observations that pious women in movements she classifies as "islam revendiqué et pratiqué" (claimed and practiced Islam) are increasingly likely "to call the interpretations formulated by male clerics into question."<sup>23</sup>

#### *Relationships with Society and State Institutions*

The association maintains a variety of relationships with other social institutions. Due to the symbolic capital of their language skills and knowledge of how institutions function, the women can play an important role mediating between the Muslims living in the town and wider social institutions.<sup>24</sup> Members of the association explain the basics of Islamic belief and practice at schools, churches, and the university as part of their *da'wah*. It is noteworthy that they do not see *da'wah* as an invitation to Islam in a missionary spirit but as a rectification of negative representations of Islam in the public sphere.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, *da'wah* can be depicted as a means for the women to present their construction of the autonomous, emancipated Muslim women as a counter-discourse to those portraying Muslim women as oppressed.

Over the last three years, the board members have met regularly with the integration office, though this relationship decreased in intensity after a shift in the responsibilities of the office. For the past fifteen years, two women from the association have provided the Islamic

<sup>23</sup> Weibel, "L'autorité," 145.

<sup>24</sup> See also Jensen, "Religious Authority," 647.

<sup>25</sup> See also Jeanette S. Jouili, "Re-fashioning the Self through Religious Knowledge: How Muslim Women Become Pious in the German Diaspora," in *Islam and Muslims in Germany*, ed. Ala al-Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 475–77.

chaplaincy in a local women's prison. They are also involved with the preparation of dead bodies at hospitals, which they see as their "last duty to a sister in Islam."

In sum, the women in this association took the initiative to carve out a space for their association that met their social and religious needs. They prefer to organize in a gender-segregated space in order to escape the dominance of male leaders. Within this space, the women accept male religious authority as long as the teachings of the *imāms* and *shaykhs* conform to their own interpretation of the women's status in Islam. At the same time, they create a space in which women can themselves become transmitters of knowledge and holders of authority.<sup>26</sup>

### *Situations Involving Attribution of Authority*

An individual is seen as authoritative when demonstrating knowledge regarding a specific issue. This knowledge can be divided analytically into, firstly, knowledge about religious beliefs and skills—such as stories of the life of Muḥammad and recitation of the Qur'ān—and, secondly, into knowledge about religious rules and norms, that is, how to behave as a Muslim. In this sample, more knowledge about Islamic beliefs and skills is mainly of interest to recent converts, whereas how to behave correctly as a Muslim (woman) within Swiss society is important for all pious (female) Muslims. As Jeanette Jouili states, religious knowledge has central implications for the formation of the pious self.<sup>27</sup> Knowledge about Islamic rules and norms shapes (female) Muslims and "constitutes the condition for becoming and acting as... an 'ethical Islamic subject'."<sup>28</sup>

### *Learning and Exchange*

Within the association, the women have access to a wide range of sources for acquiring knowledge, including booklets, books, audio cassettes, internet, the resources of various institutions, and perhaps most importantly discussions with other Muslims. Jensen observes

<sup>26</sup> See also Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume.

<sup>27</sup> Jouili, "Re-fashioning the Self," 465.

<sup>28</sup> Jouili, "Re-fashioning the Self," 466.

in her study on converts in Denmark that they are often ashamed of their lack of religious knowledge and therefore start reading books before attending classes or conferences.<sup>29</sup> From the fieldwork it was learned that not all the women read in this manner. Two converts stated that they rarely read a booklet if they read at all. This lack of interest in reading could be attributed to familial situations, as most of the women are married to immigrants and bear the double burden of working and looking after toddlers. Some of these women lament not having much time or energy to read or attend conferences and classes. Most of the interviewees say they would primarily use the library of the association, as they can “be sure that [they] don’t read the wrong things,” as one woman puts it. This means that the association is seen as authoritative with respect to choice of reading materials. The interviewed women are more likely to read *ḥadīth* compilations than the Qur’ān.<sup>30</sup> While the younger converts consult a variety of websites in their search for knowledge, the elder women rarely do. With two exceptions, the women stated that they prefer to interact with other women, as Alina explained:

I studied with Dorothea—[we] listened to some audio cassettes.... To be honest, I don’t read much. Or I went to the women’s meetings or to conferences, such things. And of course with Sabrina in the Qur’ān classes and her prayer course I acquired knowledge.... And simply discussed things. I think in this religion this discussion among women is very important you know—how do you experience this, how do you do that.

This quotation illustrates, furthermore, what Laïla Babès called *l’auto-socialisation*, the self-directed acquisition of knowledge through books, new media, and other people.<sup>31</sup> This process might be similar for both ‘second-generation’ Muslims and the converts.

Within the association, the transmission of knowledge can be observed in two different situations: first, the ‘officially’ planned lessons

<sup>29</sup> Jensen, “Religious Authority,” 646.

<sup>30</sup> For more details, see Petra Bleisch Bouzar, “‘Dans l’islam, on doit aussi faire un petit peu de recherches soi-même.’ La reconnaissance de l’autorité dans les questions religieuses chez des femmes musulmanes en Suisse,” in Purdie, Gianni, and Jenny, *Musulmans d’aujourd’hui*, 143–49.

<sup>31</sup> Léila Babès, “Norme et autorité religieuse chez les jeunes musulmans de France,” in *Les transformations de l’autorité religieuse*, ed. Martine Cohen, Jean Joncheray, and Pierre-Jean Luizard (Paris: L’Harmattan 2004), 200–201.

(*dars*); second, spontaneous discussions at the informal meetings. First, the *dars*<sup>32</sup> started as a discussion group within the association and were later turned into a lesson in Islamic knowledge. Over time, the responsibility for the *dars* was assumed by different individuals: either a woman from the association, the *imām*, or his wife. The different instructors are appraised very heterogeneously in the annual reports and the interviews. One exception can be noted: Latifa, the *imām*'s wife who was in charge of the *dars* from 2005 until 2007, seemed to have been enjoyed by all. As Latifa didn't master German, Soraja, who speaks fluent German, French, and Arabic, translated the *dars*.<sup>33</sup> In 2007, Latifa and her husband had to return to Egypt, and Soraja started to give *dars*:

Then [Latifa and her husband] had to go and [the women] here said that I could continue to give the lessons. That I could look in books and on the Internet in Arabic and then translate and tell the women about it. . . . Since then I've done it, once a month I give my lesson. It is interesting because every time I learn new things—you ask what theme they want to treat and then you go to look for these things and you present it.

Usually, the women take part in deciding which issue will be discussed in the next lesson(s). Among the recurrent themes are the stories of the life of Muḥammad, women in Islam, gender relations, Ramaḍān, death and funerals, and Islamic virtues. Soraja states that she does not consult a particular website or author to seek for material. Nevertheless, she appreciates Amr Khaled, a popular Egyptian preacher, for his “modern way of explaining Islam to the youth.” Soraja's *dars* are attended on average by seven women—except the lesson about mutual respect between husband and wife, where thirty women were present. However, the *dars* are not exclusively attended by women who seek knowledge, but also by others—like Soraja's mother Irene—who especially appreciates the reminder and refreshing effect of the lessons:

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<sup>32</sup> Participants used the term *dars* to refer to a single lesson and multiple lessons, despite the fact that the term in Arabic is singular. That usage is preserved in this chapter.

<sup>33</sup> Soraja is twenty-three years old and has just finished a master's degree in natural sciences. Born in Switzerland, she spent ten years with her father in Morocco, and joined her mother Irene, the current vice-president, back in Switzerland some years ago. For the importance of the role of the translator, see Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, this volume.

I like the lessons very much. Of course I already know a lot but it is *dhikr*—like to remember—that feels good.... It's amazing—when you leave you are different because you get the feeling that you get a sort of vitamin-flash—you do the things more consciously, a bit better and that feels good. It's like taking a bath—you feel a bit fresher afterwards, more relaxed.

On the other hand, the informal meetings, like the *souper canadien* (a shared meal) and the *Frauentreffen* (sort of a coffee party), are held in a very relaxed atmosphere full of jokes and laughter.<sup>34</sup> These meetings are very important for the women. All interviewees stated that, if the association ceased to exist, these moments of conversation would be among the most missed activities. Besides exchanging recipes and discussing educational questions or the societal integration problems of their husbands, they discuss various religious topics such as the headscarf, adoption of Islamic names after conversion, relations between men and women, forbidden acts during menses, the use and abuse of religious formulas (e.g. *in shā' allah*), the use of formulas to avoid temptation by the devil, the 'Islamic-ness' of Muslim countries, polygyny, prayer, and evolution theories. Questions arise both deliberately and spontaneously, as the following example illustrates. At one of the meetings a woman suddenly started to complain about her husband. She told us,

For three years, I've been doing my prayer and it's only now that my husband told me that I forgot to add the formulas of thanks and honor of the prophet's family. He's a jerk not having told me this earlier.

The woman next to her explained that this formula is optional, and that it is up to her to decide whether or not to say it. A short discussion then emerged on compulsory and optional parts of the prayer.

Some of the topics are debated over and over again, as some interviewees confirmed and even lamented. Prominent among these reoccurring topics are the headscarf,<sup>35</sup> menses, and relations between men and women, both within marriage and in public. Some of the women state that they primarily seek answers from the association regarding these issues, which they labeled "the women's questions."

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<sup>34</sup> Jensen ("Religious Authority," 650) observes similar activities.

<sup>35</sup> One aspect currently at the center of debate is whether a woman who is not allowed to do her job while wearing a headscarf should look for another job. Or, if her family needs her income (which is the case for most of the women encountered), whether it is acceptable to take it off during work.

*Legitimization of Religious Belief and Practice*

The quest for knowledge in the form of ‘self-socialization’ constitutes for some scholars “a further proof of the individualization of Islam in Europe.”<sup>36</sup> However, recent research emphasizes that reference to ‘the Islamic community’ or ‘the discursive tradition’ is also important for Muslims.<sup>37</sup> I argue that reference to the community or the tradition is just one of several strategies for the validation or legitimization of one’s own religious beliefs and practices. Three validation strategies appeared in my interviews: first, validation through tradition, visible in expressions such as “it is said in Islam, that...”; secondly, validation through communication, visible in expressions such as “there are some people who told me...” or “I discussed this with...”;<sup>38</sup> and third, validation through emotions, visible in expressions such as “it felt alright to...”<sup>39</sup>

These different strategies are usually complexly intertwined. This is illustrated in the following statement by Verena,<sup>40</sup> where she legitimizes living with two dogs:

Well, as long as the dogs do not piss in the house [laughing].... It is not closely conforming to Islam to have dogs, you know—it is said in Islam that one should not have dogs and some say that the angels would not enter the house.... On the other hand, they say in Islam that you should be good to every creature and they [the dogs] were here before [the conversion], you know...., so it would not be right for me to give them away.... I mean I would not buy a new one for sure.... There are some people who told me that I cannot keep them, but, in the end, I said to myself you have to do what you think is right.

<sup>36</sup> Jouili, “Re-fashioning the Self,” 470.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding “the Islamic community,” see Jouili, “Re-fashioning the Self,” 470. Regarding “the discursive tradition,” see Schirin Amir-Moazami and Armando Salvatore, “Gender, Generation and the Reform of Tradition: From Muslim Majority Societies to Western Europe,” in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and Across Europe*, ed. Stefano Allievi and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill 2003), 52–77.

<sup>38</sup> This strategy can be linked to what Danièle Hervieu-Léger calls “the mutual validation of belief” which encompasses, among other things, the exchange of individual experiences. According to her, the actualization of the believed truth lies in the intersubjective confrontation and the only validating criteria is the authenticity of the personal quest. See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 182, 186.

<sup>39</sup> This strategy can be linked to what Hervieu-Léger calls “the self-validation of belief,” *Le pèlerin*, 178–80.

<sup>40</sup> Verena is about forty-five years old and lives with her children in a house in a suburb of the town. She converted in 2007.

At the beginning of her statement, Verena refers to the 'discursive tradition,' specifically to two statements which she presents as divergent in relation to her particular problem. She then refers to interactions with other Muslims to substantiate her personal feelings. She validates the decision to keep her dogs through tradition and emotion.

However, for the purpose of this discussion the description and analysis of female religious authority or 'validation through communication' is the most interesting. Communication is understood here as the exchange of information between two individuals, either in a face-to-face interaction or by the means of different mediums such as texts, cassettes, internet pages, and so forth.<sup>41</sup> An interesting illustration of this strategy involves Ines, a trained hair stylist. In spring 2008, she attended a conference by Pierre Vogel, a German convert.<sup>42</sup> This event changed her attitude towards the headscarf. Beforehand, she had believed that God created her beautiful hair and therefore there was no need to hide it.

She [a woman from the association] said, come with me we are going there. And then she said that I should put on the scarf—I thought, ok, I'll put it on there [because] we are among us.... Then, when he [Pierre Vogel] started to talk...he has so much knowledge...and is so convincing—he is very direct...and he doesn't look to the left or to the right—exactly this and nothing else. A lot of people didn't appreciate it but I found afterwards that I did.... And concerning the headscarf—the reason why one doesn't put it on is—in fact there is no reason...the reasons are just the other people. That's all. One always cares about what others may think. It's all about that. But the reasons why one should put it on are very big. There is *ashr*,<sup>43</sup> there are a lot of good things for you because if you don't do it it's a sin.... I found that good...and really he put it across very well. I think in between I almost cried because—simply the knowledge he had—because sometimes he said it in Arabic.

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<sup>41</sup> Klaus Beck, *Kommunikationswissenschaft* (Konstanz: UTB, 2007), 15.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Vogel (b. 1978) is a former boxer who converted to Islam in 2001. For two years he studied Arabic at the Umm al-Qura University in Mecca and is seen as a star in Germany's *da'wah* milieu. Many of his conference appearances are available on the internet (<http://www.einladungzumparadies.de>).

<sup>43</sup> *Ashr* is defined later in the interview by Ines as the points the angels register in a big book in heaven. At the end of the days, she explained, God will count all *ashr* points and, based on their amount, decide whether the person is worthy to enter paradise.

Ines's account involves different interactions where she attributes authority through communication: first, in the wake of a (most likely short) discussion with her friend, Ines agrees to put on the scarf, but only during the conference; and then, twice in her narration, Ines mentioned 'people' who had influenced her decision to not wear the headscarf. Before the conference, she had decided to wear it only in situations where the people around her belonged to the category of 'us,' but not when surrounded by 'other people.' Ines not only legitimates her decisions through communication but through emotion as well. During the conference, she was deeply touched by Vogel's lecture, especially his knowledge (in particular of Arabic) and his directness. It is evident how these two strategies of validation are intimately mingled. However, Ines still does not wear the scarf at work because she would lose her job.

To sum up, authority not only arises in lessons and conferences with formally trained leaders, but also in informal gatherings where women discuss daily questions and issues.<sup>44</sup> In this way, women can become sources of authority even when they do not have formal religious training or a formal teaching position within the association.

*Women as Informal Sources of Authority: Experts and Role Models*

Within the association, several women have gradually become established as more knowledgeable than others with respect to daily religious questions. Due to their lack of formally recognized training, they are described here as informal sources of authority. With respect to informal authority, one can distinguish between 'experts' and 'role models.' Gerdien Jonker uses the category of the 'religious Muslim expert' to reveal the agency of the Muslim women working inside or outside the mosques. He describes them as "persons with specialist knowledge about a competent interpretation of Islamic tradition with regard to the status of women and children."<sup>45</sup> However, the knowledge that women transmit cannot be limited to "the status of women and children in Islam." Different, but not sharply distinguishable, from the 'expert' is the 'role model.' Role models utilize a rich experience which

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<sup>44</sup> On informal gatherings of Muslim women, see Vanderwaeren, Chapter 2.6, this volume.

<sup>45</sup> Jonker, "Vor den Toren," 1.



allows them to “not only clarify the obligations, but also respond to the highly important question of how to fulfill these obligations.”<sup>46</sup>

Sabrina has been a member since the association's early days, and she gradually took over initiating new converts to the basic ritual of prayer. Over the years, she turned into the association's main prayer expert. Her prayer course takes place only when there is a need for it and usually in an individual setting. Women commonly explain that along with the prayer course, they discussed with her their first experiences as converts. Fabienne, for example, states that she initially learned the prayer from her husband, but attended Sabrina's prayer course in order to learn the “specific gestures for women.” Sabrina also enjoys the status of prayer expert among the experienced women—whenever they have a specific question and cannot consult a *shaykh*, they ask her. This is illustrated by Alina:

Today [when I was] in the mosque a woman had to leave... [after] the prayer had already started—I don't know why but she suddenly disappeared. Then I had this question: ...should I close the ranks and join the other sister? Or should I leave the space open? Because next to me were three other women. This would be one of the points I would eventually address to a scholar or Sabrina. I think you'll not find this in a book.

Another important woman is Soraja. As noted above, she is in charge of the *dars*, and is thus also acknowledged by the women as an expert. However, some of the women with higher education degrees emphasize that they would prefer to attend *dars* given by a woman with trained religious knowledge. Soraja agrees with them because, in contrast to herself, a trained woman would be able to more spontaneously legitimate her statements with verses of the Qur'an or citation of a *hadith*. Nevertheless, Soraja enjoys the esteem of her peers due to her symbolic capital: language skills (fluency in Arabic, German, French, and English), a basic Islamic education in Morocco, knowledge and experience in both Swiss and Arab society, family ties to the current vice-president and one of the co-founders, and a somewhat pragmatic attitude towards Islamic rules.

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<sup>46</sup> Frank Peter, “Islamic Sermons, Religious Authority and the Individualization of Islam in France,” in *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt. Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie*, ed. Manuel Franzmann, Christel Gärtner, and Nicole Köck (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2006), 306.

Some of the recent converts consider Mounia, a Moroccan immigrant married to a Swiss convert, as an important interlocutress due to her ability to back up her statements with Qur'anic verses and *ḥadīth* in Arabic. Ines, in particular, notes that she accepts everything Mounia says.

The primary kind of knowledge that the women look for and appreciate within the association falls into the category some of the women label as 'the women's questions,' such as dress, gender relations, menses, pregnancy, birth, and children's education. They are also eager to learn the biography of Muḥammad and the basic rules of Islamic practice. The fact that the knowledge of their internal 'experts' has generally been constructed through self-taught strategies is not a matter of controversy, as long as the expert in question is aware of and communicates the limits of her knowledge. Also important for most of the women and for Muslims in general are a good command of the Arabic language and the recitation of the Qur'ān by heart—skills that are difficult for most converts to acquire. Therefore, group members who speak Arabic and can cite Qur'anic verses or *ḥadīth* in Arabic spontaneously are held in high esteem. Some interviewees emphasize that once they acquired this knowledge they will not need to seek out the other women any more. They will themselves become experts for the new converts.

Three women, Sabrina, Irene, and Angela, converted between twenty and thirty years ago and have been members of the association since its early days. Due to their knowledge and long-standing experience, especially in how one can live an 'Islamically correct' life within Swiss society, their knowledge is appreciated by other women and they can be described as role models. Asked which woman within the association had left an important impression on her, Alina answered:

Irene—that's evident because of her knowledge, because she has been a Muslim for a long time. Really, there are some women who have been Muslims for twenty or more years. Concerning knowledge, I'm more or less at the same level now, but they have experience and the discussions with them are really nice—especially with Irene or with Angela. Angela has ten kids. She is really a model for me with the kids—where school is concerned, what are the obstacles..., or when Christmas is approaching [for asking] "Angela, what can I do so that my daughter..."—such things.

Most of the women appreciate those experts and role-models who share a pragmatic—that is, not 'too strict'—attitude. It is worth noting

that 'too strict' does not describe a specific way of religious practice but is used by the women to distance themselves from a practice that applies more detailed rules than they judge to be conventional. They argue that it is always possible to find a legitimate practical solution to a problem, for instance, to allow taking off the headscarf at work, or keeping one's dogs. Furthermore, most of the interviewed women recognize a plurality within Islam. Therefore, concerning normative practice, their question is what the best rule in a personal and specific situation should be and how it could be legitimized. The women seem to agree that the intent behind an action is more important than the action itself. Soraja feels it is important to transmit this idea in her *dars*, as she explains:

There are different things which are difficult for me as well... to find an answer. I usually tell them that the right thing is simply that one does what one is convinced of—because it is said that Allah will punish or reward according to one's intent. If your intent is good and you have the feeling, this is the right thing—then you can't go wrong.

This argument refers to *niyyah*, a fundamental concept of Islamic law,<sup>47</sup> and can therefore be described as a validation through tradition. At the same time, it can be tied to validation through emotion. The question remains whether the stress on *niyyah* in this association reflects a general conceptualization of Islamic law in Europe, is used in this association as a framework to avoid controversy, is due to the current lack of formally trained leaders, or some combination of the above factors.

### Conclusion

The women's association portrayed in this article is an illustrative example of Muslim women creating their own space. The constant struggle with lack of financial resources and limited free time are part of the history of this association. Nevertheless, the women continue to take the initiative to overcome these problems and to keep the association's activities running. This strong motivation is due to a number of factors, such as avoiding male dominance, having free space to organize

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Paul R. Powers, *Intent in Islamic Law: Motive and Meaning in Medieval Sunni Fiqh* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 3. For the use of the concept of *niyyah* in Swedish Youth Associations see Karlsson Minganti, Chapter 3.1, this volume.

whatever activity they choose, and being able to discuss whatever topic they want.

The following quotation from an association annual report explains perfectly the common vision of most of the women interviewed:

I wish that our association becomes more and more a place of learning and personal development for us. This means to me [that we] listen frequently to people [who are] as competent as possible or at least learn from authentic sources about Islam, and discuss how to apply what we heard, but also [have] a lot of patience and tolerance for each other because every woman has her own story, her own path both in front and behind her.

Usually, converted women who contact the association for the first time are searching for other converts to exchange information with on how to live as a Muslim woman in Swiss society. For instance, how to pray, fast, dress, behave with men in home life and in public, and educate their children. Therefore, they seek experienced converted women who can be labeled as religious and social authorities or role models with whom they can discuss different solutions, and who emphasize the concept of *niyyah*, stating that the intent behind an action is more important than the action itself. The converts are also interested in the history of Islam, such as the life of Muḥammad and his companions,<sup>48</sup> and special religious skills, such as the recitation of Qur'ānic verses. The quest for knowledge is an important part of the realization of their pious selves. Contacting and participating in the association's activities can also be, however, simply another way of finding new friends.

Many of the women who the converts view as authorities within the association do not possess a formal religious education. Thus, their authority is best described as informal. Usually, their followers accept their self-taught knowledge as authoritative as long as they are aware of and communicate the limits of their knowledge and are able to support their statements with an authoritative discourse or text. Furthermore, in the setting of an association, the regular availability of a

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<sup>48</sup> Surprisingly, the converts I interviewed are not especially interested in the wives of Muḥammad as role models, as has been described in other recent work on the pious "second generation." For instance, Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge," 629; Sigrid Nökel, *Die Töchter der Gastarbeiter und der Islam. Zur Soziologie alltagsweltlicher Anerkennungspolitiken. Eine Fallstudie* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2002), 189; Gritt Klinkhammer, *Moderne Formen islamischer Lebensführung. Eine qualitativ-empirische Untersuchung zur Religiosität sunnitisch geprägter Türkinnen der zweiten Generation in Deutschland* (Marburg: Diagonal, 2000), 281.

person is a basic but important feature in the construction of informal authority as well as leadership. In order to fully consider instances in which women act as religious authorities, it is important to include the concept of informal authority.

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## CHAPTER 2.6

# MUSLIMAHS' IMPACT ON AND ACQUISITION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN FLANDERS

Els Vanderwaeren

### *Introduction*

In most European societies, Muslims contribute actively to contemporary religious discourse. With several notable exceptions,<sup>1</sup> however, Belgian scholars have paid scant attention to the existence of 'differentiating' discourses within Muslim communities, despite evidence that such discourses do exist.<sup>2</sup> Prior studies have described how some young, religious Muslim women recognize a female power inherent in Islam, despite the image presented in public discourse of female Muslims (Muslimahs) as victims of authoritarian, androcentric, and patriarchal structures.<sup>3</sup> Western societies also attribute mainly traditional identities and social roles to Muslim women. The acceptance of

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Nadia Fadil, "Submitting to God, Submitting to the Self: Secular and Religious Trajectories of Second Generation Maghrebi in Belgium" (Leuven: PhD dissertation, 2008); Konrad Pedziwiatr, "The New Muslim Elites in European Cities: Religion and Active Social Citizenship Amongst Young Organized Muslims in Brussels and London" (Leuven: PhD dissertation, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Belgium is the nation-state. Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. The article results from research conducted among Muslim women of Moroccan descent living in Flanders. Fadil focuses on how "Muslims individualize themselves through Islam rather than how they individualize themselves from Islam." See Nadia Fadil, "Individualizing Faith, Individualizing Identity: Islam and Young Muslim Women in Belgium," in *European Muslims and the secular state*, ed. Jocelyne Césari and Seán McLoughlin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 153. Pedziwiatr focuses on the "Islam of citizens," referring to the Islam of European-born citizens, who are the new Muslim elites in European urban spaces. See Pedziwiatr, "The New Muslim Elites." My research focuses on the use of various Islamic instruments (especially *ijtihād*) by Muslim women in their attempts to reconcile their religious ways of being with the broader community.

<sup>3</sup> See Els Vanderwaeren, "The Existing Conditions for Women to Conduct *'ijtihād* in the European Islamic Diaspora" (paper presented at the Seventh Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, organized by the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Florence and Montecatini Terme, Italy, March 22–26, 2006); Els Vanderwaeren, "Religieuze beschouwingen onder hoger opgeleide moslims in Vlaanderen,"

such images suggests that these women might be less inclined to adapt to modern society. This view also neglects the diverse and complex experiences of women in general, and of Muslim women (of immigrant background) in particular.

In their search for an adequate religious discourse, some Muslim women in Belgium, like Muslim women in other European countries,<sup>4</sup> have come to realize that they can no longer rely solely on the established religious authorities to understand and explain their religion. As the overall level of education among young Muslim women in European countries rises, women are increasingly formulating their own insights into everyday issues, based on their understandings of Islam (see Bleisch Bouzar, 2.5, this volume).<sup>5</sup> Within their own environment, these women actively contribute to the renewal of religious discourse by challenging current versions of Islam as cultural artifacts and falsifications of something that was originally 'more just'.<sup>6</sup>

Changes in society and in the religious arena are closely connected with reformulations of religious authority.<sup>7</sup> The end of the monopoly and the loss of influence that traditional religious authorities previously held over interpretation and leadership are consequences of a more highly individualized religiosity.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that the

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in *Diversiteit in islam: Over verschillende belevingen van het moslim zijn*, ed. Els Vanderwaeren and Christiane Timmerman (Leuven: Acco), 45–72.

<sup>4</sup> See Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," *Social Compass* 50, no. 1 (2003): 35–46; Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006): 617–42; Jeanette S. Jouili, "Negotiating secular boundaries: Pious micro-practices of Muslim women in French and German public spheres," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no. 4 (2009): 455–70.

<sup>5</sup> See Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," *ISIM Newsletter* 14 (2004): 28–29; Fadil, *Individualizing Faith*; Els Vanderwaeren, "Moslima's aan de horizon: Islamitische interpretaties als hefboomen bij de emancipatie van moslima's," in *Eigen Emancipatie Eerst: Over de rechten en representatie van vrouwen in een multiculturele samenleving*, ed. Gilly Coene and Chia Longman (Gent: Academia Press, 2005), 113–32.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of a 'just' Islam (in Arabic 'adl, derived from 'adala) is taken from a lecture by Azizah al-Hibri at the Worldwide Women's Day on March 8, 2005 at the Belgian Parliament in Brussels.

<sup>7</sup> See Frank Peter, "Leading the Community of the Middle Way: A Study of the Muslim Field in France," *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006): 707–36.

<sup>8</sup> Jocelyne Césari, *Être musulman en France: associations, militants et mosques* (Paris: Karthala, 1994); Leila Babès, *L'islam positif: La religion des jeunes musulmans de France* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier/Éditions ouvrières, 1997); Felice Dassetto, *Facettes de l'Islam Belge* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant Academia, 1997); Felice Dassetto, Brigitte Maréchal, and Jorgen Nielsen, *Convergence musulmanes: Aspects contemporains*



transformation of Islam in Western Europe amounts to nothing more than a decline in the influence of religious authorities. On the contrary, it indicates that a process of pluralization of religious authority structures is occurring. Muslims are increasingly accepting that “no one has a monopoly over the meaning of what God says,” and more people are claiming the right to develop their own personal interpretations of religious resources.<sup>9</sup>

Questions about faith and normativity have become more relevant as Muslims are confronted with the myriad shapes and colors of a global Islam in a diaspora context. Such differences within Islam are magnified in such contexts, due to the non-hierarchical and decentralized structure of Islam. Internal differentiation creates conditions for religious renewal, as they interrupt conventional hierarchies and cause many traditional and cultural anchors to disappear.<sup>10</sup> These processes spark debates about authority, as the central question often involves who is to decide what is legitimate. Authority becomes highly pluralized in terms of conceptual characteristics, as well as with regard to the ascription and acquisition of these characteristics and the identity of those who are to bear authority. In this context, traditional bearers of religious authority must accept their new counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Subordinated groups (for example, younger generations and women) see this as a chance to increase the influence of their interpretation of Islam, which they consider more relevant to their local situations. Such uniquely female interpretations by women develop from within the traditional religious framework as they choose for themselves what they will accept and believe, and what makes sense to them from within the prescribed framework.<sup>12</sup>

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*de l'Islam, dans l'Europe élargie* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 2001); Valerie Amiraux, “Jeunes musulmanes turques d'Allemagne: Voix et voies d'individuation,” in *Paroles d'Islam: Individus, sociétés et discours dans l'Islam européen contemporain/ Islamic Words: Individuals, Societies and Discourse in Contemporary European Islam*, ed. Felice Dassetto (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2000), 101–23; Nikola Tietze, *Jeunes musulmans de France et d'Allemagne: Les constructions subjectives de l'identité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Asma Barlas, “Believing Women,” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), xii.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Mandaville, “De informatietechnologie en de verschuivende grenzen van de Europese islam,” in *Naar een Europese Islam? Essays*, ed. Dick Douwes (Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt, 2001), 136–37.

<sup>11</sup> Dale Eickelman, “Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 4 (1992): 648.

<sup>12</sup> Many studies about Islam in Europe have described profound changes initiated by women in both Muslim society and religion. See for example Babès, *L'Islam positif*;

The considerable potential for social change that is inherent to this new, female approach to Islam may be perceived as threatening by leading religious authority figures (most of whom are male). This is particularly likely, given that every instance in which Muslim women (or men) attempt to achieve religious renewal in local forms of Islam in Europe represents a bid for liberation from the dictates of countries of origin and the cradle of Islam. The core of the problem lies in the traditional Islamic religious authority structure within Muslim societies and diaspora communities. This structure is rooted in a long-standing patriarchal tradition, despite the existence of other theoretical possibilities for legitimate authority. Religious renewal calls this accepted form of authority into question. The resulting democratization of Islam and the subsequent call of European Muslims for more flexibility in interpretation and argumentation indicate a shift toward emancipation (theologically as well as practically) from institutionalized authority.<sup>13</sup> This demonstrates how the non-hierarchical and decentralized structure of Islam may result in the disintegration of authenticity and authority due to internal differentiation.

This article demonstrates how certain young Muslim women of Moroccan descent in Flanders are contributing to the pluralization of religious authority structures. Such pluralization takes place during meetings with other women to formulate and disseminate religious ideas and to interpret Islamic sources regarding issues of practical daily life. A closer look at those meetings reveals the presence of mechanisms of religious authority in these living-room discussions. Authority becomes problematic, as the women (who are not considered 'qualified' as interpreters of Islam) attempt to strengthen their discourse about a more just Islamic way of life according to certain self-selected—but not always established or widely known—interpretations of Islam.

This article begins by presenting the methodology used for data collection, followed by a description and analysis of the spaces used by Muslim women for the formulation and dissemination of their own

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Valerie Amiraux, "Discours voilés sur les musulmanes en europe: comment les musulmans sont-ils devenus des musulmanes?" *Social Compass* 50, no. 1 (2003): 85–96; Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge through a Woman's Lens"; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority"; Jouili, "Negotiating Secular Boundaries."

<sup>13</sup> Steven Vertovec, "Moslimjongeren in Europa: vermenging van invloeden en betekenissen," in *Naar een Europese islam? Essays*, ed. Dick Douwes (Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt, 2001), 110.

perspectives on religious ideas and interpretations of Islam as one case in which plural modes of changing religious authority have interfered.<sup>14</sup> The study concludes by considering the religious authority acquired by spokeswomen in these living-room meetings.

### *Methodology*

The following analysis is based on data collected from thirty audio-taped semi-structured, in-depth interviews and five focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were conducted among Muslim women of Moroccan descent between April 2007 and February 2008 in Flanders (Belgium). The same group of women participated in both the interviews and the focus groups, which explored and further clarified the findings from the interviews.

All of the participants matched a particular profile: young Muslim women living near Antwerp whose families had emigrated (or who had themselves emigrated) from Morocco. Emigration, whether personal or familial (parents or grandparents), is an important selection criterion, as it affects the position, development, and experience of all family members, particularly with regard to gender relationships.<sup>15</sup> The study was limited to Moroccans and their descendants in order to strengthen the validity of the results, as we could assume that all participants belong, at least nominally, to the Moroccan Muslim community and, more specifically, to the Mālikī school of law.<sup>16</sup> This assumption remains valid, even for participants who described themselves as no longer belonging to this tradition, given that the traditions within which children are born and educated are characterized

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<sup>14</sup> My theoretical starting point for 'space' is in post-colonialism, which focuses on the heterogeneity of spaces and on the ways in which differences in and specificities of spaces are defined in local knowledge resources.

<sup>15</sup> With regard to the impact of migration, see Els Vanderwaeren and Christiane Timmerman, "Inleidende beschouwingen op diversiteit in islam: over verschillende belevingen van het moslim zijn," in *Diversiteit in islam: Over verschillende belevingen van het moslim zijn*, ed. Els Vanderwaeren and Christiane Timmerman (Leuven: Acco, 2008), 9. For a focus on gender relations, see Jen'nan Ghazal Read, "Challenging Myths of Muslim Women: The Influence of Islam on Arab-American Women's Labor Force Participation," *The Muslim World* 96 (2002): 29.

<sup>16</sup> Socialization in a Moroccan family and belonging, at least nominally, to one Islamic school of law is important because it means the research results are not a consequence of variation between different Islamic schools of law.

by dimensions of historical continuity and community.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as stated by Renaerts, primary socialization is “likely to leave indelible traces.”<sup>18</sup> With respect to age, all of the participants were over eighteen, with the oldest being thirty-eight. No children, adolescents, or elderly women were included. This age distribution implies that all participants were studying or working and that they were therefore likely to describe their lives in terms of marriage, raising children, and similar activities.

Within this profile, participants were randomly selected from among those who identified themselves as ‘active believers’ and ‘emancipated women’, based on their own perceptions of the terms where participants defined ‘active,’ ‘believer’, and ‘emancipation.’<sup>19</sup> The participants were contacted first by e-mail, followed by telephone contact in order to arrange appointments. Interviews were semi-structured around a list of major topics focusing on whether and how young Muslim women in Flanders are searching for religious answers to modern problems within Western society. With regard to legitimacy and authority, this translated into questions concerning the means and strategies that these women employ to interpret religion and subsequently to generate a foundation for their own personal interpretations of religion. In this article, I focus on the data coded as pertaining to authority, sources, leadership, role models, informal meetings, Islamic organizations, legitimacy, and authenticity. The broader research project of which this study is a part is influenced by the grounded theory approach,<sup>20</sup> in which theory derives from the data and participants receive no information in advance regarding the topics to be addressed. For this study, this meant that, during the interviews, participants were asked what authority meant to them, without being provided with a previously established definition of authority, as any definition could exclude

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, “Normative Islam in Europe,” in Dassetto *Paroles d’islam/ Islamic Words*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Monique Renaerts, “Process of Homogenization in the Muslim Educational World in Brussels,” *International Journal of Educational Research* 31, no. 4 (1999): 289.

<sup>19</sup> No unified notion of these three concepts existed among the respondents. Some of the women explained the ‘active believing’ according to their level of participation as Muslim women in broader society, while others referred to their engagement with women’s groups. In relation to emancipation, the women often stressed choice, freedom, or their ability to make decisions for themselves. See Vanderwaeren, *Vrouwen doen aan ’ijtihād*.

<sup>20</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

potential meanings. The various understandings that participants had of authority are listed below, derived from their responses to questions about authority.

The interviews were conducted either in the interviewees' homes or in my office at the university. Each interview lasted between one and two and a half hours. All data were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for analysis, thereby enabling me to draw upon direct quotations from the women I interviewed. In this article, I share their discourse on religious topics that interfere with daily life issues and experiences.

The choice to apply techniques of qualitative, in-depth analysis raises questions about generalization. A common strategy for this kind of analysis is to interview people until 'theoretical saturation' occurs,<sup>21</sup> meaning that no new information would be acquired by additional interviewing. Moreover, many studies treat Islam as a monolithic religion that controls all aspects of its adherents' lives and that reduces women to their religious identity<sup>22</sup> (in this case, a very stiff identity), thus any discussion concerning Muslim women entails the risk of essentialization. For this reason, any generalizations that I make about Muslim women (participants or not) are made with an awareness of the diversity existing among these women and the contexts in which they live.

### *Spaces of their Own: Muslimahs' Living-Room Meetings*<sup>23</sup>

The active involvement of Muslim women in the local and broader religious field is increasing in several European societies.<sup>24</sup> Women

<sup>21</sup> Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

<sup>22</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, "The Issues at Hand," in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity*, ed. Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 1998), 278.

<sup>23</sup> At the Muslim Religious Authority in Europe workshop at Isim (Leiden, Netherlands), September 30th–October 1st, 2005, Boender gave a presentation entitled "From Periphery to Centre: Female Muslim Leadership in Milli Görüs in the Netherlands," about living-room discussions among women of Turkish origin in Amsterdam. Klinkhammer uses the term *sister-groups* for the same kind of meetings in her article. Gritt Klinkhammer, "Modern Constructions of Islamic Identity: The Case of Second Generation Muslim Women in Germany," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 8, no. 1 (2003): 1–16.

<sup>24</sup> See Shirin Amir-Moazami, "Hybridity and Anti-Hybridity: The Islamic Headscarf and its Opponents in the French Public Sphere," in *Muslim Traditions and Modern Techniques of Power: Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* 3, ed. Armando Salvatore (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001), 307–27; Shirin Amir-Moazami and Armando Salvatore,

are meeting with each other to reflect upon their religion both publicly and privately, at home, in mosques, or in women's associations. In Belgium, a considerable number of women benefit from socio-religious services provided specifically for them in local Muslim or ethnic organizations. Many new female religious organizations have emerged recently. Although some of these groups depend on mosques, their involvement is not limited to formal organizations or mosques.<sup>25</sup> In Flanders, Muslimahs are searching for their own niche or space in which to practice their religion based on their personal understanding of Islam. In addition to being active in the women's spaces of mosques or Islamic associations, approximately half of the participants interviewed for this project also meet other women informally in a variety of domestic spaces, where they share religious information and discuss daily life and other topics related to Islam.<sup>26</sup> As described by Hafida (a participant), they gather in order "to, ehm, talk about Islam." Rahma

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"Gender, Generation, and the Reform of Tradition: From Muslim Majority Societies to Western Europe," in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and Across Europe*, ed. Stefano Allievi and Jorgen Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 52–77; Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge through a Woman's Lens"; Klinkhammer, "Modern Constructions of Islamic Identity"; Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals"; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority."

<sup>25</sup> Belgian women's groups include the Actiecomité Moslimvrouwen (AMV), started under another name at a mosque in Antwerp (primarily comprised of first generation Moroccan immigrants), but which later left what participants considered a male-controlled environment with limited roles for women to seek more independence. Examples of other groups include *ar-rabīta*, *al-Mināra*, the Blijf van Mijn Hoofddoek (Keep Off My Headscarf) platform, the Allochtone Vrouwen (Allochtonous Women) platform and the BOEH! group (Baas over eigen Hoofd [Boss of our own head]). Several women in my sample were or became executives and prominent members of these organizations. See Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, and Karlsson Mingati, Chapter 3.1, this volume.

<sup>26</sup> The collected data contain information on at least three different groups. The data presented here represent the collective image emerging from thirty in-depth interviews regarding the groups represented in the sample. These groups may not be representative of similar groups in Flanders (or Belgium). Not all of these meetings are mono-ethnic; some are attended by women of other ethnic origins as well. This suggests that it is not only women of Moroccan origin that seek out other women, but also women of other ethnic origins (e.g. Turkish women). This suggestion is supported by research on women's groups in the Netherlands. See Boender, "From Periphery to Centre." For Germany, see also Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge through a Woman's Lens," and Klinkhammer, "Modern Constructions of Islamic Identity"; and for France, see Jouili, "Negotiating Secular Boundaries."

notes further that these encounters serve “to remember God,” as “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.”

These meetings occur in the home of a participant with approximately ten female believers in attendance. Hafida provides the following description of the participants of one group:

young women like Ibtissame and some other women, also working women, women with the headscarf and without the headscarf. It is quite relaxed...and [it also includes] Belgian women converted to Islam.

The women do not allow men to attend these meetings. The meetings are organized for and by women. Participants explain this by pointing out that mixed-gender discussions about Islam already take place in formal organizations, as in the Sunday-morning meetings of the Muslim organization *al-Wi'ām*. The arguments for excluding men include a desire for more freedom to speak and to exchange thoughts with other women. Along these lines, Zoubaida states:

Pfff, you know, you are not formal [in living room meetings]. Allé, yes, you don't speak formally there. But with your friends, you are in a group and you can laugh. You learn how to speak your mind and you discuss things.

Participants explicitly state that they do not want to be constrained by the presence of men; only through women-only meetings will they learn to develop and discuss their own views, and express and stand up for their own opinions, a sentiment that suggests male dominance during mixed-gender debates.

The living-room meetings emerge almost spontaneously. This is evident in the initial informality of these groups. A group may start with women talking “about this, that, and the other” (*Azza*) until they encounter a subject for which they do not know the Islamic rule of behavior or response. They then try to advise each other, and they may decide to meet again to clarify the problem using religious resources. They bring a variety of resources, including the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* and *tafāsīr* texts, as well as social science books, recorded television debates between 'ulamā', or someone's *fatāwá*, to the subsequent meetings. Those more or less 'accidental' discussions and the resulting second meetings sometimes grow into the aforementioned living-room meetings. As the women begin to meet more regularly (e.g. weekly or during Ramaḍān) or at a fixed time, the meetings become increasingly structured. Hafida, herself a host to a group of eight to twelve women

every Friday, explains how they get “better and better organized”: a meeting starts to follow a certain blueprint. Ibtissame says that, after some chatter, “the teacher reads the *fātiha* and then we formally start.” The women in Hafida’s group have drawn up a schedule for meetings the following year. According to Hafida, they know “what we are going to do and what the themes are.” At a certain point, one woman emerges as a spokeswoman who guides the discussion; the spokeswoman functions as a kind of leader. Hafida describes a leader as:

one who when, ehm, we talk a bit and pose questions, can answer them well. And she looks things up in a book, she explains and . . . leads the questions [in an prepared manner instead of] inventing things on the spot.

The leader prepares for the meeting, but other participants may also bring arguments, questions, and proofs to support their own convictions.

The interviews revealed two main reasons for participating in living-room meetings. First, women would like to become better informed about Islam, and second, they would like to have accurate information about the role of women in Islam (Zefira, Rahma, Khadija, Yousra, and Sabriya). They believe that being better informed will allow them to understand their own lives better (Rahma, Hafida). The topics addressed at meetings frequently concern transgressing prescribed gender role restrictions, as well as the need for new and practical solutions to real-life situations that are religiously acceptable. For example, women may seek answers from the group about ritual ablutions and prayer. This is particularly likely, given that the wide-ranging origins of European Muslims and the varying development of their religious practices within Europe have led different groups to perform these practices in different ways. This diaspora context means that Islam is not attached to one specific social, ethnic, or cultural group in society, thus creating space for Muslim youth and women to claim authority.

This search for ‘good practices’ raises consciousness regarding religious praxis among the women “just by talking” (Hafida). Through discussion, these women try to divest Islam of its ethno-cultural baggage. Their discussion and re-reading of the sources enables them to imbue practices and texts with new meaning drawn from their own social histories and life experiences. Higher education, whether in theology or another area,<sup>27</sup> provides women with tools for counter-

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<sup>27</sup> Renaerts, “Process of Homogenization,” 290.



ing traditional non-critical attitudes. At these informal meetings, they critically examine their experienced religion as part of their search for an adequate interpretation of Islam. They try to refute existing discriminatory Islamic prescriptions through contemporary interpretation. In discussing and searching for answers themselves, they become aware that women were not always absent from dialogue about Islam, although they have been, over time, “shaded out of the domain of law, the judiciary and even the history of Islam.”<sup>28</sup>

Among these Muslimahs, there is a growing awareness that resistance to patriarchies does exist within Islam, as do texts emphasizing gender equity and equality, although these texts have been neglected by patriarchal traditions. As a result of reading and discussing books, or attending the lectures of international figures (including Azizah al-Hibri, Fatima Saddiqi, Amina Wadud, Nawal Sadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir Hosseini, and Dure Ahmed) who emphasize that Muslim women need not wait for others to emancipate them, participants feel strengthened and better able to make their own individual decisions regarding the transmitted precepts and rules that they will follow. This often leads to a true search for understanding rather than merely the passive adoption of religion. The participants' approach to Islam is characterized by a more conscious involvement in their religion and by increased individual choice. They have abandoned the idea of accepting an interpretation because it is “an age-old tradition” and has “always been done like that” (Umaymah). In the interviews, Faouzia expresses this by saying:

I want to be myself. Do you understand? I want to be myself, whoever I am, whatever I am. I don't think it concerns others as long as I, of course, respect the...the laws...surely. But besides that, what I will become, the development I undergo, that is normally my own thing. That is my right!

The decrease in the social dominance of tradition and increase in self-interpretation of religious precepts and rules until they fit concretely and emotionally into the life of participants—“accord with the heart” (El Alia)—indicate a movement towards religious pluralization.

Women meeting with other women is not a new phenomena. In *A Border Passage*, Leila Ahmed mentions that women have always

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<sup>28</sup> Haleh Afshar, “Muslim Women and Feminisms: Illustrations from the Iranian Experience,” *Social Compass* 54, no. 3 (2007): 422.

figured out religious issues and questions among themselves, and that this has resulted in a type of Islam that is essentially a women's Islam (as opposed to an official, textual Islam, or a men's Islam).<sup>29</sup> Meetings in the home reveal the space that religion occupies in daily life. According to Ask and Tjomsland, the importance of religion resides in its practice in daily life, given that it is "something that takes place in everyday life and thereby is actively founded in the experience of the believing women."<sup>30</sup> Daily life experiences and, more specifically, actions reproduce and transform norms and traditions.

In their discourses, Muslimahs become aware that the established version of Islam is, as Ahmed observes: "not the only legitimate one and consequently the only accepted interpretation, but the political dominant and supported one."<sup>31</sup> Based on their exploration of history and alternate contexts of Islam, these Muslimahs take courage from the realization that, although women have not been participants in "official theological interpretation," they have been involved in defining social and, consequently, gender relations. They have thus been involved in defining legal principles applied in Islamic law and courts. In these living-room discussions, participants develop the tools of discourse and debate that men use, in order to engage in effective argumentation with 'correct' Islamic thinking. The meetings in the living rooms of Muslimahs clearly touch upon the issue of religious authority, as I address in the following section.

### *Muslimahs' Living-Room Meetings and the Acquisition of Religious Authority*

For a long time, Muslims—especially Muslim women—have been socialized to accept that those in religious authority know best with regard to what is (and is not) proper Islam. Today, claims to absolute religious authority are becoming weaker and are frequently disputed or contested. As explained in the methodology section, the participants

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<sup>29</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America; A Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 123–24.

<sup>30</sup> Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland, "Preface," in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (Oxford: Berg, 1998), vii.

<sup>31</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 239.

in this study received no definition of authority before they were asked what the word meant or evoked. No common, clear view of religious authority appears to exist among participants. The data on authority from across all of the interviews show that all participants accept (although with differences in arguments and explanations) what Abou El Fadl calls the “authoritative” in Islam—the authority of God, the book of God, and the prophet Muḥammad.<sup>32</sup> There was less agreement about authority beyond these most important authoritatives. Faouzia’s statement that:

even God, who created us, gave us the freedom to choose to believe in him or not. Who is then the human to tell me what I have to do or not?

reflects an acceptance of the authority of God, but not of men. The problem thus does not lie with the three accepted authoritative sources, but specifically with those who consider themselves authorities regarding how these three authoritative sources should be applied to individuals and the community. This problem is of particular relevance to women’s living-room meetings.<sup>33</sup>

The living-room meetings represent a challenge to what the women themselves may consider the religious authorities of the community. The very existence of these mono-gender meetings affects the perception of religious authority, due to the absence of those who have traditionally acquired and disseminated religious knowledge: men, or those controlled by men. The women mention the acquisition of religious knowledge as necessary for achieving the two primary goals behind the meetings. In addition to an individual’s desire to become a true Muslim in conduct and spirit by ‘doing religion’—according to Mahmood, and Jouili and Amir-Moazami, the creation of a ‘pious subject’—women often participate in order to improve their ability to educate their children.<sup>34</sup> They construct religious knowledge during

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<sup>32</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 23.

<sup>33</sup> While the research that I have conducted involves detailed analyses of authority (the authoritatives and the non-authoritatives) as a topic of individual in-depth interviews, this article focuses only on what is useful and applicable regarding the authority amongst participants in the living-room meetings.

<sup>34</sup> With regard to ‘doing religion,’ see Orit Avishai, “‘Doing Religion’ in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency,” *Gender & Society* 22, no. 4 (2008): 409–33. On the ‘pious subject,’ see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton

debates, in which they express doubts about the authoritativeness of inherited traditional religious authorities (for example, institutional structures, texts, or individuals). At meetings, they search, select, and discuss religious sources; they weigh arguments and choose whom they will follow and which norms (and resulting precepts) they will observe. In other words, they personally select those to whom they listen and those whom they consider knowledgeable and authoritative.

By focusing on the acquisition of religious knowledge (or Islamic instruction) as a central activity of the meetings, women assist in the production of local religious knowledge, as such knowledge is contextual and continuously constructed. Their development of knowledge about Islam demonstrates a growing independence from the versions of Islam transmitted by traditional, orthodox, and Middle Eastern scholars. These scholars have often attached greater importance to the possession of authentic scholarly knowledge of Islam and the status of the narrator than to what was actually said. The outcome has been the development of a public field in which all may listen but not everyone may speak. This situation may explain why the sustained female religious discourse of the participants is relatively unknown to the traditional, first-generation religious elites of the diaspora.<sup>35</sup> In general, women are viewed as a 'silent' group with respect to religion, subordinate to male and patriarchal dominance.<sup>36</sup> Female religious authority does exist, however, even though orthodox Sunnī circles have often ignored it. Today, the reinterpretation of Islamic sources by Muslim women is of interest among Muslims in general, and not only among non-Muslims or within feminist circles. According to

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University Press, 2005); and Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority." Jouili and Amir-Moazami explain the high status and great responsibility that participants ascribe to the role of "mother" (622–23.) They consider Werbner's concept of "political motherhood," in which the domestic sphere is considered a separate entity, although it is a very social and political space. See Pnina Werbner, "Political Motherhood and the Feminization of Citizenship," in *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, ed. Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (London: Zed Books, 1999), 221–45.

<sup>35</sup> In an interview on December 9, 2007, a prominent Muslim member of the Union of Mosques and Islamic Organizations and of the Executive Body of Muslims in Belgium indicated that Muslim women had no special needs in relation to their Islam.

<sup>36</sup> Shirley Ardener, "Introduction: The Nature of Women in Society," in *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society*, ed. Shirley Ardener (Oxford/Providence: Berg Publishers, 1993), 12.

Roald, this is a result of the concrete and practical foundation of those reinterpretations.<sup>37</sup>

The choice to meet in homes, and not the mosque, is a throwback to the patriarchal past when mosque attendance was not customary for Moroccan women. Participants are well aware, however, that there is no prohibition against women praying in the mosques (El-Alia, Yousra, Zefira). They point out that, in the sacred area of the *ka'bah*, men and women pray side by side (El-Alia). However, non-attendance has a direct consequence on the religious knowledge of women. Ahmed explains that, because women do not engage in the practice of Friday mosque visits, women are not directly taught by teachers or preachers who have been trained in orthodox religious scriptures and who can respond authoritatively regarding how to interpret and understand Islam.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Muslim women present their ideas and problems in relation to daily life and religion at the living-room meetings. Khadija explains the interaction at those meetings:

and there is an interaction such that you can get confirmation, approval about the way it is and whether you are on the right way and how to stay on the right path.

The positions that the woman occupy in society influence these ideas, and the women search for approval and confirmation of their hybrid ideas through consensus during their local meetings.

They find support for some ideas that may be considered slightly deviant from arguments stating that "legitimate and reciprocal diversity exists in Islam" (Ibtissame) or that consensus on normative practice should be established locally (Souad, Asma, Yousra, Azza, Umaymah). The existence of consensus (or *ijmā'*) based on reasoning with fellow believers in the community (or the *umma*) helps to make new social and technological developments more acceptable within the orthodox Muslim community. The women argue that their *ijmā'* is authoritative, as the infallibility of the community is based on a *ḥadīth* that says the community never agrees on a "mistake" (Rana, Salwa).<sup>39</sup> They

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<sup>37</sup> Anne Sofie Roald, "Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought," in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 17–18.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, *A Border Passage*, 124.

<sup>39</sup> Participants address the diversity and the legitimate differences in Islam by referring to the Qur'an (12:118). They do not specify the *ḥadīth*.

argue that *ijmā'* became limited to the consensus of traditional Islamic '*ulamā'* over time. Supporters of change in Islam are critical of limiting *ijmā'* in this manner, advocating instead the practice of following a democratic consensus within the entire community rather than consensus within a small, predominantly conservative, clerical class.

The critical approach toward religious sources demonstrated by the women in these meetings clearly indicates that they do not wish to renew Islam in and of itself, preferring instead to rediscover and use all plausible space that Islam allows in order to develop a more integrated way of living religiously in European society. In this way, they remain within the margins of what they consider orthodox and normative Islam. They do not engage in what is traditionally understood as *ijtihād* (or interpretation), although they do reject *taqlīd*.<sup>40</sup> In many modern debates, people no longer consider *taqlīd*, or blind imitation, a viable option.<sup>41</sup> Today, both women and men are asserting their right to develop their own personal interpretations of Islamic sources, going beyond traditional formulations to create a new consensus on what is normative. They consider authority contextual and dependent on the local Muslim community. The contemporary importance of such consensus highlights the extent to which men have lost sole authority and control over Islamic beliefs, practices, and laws.

### *The Acquisition of Religious Authority by Spokeswomen*

The discourse of the women participating in the living room meetings reveals that they are creating their own modes of acceptance, in addition to strengthening and shaping their own perceptions of

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<sup>40</sup> In a broader study, I elaborate on participants' understanding of *ijtihād*. Proceeding from Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition, I note that participants approach *ijtihād* in a manner similar to the '*ulamā'*: in other words, doing *ijtihād* on an *ijtihād* (see Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986)). The impact of the result of the respondents' *ijtihād* is certainly different (see Els Vanderwaeren, "Vrouwen doen aan 'ijtihād. Hybriditeit als creatieve ruimte bij interpretaties van islam" (Antwerpen: PhD dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2010)). However, the potential of their doing *ijtihād* on an *ijtihād* lies in their participation in the discursive tradition, which was previously limited to scholars (predominantly male) and has now become more dispersed.

<sup>41</sup> Knut Vikør, "The Development of ijtihad and Islamic Reform, 1750–1850" (paper presented at the 3rd Nordic conference on Middle Eastern Studies "Ethnic Encounter and Culture Change," Joensuu, Finland, June 19–22, 1995).

religious authority, which must primarily accord with the 'heart' (Faouzia, Selma).

Interestingly, when ascribing authority to someone, participants make clear that a holistic faith—or the application of Islamic religious knowledge to one's entire attitude or life—plays an important role. At informal meetings, one woman often comes to act as a spokeswoman or a kind of leader. She prepares topics for discussion and provides necessary texts or materials to present and illustrate her interpretation of a topic. Such women are allowed to become leaders and present their ideas because they are considered to have "enough knowledge of the religion to explain the perspective of Islam" (Yousra).

To become a spokeswoman, a woman must possess religious knowledge, although she is not necessarily obliged to have had "a prestigious religious education" (Asma). Irreproachable behavior seems to be more important than formal education. According to the participants, a woman acquires authority not only by acquiring knowledge, but also when she "practices her religious knowledge" (Milouda). She must lead an exemplary life, balancing faith, family, and community. Boender notes that these three elements are also central to messages transmitted by female religious leaders.<sup>42</sup> A spokeswoman is capable of directing other women, despite her limited, non-theological Islamic education. She knows how to instruct and to relate to the feelings of fellow believers at those meetings. She acquires authority by influencing other women through her devotion to the group, by her self-tuition efforts and her sincerity. These characteristics seem to form the basis for achieving authority among other women, who are also not well instructed in Islam. As Anissa explains, this is because:

reading a book or summing up some directives of Islam can be done by everyone. But what makes the difference is the way you bring up these things. I think not everyone is capable of doing this, of explaining Islam in a just, correct, and affectionate manner. I don't think many persons are capable or successful at it.

She indicates how it is important to her for the teaching to touch her and not be superficial. She does not seem to ascribe authority to

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<sup>42</sup> Boender finds that the three elements in the messages of female religious leaders are similar to the topics that an *imām* disseminates when he talks about the relation between God and human, relations among people, and the relationship of believers to the extended society. See Welmoet Boender, *Imam in Nederland: Rol, gezag en binding in een seculariserende samenleving* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2007), 163.

anyone according to proof of official religious education; instead, she bases such ascriptions on perceived involvement.

The social involvement and empathic attitude of a spokeswoman is the basis of her leadership at the meetings. Some studies have shown that women may reject traditional (male) *'ulamā'* in their search for practical religious knowledge, while others (for example, social workers with an Islamic background) may gain influence and become authorities instead.<sup>43</sup> This makes it clear that, in order to be recognized as an authority, that person must be educated, but not necessarily (or solely) in the field of theology. For example, consider the authority of such male *'conférenciers'* as Tariq Ramadan, a philosopher who writes about Islamic studies, and the authority of preachers like Amr Khaled, a bookkeeper, or Hassan Iquioussen, who studied history and the Arabic language.<sup>44</sup> Roy notes how such lay religious authorities are criticized by the *'ulamā'* because of their relative lack of formal religious training, although they do not seem to need the consent of these traditional centers of Islamic authority.<sup>45</sup> The authority of these lay people is recognized because of their proximity to other people and because the knowledge they possess supports the specific local religious praxis of young Muslims living in the diaspora. These reasons can also be applied to the spokeswoman of a living-room meeting: she is nearby and offers practical and local knowledge about Islam to the other women.

Participants in living-room meetings thus clearly consider the correspondence of religious thought, knowledge, and behavior—'doing religion'—to be an essential aspect of Islam, as well as a core requirement for acquiring and exercising authority.

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 133.

<sup>44</sup> Regarding Tariq Ramadan, see Franck Frégosi, "Les contours discursifs d'une religiosité citoyenne: laïcité et identité islamique chez Tariq Ramadan," in Dassetto, *Paroles d'islam/Islamic Words*, 205–21; Anne Sofie Roald, "Tariq Ramadan, Western Muslims and the future of Islam," *Contemporary Islam* 2 (2008): 97–98. For Amr Khaled, see Asef Bayat, "From Amr Diab to Amr Khaled: Faith and Fun; Can One Have It All?" *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 639 (2003). For Hassan Iquioussen, see Frank Peter, "Islamic Sermons, Religious Authority and the Individualization of Islam in France," in *Religiosität in der Säkularisierten Welt: Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie*, ed. Manuel Franzmann, Christel Gärtner, and Nicole Köck (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag), 303–20.

<sup>45</sup> See Olivier Roy, "L'individualisation dans l'islam européen contemporain," in Dassetto, *Paroles d'islam/Islamic Words*, 76–77.



### *Conclusion*

The central point of this article is that women-only living-room meetings provide a niche within which Muslim women can develop and discuss their ideas about Islam. In these meetings, women develop a concept or understanding of religious authority that they consider more just and more applicable to their specific contexts than their perceptions of customary of Islamic leadership would allow. In addition, the critical debates in which the women engage with regard to the applicability of diverse religious opinions demonstrates the increasing pluralization of religious authority structures in Muslim communities. Muslim women emphasize the positive force of Islamic tradition (by acquiring and applying traditional—male—instruments and arguments), while simultaneously challenging the traditional (and dominant) androcentric character of current Islam.

Like other examples of female-driven changes to local forms of European Islam, the living-room discussions represent a fight for emancipation oriented towards both the women's countries of origin and traditional religious authorities. The demand of European Muslim women to reinterpret Islam—despite their gender—suggests a theological and practical emancipation from institutionalized authorities. However, the theoretical knowledge that these women have developed is not seen as well founded. This makes it difficult for the women to acquire the broader religious legitimacy and authority that they need in order to engage in emancipative discourse that is often in opposition to the traditions of their own community. Through their efforts to remain within the margins of what is considered orthodox, the interview participants made it clear that they wish to stay within the borders of Islam, as defined by consensus of the *umma* (or wider Muslim community). Keeping in mind Ahmed's observation that, throughout history, philosophers, visionaries, mystics, and some of civilization's greatest luminaries have frequently been hounded, persecuted, even executed for their opinions,<sup>46</sup> I consider the niche of the living room a promising space for socio-religious change, as well as for the reconceptualization of critical concepts and Islamic authority.

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<sup>46</sup> Ahmed, *A Border Passage*, 31.

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## CHAPTER 2.7

### WOMEN, LEADERSHIP, AND PARTICIPATION IN MOSQUES AND BEYOND: NOTES FROM STUTTGART, GERMANY

Petra Kuppinger

Every Saturday morning, a group of about fifteen teenage girls meet in the al-Nour Mosque in Stuttgart to study the Qurʾān, discuss different topics, watch films, drink tea, and enjoy each others' company.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally they bake pizza together, or go on outings in the city. The group has existed for a few years. Originally it was run by the mosque's *imam*, but he decided it was better for the group to be run by a young woman who spoke German (he did not). The *imam* could then withdraw and only do the theological parts of the group meetings. It took some effort to find a young woman who was willing and able to run this group. The *imam* eventually approached Rahma, a university student who had only a few years earlier come to Germany, but whose German was impeccable. Rahma notes, "I initially refused since I had never done such a thing and I had no idea what to do and how to run the group. But I agreed to give it a try." Two years later, Rahma still runs the group with great enthusiasm. She sums up her experience: "It was hard in the beginning, but I learned a lot and really like the work, the group, and the girls."<sup>2</sup>

Rahma's example of taking a leadership role in a German Muslim community illustrates larger transformations wherein Muslim women are increasingly taking over significant roles in communities, other

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All place, group, and personal names are pseudonyms. I changed a few small additional facts to protect the anonymity of individuals.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that by early 2010 the mosque had three instead of the earlier two teenage girls' groups bespeaks the success of these groups.

Muslim contexts, and the larger public sphere. These women participate in the concrete everyday making and remaking of communities, in the articulation of a rapidly growing German Muslim public sphere, and they participate and act as pious Muslimahs in the public sphere. They work to create a legitimate space for Muslims and Muslim concerns in different social settings and they mediate in difficult contexts between religious discourses and the pragmatic needs of everyday lives. These women work hard to create meaningful religious and social communities, to construct platforms for debates that are of relevance to them, to foster activities and engagements they deem important, to participate in larger public debates, and to speak up for the rights and needs of Germany's growing Muslim community. Moreover, they contribute to the construction of local Muslim identities, practices, and networks. By becoming social or religious leaders, public participants, and activists, women like Rahma take over responsibilities of running particular groups or activities, and also become religious, cultural, and social mediators and translators. They encourage and maintain debates in their groups about relevant subjects; attempt to address conflicting demands and concerns; try to formulate new positions, practices, and relationships; encourage participation in new spheres; and, finally, they situate themselves, their groups, and communities in the broader public sphere.

Analyzing the specific contexts of Rahma and two other women and their formal or informal leadership in Stuttgart, I argue that these women are central in the construction of not only Muslim communities, but also Muslim identities, practices, modes of living, and ways of civic participation in a European urban context. While these women's involvements and activities are often unrecognized, they constitute relevant forms of citizenship in a multicultural and multireligious society.

### *Becoming Part of the City*

Like other European cities, Stuttgart has in the last decades witnessed the emergence of a rapidly growing Muslim population.<sup>3</sup> As the state

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<sup>3</sup> There is a growing body of studies of (pious) Muslims in German cities: see Rauf Ceylan, *Ethnische Kolonien* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006); Nikola Tietze, *Islamische Identitäten* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001); Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Stolen Honor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ruth Mandel, *Cosmopolitan Anxieties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). For European cities, see

capital of Baden-Württemberg, Germany's sixth largest city (600,000 inhabitants), and center of the prosperous Mittlerer Neckarraum region (about 2.5 million inhabitants), Stuttgart has attracted thousands of migrants, many of whom are Muslims. Today there are almost 60,000 Muslims in Stuttgart of numerous ethnicities and nationalities (Turkish, Kurdish, Moroccan, Bosnian, Afghan, Iraqi, etc.).<sup>4</sup> Stuttgart's Muslim community includes first, second, third, or fourth generation migrants, many of whom hold German passports. Some have intermarried with Germans or others. There are also small but growing numbers of ethnic German converts to Islam. Muslim Stuttgart is marked by a vast spectrum of religiosities and lifestyles. From the most secular cultural Muslims who never set foot in a mosque, never pray or fast, drink alcohol, and see being Muslim as a cultural issue, to those who follow every letter of the law and spend much of their time in mosques, there are many ways of being Muslim in the city.

Since the late 1960s, groups of Muslims have organized associations in Stuttgart, first only to secure prayer facilities, but, starting from the mid-1970s, also to organize more permanent mosque communities and similar organizations.<sup>5</sup> Initially, Turkish, Moroccan, Tunisian, and other migrants saw their stay in Germany as temporary and settled for modest sites for their prayer spaces.<sup>6</sup> Here the term *Hinterhofmoschee* (backyard mosque) originated, which for many years aptly described the social and political situation of Muslims: invisible or tucked away in unsightly locations.<sup>7</sup> In those early years, women played almost no

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Gilles Kepel, *Les banlieues de l'Islam* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1987); Trica Keaton, *Muslim Girls and the Other France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Pnina Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Baden-Württemberg, Staatsministerium, *Muslimen in Baden-Württemberg* (Bericht für den Ministerrat, 2005), 10. In 2004, about 3.2 million Muslims resided in Germany. They account for 4% of the population. See Ludwig Ammann, *Cola und Koran* (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Petra Kuppinger, "Mosques in Stuttgart: Struggling for Space," *ISIM Review* 21 (2008): 48–49; "Factories, Office Suites, Defunct and Marginal Spaces: Mosques in Stuttgart, Germany," in *Reshaping the City: How Global Mobility Transforms Architecture and Urban Form*, ed. Michael Guggenheim and Ola Söderström (New York: Routledge, 2010), 83–99.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schmitt, *Moscheen in Deutschland* (Flensburg: Deutsche Akademie für Landeskunde 2003), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Mandel, "A Place of Their Own: Contesting Spaces and Defining Places in Berlin's Migrant Community," in *Making Muslim Space*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 147–66.

role in these associations, as most early male migrants had left their wives behind in hopes of their speedy return.

With the arrival of many migrants' families in the 1970s, prayer rooms transformed into small mosques that started to offer Islamic instruction for children. Lessons for women followed. By the 1990s many families had permanently settled in Germany, and some had taken German citizenship, articulating new German-Turkish-Muslim (or other) identities. At the same time a cultural and intellectual (pious) Muslim elite emerged, and Muslims and their communities became more visible.<sup>8</sup> Younger individuals with university education or sophisticated professional training started to ask for their legitimate rights and representation in society. Individuals who were economically successful helped communities to move out of rental backyard arrangements and acquire more appropriate facilities and expand their programs and offerings. For religious Muslims interested in participating in a mosque community, the mosque often became an important social space.<sup>9</sup> Women in many communities were increasingly drawn into mosques and their activities.<sup>10</sup> A small but growing number of men and women entered the urban public sphere, where they participated, lectured, and debated as pious Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Muslim Public Sphere*

The early prayer rooms had been spaces that had looked toward their home countries. In contrast, the mosques of the 1990s turned increasingly into spaces that helped Muslims to live their lives in Germany and helped them to define spaces, positions, and identities in local society.<sup>12</sup> Mosque communities and programs increasingly positioned

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<sup>8</sup> Nilüfer Göle and Ludwig Ammann, eds., *Islam in Sicht* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004); Gerdien Jonker and Valerie Amiraux, eds., *Politics of Visibility* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006); Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> For detailed descriptions of larger Muslim associations, their history and complexity, see for example Jonker, *Eine Wellenlänge zu Gott*, and Schiffauer, *Parallelgesellschaften*.

<sup>10</sup> Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006): 617.

<sup>11</sup> Jonker and Amiraux, *Politics of Visibility*.

<sup>12</sup> Ceylan, *Ethnische Kolonien*, 140; Werner Schiffauer, *Parallelgesellschaften* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 51.



themselves with regard to local urban contexts.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, women came to play larger roles in mosques. Not only were numerous women's Qur'an study and discussion circles founded, women increasingly demanded a say in interpretive exercises and carefully voiced challenges to what they perceived as socially patriarchal interpretations of religious texts.<sup>14</sup> Some women started independent discussion circles in homes or public spaces (e.g. secular community centers).

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, Stuttgart was home to about twenty-five formal mosque associations and a growing number of formal and informal smaller groups related to Muslim concerns (e.g. a Muslim Women's Swimming Club). Much of this scene is dominated by men. A look inside mosque communities or other relevant but less visible groups, however, shows that there are many women who are equally active but often less visible in the local Muslim public sphere.<sup>15</sup> Indeed it is often the women who make sure that the Muslim public sphere remains involved in debates with the larger public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

The Muslim public sphere, in my usage, is one of many vaguely circumscribed yet connected 'sub-spheres' of the public sphere. These 'sub-spheres' constitute themselves in relation and constant exchange with other such spheres whose sum total is 'the' public sphere.<sup>17</sup> Important for the emergence and maintenance of the local Muslim public sphere are different smaller or larger platforms and debates. For their diverse Muslim constituencies, these platforms accommodate discussions of religious issues and serve social, cultural, and other communal purposes. Questions of appropriate everyday religious practices, diasporic lifestyles, and Muslim identities are central concerns of many pious individuals and communities. Questions about roles and rights of women often figure prominently in such debates, especially as women become more outspoken participants (see Spielhaus, Chapter 3.4, this volume). Their contributions are complex and intricately

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<sup>13</sup> Jonker and Amiraux, *Politics of Visibility*; Tariq Ramadan, *Die Muslime im Westen* (Berlin: Green Palace, 2003), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority."

<sup>15</sup> Nilüfer Göle, "Die sichtbare Präsenz des Islam und die Grenzen der Öffentlichkeit," in *Islam in Sicht*, ed. Nilüfer Göle and Ludwig Ammann (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Bullock, ed., *2005 Muslim Women Activists in North America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Sigrid Nökel, *Die Töchter der Gastarbeiter und der Islam* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Philip Lewis, "From Seclusion to Inclusion: British 'Ulama and the Politics of Social Visibility," in Jonker and Amiraux, *Politics of Visibility*, 169–90.

combine religious and social elements. Women contribute and debate in existing spaces (e.g. mosques) and create new spaces and platforms (informal and/or independent groups). As I will show below, the Muslim public sphere is an important source of respect and recognition for individuals as they transcend the boundaries of particular mosques or smaller groups.

### *Context*

Based on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2006 to 2009 among pious Muslim individuals and communities in Stuttgart, this paper examines the increasingly complex roles of female leaders and mediators in Stuttgart's Muslim public sphere and beyond. To illustrate the scope of Muslim women's leadership in Stuttgart, I will introduce specific women and their leadership activities. First I introduce Bayan, who almost single-handedly runs and organizes considerable parts of one of Stuttgart's larger mosque's women and children programs. My second example is Sinem, a young woman who, together with a friend, organizes a discussion circle for young Muslim women that meets in a public cultural center. Finally I will briefly return to Rahma, whom I mentioned in the introduction.

### *Informal Leadership*

In fall 2006, I joined a women's German-language Qur'an study group in the al-Nour Mosque in Stuttgart. Members and visitors of this mosque are mostly Arabs (Egyptians, Palestinians, etc.) or individuals of Arab descent. However, more than any other mosque in Stuttgart, this mosque is also frequented by individuals of other ethnicities or nationalities, including Afghans, Albanians, Somalis, Turks, and German and other converts (e.g. Greek, Russian, and Italian). For some converts the mosque constitutes a point of entry into Islamic religiosities, lifestyles, and social networks. Because of the diversity of its visitors and the smaller Arab community in the city (versus the Turkish one), the al-Nour Mosque increasingly runs some of its groups and programs in German (see Rahma's group). The fact that the *imam* spoke little German posed a problem for some groups. The German-language Qur'an study group solved the problem by having Bayan translate for the *imam*. This made the group sessions a little tedious,

but this was the only way for the *imam* to communicate with those who speak little or no Arabic.

Bayan is in her late thirties and has been living in Stuttgart half her life. Originally from Syria, she is married with four children. Bayan is one of the, if not the, most active female members of the community. On and off Bayan has been overseeing considerable aspects of the weekend Arabic and Islamic studies programs for children, and she is involved in two women's groups. Larger mosques run by the Turkish Islamic Association of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği, DİTİB) increasingly employ female religious scholars (*hocas*) for such tasks. Most other mosques, however, are hard-pressed to pay for the *imam*, and female religious scholars are beyond their financial means. Despite the considerable time that Bayan invests in mosque activities, her work remains informal and unpaid. As the central figure of several mosque programs, Bayan—who has no formal theological training, but over the years has acquired a solid theological knowledge—has become an informal female leader in the community. While not a member of the mosque's all-male board of directors, Bayan is the (informal) contact person for many women's and children's issues for the board. Communication between Bayan and the board is informal and somewhat unpredictable. Bayan spends long hours in the mosque, organizing and being available for others to talk to. Apart from everyday work—including such mundane tasks as setting the cleaning schedule for the mosque—Bayan is centrally involved in organizing and running special events like, for example, a celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mūlid an-nabi*). She often also serves as the translator for women in larger events or lectures. Bayan's immense engagement in the mosque is obvious and recognized by most (female) members of the mosque and indirectly by the board of directors and the mosque's male constituency. If organizational questions emerge among the women, individuals frequently refer to Bayan as the person to talk to. While these aspects of her engagement are paramount, I will in the following focus on her task of translating for the Qur'an study group.

In November 2007, the group was discussing the topic of marriage in Islam. After finishing more general aspects of marriage, the *imam* was expected to explain the concept of 'travel marriage' (*nikāḥ misyār*). He first described the travel marriage, its legal, social, and cultural contexts. It was legally recognized by Sunnī Islam if both spouses were in agreement about the marriage, and the wife renounced her right to live

in the house of the husband and be supported by him. The husband would only come for visits. As the *imam* explained details in Arabic and Bayan translated in installments, questions quickly emerged among the women. Was this marriage practiced as a second marriage? Yes it was, he noted, often it was a marriage contracted by somebody who frequently traveled to a particular place and took a second wife there. What about children, who would support them? The father would, the *imam* responded. With the translation time lag and brief joking by the women who foresaw possible male abuse of such nuptial possibilities, the *imam's* answers overlapped with smaller discussions around the table. Such an animated chaos rarely occurred in this otherwise disciplined group. Bayan did her best to keep the debates connected, not only in the actual flow of arguments and questions, but also to convey the misgivings and sentiments that the women had. At moments there were two debates, one in German around the table and a second in Arabic between the *imam* and Bayan, as she explained the women's sentiments to him.

Group members were uncomfortable with the possibilities of secrecy and abuse that they foresaw for this type of marriage. Their discomfort was not with the legal context, but real life male behavior. The women turned to forms of possible abuse of such marriage contracts. Did a husband have to inform his first wife? What about the inheritance of the children if nobody at the main residence of the husband knew about them? Questions poured out. At no point did the women voice a disapproval of the rule. They accepted it as divine law. Their concerns were with the possible abuse by less than perfect men. This group of about a dozen (married) women, most of them around forty years old, had some doubts about men—any men, Muslim or not—however well-intentioned they might be, not abusing such a possibility. The discussion proceeded based on the taken-for-granted assumption (from the perspective of the women) that men were often weak, frequently acted for their own advantage, particularly with regard to marriage and women. Nobody doubted the proper intention of the law, but they doubted men's intentions and honesty. This argumentation did not sit too well with the *imam* who preferred to lecture about abstract legal issues and stay away from messy real-life circumstances and the actions of faulty individuals. Bayan tried to convey the core of the women's misgivings: concern about male behavior. The women were trying to move the *imam* from abstract theological territory to everyday realities: but he stubbornly remained in the safe territories

of theological wisdom and neither ventured into real-life issues nor engaged in controversial debates with the women.<sup>18</sup>

Bayan was caught in the middle. Her task transcended mere translation, as she mediated between very different sentiments and approaches to the topic. The women argued from the position of committed believers, but they spoke with a keen eye on real-life circumstances. They wanted to pull the debate to this level and ultimately expected a disclaimer that ‘real-life’ Muslim men might abuse the law and be less than perfect. Bayan understood the women’s concerns and kept translating them. The *imam* neither wanted to address these concerns nor provide the women with the disclaimer they wanted. He never left his abstract theological discourse. Instead he became increasingly uncomfortable and rushed the debate along. Yet the women did not give up easily.

The women wanted a statement about the ills of social patriarchy, and recognition that some men were prone to weakness and abuse of laws. But the *imam* did not even concede that social patriarchy existed, nor that it could interfere with pious practices. Neither was he willing to admit that some Muslim men might abuse the law, or worse still lie outright about their circumstances. Questions became trickier and aimed to produce a statement by the *imam* that some men might not abide by divine law. In this back and forth, Susanne, who—with her considerable theological knowledge—often played the role of the mediator and clarifier, noted:

The question ultimately then is between Allah and the individual. If a man marries more women than he is supposed to, or does not tell one wife about the other, this is a question of his honesty and sincerity.

Bayan translated this to the *imam* who agreed, but continued his line of argument.

Where the women saw a line between religious law and appropriate mundane behavior on the one side, and individual male misbehavior on the other, the *imam* did not want to see this line. For the women, Islamic law and mundane social patriarchy were two distinct issues. The fact that social patriarchy existed did not discredit Islamic

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that Yusuf al-Qaradawi (who prominently features on the *imam*’s bookshelf) noted that *nikah misyar*, while legally valid, might not be the most socially acceptable or advisable practice. See [www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=Islamonline-English-Ask\\_Scholar](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=Islamonline-English-Ask_Scholar) (accessed January 14, 2010).

law for them; on the contrary, this was an issue to be addressed for the sake of proper Islamic practices. To construct Islamic lifestyles, social practices needed to be identified and, if found to be un-Islamic, eliminated. The target of the women's criticism was neither the *imam*, nor the teachings of the Qur'ān, but mundane male practices. The fact that some men disregarded divine law did not reflect a weakness in religious law, but a male weakness. For the *imam* the two—law and taken-for-granted ideal male behavior—were inseparable. For him, there could be no gap between theological moral standards and everyday practices. The women disagreed. Bayan with her theological knowledge and understanding of the women's concerns tried hard to connect the two sides in this debate. While on this particular occasion the two ultimately remained distant, on most other occasions Bayan successfully mediated between the *imam* and the group.

The point here is not simply smooth translation and mediation,<sup>19</sup> but an understanding of the juxtaposition of different opinions and lifeworlds. Earlier in 2007, having so overstretched herself in the mosque, Bayan had decided to drop this group and had found a younger woman, Somaya, who spoke perfect German, to take over. For a few sessions Bayan tried to ease Somaya into the job. Soon it became apparent that perfect command of both languages was not enough. In order to successfully translate for the *imam*, the translator needed a good grasp of theological concepts and their German translations, and would ideally know the group members and their lifeworlds. Bayan had it all, and she had the full trust of both sides. To everybody's relief, Bayan understood these demands and never left the group.

The unusually lively discussion of this session, while unique in this group, represents dynamic debates among, in particular, younger and female Muslims, who are not willing to accept teachings without making sure they are truly based in the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*.<sup>20</sup> Piety, to these individuals, does not mean accepting traditions and

<sup>19</sup> Translation—written and oral—and translators still play important roles in the context of European Islam, though. See Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," *ISIM Review* 14 (2004): 28.

<sup>20</sup> Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'islam des jeunes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 137; Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France." See also Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, this volume.

time-honored practices, but implies a learning process where ideas and practices are analyzed with regard to their Qur'anic roots and justifications.<sup>21</sup> For women, in particular, this includes separating Islamic practices from cultural traditions or patriarchal practices.<sup>22</sup> The exchange with the *imam* was part of ongoing critical debates among the women that normally unfolded in the absence of the *imam*.<sup>23</sup> Bayan's role in this discussion and other activities is not only linguistic translation, but also social, cultural, and theological translation and mediation. She was aware of the two different positions and tried her best to make each side understand the other without offending either one. The passion, the complexity of the positions, and the different lifeworlds of the women and the *imam* made it impossible for her to close this discussion in a satisfactory manner for either side. The women demanded a more pragmatic interpretation or response than the *imam* was willing to give.<sup>24</sup> While less controversial, even ordinary meetings involve complicated debates between the women, Bayan, and the *imam* as to the proper use and translation of theological terms, an important aspect in the localization of Islam and Muslim thought.

Bayan's work is hard to analyze as it unfolds in very different settings and contexts. She informally mediates between female community members and the mosque's board of directors. She plays a central role in the running of Islamic instruction for children and serves as the *imam*'s translator in the Qur'an study group and other larger meeting and events. Here, her work transcends the task of linguistic

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<sup>21</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Jeanette Jouili, "Re-Fashioning the Self Through Religious Knowledge: How Muslim Women Become Pious in the German Diaspora," in *Islam and Muslims in Germany*, ed. Ala al-Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 465–88; Katherine Bullock, "Activism as a Way of Life," in *Muslim Women Activists in North America*, ed. Katherine Bullock (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 55–72.

<sup>22</sup> Nimat Hafez Barazangi, "Silent Revolution of a Muslim Arab American Scholar-Activist," in *Muslim Women Activists in North America*, ed. Katherine Bullock (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 1–17; Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Hülya Kandemir, *Himmelstochter* (München und Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> This discussion sparked later exchanges among some women, but no further discussion in the group.

<sup>24</sup> On the value placed on pragmatism especially in assessing the relative quality of (male) preachers, see Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," and Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, this volume.

translation, in that she mediates between the lifeworlds of group members and the—at times very abstract—theological universe of the *imam*. Linguistic competence, theological knowledge, and social grace are central ingredients of her success in this role.

In the years that I attended this group, it was for a number of converts a first context for learning more about Islam and easing into a new lifestyle and social universe. Arriving in the group with no understanding of even the most basic tenets of Islam, these women often had very basic questions rooted in their lifeworlds and previous religious experiences. The challenge is not just to provide these women with abstract knowledge but to ease their way into the complexity of an entirely new religiosity. In this context, it is important to address women's questions in basic and simple terms, without the use of complex theological concepts. Bayan understands just how to mediate between these women and the *imam*. In addition to her formal translation and mediation work, Bayan, by way of her personal warmth and social grace, makes newcomers feel welcome and tries to integrate them into the group. While Bayan has neither an official position, nor formal theological training, she is nonetheless considered by many women a social and, in some minor aspects, a theological authority. She is consulted regarding organizational issues as much as she is sought out by some women for religious questions. While she clearly defers to the theological authority of the *imam*, she is tirelessly available to answer all sorts of questions and issues.

Summarizing, Bayan plays a central role in the mosque even though she does not have much of a formal role (other than in the children's instruction program). Over the years, Bayan has carved out a unique space for herself. She is an informal leader and most importantly a mediator who has greatly contributed to the vibrant nature of the mosque's women's, children's, and family programs. Without a position of religious leadership, Bayan plays an important role in shaping aspects of the community and communal life. By mediating between female community members, recent arrivals, new converts, their diverse lifeworlds, and the abstract—and, at times, socially disconnected—theological universe of the *imam*, Bayan greatly contributes to the smooth functioning of the community, the negotiation of local Muslim identities and lifeworlds, and the Muslim public sphere.



*New Spaces*

I met Sinem at an event in a mosque. After she had asked me about my project, we quickly started to talk, as she herself was studying social sciences at the university. We met informally several times. At one meeting she casually mentioned that she had founded a discussion circle, the Güneş Club for young Muslimahs, that met in a public cultural center (*Bürgerhaus*). Months later we took up that topic again. We arranged a more formal interview and later I also briefly visited a group meeting of the Güneş Club.

Sinem explained that some time ago she had the idea of a young women's debate circle. Sinem, by way of a neighbor, knew about a more established women's discussion club, the Hatice Club that, as a legally registered association, had access to public facilities for its meetings. The Hatice Club had started as an informal group of married middle-aged (largely Turkish) women who had a shared interest in discussing religious issues. Initially they met in private homes. Eventually the women founded a registered association and moved their meetings to a public cultural center. In 2005, Sinem attended a Hatice Club meeting to announce her planned new young women's group in hopes that the women might spread the word or invite their own daughters. Nobody came to the announced preliminary meeting. Sinem gave up. Two years later a friend of hers became interested in Sinem's idea and they decided to try again to recruit others to join them:

We addressed young, unmarried women between twenty and thirty years old.... The women of the Hatice Club were nice enough to make us into their youth chapter, that way we got to use a room in the same community center.

When I asked Sinem why they were so set on this facility and whether they had ever considered a mosque as a meeting place, she made it clear that a mosque had not been an option. The young women felt that such facilities would be limiting and possibly too closely supervised. Sinem emphasized that they had no intention of doing anything beyond the confines of Islamic piety, but "on occasion, we might want to listen to more popular music, and that would not be appropriate in a mosque." Sinem's idea was to provide young pious women and those with only a vague interest in religion with a space to discuss religious and other concerns and have fun with other like-minded women. Islamic piety

provides the framework of the group, but its concrete contents, topics, and activities were up for negotiations among the group members. At the proposed founding meeting in 2007, six young women showed up. The group arranged for weekly meeting hours at the cultural center. With late evening meeting hours, the group accommodates its working members and positions the group in a young adult sphere.

In their first year, the group discussed several themes each for about a month at a time, including women and Islam, creation in Islam, and the Prophet Muḥammad. They attended other events like the 'Islam Week' at Stuttgart University (an annual lecture series), they visited a similar young women's group at a mosque, and they went to see a pantomime performance at a theater. Sometimes they go to cafés after meetings, just to relax and chat. In the early summer of 2008, less than a year after the group's start, they participated in a neighborhood summer festival and had a stall at a flea market there. Sinem noted that running the stall had helped the group get closer (*hat uns zusammengescheisst*), especially since the group continued to work together after it started raining. Sinem proudly reported that the group donated over €200 from the proceeds of the flea market for earthquake victims in China.

Meanwhile, a second young woman, Sabihe, had joined Sinem as a core organizer of the group. "She is a good friend of mine, and that really helps." In the summer of 2008, the group had about fifteen members of whom eight to ten regularly attended the meetings. The majority was of Turkish descent, but there was also an Iranian and a Pakistani woman. The club tries to be open to all young Muslimahs regardless of ethnic background, education, jobs, and religiosity. Some young women were happy to find a forum like the Güneş Club that spoke to the needs of young Muslimahs but did not have the ties and supervision of a mosque. Sinem noted that some members do not go to mosques as they do not find them interesting, or because they find no suitable space for themselves within mosque communities. The group created an interesting liminal space between mosque communities and society at large where a fairly heterogeneous group ("some of our members even drink alcohol occasionally") of young Muslimahs independently discusses relevant topics.

Sinem invited me to attend the group's summer party at the cultural center. When I arrived, only Sinem, Sabihe, and Tukan were present. They were preparing sweets, tea, and coffee for the party. Looking at Sinem and Sabihe, the mediating nature of the group and its appeal to

different Muslimahs immediately became apparent. Sinem wore very fashionable modest Islamic clothes and headscarf, and Sabihe wore a short-sleeve T-shirt and her long curly hair held back in a pony tail. Both Sinem and Sabihe are lively, talkative, and easily interact with different people in different settings. Between them, they are able to relate to women who have little interest in mosques, but also to parents who might fear the relative openness of the group.

As much as Sinem loves the group and its members, she has a few complaints about the latter. "Some are not very punctual, but if we want to have a good discussion it does not work for some people to show up forty minutes late. We try to tell them that." As we stood waiting for the party guests at the cultural center, Sabihe added "we need to educate our members a little more about these things." Sinem said that she had just called one of the women who said she had to study some more before she could come. "Can she not come on time, better organize her time, or go home and study some more later?" Sinem asked. In the long run, Sinem expects more help and commitment, and a little more punctuality from the group.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, Sinem, Sabihe, and Tukan were upbeat about their party and confident that their friends would show up. "This is how they are and we live with it," Sabihe noted. When I asked Sinem what the group meant to her personally she said that organizing the group, preparing topics, and leading discussion has helped her a lot. "It has certainly made me more confident to speak at the university."

Sinem, as the main organizer, made the decision not to meet in a mosque even though mosque leaders had offered a space because she felt they would be freer to debate and meet in a 'neutral' space. The group's aim is to examine issues of interest to young women without male or professional help, and to search for answers for their questions in the Qur'an and other relevant religious texts. None of the young women has any theological training beyond the training that some received from lessons in their local mosques when they were younger.

By moving beyond the more male-dominated and hierarchically structured contexts of mosque communities, Sinem, Sabihe, and other group members have created a space for themselves that closely reflects their needs and questions. While the group's central focus is on issues

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<sup>25</sup> Bullock, "Activism as a Way of Life."

of religiosity, it also addresses questions of what it means in concrete terms to be a Muslimah in Germany. As a group, the young women take concrete steps to define engagements and borderlines. They act and interact in the public sphere (cafés, cultural events, flea market) and thus position themselves as Muslimahs beyond the confines of mosques and communities.<sup>26</sup> How to be a 'good' Muslimah and a young woman in a European city are important issues for the group.

Unlike the women's Qur'ân study group in the al-Nour Mosque, where the *imam* largely decides topics (occasionally the women ask for specific topics and information) and modes of engagements (mostly lectures, some question and answer sessions, but few discussions), the Güneş Club meetings aim at participation and discussion. In this context the role of Sinem is not only one of leadership and organization but also one of partnership and participation. Sinem does not see herself as a religious authority in any manner but as a friend and partner to all members of the group in their quest for a better understanding of Islam, and its real-life implication for young women in Germany. She commands a certain vague social authority in that she organizes the group and occasionally reminds members of their duties or to be punctual. But this authority is not a central focus of her work, which she largely sees as a shared venture. Instead of working with a hierarchical model of leadership, the Güneş Club is based on an understanding of cooperation and support, where Sinem and Sabihe function more as organizers, mediators, and facilitators of a shared experience of religiosity and everyday cultures.<sup>27</sup> The club thus provides a space for young women to experiment with ideas and practices (rooted in a larger Islamic discourse) that ultimately remain open-ended. 'Leadership' here does not mean to guide others toward a set goal but instead implies a communal search for new ways and practices within a broadly defined context of Muslim religiosities.

Beyond debating issues of piety and religious knowledge, members of the Güneş Club also treat the difficult territory of social and cultural experimentation. Not all Muslim parents would approve of their daughter frequenting mainstream cafés or cultural performances. For Sinem and her friends to do this within the context of a religiously

<sup>26</sup> Nökel, *Die Töchter der Gastarbeit und der Islam*.

<sup>27</sup> Qudsia Mirza "Islamic Feminism and Gender Equality," *ISIM Review* 21(2008): 30–31.

defined group shows that they actively search for workable compromises and guidelines for what it means to be a young pious Muslimah in Europe. Like Bayan, Sinem's central contribution is not the construction of profound religious knowledge, but the important and complicated work of constructing viable female Muslim identities and everyday practices that are thoroughly rooted in a larger Islamic universe, but equally at home in aspects of Stuttgart's urban and youth culture.<sup>28</sup>

### *Young Spaces*

Like the Güneş Club, the Saturday morning group (see introduction) deals centrally with what it means to be a young Muslimah in Europe, only the girls are much younger. For the *imam* to hand the group over to a younger woman indicates his willingness to run the group not only as religious instruction but also as a social platform. The girls obviously feel more at ease with Rahma, with whom they can freely talk because she speaks German and is closer to their own lifeworlds. Partly because of the age of the girls, the group includes more elements of straightforward teaching where the *imam*, or at times Rahma, lectures on theological topics.

Yet there are other spaces of debate and experimentation that resemble those of the older women's Qur'ān study group or the Güneş Club. The girls are sometimes passionate about topics and opinions (e.g. whether it is advantageous for a girl to wear a headscarf or whether she might ruin career prospects that way) and willing to debate these questions formally or informally in the group. Much like the Güneş Club, the group undertakes activities beyond theological studies and also beyond the physical constraints of the mosque. At one point the group planned to visit Rahma in her university dormitory. Such a trip provides a unique opportunity for the younger (school) girls to anticipate their own possible university studies and other career paths as pious Muslimahs. With this diversity of topics and activities, the group prepares the girls to possibly take up other roles and contribute in debates in the mosque and beyond.

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<sup>28</sup> For similar discussions regarding male teenagers and young adults, see Tietze, *Islamische Identitäten*.

By virtue of the age difference, Rahma's position as a university student, and the trust invested by the younger girls' parents in her, Rahma has a position of authority in the group that differs from that of Bayan and Sinem. Because the girls like and respect her so much, they turn to her for advice. But Rahma ultimately defers to the *imam* for more complicated theological questions. Socially, in contrast to Bayan and Sinem, Rahma has considerable authority, because—by being approved by the mosque and the *imam* to run this group—her lifestyle as an unmarried young woman living abroad alone is held up as a possibility for the girls. The visit to her dorm room is not just a fun trip, but also an illustration of what a young pious woman can do and achieve. Rahma thus sets an example for the members of her group.

*Platforms, Participation, Respect, and Recognition*

The respect that leaders and mediators enjoy is not necessarily only rooted in one context. As the (local) Muslim public sphere grows and consolidates, recognition of individuals is also based on the convergence of their performances in multiple locations and contexts. As I noted above, I first met Sinem at a lecture in a mosque, where on that occasion she translated for a German lecturer to an audience of Turkish women. This indicates that she has a trusted position within this community. Sinem also serves as a female representative of this mosque community to an informal municipal body. In addition to these activities, Sinem is also part of an inter-mosque (and regional) workgroup about domestic violence. With her multiple activities, and the relationships that come along with these, she has built a position of respect which helps her work with the Güneş Club.

Similarly, Susanne, whom I briefly mentioned in the context of the Qur'ân study group as a very knowledgeable and outspoken community member, crisscrosses the local Muslim and broader public sphere in different capacities. She participates in another non-mosque Qur'ân study circle, she is among the organizers of the 'Islam Week' at Stuttgart University (see above), and she has lectured in non-Muslim contexts on issues to do with Islam. Sinem and Susanne are only two examples of such activists; there are other many women who are participants, mediators, translators, and lecturers in different contexts and who draw their recognition (and reputation) from their different involvements and activities.

It is in this context that Stuttgart—as an urban platform that is large enough to accommodate numerous communities and activities, but still small enough for many central actors to know each other—plays an important role. By looking at the paths, activities, and connections of women like Bayan, Sinem, Rahma, and also Susanne, it becomes clear that their recognition does not necessarily stem from one mosque or group, but often is based on complex interactions of their different engagements, involvements, and activities.

### *Conclusion*

Looking at women leaders—or more precisely mediators, organizers, and translators—in mosques and beyond allows for a broader view of their engagements in pious and other activities in both the Muslim and larger public sphere. Such a perspective illustrates the increasingly central contribution of women in the construction of diasporic communities and their civic engagements. To look at leaders and activists beyond mosques illustrates the important roles that these women fulfill, maneuvering within a public sphere that is often hostile to their demands and concerns. To negotiate this sphere and its representative institutions requires considerable skills and expertise.

Bayan, Sinem, and Rahma are examples of leaders, mediators, organizers, authorities, and activists. Each one of them illustrates different platforms and modes of participation. Bayan and Rahma largely stay within the confines of a mosque and work to accommodate women's, children's, and female teenagers' needs. Yet they also create important connections to contexts and ideas beyond the mosque. Bayan helps to create and maintain spaces where Muslimahs can learn about and debate relevant issues of piety, and apply this information in their everyday lives. Beyond her practical work as an organizer, Bayan is engaged in a sophisticated process of mediating between individuals and groups, and the vast body of Islamic theological knowledge. She does not simply translate from Arabic to German or vice versa, but conveys questions and messages rooted in one universe into the other. In the process, Bayan helps to further articulate local Islamic discourses, identities, and lifeworlds. As such she has acquired some religious authority, but much more social authority in the community. Bayan's contribution is not a simple one-way communication where she mediates theological knowledge to those who do not know Arabic. Even though Bayan spends long hours and much of her energy in the

mosque, her contribution to the mosque, and by extension to society, remains invisible for many male mosque members and certainly for outsiders.

Sinem's activities point in yet another direction. While Bayan largely works among self-defined pious individuals, Sinem reaches beyond this group to address those who do not see themselves as very religious, but enjoy spending time with other Muslimahs. Sinem's quest is not to establish herself as an authority, but as a friend and partner in a shared project. The Güneş Club consciously situated itself beyond mosques and within the sphere of a public cultural center. The fear of being co-opted into a larger community with ethnic, political, and generational (and male) agendas, characterizes this group's decision to remain independent.

As in the discussion described above about Muslim marriages, women's efforts to keep their distance from established (male-dominated) communities are not rooted in theological disagreements, but instead in efforts to find their own ways to be pious. For Sinem and the Güneş Club, it is central to provide an alternative space for those young women who feel that their lifestyles (not wearing a headscarf, participating in local youth culture) could be points of criticism if they went to a mosque. Moreover, the group caters to young women who are too old for teenage programs but do not feel comfortable in groups that cater to married women.

Rahma's work points in yet another direction and illustrates an interesting division of labor. The *imam* provides much of the formal teaching in the group, yet the task to debate and explain more specific questions falls to Rahma. By spending more time with the girls in the mosque and sometimes beyond the mosque, Rahma is there to answer questions and to guide the girls in 'real-life' contexts beyond the mosque. Because she is older and more experienced, and because she is responsible for the group and its members, she has a certain religious and social authority invested in her by the community and the *imam*. Making decisions about what to do and where to go, Rahma and the girls construct their own experiences, and venture as young Muslimahs into other urban spatial and social contexts. But Rahma remains the one who provides the larger frame and social outlines for group projects and ventures.

The engagements of Bayan, Sinem, and Rahma illustrate a growing landscape of German and European Muslimahs who work to formulate identities and positions for themselves, and create spaces for



debates and other activities that cater to their needs. These spaces and activities often remain invisible to dominant societies which either do not care to see, or simply think of Muslimahs as oppressed, and their specific spaces as oppressive or forcefully segregated. Contrary to such prejudices, the work of Bayan, Sinem, Rahma, and others aims to create diverse spaces and debates that engage often contradictory elements in women's lifeworlds. Most importantly, they create spaces where women can be pious Muslimahs and active participants in urban culture and society.

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CHAPTER 2.8

REMEMBERING FĀṬIMAH: NEW MEANS OF LEGITIMIZING  
FEMALE AUTHORITY IN CONTEMPORARY SHĪ'Ī DISCOURSE

Matthew Pierce

“The past is never dead. It isn't even past.”

William Faulkner

Ruth Roded, in her fascinating survey entitled *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, briefly mentions the life of Fāṭimah, the daughter of the Prophet.<sup>1</sup> After explaining that Fāṭimah's “marginal and even passive role in the events of early Islam support[s] the thesis that originally the Prophet's daughter was not of much consequence,” Roded finishes with her own gloss that “it is difficult to escape the notion that Fatima is little more than a holy womb.”<sup>2</sup> In stark contrast, however, Massoumeh Ebtekar and Monir Gorgi wrote in 1997 that Fāṭimah, the daughter of the Prophet, had fulfilled a “role in the highest level of decision making in the society of her time,” a position which was “independent from that of her husband [‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib].”<sup>3</sup> The latter understanding of Fāṭimah represents a current trend among Shī'ī women and men to present the authoritative model of Fāṭimah as evidence of the right of women to assume positions of religious and political authority. It is an interpretation which is in tension with classical—Sunnī and Shī'ī—narratives of Fāṭimah, yet is born out of the same sources in interesting ways and with powerful results.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Boston University and the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations for helping fund my participation in the conference that formed the basis of this volume. I would also like to thank those who assisted me in the conceptualizing and writing of this essay, particularly Kecia Ali, Houchang Chehabi, Jennifer Knust, and Laurie Blanton Pierce. Obviously, I am responsible for all remaining shortcomings.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to “Who's Who”* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar and Monir Gorgi, “The Life and Status of Fāṭimah Zahrā': A Woman's Image of Excellence,” *Farzaneh: Journal of Women's Studies and Research in Iran and Muslim Countries* 3, no. 8 (1997), <http://www.farzanehjournal.com/archive/archive8.htm>.

In recent decades, some Muslim scholars have explored how a re-evaluation of classical historical narratives may interrupt certain dominant gender assumptions and give rise to greater gender justice within Islam. Mining the historical record to unearth a more usable past is nothing new: from the modernist reform movements to contemporary Islamic puritanism,<sup>4</sup> the reinterpretation of early Islamic history has become so commonplace in the last century that it hardly deserves another commentary. In some ways, however, it has become such a familiar phenomenon that its significance can be overlooked, with the result that transformative shifts in contemporary Muslim discourse may be underappreciated.

In keeping with this trend, some contemporary Muslims have revisited the stories of historical figures in search of powerful new symbols (or to reinvest “new meanings into old symbols”)<sup>5</sup> that support alternative visions of gender roles and claims to female religious authority. The stories of prominent women in Islamic history have been retold in order to inspire and justify the acceptance of wider spheres of female authority. Fatima Mernissi, for example, has eloquently explored the communal memory of ‘Ā’ishah bint Abī Bakr to that end.<sup>6</sup> Denise Spellberg has discussed the strengths and limitations of ‘Ā’ishah’s legacy, noting the ways in which the legacies of ‘Ā’ishah and Fāṭimah have often been seen as representative of two different conceptions of women’s proper roles in a Muslim society.<sup>7</sup>

This paper draws attention to an important shift in contemporary Shī‘ī discussions about Fāṭimah al-Zahrā’, the daughter of the Prophet. The recasting of the memory of Fāṭimah powerfully challenges the way the Muslim feminine subject has been conceived, and it is being effectively utilized by an array of male and female Shī‘ah to expand the public role of women. This resignification of Fāṭimah’s role in the Shī‘ī narrative retains some continuity with classical articulations, but it also departs from them in important ways. We must understand this discursive shift in order to make sense of the way in which some

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<sup>4</sup> For the use of ‘Islamic puritanism,’ see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006), 220. Wadud is here referring to the *hijāb*, but the principle is the same.

<sup>6</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ‘A’isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Muslim women present the story of Fāṭimah as supportive of their claim to religious leadership. The following examination of Fāṭimah's evolving legacy among contemporary Shī'ah provides us with a glimpse of how some women are constructing and defending their right to religious authority.

*Classical Framings: Fāṭimah's Image in Classical Sunnī  
and Shī'ī Literature*

A full appreciation of how some contemporary Shī'ah have reshaped Fāṭimah's legacy requires a familiarity with the way in which that legacy was constructed in classical scholarship. The historical Fāṭimah is elusive, and the events of her life are difficult to detail with any certainty.<sup>8</sup> This is surprising given her proximity to other key figures, male and female, about whom we know far more. Early sources do not elaborate on her life, and the *ṭabaqāt* literature all but ignores her. Fāṭimah rarely appears in the chains of transmission of Sunnī or Shī'ī *ḥadīth* literature. This contrasts sharply with the myriad appearances of other women like 'Ā'ishah and Umm Salāmah. The *ḥadīth* in which Fāṭimah does appear tend to focus on non-legal matters.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of this, Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' ("the shining one") retained an important role in the narratives of early Islam. Like 'Ā'ishah, Fāṭimah was assured of an enduring place in the narrative of Islam by her proximity to important men. 'Ā'ishah's position as daughter of Abū Bakr and wife of the Prophet Muḥammad assured her a prominent status, and Fāṭimah was afforded similar standing by virtue of being

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<sup>8</sup> The best attempts at a full overview of the historical Fāṭimah are given by Henri Lammens, *Fāṭima et les filles de Mahomet: Notes critiques pour l'étude de la sira* (Rome: Sumptibus Potificii Institutii Biblici, 1912); Louis Massignon, "La Mubāhala de Medina et l'hyperdulie," in *Opera Minora*, ed. Y. Moubarac, 1:550–72 (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963); and Denise Soufi, "The Image of Fāṭimah in Classical Muslim Thought" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1997). See also L. Veccia Vaglieri's entry on Fāṭima in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (EI2, s.v. "Fāṭima," vol. 2: 841–50), and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's article "Fāṭema, Daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad: i. In History and Shi'ite Hagiography," in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* vol. 9: 400–402. For research specifically on how the early and classical scholars remembered Fāṭimah, Soufi and Spellberg provide the most assistance. As this volume was being prepared for print, I was made aware of a recent work on Fāṭimah: Christopher Paul Clohessy, *Fatima, Daughter of Muhammad* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009). Unfortunately, I was not able to utilize Clohessy's research in the present study.

<sup>9</sup> Soufi, "Image," 69–74. A couple of exceptions to this can be made, however: see Wilfred Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 69–75.

Muḥammad's daughter and 'Alī's wife.<sup>10</sup> Not only was Fāṭimah's value in the classical literature rooted in her relationship to important males, but her legacy was also shaped largely by male scholarship. Spellberg notes that this was the case for 'Ā'ishah, despite the large number of *ḥadīth* she reports about herself. "The pen," says Spellberg, "in the creation of her legacy, is wielded in other hands."<sup>11</sup> The same is true for Fāṭimah.

Denise Soufi, in her skillful analysis of the portrayal of Fāṭimah in classical Islamic literature, divides Fāṭimah's life into two parts: before and after the death of Muḥammad.<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the second part is vastly shorter than the former, but the division is useful when pointing out where classical Sunnī and Shī'ī scholarship agrees and disagrees. Sunnī and Shī'ī sources generally agree, in spirit if not always in detail, on the first part of Fāṭimah's life; the two traditions diverge, however, in their depictions of the second part.<sup>13</sup> The following sections are intended to introduce the most well-known narrations found in the early and classical sources and the primary ways in which these stories coalesced into specific presentations of Fāṭimah. My goal is not to examine the authenticity or historicity of the accounts but rather to give an idea of the content circulated about Fāṭimah and how that content was received.

#### *Summary of Reports: Before the Prophet's Death*

Fāṭimah was the last of the four daughters of Muḥammad and Khadījah. Only two widely accepted narrations exist that pertain to her childhood in Mecca. The first records the grief Fāṭimah displayed upon her mother's death, which prompted Muḥammad to offer words of consolation from the angel Jibril. The second refers to an incident when an enemy of Muḥammad threw animal innards onto the Prophet as he was prostrated in prayer. In this story, Fāṭimah quickly removed the refuse and cursed the perpetrators.<sup>14</sup>

Each of these stories illustrates dominant themes in Fāṭimah's life. The first theme, one that Lammens emphasizes greatly in his work, is

<sup>10</sup> Spellberg, *Politics*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Spellberg, *Politics*, 11–13. See also Soufi, "Image," 199.

<sup>12</sup> Soufi, "Image," 32.

<sup>13</sup> Soufi, "Image," 149, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Soufi, "Image."

that Fāṭimah experienced severe grief and affliction.<sup>15</sup> This is seen in her mourning her mother's death and her experience with her father's persecution in Mecca. The second is the intimacy of Fāṭimah's relationship with Muḥammad.<sup>16</sup> This is seen in Muḥammad's desire to comfort Fāṭimah as well as Fāṭimah's readiness to come to Muḥammad's aid.<sup>17</sup>

After the *hijrah* to Medina, there was Fāṭimah's betrothal and marriage to 'Alī. Early accounts offer several details about this time of Fāṭimah's life,<sup>18</sup> but the narratives often lack connection and coherence. Later Sunnī and Shī'ī accounts generally attempt to weave a unified story from the varied accounts, and they usually agree that both Abū Bakr and 'Umar had asked (and been refused) Muḥammad's permission to marry Fāṭimah.<sup>19</sup> Muḥammad apparently chose 'Alī to marry Fāṭimah, though 'Alī was hesitant on account of his poverty and inability to provide a *mahr* (dower). The details vary, but some kind of an arrangement was made that involved the sale of a portion of 'Alī's goods in order to provide a modest, or possibly an utterly meager, *mahr*.<sup>20</sup> Whatever the amount, it is generally agreed that both the *mahr* and the *jahāz* (dowry) given to Fāṭimah were modest.<sup>21</sup> Fāṭimah's reported reaction when Muḥammad sought her approval of the marriage was silence, understood as a clear affirmation.<sup>22</sup> Her generally quiet and shy demeanor meant that she would only have spoken if she had disagreed. In some accounts, she is said to have initially complained to Muḥammad about the match, but after hearing Muḥammad extol 'Alī's virtues she agreed. At the wedding ceremony Fāṭimah is said to have tripped over her wedding dress, illustrating again her shyness.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lammens, "Fāṭima," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1st ed., vol. 3: 85, 86.

<sup>16</sup> For more examples of this bond, see Soufi, "Image," 67–68.

<sup>17</sup> Fāṭimah's *kunyah* (honorific), Umm Abihā, also emphasizes this special connection between Fāṭimah and her father.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, in Gertrude Stern's examination of early Islamic marriage practices, the details of Fāṭimah's marriage serves as a particularly helpful case study with details about her level of consent, her *mahr*, her *jahāz*, and even what she wore. See Gertrude Stern, *Marriage in Early Islam* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1939), 32, 33, 47–49, 55, 56, 87, *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. "Fāṭima," EI2, vol. 2: 842. See also Soufi, "Image," 34, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. "Fāṭima," EI2, vol. 2: 842, 843.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this, see Stern, *Marriage*, 47–49, 55–56; Soufi, "Image," 35, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Stern, *Marriage*, 32, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Soufi, "Image," 34–37.

Fāṭimah's early years as wife and mother were characterized by difficulty. We find two ready examples of this in the sources. The first relates to the financial hardship endured by the young couple. There are many stories in both Sunnī and Shī'ī sources that illustrate the poverty in which Fāṭimah and 'Alī lived.<sup>24</sup> Fāṭimah had no servants to help her with housework, and she cleaned, ground grain, and fetched water herself, which gave her blisters and chest pains.<sup>25</sup> Lammens extrapolates from these and similar narrations an unwaveringly bleak picture of her life.<sup>26</sup> However, as Vaglieri points out, it is unlikely that these financial hardships extended beyond the first few years of the marriage.<sup>27</sup>

The second example illustrating Fāṭimah's hardships during marriage comes from reports that describe friction between Fāṭimah and 'Alī, which is often ascribed to the latter's harsh treatment of his wife. These narrations are less prevalent in Shī'ī sources.<sup>28</sup> One story found in both Sunnī and Shī'ī sources relates that 'Alī planned at one point to take a second wife. It is agreed that Muḥammad forbade 'Alī from doing so, giving him a choice of divorcing Fāṭimah or refraining from taking extra wives.<sup>29</sup> It was in this context that most sources relate the famous statement by Muḥammad about Fāṭimah: "[she] is a part of me, and whoever offends her offends me," or "whoever angers her angers me also."<sup>30</sup> 'Alī remained monogamous throughout Fāṭimah's life.

Classical Sunnī and Shī'ī literature praising Fāṭimah's character focused upon her chastity, shyness, obedience to her father and husband, work ethic, and connection to the Prophet. The first part of her life, prior to the Prophet's death, exemplified these characteristics. She was said to have walked like the Prophet. She was lovingly comforted by him upon Khadijah's death.<sup>31</sup> She was the shy virgin bride who tripped over her dress, and she was the daughter who accepted her father's advice to marry 'Alī despite his poverty, illustrating her obedience and

<sup>24</sup> Soufi, "Image," 57–63.

<sup>25</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. "Fātima," EI2, vol. 2: 843.

<sup>26</sup> Lammens, "Fāṭima," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1st ed., vol. 3: 85, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. "Fātima," EI2, vol. 2: 843.

<sup>28</sup> Soufi, "Image," 55–57.

<sup>29</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. "Fātima," EI2, vol. 2: 843.

<sup>30</sup> Both quoted by Vaglieri (s.v. "Fātima," EI2, vol. 2: 843) from al-Balādhurī and al-Tirmidhī.

<sup>31</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. "Fātima," EI2, vol. 2: 842.



her pious trust in God.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, she was the hard-working wife who was able to take care of the domestic duties without a servant.<sup>33</sup> In an apt summary, Soufi says, “the classical image of Fāṭimah is a male construction of the ideal Muslim woman.”<sup>34</sup> Fāṭimah’s legacy served as a powerful model for exhorting women to live in such a way. On this matter, Sunnī and Shī'ī scholarship came to agree.

*Summary of Reports: After the Prophet’s Death*

Fāṭimah lived only six months after the death of the Prophet, but the immense importance of the events in which she was involved during this time justifies Soufi’s designation of this period as the second part of her life. Those events centered on two major issues: the succession to the Prophet and the Prophet’s inheritance. The accounts relating to this period are much more ‘partisan’ in nature than those related to the first part of her life.<sup>35</sup>

Fāṭimah’s role in the debate over succession is not entirely clear. Soufi observes that her presence and role in a given source is usually directly proportional to how much conflict is presented in that same source.<sup>36</sup> Thus literature that attempts to ignore certain conflicts speaks very little of Fāṭimah’s role. However, sources that detail the conflicts delineate a proportionately detailed role for Fāṭimah in that conflict. One instance that is particularly well attested relates that Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and some followers forcefully approached ‘Alī and Fāṭimah’s house, where a number of ‘Alī’s supporters had gathered, in order to gain ‘Alī’s homage to the newly elected caliph. As the intruders gained the upper hand over ‘Alī, Fāṭimah “raised such cries and threatened so boldly to uncover her hair that Abū Bakr preferred to withdraw.”<sup>37</sup> Al-Balādhuri’s account of the event portrays an ‘Umar intent on burning down the house over Fāṭimah.<sup>38</sup> It is worthy of note that ‘Alī did not pay homage to Abū Bakr until after Fāṭimah’s death. This fact

<sup>32</sup> Soufi, “Image,” 34–37.

<sup>33</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. “Fātima,” EI2, vol. 2: 843.

<sup>34</sup> Soufi, “Image,” 199.

<sup>35</sup> Soufi, “Image,” 149, 206.

<sup>36</sup> Soufi, “Image,” 84.

<sup>37</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. “Fātima,” EI2, vol. 2: 844. Vaglieri here draws on al-Ya‘qūbī. Also see Soufi, “Image,” 88, for a list of sources on the event.

<sup>38</sup> Vaglieri, s.v. “Fātima,” EI2, vol. 2: 844.

leads Soufi to speculate on the centrality of Fāṭimah's role in 'Alī's claim to the Caliphate.<sup>39</sup>

The other main issue of the second period of Fāṭimah's life, namely the Prophet's inheritance, is one in which Fāṭimah's role is universally considered to be central, despite the partisanship evident in Sunnī and Shī'ī sources. Following the death of Muḥammad, Fāṭimah requested that Abū Bakr hand over the Prophet's inheritance. Abū Bakr refused, saying the Prophet had told him, "no one inherits from us [prophets]."<sup>40</sup> The nature of the inheritance is not clear in the earliest sources, but the dispute is commonly believed to have centered upon Fadak, a valuable piece of land the Prophet had owned. Sunnī sources generally suggest the conflict was minimal, while Shī'ī sources tend to maximize the conflict. The latter even record Fāṭimah giving a public *khutbah* in the mosque of Medina defending her rights to her inheritance and denouncing Abū Bakr's claim to the caliphate. As Soufi points out, the fact that Sunnī sources did not completely deny Fāṭimah's anger with Abū Bakr over the issue suggests that some level of conflict did in fact occur.<sup>41</sup>

Making sense of the varied classical representations of Fāṭimah is not easy, for her image is portrayed in highly variant ways even within Sunnī and Shī'ī scholarship. Over time, portrayals and conceptions of Fāṭimah began to differ within the individual Sunnī *madhāhib* and different Shī'ī sects as well; thus one cannot accurately construct monolithic Sunnī or Shī'ī images on which to base comparisons. Vaglieri oversimplifies the matter by attempting to separate the Fāṭimah of history (using Sunnī sources) from the Fāṭimah of legend (using Shī'ī sources). Among other problems stemming from this treatment is the implication that no Fāṭimah of legend existed in the Sunnī tradition, which is demonstrably false.<sup>42</sup> Soufi offers a more helpful paradigm for looking at Fāṭimah's life and the pertinent scholarship where she examines Fāṭimah as 'Daughter, Wife, Mother,' in the time period prior to her father's death, and then as 'Activist and Martyr,' in the time period after. Classical literature tended to focus primarily on the

<sup>39</sup> Soufi, "Image," 87.

<sup>40</sup> Soufi, "Image," 95. Some sources go on to add that the Prophet had also told him that his possessions should be used for charity (95, 96).

<sup>41</sup> Soufi, "Image," 27, 106–11.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Spellberg's discussion of Fāṭimah in late medieval scholarship (*Politics*, 181–84).

former aspects of Fāṭimah's life. Recent Shī'ī presentations of Fāṭimah, however, have increasingly begun to draw upon the latter.

*The Discursive Shift: Contemporary Shī'ī Reinterpretations of Fāṭimah*

*‘Alī Shari‘atī*

For many Shī'ah, the most memorable portrayal of Fāṭimah that differs strikingly from that which they had inherited was articulated by ‘Alī Shari‘atī, the famous socialist revolutionary of Iran who died in 1977. His book *Fāṭimah Fāṭimah Ast* provides an extensive discussion of Fāṭimah and up to now has probably had the most widespread influence on the way Shī'ah view the topic.<sup>43</sup>

Shari‘atī's book developed out of a lecture he gave in 1971 at the Ḥusaynīyah Irshād, a popular religious center in Tehran. The lecture forms the first half of the book, wherein Shari‘atī discusses what he understood to be a crisis of identity experienced by contemporary Iranian Muslim women. The second half of the book was written after the conclusion of the lectures in order to elaborate on a suggestion he had given during them: that a model for modern Iranian Muslim women can be found in Fāṭimah. Shari‘atī believed that the Muslim women of his time were confused about their identity. He juxtaposes the ‘traditional’ mold, which these women had seen in their parents, with a ‘Western’ mold.<sup>44</sup> The former mold, Shari‘atī writes, was rooted in religious tradition but carries no appeal for young women. The latter mold is appealing but not authentic to Islam. He lays the blame for this perceived problem squarely on the shoulders of the religious scholars. The scholars, he claims, have failed to retell the story of Islam accurately and instead have imparted an uninspiring view of Fāṭimah as a weak, mourning housekeeper.<sup>45</sup>

According to Shari‘atī, modern women see only two choices: traditional or Western. After making it clear that neither option is suitable

<sup>43</sup> References will here be given to the 1981 English translation by Laleh Bakhtiar, published as *Fāṭimah is Fāṭimah*. While not an excellent translation, it is adequate and its use here will facilitate any referencing that may be desired by those without knowledge of Persian.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Alī Shari‘atī, *Fāṭimah is Fāṭimah*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Tehran: Shari‘ati Foundation, 1981), 23–105.

<sup>45</sup> Shari‘atī, *Fāṭimah*, 24, 25, 41.

for the modern Muslim woman, he proposes a third choice: the rediscovery of Fāṭimah. Shari'atī finishes his lecture with these words: “[modern women] neither want to remain as this [traditional] nor become that [Western]. They cannot surrender themselves to whatever was and is, without their own will and choice playing a role. They want a model. Who? Fatimah.”<sup>46</sup>

In the second half of the book, Shari'atī retells the story of Fāṭimah's life in a way he hopes will inspire an authentically Islamic modern woman. In his account of Fāṭimah's life, he devotes almost equal time to the periods before and after Muḥammad's death. Given that the latter period is only about six months long, it is obvious where the weight of his discussion lies. Shari'atī consistently emphasizes the self-assertive aspects of Fāṭimah's character, not only in the second period of her life, but also in the first. Noting her early struggles, Shari'atī uses them as illustrations of the challenges Fāṭimah overcame to become her true self. He writes:

Sorrow and loneliness are the water and earth of this girl who must grow under the light of revelation and bear the burdens of freedom and justice. She is the beginning of the ‘pure roots,’ where each branch... must, like Atlas, carry the heavy globe of the Earth upon their shoulders and ‘bear it.’<sup>47</sup>

Shari'atī also points out Fāṭimah's agency in determining her own future by turning down the marriage proposals of Abū Bakr and 'Umar.<sup>48</sup>

By the time his discussion reaches the last months of Fāṭimah's life, Shari'atī has developed a full head of steam in portraying an active, self-made woman. The ‘house of Fāṭimah’ becomes the center of political protest. In fact, Fāṭimah is presented as the backbone of 'Alī's claim to the caliphate, the courage that inspires him and upon which he is dependent. She does not rely on 'Alī to fight the battles at hand, but actively engages in the political protest herself. She is his protector. Fāṭimah stands up to Abū Bakr in demanding her inheritance rights. Her model serves as an ‘inspiration for freedom.’<sup>49</sup> In sum, Fāṭimah is presented as intelligent, and as socially and politically active:

<sup>46</sup> Shari'atī, *Fāṭimah*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Shari'atī, *Fāṭimah*, 159.

<sup>48</sup> Shari'atī, *Fāṭimah*, 154.

<sup>49</sup> Shari'atī, *Fāṭimah*, 180, 202–10, 224. He also makes a vague comment about Fāṭimah having long participated in *jihād*, but he does not explain what he means (196).

Fatimah knows all things well. She understands them. She is not someone who sits at home aware of nothing which is going on. Fatimah has learned how to walk through struggles. She knows how to cut through propaganda. Her youth had been spent in the heart of the movement's storm and her maturing years in the political fire of her times. She is a Moslem woman: a woman whose ethical purity does not prohibit her from social responsibility.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond Shari'ati's presentation of what Fāṭimah *did*, his emphasis is on who she *was*. The theme throughout *Fāṭimah Fāṭimah Ast* is the existential dilemma of self-realization. Fāṭimah's struggle was 'becoming Fatimah.'<sup>51</sup> Shari'ati speaks of the need for women to find their own self-worth. He writes, "And the value of Fatimah? What can I say? To whom does her value belong? To Khadijeh? To Mohammad? To 'Ali? To Hosein? To Zainab? To herself!"<sup>52</sup> He makes it clear that Fāṭimah's identity is not in relation to her kin. It is in being Fāṭimah. He even goes on to say: "She herself is an Imam, a guide, that is, an outstanding example of someone to follow, an ideal type of woman and one who bears witness to any woman who wishes to 'become herself' through her own voice."<sup>53</sup> Being true to oneself and finding one's own value independent of others is the thrust of the message. Fāṭimah's identity—and her value—is not contingent upon anyone else:

I wanted to begin in this manner with Fatimah. I got stuck. I wished to say, 'Fatimah is the daughter of the great Khadijeh.' I sensed it is not Fatimah. I wished to say, 'Fatimah is the daughter of Mohammad.' I sensed it is not Fatimah... the wife of 'Ali... the mother of Hasan and Hosein... I still sensed it is not Fatimah. No, these are all true and none of them are Fatimah. FATIMAH IS FATIMAH.<sup>54</sup>

The ways in which Shari'ati's work is groundbreaking are obvious. He arranges the existing narrative of Fāṭimah's life in a way that departs dramatically from—without necessarily contradicting—the classical image of Fāṭimah. He emphasizes Fāṭimah's agency in shaping her own identity and the fate of her community. Drawing especially from the

<sup>50</sup> Shari'ati, *Fāṭimah*, 201, 202.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Shari'ati, *Fāṭimah*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> Shari'ati, *Fāṭimah*, 165.

<sup>53</sup> Shari'ati, *Fāṭimah*, 225.

<sup>54</sup> Shari'ati, *Fāṭimah*, 226. Capitals in original.

second part of Fāṭimah's life, he stresses the important role she played in shaping the political protest around which Shī'ī identity revolves.<sup>55</sup>

### *Contemporary Iranian Religious Scholarship*

Shari'ati's influence on contemporary Shī'ī Islam, especially among religious progressives, has been immense. He was not the first scholar to offer a new interpretation of Fāṭimah's life, but his widespread popularity helped him alter the way Fāṭimah is remembered among scholars and lay persons alike. Since the publication of *Fāṭimah Fāṭimah Ast*, nearly every book on women written by Shī'ah has devoted space to discussing the significance of Fāṭimah's life. Even conservative scholars such as Ayatullah Āzari-Qummī seem to be in conversation with Shari'ati over how Fāṭimah is remembered. In *Simā-yi zan dar niẓām-i Islāmī*, Qummī concedes some of the expanded public roles ascribed to Fāṭimah, as well as the assumption that she is an authoritative role model. But Qummī challenges the direction of Shari'ati's reflections by re-emphasizing Fāṭimah's performance of traditional domestic roles.<sup>56</sup>

Scholars less conservative than Qummī, however, have been more inclined to explore the implications of what this new image of Fāṭimah might mean for our understanding of women in Islam. One of the most important works on women written by a religious scholar in Iran since the revolution is Javādi Āmūli's *Zan dar āyinah-ye jalāl va jamāl*.<sup>57</sup> Javādi Āmūli is an influential senior cleric in Iran, and the abovementioned book comprises a collection of lectures and seminars which he delivered on the subject of women, as well as some Qur'anic exegesis he conducted on the topic. Mir-Hosseini calls it one of the "core texts" for the neo-traditionalist approach to women's issues in Iran.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> For more on Shari'ati's influence on women's status in Iran, see Azar Tabari, "The Enigma of the Veiled Woman," *MERIP Reports* 103 (1982): 24; Adele Ferdows, "Women and the Islamic Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 2 (1983): 283–98; and Nahid Yaganeh and Azari Tabari, *In the Shadow of Islam* (London: Zed Press, 1982), 41–74.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmad Āzari-Qummī, *Simā-yi zan dar niẓām-i islāmī* (Qum: Dār al-'Ilm, 1372/1993).

<sup>57</sup> 'Abd Allāh Javādi Āmūli, *Zan dar āyinah-yi jalāl va jamāl* (Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Farhangī-yi Rajā, 1369/1990). On this work and its significance, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 83–85.

<sup>58</sup> Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, 83–85.

Javādī Āmūlī begins his work with theory and method and ends it with a discussion of Fāṭimah. *Zan dar āyinah-ye jalāl va jamāl* is a scholastically grounded approach to the topic of women, well organized and carefully argued. He devotes particular attention to the creation narrative found in the Qur'ān and argues against any notion that man was created before woman. Instead, they were created from the same essence.<sup>59</sup> Whereas Āzarī-Qummī directed most of his attention to female social behavior, Javādī Āmūlī is largely interested in establishing the inherent value of women. The only implication of this inherent value on which he focuses at any length is the right of women to participate fully in religious scholarship. This is where Fāṭimah enters the picture.

Javādī Āmūlī argues that Fāṭimah participated in *jihād* of all kinds during her life.<sup>60</sup> He quotes *ḥadīth* saying that had 'Alī not been alive, Fāṭimah would not have found an equal partner for marriage. He takes this to mean that Fāṭimah and 'Alī are equal in their piety, spirituality, and even authority. He argues that Fāṭimah was not only infallible (*ma'ṣūmah*) but also authoritatively infallible (*ma'ṣūmah muṭlaqah*). This means, he says, that her *sunnah* is just as authoritative as 'Alī's. He uses this reasoning both to argue that the use of Fāṭimah as a role model is grounded in the *sharī'ah* and to imply that the potential for women's authority is no less than men's. The implications of the latter point, however, are not clearly specified. Furthermore, after making these controversial declarations, Javādī Āmūlī soft-peddles by delineating some traditional roles for women. He clarifies that he does think women should wear appropriate *ḥijāb* and that their position behind men in prayers is mandated.<sup>61</sup>

The discussion of Fāṭimah is less central to *Zan dar āyinah-yi jalāl va jamāl* than it is to the works of Sharī'atī and Āzarī-Qummī; Javādī Āmūlī's key aim seems to be establishing her authority and her value. He is not concerned with detailing the narrative of her life; rather he looks at the legacy of Fāṭimah in jurisprudential terms. Unlike the other two writers, Javādī Āmūlī uses *fiqh* to justify the presentation of Fāṭimah as the supreme model for women.

<sup>59</sup> Javādī Āmūlī, *Zan dar āyinah-yi jalāl va jamāl*, 43–46.

<sup>60</sup> Javādī Āmūlī, *Zan dar āyinah-yi jalāl va jamāl*, 412, 413. And I think that he is also implying *ijtihād*.

<sup>61</sup> Javādī Āmūlī, *Zan dar āyinah-yi jalāl va jamāl*.

I have mentioned the writings of Sharīʿatī, Āzarī-Qummī, and Javādī Āmūlī because their works have been so influential on contemporary Shīʿī thought, especially in Iran. However, female scholars are also taking part in a fresh reflection on Fāṭimah's legacy. Jamīlah Kadīvar, an Iranian political leader and scholar of political science, has also focused on the example of Fāṭimah in her work *Zan*. Kadīvar is primarily concerned with the political leadership available to women, but her arguments mirror those invoked in discussions regarding women and religious leadership. She builds upon the work of several religious scholars, noting that in the final months of Fāṭimah's life, after the death of her father, she seems to assume political leadership.<sup>62</sup> Kadīvar goes on to build her case that political leadership should be accessible to women based on Fāṭimah's example. *Zan* concludes with a fascinating interview with Ayatullah Faḍlallāh of Lebanon in which he and Kadīvar discuss the ramifications of Fāṭimah's example for extending legitimacy to the right of women to exercise political and religious authority.<sup>63</sup>

### *Bint al-Hudá*

The discursive shift surrounding the legacy of Fāṭimah among the Shīʿah in recent decades is not limited to theoretical discussions about the permissible public roles and potential religious authority of women. On a distinctly practical level, a revised memory of Fāṭimah has served as concrete justification for women who have exerted their religious authority in dynamic ways. An example of this can be found in the life of Aminah al-Ṣadr (1937–80), who was active in Iraq during the 1960s and 70s. This social activist, religious scholar, and writer, better known as Bint al-Hudá, grew up in and around the Shīʿī religious education system, the *ḥawzah*, and was a member of the influential Ṣadr family. She is well remembered for her activities as an advocate for women's rights in Iraq, particularly in the arena of education—in fact, another name by which she is known is Aminah al-ʿĀlimah (the religious scholar). Bint al-Hudá founded several schools for women's religious education in Kāzimīyah and Najaf, and later, at the request of

<sup>62</sup> Jamīlah Kadīvar, *Zan* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Iṭṭilāʿāt, 1375/1996), 88–94.

<sup>63</sup> Kadīvar, *Zan*, 217–29.



Ayatullah Khū'ī, oversaw schools in Najaf and Baghdad as well.<sup>64</sup> Joyce Wiley has an excellent essay on her influence entitled “‘Alima Bint al-Hudá, Women’s Advocate.”<sup>65</sup> At the age of twenty, Bint al-Hudá wrote a treatise entitled *al-Hudá*, and in it she proclaimed herself a *mujtahidah*. Her family, particularly her brother, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, supported her in this claim, and as such some considered her an authoritative source for legal rulings.<sup>66</sup> Her biographers have often counted her among the leading religious scholars of her day.<sup>67</sup> However, on April 8, 1980, the Ba‘ath regime executed her and her brother.<sup>68</sup>

Bint al-Hudá’s achievements are important to note because of the inspiration which she drew from the example of Fāṭimah. The fact that Bint al-Hudá understood Fāṭimah as having been “active in public affairs,” notes Wiley, gave her courage to be so as well.<sup>69</sup> Faḍl al-Nūrī also notes this connection, emphasizing the inspiration of Fāṭimah on Bint al-Hudá’s manner of teaching and preaching.<sup>70</sup> When Bint al-Hudá established primary schools for girls, she called them “Zahrá’ schools,” pointing again to her focus on Fāṭimah. The case of Bint al-Hudá’s dynamic use of Fāṭimah’s legacy is also important in that it serves to illustrate that this was an emerging trend within ShĪ'ī discourse, which pre-dated ‘Alī Shari‘atī’s lecture and book on the topic. The work of Shari‘atī provides an important documentation of the shift in how Fāṭimah is popularly signified within ShĪ'ī religious discourse, but that shift did not originate with him.

<sup>64</sup> Faḍl al-Nūrī, *Uswat al-‘āmilīn fī riḥāb al-imām al-shahīd al-Ṣadr wa-al-shahīdah Bint al-Hudá* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Arif lil-Maṭbū‘āt, 2008), 286.

<sup>65</sup> I am indebted to Joyce Wiley for drawing my attention to the example of Bint al-Hudá in her article “‘Alima Bint al-Hudá, Women’s Advocate,” in *The Most Learned of the Shi‘a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid*, ed. Linda S. Walbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 149–60.

<sup>66</sup> While contemporary ShĪ'ī scholarship has generally upheld the possibility of women attaining the level of *mujtahidah*, only a minority of ShĪ'ī scholars have considered the possibility that these female Ayatullahs might also be a source of emulation (*marja’ al-taqlid*) on legal issues for others.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Arif Kāzīm Muḥammad, *al-Shahīdah Bint al-Hudá: al-sīrah wal-masīrah* (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍá, 1425/2004), 19.

<sup>68</sup> For more information on her life, see Ja‘far Ḥusayn Nizār, *‘Adhrā’ al-‘aqīdah wal-mabda’ al-shahīdah Bint al-Hudá* (Beirut: Dār al-Ta‘āruf, 1405/1985); Muḥammad, *al-Shahīdah*; and Muḥammad Riḍā Al-Nu‘mānī, *al-Shahīdah Bint al-Hudá: Sīratuhā wa masīratuhā* (Qum: Mu‘assasah-yi Ismā‘īliyyān, 1378/1999).

<sup>69</sup> Wiley, “‘Alima Bint al-Hudá,” 150.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Nūrī, *Uswat al-‘āmilīn*, 301–3.

*Summary of Contemporary Views*

The shift in how the memory of Fāṭimah is constructed among the Shī'ah today is not limited to a handful of scholars or clerics. An abundance of examples can be found among the Shī'ah of Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon of the memory of Fāṭimah being invoked in part to provide firm religious support for the expanding roles of women today. For example, Marjan de Gruijter, in a MA dissertation entitled “‘Fāṭimah is the Woman Islam Wants a Woman to Be’: Redefining the Role of Shī'ite Women in the Imam al-Ṣadr Foundation in Sur, Lebanon,” documents another example of the memory of Fāṭimah being utilized by men and women to justify women’s participation in politics and religious education.<sup>71</sup> The symbolic significance of institutional names is also revealing. The women’s university in Tehran is called Zahrā’ University; and in Qum the first all-women Shī’i school of higher religious education was also established in Fāṭimah’s name in 1984 as a part of the city’s influential *hawzah*.<sup>72</sup> Recent scholarship exhibits a rediscovery of Fāṭimah as well.<sup>73</sup> Several detailed commentaries on Fāṭimah’s *khuṭbah* have recently been published in Iran and Lebanon.<sup>74</sup> It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Massoumeh Ebtekar and Monir Gorgi consider Fāṭimah the primary example of Muslim women’s religious and political rights to speak and teach with authority. As we can see from these and other examples, the memory of Fāṭimah

<sup>71</sup> Marjan de Gruijter, “‘Fāṭimah is the Woman Islam Wants a Woman to Be’: Redefining the Role of Shī'ite Women in the Imam al-Ṣadr Foundation in Sur, Lebanon” (MA diss., Vrije University, Amsterdam, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Regarding the former, it was originally established in 1964 as the Higher Educational Institute for Girls but was renamed after the 1979 revolution. Zahrā’ Rahnavard was appointed chancellor of the institution in 1998 (see <http://www.alzahra.ac.ir/persian/index.asp>). Regarding the latter, the school is named Jāmi‘at al-Zahrā’ (see <http://www.jz.ac.ir/web/>).

<sup>73</sup> The amount of Shī’i literature on Fāṭimah has grown exponentially over the last few decades. Perhaps the largest work was written by ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Muhājir, *‘Ilamū annī Fāṭimah: Fāṭimah al-Zahrā’ wa-al-ḥadārah al-islāmīyah*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb, 1993). The author here not only expounds on every reported portion of Fāṭimah’s life, but continually puts her life in conversation with the questions and issues of gender roles today.

<sup>74</sup> See Grand Ayatullah Sayyid ‘Izz al-Dīn Ḥusaynī Zanjānī, *Sharḥ-i khuṭbah-yi Hazrat-i Zahrā’*, 2 vols. ([Iran]: Būstān-i Kitāb, 2007); Ayatullah Ḥusayn ‘Alī Muntazirī, *Khuṭbah-yi Hazrat-i Fāṭimah Zahrā’* (Qum: Nashr-i Sarayī, 2003); and Ayatullah Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍallāh, *Sharḥ khuṭbat al-Zahrā’* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-‘Arif, 2006). Another commentary is included in Ayatullah Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Shirāzī, *Min fiqh al-Zahrā’*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Sādiq, 1998). There are many more by less acclaimed scholars as well.

is no longer a simple model for traditional gender roles within most Shī'ī circles. A focus on her last days and the way she publicly asserted herself in the street and in the mosque has allowed her memory to be effectively resignified.<sup>75</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Despite all of the diverse beliefs and practices represented under the title of Islam, there exists an identifiable continuity of memory connecting Muslim societies to a shared historical past. Even in the moments when Muslim cultures change most dramatically, they remain in dialectical and discursive connection to this past. In fact, changes within Muslim societies are often given their most powerful defense and articulation by rooting those changes in how this shared past is understood. The case of contemporary Shī'ī understandings of Fāṭimah illustrates this point. By giving new expression to the meaning of Fāṭimah's life and emphasizing certain aspects of her life (and death) over others, Shī'ī women and men are providing an Islamic basis for the legitimate expansion of women's authority in contemporary Muslim societies.

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<sup>75</sup> It is worth noting that the resignification of Fāṭimah's life described in this paper is limited to Shī'ī circles. Not only does this newly framed memory of Fāṭimah lack any power to expand women's roles among Sunnī, it also re-emphasizes the sensitive and disputed history between Sunnī and Shī'ah. Although symbols and discourses are flexible in meaning and structure, they are influenced and constrained by other intersecting discourses which limit the possibilities of what can be meaningfully stated. The power and authority many Shī'ī women have found in the story of Fāṭimah's final months is a narrative that is effectively unavailable to Sunnī. Above the contemporary discourse of women's religious authority in the mosque stands the grammar of a more enduring Islamic language—that of sectarian identity—which does not permit the intelligibility of the same understanding of Fāṭimah among Sunnī and Shī'ah.

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SECTION III

THE IMPACT OF AUTHORITY ON MUSLIM WOMEN,  
MUSLIM SOCIETIES, AND CONCEPTIONS  
OF ISLAMIC AUTHORITY



## INTRODUCTION TO SECTION III

The chapters in this section illuminate the diversity of consequences that these female preachers and leaders can have for ordinary Muslim women, the Muslim societies in which they operate, and the nature of Islamic authority. Some of these female preachers are using their authority to reinterpret texts, reorganize gendered spaces within the mosques and *madrasahs*, and argue for new roles for Muslim women; others use their agency to consolidate traditional conceptions of gender roles and encourage more Muslim women to imbibe the orthodox sense of piety. The responses of these female leaders can easily be placed on a continuum, where one end represents strict adherence to orthodox interpretations of the texts, and the other represents concerted efforts to revise the scholarship on feminist lines, including an active struggle to secure Muslim women the right to lead mixed congregations. The important point to note, however, is that it is not just the women who choose to challenge the male religious hierarchy—such as Amina Wadud’s assertion of the right to lead mixed congregations—but even those who seem to be bound by the rules of the male religious hierarchy, who show remarkable agency in trying to expand their sphere of authority. The chapters in this section demonstrate the rich diversity of consequences these women can have for their immediate communities, depending on their caliber and the context in which they have to operate.

In the first chapter in this section, Pia Karlsson Minganti very skillfully illustrates the agency of women in reforming gender roles within Muslim communities in Sweden, even where they are apparently working strictly within the frame of reference of orthodox Islam. Focusing on the female members of the Sunnī-dominated national organization Sweden’s Young Muslims (Sveriges Unga Muslimer, SUM) and some of its local youth associations in different Swedish towns, Karlsson Minganti shows how these women are being invited by broader Swedish society, as well as by fellow Muslims, to function as public representatives of Islam. These young women act as guides in mosques and as invited public speakers and debaters. The chapter records how these women publicly defend Islam and actively work to negate the images of women’s oppression associated with Islam by showing themselves

as active agents who defend Islamic values through choice and because they find these values empowering.

In Karlsson Minganti's view, their Islamic activism is in many ways compatible with what could be defined as identity politics: for instance, they take action in favor of specific minority rights, such as alternative diets in school and the establishment of mosques and Muslim free schools; they are committed to supervising representations of Islam and Muslims in the media and other public spheres and counteracting misrepresentations; and they engage as writers and editors for newsletters and homepages on the internet. However, the chapter also shows that behind the scenes these women are negotiating greater space for themselves within the Muslim communities by their very reliance on the Islamic discourse with which they have now become more conversant. These women actively use their knowledge of Islamic texts to question the male hegemony on religious discourse, even within the domestic sphere; and they constantly find justifications from within Islamic teachings to renegotiate existing gender roles in favor of women within the Muslim communities in Sweden.

Presenting the case of two female preachers in Egypt, the next chapter in this section notes similar trends where female preachers are using knowledge of the Islamic texts to empower their students to renegotiate new roles in society while staying firmly within the domain of Islam. Hiroko Minesaki explores the impact of female religious leadership and Islamic discourses on the daily lives of Egyptian Muslim women by studying the daily activities of two ordinary female preachers, one based in Cairo and the other in a suburb of Cairo. While these instructors do not have sufficient authority to deviate significantly from widespread interpretations and practices, Minesaki highlights the ways in which they pass on to their students arguments and textual evidence that they can use to resist attempts by family members and the wider community to control their daily lives. Through giving advice, Samah, the preacher in the urban area, cultivates the participants' legal literacy and ability to make full use of Islamic discourses; while the case of Shaima, the preacher in the rural area, shows how women use Islamic discourses as a tool for negotiation with others in day-to-day life and how a female preacher helps them in that situation.

Shaima's lectures explain how Islam protects women and how for them loving Allah means being able to select a path appropriate for protecting their own rights, emphasizing that it is their duty to stand up for these rights. She teaches her students that the "strict gender



norms” of their village are the product of “custom” instead of Islam, encouraging them to distinguish between individuals who are *mutashaddid* (extremist) as opposed to *mutadayyin* (pious), where the latter describes their ideal practice of religion. In Minesaki’s assessment, increasing literacy rates and academic achievement among urban Egyptian women have in recent years combined with a general interest in “reviving” Islamic practice to significantly increase demand among urban Egyptian women for Islamic instruction, leading many women to attend lessons at special Islamic schools, mosques, or in homes. As in the case of Le Renard’s chapter (1.4), Minesaki argues that gender is a factor limiting the ability of female Islamic discourses to reach male audiences, yet also encouraging the creation of separate (and somewhat autonomous) religious spaces for women.

In Chapter 3.3, Nelly van Doorn-Harder’s account of the great diversity within female Islamic groups in Indonesia further illustrates the wide-ranging consequences of these movements for the day-to-day working of Muslim societies. The chapter notes how in Indonesia, since the beginning of the twentieth century, Muslim women have developed various forms of Qur’an-based activism, and focuses on two distinct activist movements among Indonesian Muslim women—“Muslim feminists” and “*sharīah*-minded activists.” By looking at the discourses of these two groups, she illustrates the ways in which women from both ends of the spectrum use and transmit their religious knowledge to influence social debates. Van Doorn-Harder illustrates how, for the “Muslim feminists,” religious texts should not constrain women within authoritarian rules but instead empower individuals with knowledge that allows them to create new forms of agency, identity, subjectivity, and self-image. She captures the different outlooks of the two groups by comparing their positions on the issue of polygamy.

The multiplicity of voices engaging in the Islamic discourse is further documented by the fact that even secular feminists are learning to argue from within the framework of Islam. Some groups are now trying to bridge the decades-long gap between Muslim and secular activism by organizing religious courses. For Muslim feminists, active engagement with the media and political processes, along with knowledge of the religious texts, is critical for advancing their claims. However, she notes that it is the actual knowledge of the Islamic texts and the ability to demonstrate that knowledge which enables Muslim feminists to counter the arguments of pro-*sharīah* activists who, according to the feminists, want to deprive women of their basic Islamic rights.

Although it is hard to predict the final outcome of the struggle for women's agency in Indonesia, it is clear that few Muslim feminists are prepared to hand over women's rights without fighting for alternatives.

The next chapter in this section presents yet another conception of authority exemplified by female preachers. In describing a case from Germany, Riem Spielhaus shows how the priorities of these female preachers are varied. While in some chapters in this volume the ultimate sign of empowerment of female preachers within the mosque sphere is viewed to be the right to lead mixed congregations, this case profiles a preacher in whose view the ideal sign of the assertion of authority of female leaders in mosques and *madrasahs* rests in their written scholarship gaining a popular following within the Muslim population, both men and women. The chapter presents the case of Halima Krausen, a female preacher in Hamburg, who has managed to exercise her authority without stirring active resistance. Although she takes active leadership positions, Krausen does not advocate a feminist outlook, thereby distinguishing herself from female scholars such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and Rabeya Müller, who engage in explicitly feminist reinterpretations of the Qur'an.

As opposed to these women, Krausen seeks to lead only by consensus, and is keen to lead both men and women. She gave up an opportunity to give the Friday *khuṭbah* when she learnt that it could lead to division within the followers, and instead focused her energies on writing Friday sermons and making them widely accessible to both male and female audiences. For her, the main goal is to ensure that female scholarship is treated seriously by not just women but also Muslim men; for her, this goal is more important than trying to assert the female right to lead Friday prayers. However, the chapter also notes that Krausen's model is just one of many models of female authority emerging within German Muslim communities. As in the chapter on Sweden (3.1), this case also illustrates how the specific functions of these female leaders are shaped by expectations placed on them by the broader German community to act as representatives of Muslim communities.

The final two chapters in the volume give readers a good sense of the great diversity of this phenomenon. These chapters discuss the attempts of a small minority to completely overturn the gender-based limitations on female Islamic leadership discussed in Section II through the advocacy of female leadership of mixed-gender prayer. The decision of these female leaders to publicly reject these restric-

tions, however, means that while their activities have had a major impact, their claims to leadership are not universally recognized and female-led prayer remains a marginal practice in the eyes of many conservative communities.

Juliane Hammer's chapter presents two events in American Muslim life—the 2005 woman-led prayer in New York City and the Muslim Women's Freedom Tour (or Daughters of Hajar) the previous year—in the context of female efforts to reinterpret the Qur'an to support gender equity. The events in question represent attempts to significantly expand the authority of female Muslim leaders through activism that Hammer describes as "embodied *tafsir*." The woman-led prayer in March 2005 was highly publicized and consisted of a Friday sermon and prayer given by Amina Wadud in front of a mixed-gender congregation. The Muslim Women's Freedom Tour was initiated and organized (like the prayer) by journalist and activist Asra Nomani, and aimed to claim prayer space and leadership roles in American mosques for women.

Hammer argues that these events are part of ongoing efforts by American Muslim women to claim the right to advance their own gendered reinterpretations of Islamic texts and to challenge the lack of gender equality in established ritual and social practices. She outlines in detail the hermeneutical techniques used by Amina Wadud and others to reinterpret Islamic texts to show the spiritual equality of the genders, and then shows how the principles and authority behind these reinterpretations were used to legitimate the efforts to increase female leadership in Muslim communities described above. Furthermore, Hammer argues that American efforts to increase female religious leadership are connected with demands for female participation in other forms of communal leadership, such as mosque administrative boards. The chapter as a whole demonstrates how—in the context of North American Muslim communities—an interpretive community emerged around the concept of activism as an embodiment of gender-equal interpretations of the Qur'an.

In the following chapter, Uta Lehmann presents a study of Muslim communities in Cape Town, South Africa and records the impact of several events—including Amina Wadud's 1994 delivery of a Friday sermon in a local mosque and her 2005 leading of Friday prayer in New York—on the struggle of local women for equal access to mosque space and leadership. The debates following these events reveal a wide spectrum of opinions about appropriate roles for women in the sacred

space of the mosque and must be seen within the context of South Africa's history. Especially important was the movement to end apartheid, during which a parallel human rights discourse among South African Muslims emerged, leading to differing understandings of women's positions in mosques. Regional cultural differences also play a role, as female access to mosques is much more widespread in the Malay-dominated south than in the South Asian-dominated north. Lehmann's analysis of newspaper accounts and interviews reveals the significant controversy that these events sparked. This controversy, however, is yet to lead to widespread expansion in the place of women in mosque space or leadership.

As illustrated by all these chapters, by virtue of their desire to shape the individual behavior of their followers and students in line with Islamic principles, these female preachers are influencing not just the working of Islamic authority but are shaping everyday realities and changing the structures within modern Muslim societies. The impact of these female mosque and *madrasah* movements is thus much more significant than has been recognized in the literature.

## CHAPTER 3.1

### CHALLENGING FROM WITHIN: YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS AND FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN SWEDISH MOSQUES

Pia Karlsson Minganti

New generations of Muslims are coming of age in contemporary Europe.<sup>1</sup> Some of these choose to elaborate on their religious faith and identity, “to act and speak as Muslims.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on women members of the Sunni-dominated national organization Sweden’s Young Muslims (Sveriges Unga Muslimer, SUM) and some of its local youth associations in different Swedish towns,<sup>3</sup> to argue that involvement with these associations is increasing Muslim women’s engagement with mosques and other venues for acquisition of Islamic knowledge. The women linked to these youth associations acquire leadership positions within Muslim communities and thereby face demands that they should themselves disseminate Islamic knowledge, acting as teachers of children and peers, and as guides in mosques. In fact, both fellow Muslims and non-Muslims place demands on these young women to function as public representatives of Islam. This leads their Islamic activism out beyond the frames of mosques and

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<sup>2</sup> Gerdien Jonker and Valérie Amiraux, eds., *Politics of Visibility: Young Muslims in European Public Spaces* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2006), 10.

<sup>3</sup> The analysis draws on material collected during fieldwork carried out between 1998 and 2002 (see Pia Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima: Islamisk väckelse och unga kvinnors förhandlingar om genus i det samtida Sverige* [Muslima: Islamic revival and young women’s negotiations on gender in contemporary Sweden] (Carlsson Bokförlag: Stockholm, 2007); and “Becoming a ‘Practising’ Muslim: Reflections on Gender, Racism and Religious Identity among Women in a Swedish Muslim Youth Organisation,” *Elore* 15, no. 1 (2008)), with a follow-up in 2009. The method used was qualitative, with participant observations and spontaneous talk along with repeated in-depth interviews with nine women. They were initially 18 to 25 years old, and unmarried. They were born in West Asia and North and East Africa to parents of different social backgrounds, who in one way or another identified themselves as Muslims. Coming to Sweden during childhood (at 4 to 11 years of age), the women went to public school and could speak fluent Swedish.

classrooms, and into identity politics<sup>4</sup> played out in civic centers and TV studios.

Illuminating the continuous challenges to the women's presence in mosques and their wider public activism, I will examine how these women defend their right to exercise religious authority while supporting the traditional sources of Muslim authority in the public sphere. I will analyze how the women reinterpret the Islamic texts to change their daily lives as well as their position within both the Muslim community and Swedish society as a whole. These women are clearly driven by an impulse to counter their popular image as passive victims; rather, they want to present themselves as autonomous agents.<sup>5</sup> This message has, however, not been absorbed by ordinary Swedes, who find claims of female empowerment, shrouded in Islamic dictates, unconvincing. I will review this discord in relation to (1) the women's dependence on other Muslims' religious authority, and (2) the women's primary loyalty to the male-dominated Muslim community in situations of public conflict. I will also emphasize that in more informal situations, *backstage* among peers, the women put gender on the agenda, initiate reflexive deliberations, and test alternative norms and practices.

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<sup>4</sup> By the term 'identity politics' I mean "an intersection of *group* identity and politics, which can lead to social change. Identity politics arises when oppression becomes the focus of a strong separate group identity around which support, political analysis, and action are developed" (Ann Phoenix, "Identity Politics," in *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge* vol. 3, ed. Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1097). It is a contradictory concept: "On the one hand, it can perpetuate the status quo by treating social categories as natural, static, and based on characteristics unique to a group—that is, by being essentialist. On the other hand, it can disrupt the status quo by providing a basis for new political definitions and new struggles" (ibid.). Without delving further into the implications of and debates regarding this concept, I use it in this essay to underline the strong emphasis on identity and representation associated with the young women's Islamic activism.

<sup>5</sup> Various authors have criticized the practice of describing pious Muslim women using terms, such as 'autonomy' and 'agency,' that stem from Western liberal discourse: see, for example, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8. However, I concur with Ruba Salih's view that agency must be analyzed in particular contexts, and that in Europe young Muslim women can be seen shaping complex selves, simultaneously pious and liberal: see Ruba Salih, "Muslim Women, Fragmented Secularism and the Construction of Interconnected 'Publics' in Italy," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no. 4 (2009): 410, 421.

*Mosques and Muslim Organizations in Sweden*

There are 350,000–400,000 Muslims living in Sweden, which has a total population of 9 million. Approximately 100,000–150,000 Muslims belong to officially registered Muslim organizations.<sup>6</sup> No specific ethnic group can be identified as having a dominant position. The cultural, social, and religious heterogeneity among Swedish Muslims is reflected in their mosques and organizations, resulting in comprehensive collaborations but also tensions regarding official representation. The Swedish state has encouraged the creation of formal organizations with representative spokespersons. Registered religious organizations may apply for state grants from the Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities (SST). Today there are six umbrella organizations (one Shīī, five Sunnī), which, in turn, unite in the Islamic Collaboration Council (Islamiska Samarbetsrådet, IS), which interfaces with the SST.

Plans to build mosques have, as in other European countries, been met with economic and organizational obstacles, as well as opposition from the surrounding society.<sup>7</sup> To date, five mosques have been erected: in Gothenburg (Aḥmadī), Trollhättan (Shīī), Malmö, Uppsala, and Fittja (Sunnī). Some other mosques have been set up through restructuring already existing buildings, such as an electric power station in Stockholm and a former Pentecostal church in Västerås. Furthermore,

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<sup>6</sup> Göran Larsson, ed., *Islam in the Nordic and Baltic Countries* (London: Routledge, 2009), 56; SST, Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund [The Swedish commission for government support to faith communities], *Statistik 2009*, <http://www.sst.a.se/statistik/statistik2009.4.64075cf012c96962a7d80002580.html>. For further discussion of the process of institutionalization of the Muslim community in Sweden, see Jonas Alwall, *Muslim Rights and Plights: The Religious Liberty Situation of a Minority in Sweden* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1998); Ingvar Svanberg and David Westerlund, eds., *Blågul islam? Muslimer i Sverige* [Blue-and-yellow Islam? Muslims in Sweden] (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1999); Göran Larsson, *Muslims in the EU: Cities Report (Sweden): Preliminary Research Report and Literature Survey* (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2007); and Göran Larsson and Åke Sander, *Islam and Muslims in Sweden: Integration or Fragmentation? A Contextual Study* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Stefano Allievi, ed., *Conflicts over Mosques in Europe: Policy Issues and Trends—NEF Initiative on Religion and Democracy in Europe* (London: NEF/Alliance Publishing Trust, 2009); Jocelyn Cesari, ed., “Mosque Conflicts in Europe,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31, no. 6 (2005): 1015–1179; Pia Karlsson and Ingvar Svanberg, *Moskéer i Sverige: En religionsetnologisk studie av intolerans och administrativt vanmakt* [Mosques in Sweden: A study of intolerance and administrative despair] (Uppsala: Svenska kyrkans forskningsråd, 1995); Pia Karlsson Minganti, “Mosques in Sweden: On Identity and Spatial Belonging,” in *Creating Diversities: Folklore, Religion and the Politics of Heritage*, ed. Anna-Leena Siikala, Barbro Klein, and Stein R. Mathisen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2004), 153–64.

there are a couple of hundred so-called 'basement mosques' situated in apartments and other rearranged premises.

The most prominent Muslim youth organization is Sweden's Young Muslims (SUM).<sup>8</sup> It is a national organization with 3,500 members and over forty local youth associations in towns all over the country. SUM is member of the Sunnī umbrella organization, the Council of Swedish Muslims (Sveriges Muslimska Råd, SMR). It is also a member of the National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations (LSU) and the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO). Although dominated by Sunnī Islam, SUM welcomes young Muslims regardless of ethnic or confessional commitment. As the majority of its members have been raised in Sweden, converts included, it may be plausibly argued that these youth are more motivated than their parents' generation to see Islam as a Swedish religion. They tend to adhere to the global Islamic revival and its call for the return to the supposedly authentic message of Islam, while distancing themselves from what they define as cultural traditions and human misconceptions.

The distinction between religion and culture leads to three important features among young organized Muslims. First, they construct a common Islamic identity, which ideally surpasses any association with 'race'/ethnicity, clan, or class. Second, they claim that this universal Islamic identification is compatible with being a good Swedish citizen. Third, the youth often question and sidestep traditional authorities, such as parents and '*ulamā*'. For instance, many of these organized young Muslims find appeal in the idea of a state-funded educational program for training of *imāms*. They call for religious authorities that are familiar with Swedish language and society, and oppose the 'imported' *imāms* from former home countries.<sup>9</sup>

There is a relatively high tolerance for difference within youth associations. The same organization can contain members of Palestinian background inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood working side by side with young peers of Somali background adhering to Salafist

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<sup>8</sup> Established in 1991, it was originally called Sveriges Muslimska Ungdomsförbund (SMUF), <http://www.ungamuslimer.se> (accessed May 9, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> In 2009, a government-appointed investigator recommended that the Swedish government drop plans for state-funded education for *imāms*. Although organized Muslim groups admitted that there was a demand for training in language and knowledge of Swedish society, they still strongly opposed the proposal that the state should itself engage in religious teaching. See Larsson, *Islam in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*.



interpretations. They are influenced simultaneously by a wide range of sources, from Tariq Ramadan's *To Be a European Muslim* to international authorities such as Hamza Yusuf and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. This relative tolerance within Muslim youth is actively recognized by members of these organizations. As one female respondent noted: "Personally I follow the majority of the Muslims. Then there are Salafis and Sufis. We can all share the same house. Yes, it is possible."

The young activists' bonds with the mosques show solidity, but they are not static. Rather, there is constant reflection and re-adjustment. An illustrative example is how the members of SUM use spaces in Stockholm Grand Mosque (Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan's Mosque) for prayers, festivities, teaching, and office work, but at the same time also have independent premises in another part of town where they often choose to pursue their activities at some distance from the older generation.

Mosques in Sweden are generally open to women; it seems reasonable to claim that the societal climate makes it difficult for mosques not to open their doors. Sweden today is imbued with debates, reforms, and legislation promoting equal opportunities for people regardless of ethnic belonging, religion, or gender. In order to qualify for grants from the SST the religious communities are required to maintain and strengthen the fundamental values of society, including equality between men and women.<sup>10</sup> In new mosques, built in line with modern pan-Islamic architecture, special entrances and balconies guarantee the presence of women, although cementing their spatial separation from men.<sup>11</sup>

Muslim congregations and organizations in Sweden are still dominated by male leadership and women continuously turn to male authorities. As a consequence of the lack of female influence, during the 1980s and 1990s Muslim women (mostly converts) established their own organizations and activities.<sup>12</sup> The members take initiatives to reinterpret Islam and choose which men to reckon as advisors.

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<sup>10</sup> The rules are vague and, for instance, there are no demands on how the communities elect their clergy.

<sup>11</sup> Renata Holod and Hassan-Uddin Khan, *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons and Designs since the 1950s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 19–21.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Sofie Roald, "Evas andra ansikte: Muslimska kvinnoaktiviteter" [Eve's second face: Muslim women's activities], in Svanberg and Westerlund, *Blågul islam?* 123–39.

Several of these initiators are involved in children and youth activities and, thus, transmit their religious interpretations to young women. In this way, the younger Muslim women have come to have several adult women role models, showing that public engagement is both possible and worth striving for.

The women's activism in mosques in Sweden is, however, acceptable to the larger Muslim community as long as they do not claim the space to lead prayers or give the *khutbah* before men. Another condition for women's presence in mosques and other central Muslim forums is their respect for gender-separated spheres. Within the youth associations, the gender division results in clearly defined rules for collective prayers: the prayer hall either provides for separate women's spaces, or women collectively position themselves behind men. Islamic education classes are held in a joint room with men and women seated on each side, or in separate rooms with the women following a female instructor, or a male instructor via TV screen or loud-speaker. Socially, expectations regarding women's piety are visible in their modest clothing and behavior, with male and female members of the youth organization referring to each other as 'brothers and sisters in Islam.'

#### *New Attitudes to Women's Religious Authority*

Several of the young women interviewed for this study had, during their childhoods in the 1980s and 1990s, participated in Qur'an schools in local mosques. However, their narratives reveal a lack of continuity in their mosque attendance. There was not much space offered to the adolescent women within their congregations. This reflects the practices of the early establishment of Islam in Sweden, when there were still only a few larger mosques, and smaller premises rarely allowed any space for women. Thus, the exclusion of the young women from the mosques was also reflective of the differing perceptions and expectations of the appropriate roles for 'man' and 'woman.' Women were associated with the domestic sphere; they were not expected to play a role in religious rituals, social meetings, or decision-making in public forums such as mosques. Intimately linked to this division of labor was the understanding of sexuality as a destructive force if left unregulated. The identification of women as source of *fitnah* (disorder), because of their ability to arouse temptation in men, justified their exclusion from

the formal sphere of religious authority.<sup>13</sup> To avoid any misconduct or distraction, women were better kept away from mosques.

However, as pioneers in the first Muslim youth associations during the 1990s and 2000s and the national organization SUM (established in 1991), the women experienced the mosque culture shifting from a 'mono-gender space' to a 'two-gender forum.' One possible explanation of this shift is the need to mobilize women in the Islamic revival. The perception of women as source of *fitnah* was weighed against the other dominant representation of women as *bearers of Islam*.<sup>14</sup> According to this view, women have a central role in the propagation of Islam because as mothers they are the transmitters of Islam to the next generation. Hence, not just women but the entire Muslim community stands to gain from serious religious training for women. This shift in attitudes toward women has been noted in Europe and beyond.<sup>15</sup>

In their Islamic communities the young women share a reinterpretation of the concept of *fitnah*, which means that the woman is now understood as a passive temptation rather than an active temptress. Another reinterpretation claims that men can indeed be *fitnah*—temptation—to women, and not only the other way around. The intimate link between *fitnah* and 'woman' is thereby dissolved, paving the way for mutual responsibility of men and women in managing sexual attraction. Further, androcentric interpretations of the 'female' character are challenged, such as the *ḥadīth* declaring women as being deficient in intellect (*ʿaql*) and religion (*dīn*).<sup>16</sup> References which support women's equal abilities in respect of *ʿaql* and *dīn* are instead more actively consulted. Importantly, the women are recognized as religious subjects, with the right—or rather the duty—to attend mosques and *madrasahs* in order to cultivate their piety and increase their knowledge of Islam.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ayşe Saktanber, *Living Islam: Women, Religion and the Politicization of Culture in Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Sylva Frisk, *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009); Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment, and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 617–42; and Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Book of Menstruation*, discussed in Anne Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (London: Routledge, 2001), 131.

The young women's narratives also evidence the influence of Swedish identity in the new forms of female engagement in the religious sphere. Their pious subjectivity is shaped not only by Islamic conceptions of good motherhood, but also by the demands of Swedish citizenship. The female respondents in this study talked about their duty to educate themselves within both the religious and secular spheres, and to show that Muslims—women included—can be represented at all levels of society and in all possible professions. In fact there is a great demand for the young women's public Islamic activism, from both Muslims and non-Muslims. Within the frames of mosques and youth associations they are needed as transmitters of Islam to the next generation, as well as motivators for the young to identify with Islam. Thus, even while they are students, the young women also take part in teaching basic knowledge of Islam to children and peers. As confirmed by the research of Dessing and Bleisch Bouzar (see Dessing, Chapter 2.2, and Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, this volume), the lack of formally trained scholars among European Muslims produces a market for many less skilled teachers to contribute, women among them. The youth associations seem to be platforms for any individual with basic knowledge of Islam to become a religious leader. Here, charisma would first and foremost be a question of having an extrovert personality, and contributing to the sense of community and role-modeling of the new generation of Muslims. Further, the women are invited to act as leaders in the sense of being decision-makers and organizers. In their youth associations they are engaged in boards and committees, even as chairpersons. They organize courses, seminars, conferences, camps, and excursions.

In relations with broader Swedish society, which places demands on Muslim communities to move toward more egalitarian gender norms, the young women are requested by the Muslim community to act as public representatives or 'ambassadors' for Islam. This mindset is reflected in the views of one male respondent, who argued that there was a need for a 'super-sister' to defend Muslim women's interests, "because their own voices would be better heard than men speaking on their behalf." Thus, the young women act as guides in mosques and as invited public speakers and debaters. Their Islamic activism is in many ways compatible with what could be defined as identity politics: for instance, they take action in favor of specific minority rights, such as alternative diets in school and the establishment of mosques and Muslim schools; they are committed to supervising representations of

Islam and Muslims in the media and other public spheres and counteracting misrepresentations; and they engage as writers and editors for newsletters and homepages on the internet. Their commitment to Islam includes acting as participant citizens and they cooperate with non-Muslim organizations, institutions, and projects aiming at, for instance, inter-religious dialogue, charity, anti-racism, and temperance.

### *Challenges to Women's Religious Authority*

A constant condition for Muslim women's participation in Swedish mosques is their acceptance that leading a prayer or giving a *khutbah* before men is purely a male prerogative. A few adult women call themselves *imāms*, such as Ethiopian-born Suad Mohamed, who was educated in *sharī'ah* in Jordan. For her the title '*imām*' signifies a role corresponding to that of the deacon in Christian congregations, and is concerned with advising and leading prayers for women. Mohamed has experienced exclusion from mosques, but claims to be increasingly invited to perform her services. However, she does not aspire to conduct marriages or funerals, or work as an advisor for an entire congregation in the near future.<sup>17</sup> The women participating in this study did not claim the kind of authority that Mohamed demands; instead they were more oriented toward teaching children, peers, and non-Muslims. They were therefore not as provocative to male Muslim scholars as Suad Mohamed seems to be. However, even these women faced challenges in maintaining their mere presence in mosques and in defending their public Islamic activism.

Within the congregations and the Muslim associations, there were individuals who found the women's presence in the public sphere disturbing. When visiting mosques the women could be met with harsh glances and rebukes which restricted their movements. These competing gender norms made the women ambivalent. On the one hand, they unhesitatingly affirmed their right to participate in mosques; on the other, they expressed feelings of discomfort. A young woman named Hawa said:

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<sup>17</sup> Marie Eriksson, "Kvinnlig imam utmanar normer" [Woman imam challenges norms], *Paraplyprojektet* [The umbrella project], online newsletter, 2007, <http://www.paraplyprojektet.se/nyheter/suad/>.

- Hawa: It's a sensitive matter. I don't know how far I can go, or what I can do. If I can go to the guys when they pray... these things.
- Pia: Can you do that in your mosque?
- Hawa: Yes, but it's at your own risk [laughter]. Well, you *can* do it, but it's not so funny if there're some grumpy old men who scold you. But it is kind of permissible.
- Pia: So, it's mostly old men who... are grumpy, or may there be some younger people too?
- Hawa: There are some types there. I don't know, they are probably middle-aged... who think that... well, who somehow have something against women... I can stay in the women's room and on the balcony. Of course, at times I can go into the main prayer-hall as well. And if I have a necessary errand I can go to the other side too, where the men are. It's not that I'm not allowed to go there at all, but... sometimes it might feel a bit embarrassing.
- Pia: Go where?
- Hawa: If I go to the other side, where there are a lot of men... then it feels... at least *I* personally think... messing around there, like... there is no need for it. It doesn't have to be anyone saying so, it's more something one feels.

The young women have to confront not only the others' attitudes, but also the expectations and norms ingrained in their own embodied *habitus*.<sup>18</sup> Even when the women are convinced of their right to participate it does not always *feel* right. The mosque is still mainly male territory; men use it as an obvious resource, which improves their piety and authority. Women might enter and participate, but they have partially accepted that this access is bound up with certain conditions.

The women's uneasiness about being in the 'wrong' place is coupled with concerns about doing the 'wrong' duties. The women are exposed to contradictory femininities. One affirms their right to public activism; the other makes them wonder if their legitimate role is actually within the confines of the home, and questions their presence in mosques and other central Muslim forums. In order to illustrate the notion of 'public' femininity, I return to the young man who was calling for an outspoken 'super-sister' to publicly defend herself and her co-sisters in Islam. His assertion that the positive testimonies of women have greater impact than men's (re)presentations made one of the young women willingly embrace the role of 'ambassador of Islam.' Hawa told me about her perception of this extrovert task, referring to

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

herself as a capable and courageous person fighting for Islam: “Sometimes we say, ‘She’s a real *mujāhidah!*’ That is, someone who fights.” The denomination *mujāhidah* is a feminine form for ‘freedom-fighter.’ To the women of my study it signaled agency. Hawa clenched her fist, but immediately chose to clarify herself:

I mean, not *jihād* like violence. Everyone seems to believe that *jihad* is only about *war*, but it is more like *struggle*. So, a *mujāhidah* can be someone who does her best. Like Amina, my friend, who studies to become a physician and has children at the same time. Or like me, who struggles for people to understand Islam.

However, Tariq, a young man from her youth group, expressed a view on femininity fairly different from that of the resourceful ‘super-sister.’ In a critical tone, Tariq reminded Hawa about the divergent roles of men and women, likening men to ‘foreign ministers’ and women to ‘domestic ministers.’ He thus pointed to the ever-present perception of the home as the woman’s proper place, to the conception of femininity as shy and private, and to needing to be protected from public situations and people’s gazes. “It is such an effort that you should not need to be exposed to,” Tariq declared to Hawa, who was about to participate in a TV program about the use of *hijāb*. This example of two conflicting positions on femininity illustrates how the young women’s public activism was not a neutral fact, but an issue constantly renegotiated and challenged.

Another obstacle to the young women’s Islamic activism is the ever-topical issue of women’s movement and travel. At the core of this debate is the issue of the need for men to act as women’s guardians. Again, there is a tension between a femininity built on the perception of women’s need for protection and the capable femininity of the *mujāhidah*—one of being recognized as a pious subject, capable of self-control and personal responsibility before God. They wear *hijāb*, signaling decency to the world; in fact, their pious dress-code is often regarded as a compensation for the lack of a male escort. The women appreciate the fact that they are ‘traveling’ persons, making everyday journeys to and from workplaces, universities, gyms, and *da’wāh*-activities. But there are limits, as illustrated by the following account of the negotiations over Latifa’s plan to participate in an Islamic course abroad.

Last year Hamza Yusuf held a course in England and I really wanted to participate. But it is a sensitive matter, traveling. Different schools and alignments claim different things. Some say that women can’t travel

on their own. You have to go with someone who is *mahram*, like your brother or father or husband. And I can understand that in today's world it's dangerous to travel as a woman. Many think so. So I sent an e-mail message to a *shaykh* here in Sweden and asked if it would be okay for me to go to that course. He answered that: "First of all, if you don't have the company of *mahram* you should preferably go with a group." That is, with friends, or, well, a group of Muslims. But I was like: "I don't have any *mahram* available. And there is no group going, just me and one brother [in Islam]. But I can't go alone with him, because he's not *mahram*." Then the *shaykh* said: "If there is no person like Hamza Yusuf in Sweden, then you may travel to this course on your own. Since you are searching for knowledge. That is permissible. But it would really be the ultimate solution." He really didn't want me to go by myself. He said so.

Latifa never went to the course in England. She could not convince herself that her search for knowledge was strong enough a justification for such a long journey alone. The negotiation was performed with her own conscience, with God, and with Muslim collectives, under the pressures of the dominant religious discourse which painted her journey as suspicious, dangerous, and unnecessary.

In fact, the young women are in a position where their religious activism could at any time be challenged by duties with higher value for family members: duties of modesty, obedience, and domestic work. They are supported by some religious authorities and family members, and countered by others. When turning to elders or peers for answers, the young women are met with ambiguity. Sometimes they get support for opposing the demands of relatives by defining these demands as 'non-Islamic cultural traditions.' However, often they are told that women's *da'wāh* is a voluntary activity, while obedience is obligatory and her first priority.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the possibility of undertaking many of the women's projects of pious activism would likely turn on a single man's approval or disapproval.

### *Exercising Religious Authority*

On becoming practicing Muslims engaged in youth associations, the young women wish to have an impact on Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The women have experienced conflicts associated with both such categories. In fact, all the women's narratives contain descriptions

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 178–79.



of teenage crises that threatened their bonds to Swedish society and their families, as well as to Islam. Besides possible conflicts that young people might endure, these women explicitly tell about processes of ‘othering’ in connection to gender, religion, and ‘race’/ethnicity, processes that subordinate them as both ‘Muslims’ and ‘women.’ In the end they chose not to break away, but to challenge prevailing norms from within—that is, by enrolling in the Islamic revival.

In mosques and youth associations the women are presented with the opportunity to re-read Islamic texts and to reflexively choose what interpretations to adhere to and disseminate to others. They are critically considering the possibility that some interpretations result from androcentric readings. To counteract bias they circulate references reflecting women’s interests. They dismissed misogynist *ḥadīths* as weak or even false, and evoke the wives of the prophet Muḥammad as role models—Khadijah as a businesswoman and ‘Ā’ishah as a leader in knowledge, society, politics, and war. In this way, the young women defend their subjective piety, public activism, and their right to make their own decisions regarding their life plans, for instance concerning their education, professional career, and marriage.

As organizers and lecturers for youth classes, the young women put gender on the agenda. In Suad’s youth association they decided to take away the curtain dividing them from the male teachers and peers, a decision which she appreciated as an improvement: “I mean, you actually don’t learn well if you are only listening. One also wants to see the speaker and to be able to put questions to the teacher.” The issue of Islamic clothing provides another illuminating example of gender issues on the young women’s agenda. They draw attention to the religious aspect of wearing *ḥijāb*: that is, they do not only frame it as an identity marker but also as an all-inclusive package of pious intention and behavior. They argue that the *ḥijāb* must be taken on after serious considerations, as a personal choice. If the decision is not made independently of others’ pressures it fails to be morally valid before God. By emphasizing piety and defending free choice as a basic moral category, the women generate tools to combat forced covering.

Further, by stressing the tendency to make women adorn the visible symbols of Islamic identity, the young women push for their contribution to be recognized. Their primary call is not for clear-cut justice between the sexes, but rather for *respectful* gender complementarity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima*, and “Becoming a ‘Practising’ Muslim.”

This model presupposes two absolute genders—man and woman—to which different characteristics and duties are ascribed. Ideally, the two should complement each other harmoniously, but often the female contributions fail to elicit proper recognition. By putting Islamic dress on the youth associations' agendas the women explicitly share their experiences of wearing *ḥijāb* in a non-Muslim society. In doing this they are partly asking the young men to fulfill their own obligations to adhere to the Islamic dress code, but, more importantly, through this they gain respect as critical agents in the joint project of living Islam.

The women's notion of respectful gender complementarity involves what I call *tactical orthodoxy*:<sup>21</sup> that is, temporary allusions to one's own perceived higher degree of piety in order to realize personal preferences (within, of course, the frame of what the individual in question understands as true Islam). By *tactic* I refer to Michel de Certeau's notion of the "fragmentary and fragile victories of the weak" within the framework of a power order that they cannot (or do not want to) escape.<sup>22</sup> With the religious scriptures in their hands, the women claim their rights by emphasizing *all* Muslims' duty to realize Islam—men included. That is, if men want obedient women who accept their protection, they themselves must accomplish their duty as providers and escorts. Should kinsmen fail in this task, the women felt it legitimate to let themselves be escorted by pious peers in their Islamic associations, or even to move around on their own.

Tactical orthodoxy makes it possible for the women to provisionally redefine and displace power. They charge the female need for protection with new meaning. Rather than associating the limitations of their mobility with subordination or vulnerability, they associate them with men's shortcomings. In line with Mahmood's theorizing regarding the politics of piety,<sup>23</sup> I would argue that the women of my study do not let discrepancies between ideals and their own practices lead to consciously subversive acts. Rather, they interpret these as personal shortcomings that could be corrected through pious self-discipline. However, their own successful performances of Islamic ideals could expose the failures of others, and here the women allow themselves to be subversive. Thus, Hawa challenged the privileges of her male kin:

<sup>21</sup> Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima*, and "Becoming a 'Practising' Muslim."

<sup>22</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xviii–xx.

<sup>23</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 164–65.

- Hawa: Cook for my brother? Why should I?  
 Hawa's mother: He's tired when he comes home.  
 Hawa: He doesn't work, does he? He doesn't earn money for me. [Turning toward me] Yes, I know. I should be kind now during Ramaḍān, but apparently I'm not. It isn't fun to be kind when they take it for granted.

The example shows Hawa asking for recognition of her contribution in line with respectful gender complementarity. Also, she is altering a dominant interpretation of *qiwama*, that is, the divinely prescribed leadership position of men over women and children. The position implies responsibility for the supply, protection, and morals of the dependants.<sup>24</sup> Hawa and the other women deny that this duty legitimizes unlimited command or that it should be understood as assigning men general superiority over all women. Further, they argue for an increase in women's influence and a modification of the division of labor, in case the male supplier should fail in his task.<sup>25</sup> Like the women in Minesaki's study (see Minesaki, Chapter 3.2, this volume), Hawa and her peers use arguments and textual evidence to resist attempts by family members to control their daily lives, be it a matter of the division of labor, the right to pursue public Islamic activism, or to choose a future spouse.<sup>26</sup>

Absorbing the influence of the surrounding society, the women also aim at altering their own position within it. A crucial ambition is to change the widespread image of Muslim women as passive victims vulnerable to sexist or racist oppression. Rather, they are keen to create an image of 'normality,' in which Muslim women are seen as well-spoken, humorous, capable of maintaining a public presence, and visible in cinemas and cafés, shopping with friends, talking to young men, or even taking part in activities linked to men, such as parachuting and martial arts. During interviews, many talked about their desire to 'shock' people, in the sense of positively breaking with

<sup>24</sup> Roald, *Women in Islam*, 145–84.

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that Hawa did not cook that day—yet her young sister-in-law did. Not only did Hawa have Islamic authority working in her favor, she could also capitalize on her status in the family hierarchy. In pointing this out, I aim to emphasize that women's empowerment is often dependent on other women's subordination.

<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, there were limits to the success of the women's negotiations. If family members did not share the same Islamic frames of reference as the young women, they could put an end to the women's negotiations at any time. There was the threat of violence for some, and the fear of repudiation for all.

negative stereotypes. For instance, during an open seminar on 'the position of women in Islam,' organized by a non-Muslim student association, Hawa challenged the speaker, an exiled Iranian atheist feminist. When the speaker talked about Saudi Arabian women being prohibited from driving cars, Hawa turned to the audience with an ironic wink and said loudly: "I drive a car!" With this comment she opened the floor for her peers to inform the audience about the difference between 'true' Islam (which they argued was open to allowing women to drive) and Saudi 'cultural traditions.'

The young women use a particular discursive strategy, informing the general public about the 'new-generation Muslims' and their proper position in a modern democracy. This positioning is constituted by dissociating themselves from 'cultural' Muslims and their 'customs and delusions,' such as bans on women driving, 'honor-killings,' or genital cutting. In fact, the women see themselves as seeking to prevent Islamophobia through providing information about 'true' Islam. This view is illustrated by the young woman who, with reference to the physical abuse of women, said: "This is, in fact, a matter of so-called Muslims doing stupid things, and then the Swedes cannot understand that this is actually not Islam." Through their informative activism she and the other women hope to put an end to Islamophobic sentiments and discrimination.

From the majority society there is a demand for the young women to act as cultural and religious mediators and icons of 'good' Islam. To illustrate this demand I will offer two examples of women from the Muslim youth movement appointed as TV hostesses. Nadia Jebri's career as a TV personality was fuelled in 2002 after she was denied an appointment as a host of the multicultural TV program *Mosaik* because of her wearing the *hijāb*. Later she became a program leader of the cooking show *Ät!* and the travel show *Packat & Klart*. She has managed to stay in the business, showing preparedness to keep a low profile in the debate, not emphasizing Muslim exceptionality, but talking reflexively and understandingly about her conflict with the board of Swedish Television.<sup>27</sup> She has lifted the *hijāb* at times and embodies a 'good,' liberal Muslim in line with non-Muslim mainstream expectations on mediation.

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<sup>27</sup> Jonas Otterbeck, "The Legal Status of Islamic Minorities in Sweden," *Journal of Conflict and Violence Research* 5, no. 2 (2003): 46–47.

In the autumn of 2008, Swedish Television launched a talk show called *Halal-TV*, with three hostesses all wearing *hijāb*. It was broadcast in prime-time with the explicit aim of giving voice to women committed to Islam. It was cancelled after one season, after strong criticism not only from those normally negative to the mere presence of Muslims in Sweden, but also from people who initially looked forward to the program. Part of the critique made reference to the hostesses having given an impression of double-speaking and as having an unclear agenda. Were they ‘extremists’ rather than ‘good’ Muslims? Why did they refuse to shake hands with a non-Muslim male guest? Did one of them, a student of law, reject the death penalty and reject stoning as an execution method or not?

In line with other contributions in this volume, the example of the TV hostesses shows the multiple platforms through which Muslim women are exerting their authority. The example also sheds light on the failure of non-Muslim audiences to grasp the complexity of young women’s representations of Islam. In order to cast further light on such complexity, in the next section I will discuss two important aspects affecting the young women’s representations of Islam: namely, (1) their dependence on religious authorities and consensus, and (2) their primary loyalty to a male-dominated community engaged in postponing women’s rights.

### *Recognizing Complexity*

It is indeed empowering for the women to take part in the re-reading of original Islamic texts. However, reinterpretation is not supposed to be carried out according to individual initiative, but developed in relation to authorized representatives and the general consensus on what should be recognized as ‘authentic’ Islam.<sup>28</sup> These conditions explain why the women would confidently proclaim female genital mutilation to be an un-Islamic cultural custom—thus, positioning themselves in line with the Swedish mainstream rejection of this practice—while at the same time hesitate to denounce physical punishment of women and children, which is likewise illegal in contemporary Sweden. The rejection of female genital mutilation is safely based on the consensus

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<sup>28</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 115–17; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, “Knowledge, Empowerment, and Religious Authority,” 634.

of their Islamic community, while an absolute denial of corporal punishment of women and children is not. Not surprisingly then, women and their peers are more eager to discuss the former issue than the latter (or the death penalty, for that matter) before non-Muslim audiences.

The women's obedience to religious authorities results not only from their understanding of the religious texts, but equally from their loyalty to the wider Muslim community. The young women's relationship to Muslim religious authorities is influenced by their perception of Islam as being under attack and of the Muslims in diaspora as being in vulnerable positions. Researchers such as Schirin Amir-Moazami and Nadia Fadil have illustrated how Muslims are deprived of authority and pressed to submit to what is perceived as the majority's national values in order to be recognized as citizens.<sup>29</sup> The minority has to adapt to the practice of hand-shaking with the opposite gender, while the majority does not need to realize the coexistence of diverse ways of greeting. My analysis adds an emphasis on how such domination may result in the young women acquiescing to the restoration of (male) Muslim authority through the suspension of critical public debates on the organization of gender within their Muslim community.

When the Prophet Muḥammad—allegedly married to nine-year-old 'Ā'ishah—was portrayed as a pedophile by non-Muslim debaters, the young women's activism focused on combating blasphemy rather than child marriages. When Amina Wadud led prayers and preached before a mixed-gender congregation, the young women did not primarily consider the implications for gender equality, but chose to adhere to the dominant rejection of this initiative as causing *fitnah* in the Muslim *ummah* (see Hammer, Chapter 3.5, and Lehmann, Chapter 3.6, this volume). When Stockholm's new grand mosque was reported for gender discrimination by a woman member of the Swedish parliament to the government agency Jämställdhetsombudsmannen (The Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, EOO), it was hardly on the young women's agenda to compare their position with men or to measure their status by the amount of square meters offered on the balcony.

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<sup>29</sup> Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Dialogue as a Governmental Technique: Managing Gendered Islam in Germany," *Feminist Review* 98, no. 1: 9–27; Nadia Fadil, "Managing Affects and Sensibilities: The Case of Not-Handshaking and Not-Fasting," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no. 4 (2009): 439–54.

In order to better understand the young women's priorities when negotiating gender dynamics within the Muslim community, I propose that the concepts of *frontstage* and *backstage* actions are helpful. According to Goffman, frontstage actions aim at presenting a coherent self before a broader audience, while keeping all incoherence backstage.<sup>30</sup> In critical frontstage situations, as in the case of the Stockholm Grand Mosque being reported for gender discrimination, the young women did not prioritize debates on alternative gender orders; instead they stood together with the traditional religious authorities to protect the prevailing order. However, in less formal situations—i.e. backstage, within the Muslim communities and out of sight of broader Swedish society—these women constantly debate and renegotiate gender roles. If in frontstage performances the women are seen declaring their separate balconies in mosques to be adequate, backstage they are negotiating for greater visibility and presence within the formal affairs of the Muslim community, including the arena of religious authority.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter focuses on young women who have seen the Swedish mosques transform from mono-gender male spaces to forums capable of accommodating both genders, though with continued contestation. As members of Muslim youth organizations in Sweden, these women are faced with expectations to embody and represent Islam. They are invited to act as teachers for the community's children and their peers, and as decision-makers and organizers on boards and committees. Given the opportunity to re-read Islamic texts, these women offer reinterpretations that are changing their daily lives as well as their position vis-à-vis the Muslim community and Swedish society as a whole. However, in the process they are not directly challenging the traditional authorities within the Muslim communities. Like other organized Muslims in Europe, these young women are using their mosques and youth organizations as platforms for securing the rights and needs of the growing Muslim minority (see Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, this volume).

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<sup>30</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

In fact, both fellow Muslims and non-Muslims place demands on the young women to function as cultural mediators and public representatives of Islam. Acting as guides in mosques, public speakers, and writers for newsletters and websites, their Islamic activism is pursued beyond the confines of the mosques and classrooms and turns into identity politics in civic centers, TV studios, and cyberspace. Their tendency is to prioritize the male-dominated Muslim community's interests and deflect the attention of broader Swedish society away from the stigmatizing issues of women's rights in Muslim communities. However, internally—i.e. within the Muslim communities—they are questioning and renegotiating existing gender norms. Mosques and Muslim organizations in Sweden are still male-dominated and there are no strong signs that women will soon become prayer leaders or advisors to men. Yet, in more informal situations, backstage among their peers, these women are engaged in reflexive deliberations and are testing alternative norms and practices. They are indeed negotiating for greater visibility and presence within the formal affairs of the Muslim community, including the arena of religious authority.

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## CHAPTER 3.2

### GENDER STRATEGY AND AUTHORITY IN ISLAMIC DISCOURSES: FEMALE PREACHERS IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPT

Hiroko Minesaki

#### *Islamic Revivals and Gender*

Religious revivals are a current global phenomenon that is especially salient in contemporary Islamic communities. The gendered aspects of religious revivals were not addressed in early scholarship but are currently attracting an increasing amount of attention, both generally and with respect to Islam.<sup>1</sup>

The Egyptian case studies in this chapter belong solidly in these wider contexts of religious and Islamic revival. The chapter examines the impact of female Islamic authority and Islamic discourses among women on Muslim women in Egypt. It analyzes the activities of female religious leaders, the meanings of the discourses that they create, and the importance of the concepts of authority, authenticity, and legal literacy to the spread of these discourses.<sup>2</sup> By 'Islamic discourses', I mean Islamic teachings that are propagated in society, or those that

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<sup>1</sup> Important religious studies work on gender and religion includes the work of Ursula King, Kwok Pui-lan, and Laura E. Donaldson. Especially important to this chapter is Saba Mahmood's work on women in Egypt's Islamic Revival. See Ursula King and Tina Beattie eds., *Gender, Religion, and Diversity: Cross-cultural Perspectives* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan eds. *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). I am indebted to Samah and Shaima, all participants, and all informants, for their cooperation and assistance. A part of this research was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Kodansya Noma Asia Africa and Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows, Nos. 07J12952 and 09J0970.

<sup>2</sup> Legal literacy is ability to use the law through knowing one's rights, and understanding the legal process and the legal system. When people, particularly marginalized groups such as women, know what the law guarantees them, they can recognize and challenge injustices much more effectively; see Margaret Schuler and Sakuntala Kadrigamar-Rajasingham, eds., *Legal Literacy: A Tool for Women's Empowerment* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 1992): 21–69. In this paper, I will discuss legal literacy concerning *shari'ah*, not statute law.

are influential under certain conditions. These discourses may (or may not) include citation of Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, or *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

I focus specifically on the work and daily activities of two ordinary female preachers (*dā'iyyah*) and participants in their classes (*dars*) in Cairo and the suburbs. I give a picture of the everyday lives of these women ethnographically, from a grassroots point of view. In the Cairo case study, which focuses primarily on upper and upper-middle-class women, I investigate the conditions enabling women to create Islamic discourses and become religious leaders. In the suburbs case study, which focuses on women of lower socioeconomic status, I further investigate how women, with the assistance of female preachers, apply Islamic discourses to improve the circumstances of their everyday lives.

This chapter is based on cultural anthropological fieldwork carried out during four years and seven months spent in Egypt between September 2000 and January 2008. I worked with the female preacher in the Cairo case study from June 2003 to September 2006 and with the female preacher in the suburbs from November 2005 to September 2006. To protect the informants' privacy, I use fictional names except when referring to eminent persons.

The Egyptian Islamic revival began in the 1970s, after the failure of Nasser's more secular Arab socialism, and it has resulted in increasing Islamic practice as well as increased opportunities for female religious leadership. Two developments are especially important with respect to the development of female religious authority. First, al-Azhar University, Egypt's premier religious institution, began admitting female students in 1961 and allowing them to specialize in religious subjects.<sup>3</sup> Second, the number of Islamic special schools (*Ma'had al-Islāmīyah*, *Ma'had al-Dīn*) providing women with religious training has expanded since 2000, especially in Cairo.

Women who are not qualified to enter al-Azhar University—for instance, those who could not recite the Qur'an well enough—can study Islam in Islamic special schools. These Islamic special schools usually consist of one, two, or four grades. Their various educational aims include training female preachers and fostering the growth of Islamic knowledge. There are wide discrepancies among the schools in equipment, facilities, education content, and class size. There is a

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<sup>3</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 66.

clear correlation between a student's social and economic status and the educational facilities available to them. The popularity of these schools shows that women's desire to acquire Islamic knowledge is widespread at all levels of society in contemporary Egypt. Demand for Islamic education needs to be seen in the context of rising female literacy rates, high academic achievement by women in the cities, and the difficulty experienced by highly educated people in getting jobs.<sup>4</sup>

Other phenomena demonstrating Egyptians' growing interest in Islam include the increasing connection between Islam and consumer culture and the increasing presence of Islam in Egyptians' daily lives. "Islamic goods," including stickers, key holders, ornaments for doors and cars, or other items that carry verses from the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*, are widely circulated in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Another link between Islam and popular culture is that the increasing trendiness of the veil among young women makes it both an Islamic symbol and a fashion statement. Since 2000, various Islamic salutations have become increasingly commonplace in the daily lives of Egyptians. They are used on the telephone, for instance when one person says—before putting down the phone—"there is no god except Allah," and the other speaker replies "Muḥammad is the Prophet of Allah." Another example is the increasing prevalence of minor Islamic observances such as *'aḳīqah*,<sup>6</sup> and offering special prayers in groups in the mosques and streets due to the solar eclipse of March 29, 2006.

### *Gender in Islamic Discourses*

Gender affects the ability of preachers to influence Islamic discourses. Except for sermons on television, female preachers and *'ulamā'* can

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<sup>4</sup> In 2004, the illiteracy rate in Upper Egypt was 43.2% and that in urban governorates was 19.2%. The female illiteracy rate in Upper Egypt was 51.8% and that in urban governorates was 31.1%. The overall literacy rate in Egypt was 34.3%, and the overall female illiteracy rate was 44.8%. The female-male gap (in terms of females as a percentage of males) in literacy (15+) improved from 57.0% in 1992 to 68.3% in 2004. See United Nations Development Programme, *Egypt Human Development Report 2005* (Cairo: United Nations Development Programme and The Institute of National Planning, Egypt, 2005), 27, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Starrett, "The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo," *American Anthropologist* 97 no. 1 (1995): 51-68.

<sup>6</sup> *'Aḳīqah* follows the prophetic tradition where a baby's birth is celebrated by butchering two goats or sheep for a boy, or one for a girl, and sharing the meat with relatives, neighbors, and the poor, giving one-third to each.

instruct women only because men are excluded from female spaces, but male preachers and *'ulamā'* can teach both men and women because women can listen to male preaching in mosque spaces designated for women. Male preachers' sermons are widely open to women in both mosques and on television, and women form an important part of their audiences. For example, 'Amr Khālīd (1967–), one of the most famous preachers of the Arab world, was mainly supported by urban, highly educated women, especially at the beginning of his career in Cairo.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the discourses of preachers are segregated according to sex.

The segregation of Islamic discourses along gender lines is further demonstrated by an event I witnessed at a dinner party in Alexandria in July 2006. The party was hosted by the secretary general of the Islamic Phone,<sup>8</sup> and celebrities and their families were present. There was 'Abra al-Kaḥalāwī (1948–), a professor of al-Azhar University for women, one of the famous female *'ulamā'* in Egypt, and a famous male scholar from Syria. After dinner, as a natural course of events, the two *'ulamā'* started to preach separately. At first, men and women mixed with each other, but, as people moved between the two famous *'ulamā'*, they gradually separated according to their sex. Nobody listened to the preaching given by the *'ālim* of the opposite sex except children. One male participant said later, "I would have liked to hear 'Abra's preaching live, but it was impossible in that situation."

An *'ālim* working for the Galā'a mosque in Ramses district of Cairo provided further confirmation of this practice in a June 2006 interview:

Now, there are some Islamic special schools and lessons for women. There are also Islamic lessons conducted by women for women. In the past, such lessons did not exist at all. Women now understand more and are able to acquire more knowledge about Islam than in the past. There are two merits of these lessons. First, the teachers pay close attention to women's sensibility and to customs peculiar to a region. Second, and more importantly, women would like to keep their secrets between themselves. Female preachers teach Islamic matters without disclosing women's secrets, so participants are not forced to disclose their private affairs to male *'ulamā'* in order to obtain an Islamic legal opinion, for example. That's why these women-to-women lessons are useful.

<sup>7</sup> Issandr El Amrani, "A Sheikh for Modern Living," *Cairo Times* 6, no. 36 (2002), 14–20.

<sup>8</sup> For further details of Islamic Phone, see Minesaki Hiroko, "Gender and Islamic Discourses in Daily Life: Social Function of Fatwa in the Case of Islamic Phone in Egypt," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 77 (2009).

This example shows not only that gender norms separate women's and men's spaces and that these norms create a gender gap that affects the use and consumption of Islamic discourses, but also that male *'ulamā'* recognize the existence of these gender norms and gaps and therefore highly value female preachers and women-to-women lessons.

The segregation of Islamic discourses by gender can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, it means that Islamic discourses proffered by women are restricted to the female sphere, which remains marginalized from mainstream religious discourse. From another point of view, however, female-only spaces mean that women are more at liberty to construct their own Islamic discourses without overt male intervention.<sup>9</sup>

### *Case Study 1: Female Preacher Samah in Cairo*

The case studies in this chapter provide examples of Islamic discourses by women for women. Each case looks at an ordinary female preacher and the women who participate in her lessons. The authority of each of these women depends on her formal Islamic education and connection with *'ulamā'* who authorize their Islamic discourses. As I discuss further at the end of the case studies, these two factors are more important than factors such as charisma, pedigree, or family ties to reputable *'ulamā'*.

These case studies fit within the framework of increasing female interest in Islam over the past two decades that Saba Mahmood has referred to as a "piety movement." Mahmood's ethnography describes the importance of lessons and preaching for women in mosques and— notably for this study—that mosque instruction has the potential to empower women in their daily lives.<sup>10</sup> The cases in this study differ, however, from those discussed by Mahmood because the instructors utilize salons and other non-mosque spaces, which have been increasingly used by upper and upper-middle-class Egyptian women for lessons since the latter half of the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

First, we discuss how Samah, an upper-middle-class preacher from Cairo, and her students create their own Islamic discourses in

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<sup>9</sup> For another example of this phenomenon, see Le Renard, Chapter 1.4, this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 175–79, 182.

<sup>11</sup> El Amrani, "A Sheikh for Modern Living."

women's spaces. Samah is a 1999 graduate of the American University of Cairo's Faculty of Economics who held three or four lessons per week in Cairo at participants' homes from 2003. I observed her lecture every Thursday after the prayer of *maghrib* (after the setting of the sun) over the span of two and a half years. She is from an upper class family, twenty-eight years old, and divorced with a five-year-old son. She was unemployed in 2006, and was living with her parents and son in Zamalek, a high-class residential area. Thanks to her father's job, she was born in the United States and has dual nationality. She spent a year in Michigan as an exchange student during high school. She started her preaching career in 2003 as a volunteer, after spending a year studying in an Islamic special school. In 2005, she started wearing the *niqāb* (face veil).

Before getting married, she worked for a transnational oil corporation, and during business trips she met many Westerners who were free from sexual restraints and slept with anyone they liked; much to her surprise, she felt uncomfortable with this. At this point in time, she was not particularly religious, and did not think much about Islam. She thought that she shared the Western mentality, but she found upon getting to know her Western colleagues that she did not agree with their ideas. At that time, she began thinking about Islam. After leaving her job, she made a pilgrimage to Mecca (*'umrah*) with her older brother, and felt much better for doing so. After this pilgrimage, she became pious and started to study Islam. Generally, the upper class—including her family—is not interested in Islam. Her family tolerated her pious life and activities as a preacher, but they opposed her decision to wear the *niqāb*, saying this was 'too much.'

Women attend Samah's lessons because they were aimed at beginners and easy to comprehend, and because their educational and social background was similar to Samah's, which made them feel comfortable asking questions. They preferred private lessons to mosque lectures because they felt lectures at the mosque were too crowded and included uneducated and unsophisticated participants. Also, they felt that the *'ulamā'* in the mosque did not understand their feelings or background. Participant A said,

Samah has much in common with me; she is not my friend but just like a friend. How can I say, she understands a lot of things. She is close to me; she is 'my *shaykh*.' That's why I come to her lessons.

Another participant said, "I came to this lesson just to make sure that 'I am OK' as a Muslim and feel reassured." Samah neither turns stu-



dents away from her lectures, nor does she pursue those who walk out, but most members remain.

Samah's students were in their twenties, middle or upper-middle class, generally well educated, and were not expected to contribute to their family incomes. Almost none of the participants had an Islamic educational background. Some were from very rich families. Of the twenty to twenty-five attendees at her lectures, I conducted close field-work with eighteen. Fourteen of them acknowledged that their parents paid no attention to Islam and that they were much more knowledgeable about Islam. Six of them taught Islamic concepts to their mothers after lessons, and four of them were disgusted by their parents' lack of interest in Islam. Two-thirds of them—twelve—were educated at private high schools.<sup>12</sup> Eight of these twelve thought that, in private schools, the Islamic curriculum is not adequate and their resulting lack of knowledge made attending these lessons necessary. The most extreme case was participant J, who told me that her Nasserist father worked in the stock market as an investor and had absolutely no interest in Islam, so her family never fasted at Ramaḍān and never prayed. She learned how to pray when she was twenty-two years old.

Ten of the eighteen women had worked, but none of them had to work, nor were expected to contribute to family income; those who chose to work could instead spend their salary on themselves independent of family members. For example, Participant A's sister worked as a cabin attendant for an Egyptian airline in 2000; however, she never contributed to the family income even though her salary was higher than her mother's military survivor's annuity that was the only source of family income. Participant A's sister said, "I do not have to support my mother financially. I do not see the necessity." Her mother said,

I hope that she saves money for the future, but I do not want her to give me money. It is my duty as a parent to provide education and food until marriage.

Participants B and C, who belonged to very rich families, explained their reasons for job hunting as follows: "I have too much free time"

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<sup>12</sup> Most private schools in Egypt are missionary schools where classes are conducted in a foreign language. In recent years, Private Islamic English Language Schools (PIELS) have been established in competition with the current private schools. These PIELS target the pious upper-middle-class children. See Mehmet Ozan Aşik, *Religious Education in Egypt* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & co. Kg, 2008), 100–101. This movement is especially noteworthy with respect to a future Islamic Revival in the upper-middle class.

and “I want to kill time.” Their financial situation was never mentioned. Participants A and D, who were from middle and upper-middle class families, explained their employment as follows: “I need pocket money.” However, they also never thought of supporting their families. This is in line with both common interpretations of *sharī‘ah* as well as the Civil Code of Egypt, which holds men responsible for supporting their wives and unmarried daughters.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their high level of education, however, it is difficult for participants to find steady, suitable work, as the unemployment rate for young, well-educated people in urban areas is extremely high. Except for Participant E, all participants had changed their jobs at some point, and some of them switch their jobs frequently. Most of the participants are dissatisfied with atypical employment and jobs that are not suited to their educational background, which leads to an unwillingness to work.

In Samah’s lectures, participants not only listen but also discuss topics with Samah, creating their own Islamic discourses. Samah provides guidance to her students but is also influenced by their opinions and objections. The creation of Islamic discourses in women’s spaces, such as Samah’s lessons, is important, as these discourses encourage women’s legal literacy concerning *sharī‘ah* and women’s issues, and makes it possible for them to influence the impact of Islamic discourses on their lives.

As Samah and her students have a very close relationship, participants feel comfortable cutting her off and publicly asserting their opinions. For example, when Samah gave a lecture on the rights and duties of husbands and wives, one of the participants felt that Islam gives wives more rights than Samah had indicated. Samah said to her: “I will discuss this issue with my teacher, so leave it for now, and we will talk about this next week.” At the next lecture, Samah changed her interpretation to agree with the participant. Samah told me later that she agreed with the student during the first lesson, but needed to see her teacher to find a suitable sentence from the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*, or a traditional interpretation to support her opinion.

This example is especially interesting, because it shows Samah engaging in legal interpretation (*ijtihād*), albeit in an unorthodox manner.

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<sup>13</sup> Egyptian Parliament, *Law no. 100*, 1920, art. 1.

Customarily, *'ulamā'* engaging in *ijtihād* start from the sources of law (sentences from the Qur'an, *sunnah*, *ijmā'*, *qiyās*) and interpret these sources independent from particular beliefs or needs.<sup>14</sup> Here, Samah did the reverse, starting from her belief that "I am right" and using the sources of law to support this conviction. In this way, Samah and her students collaborate in the creation of Islamic discourses that meet their needs as Egyptian women.

Samah also advises the participants on how to use Islamic discourses and deal with the male *'ulamā'*. She is well connected and is very knowledgeable about male *'ulamā'*, including which are conservative and which are liberal, which are misogynists and which are not, which sympathize with women's social position, and which are good at dealing with inheritance and other family issues. This information greatly assists the participants when they approach *'ulamā'* for *fatwās*, as it helps them sort through the myriad variations in Egyptian Islamic discourses and find answers that are of use to them. In this way, Samah cultivates her students' legal literacy and enables them to make full use of Islamic discourses.

An especially interesting reinterpretation of *sharī'ah* by Samah is related to her support for polygamy and her wish to remarry to a man who already has a wife. This opinion is unusual among Egyptian women, as even especially pious women rarely acquiesce to their husband having another wife. Participant F said,

Polygamy was a special measure for the time and historical situation of the Prophet. I could not stand for my husband to have another wife, even though it is in accordance with *sharī'ah*.

Samah's support of polygamy is not only unusual because her position differs from many Egyptian women but also because of how she reconstructed the concept to suit her personal needs. Creatively, she regards polygamy as a useful system to reduce her burden in married

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, these legal formulations and the method of interpretation belong to a particular historical and social context. In their day-to-day practice of *ijtihād*, *'ulamā'* have not always followed these principles, and sometimes their interpretations have undoubtedly sprung from their or their ruler's needs. On this subject, see Noel J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964); Baber Johansen, *The Islamic Law on Land Tax and Rent* (London: Croom Helm, 1988).

life because it would enable her to share the responsibilities of marriage with another wife. In 2004, she obtained a divorce by *khul'* because her ex-husband did not want to support her activity as a preacher.<sup>15</sup> However, she wants to fulfill all of the obligations given to women by Islam as she interprets it, and this includes marriage. She would not give up being a dedicated preacher for the sake of marriage, however. Her reconstruction of polygamy from a women's point of view to suit her personal needs is part of her strategy for survival and her search for ways to be both a pious woman and an independent person dedicated to Islamic preaching.

*Case Study 2: Female Preacher Shaima in Farm Village Environs*

The case of Shaima, a female instructor in a suburban village, demonstrates how a female preacher assists women to use Islamic discourses as tools for negotiation with others in day-to-day life. Shaima is also an interesting example of how the discourses and activities of female preachers are authorized. For the purposes of our discussion, we should notice how women use the words 'pious' (*mutadayyin*), 'extremist' (*mutashaddid*), and 'deviation' (*bid'ah*).

Shaima's village—henceforth labeled M-village—is located in Lower Egypt and has a population of around 8,000. It is one and a half hours from Cairo by microbus and metro. A number of villagers, including women, make this commute to Cairo for work. This village's overall educational level is lower than that of Cairo; in particular the illiteracy rate is undoubtedly higher than Cairo's, and, as may be expected, there is a gender gap therein. Real GDP per capita (PPP\$) in 2003–4 in Cairo was 7,622.6, while in Lower Egypt it was 3,792.5.<sup>16</sup>

Shaima and her parents were born in M-village. She was twenty-five years old in 2006, and living with her parents, three single sisters, and two single brothers. After finishing high school, she took the *da'wah* (mission) course at a four-grade Islamic special school that fell under the jurisdiction of al-Azhar, located in the Ramses district in Cairo. She

<sup>15</sup> A woman can ask a court to grant her a divorce under the condition of abandoning her property rights that were written into the marriage contract. *Khul'* depends on a 2000 revision of Egyptian law, first issue and arts. 89–91. See Qadri 'Abd al-Fattāh al-Shahāwī, *Mawsū'at Tashrī'āt al-Aḥwāl al-Shakhṣīyah* (Alexandria: Munsha'at al-Ma'ārif, 2001), 244–269.

<sup>16</sup> UNDP, *Egypt: Human Development Report 2005*, 211.

graduated from this school in 2005, and started her career as a preacher for women in M-village, where she was the first female preacher. She was also taught by her paternal uncle,<sup>17</sup> Muḥammad Abū Layla, who is a professor in al-Azhar University's English-language Department of Islamic Studies. Sometimes, she asks his advice in complicated cases that she is unable to resolve on her own.

With respect to work, Shaima was employed at a pharmacy and did some work as a preacher on a volunteer basis. To put this into perspective, in Egypt, almost all religious work is done on a volunteer status, except in the case of official governmental occupations, such as teacher or professor.

In M-village, many old, conservative customs still remain, including those that forbid women to go out without reason, those allocating men control over female family members so as to keep their 'honor,' and those that mean villagers keep watch on their neighbor's behavior. In general, customs found in the village are stricter than those prevalent in Cairo. Shaima's female pharmacy colleague (in her forties, married and lives with husband, has one married daughter in Kuwait and one married son in Cairo) explained her opinion on these differences as follows:

If it is possible, I would like to live with my son in Cairo. I was born here but I do not like this place. How can I say... here, people are saying nasty things about people behind their backs and keeping an eye on each other's movements. I am disgusted by it.

While in M-village, I was not allowed to sit with Shaima's brothers but could only greet them, and when male visitors came to her place, she asked me never to leave the room. Another example occurred when Shaima and I were on the way to the mosque where she preaches. When I began to run because of lateness, Shaima said a word to stop me: *'ayb* (it is shameful). Moreover she continued, "If you run, everyone will look at us. Women must not be watched because of doing something striking." I was surprised because women in Cairo run like me, and no other women have brought up this subject with me.

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<sup>17</sup> Although she uses the term 'paternal uncle' (*'ammī*), he is, in fact, her father's maternal cousin. Egyptians often call paternal relatives belonging to their parents' generation who are close to them 'paternal uncle.' This is an interesting case to show that mental closeness is more important than a real position of kinship in their forms of address.

Shaima runs a great number of social activities in her village, including lectures at the mosque on the Qur'an and the story of the Prophet Muḥammad twice a week, and another lecture on Islam in general once a week. The Qur'an lectures were a good opportunity for adult women to study reading and writing. The purpose of the lectures on the story of the Prophet was to teach Islamic history and morals, especially for children, as well as to give adult women an opportunity to get out from their homes and gain from a sense of solidarity with other women. One participant (in her late fifties and married) said, "It is a pleasure to me to hear Islamic stories in the mosque away from my family. Also I can take a walk around." There are around thirty-five to forty participants in Shaima's lectures, from all generations, ranging from under ten years of age to their sixties; they come and go. They do not interrupt Shaima during lectures, but instead they enjoy just listening.

As I mentioned above, men have control over female family members, especially unmarried women so as to keep their 'honor.' One day, a twenty-two year old participant who was unmarried and living with her parents and unmarried older brother asked me, after spending a day with us at Shaima's house,

It is too late, mom must be angry. Please come to my house with me to allay my mom's rage. I am sure that if she knows I am late because of you, Shaima's Japanese guest, she will not be angry with me.

Her mother worried about her because of Shaima's brother. In another case, a woman phoned Shaima for advice with regard to her father's attempts to force her to marry against her will; she specifically wanted advice from an Islamic point of view. Shaima said to her,

Don't let your family interfere in your life too much. You have the ability to solve your problem, so you can decide for yourself. Never let him order you. We have a lot of Islamic knowledge now, so we can handle this situation. From an Islamic point of view, in your case, he has no right to force you to get married against your will.

Thereafter, she called Shaima again and reported that when she talked with her father about the *shari'ah's* approval of women's right to veto a forced marriage, he clammed up, so this problem was resolved. I observed three other cases where women asked Shaima's advice over the phone while crying. Shaima acknowledges that looking after them and giving advice from an Islamic perspective is one of her most important jobs as a preacher.

It should also be added that she is popular with women as a sewing instructor. Women visit her frequently to have a garment's waist taken in, to have embroidery done, and so on. They enjoy chatting about neighbors, fiancés, and family members, all while doing needlework. Shaima listens to them, throwing in an appropriate comment such as, "this person is wrong, not you," or "the Prophet says that to exchange greetings is important. You had to say hello to him." In such ways is knowledge of Islamic gender norms propagated informally.

In lectures, Shaima teaches female villagers how Islam protects women and how loving Allah means being able to select a path appropriate for protecting their own rights, because Allah does not show mercy to those who submit themselves to ill-treatment. She explains that people who ignore their own rights are acting against Allah's will, because Allah wishes all people to manifest His love for them.

Shaima thinks that many of the strict gender norms in M-village are based on customs, instead of Islam itself, and she passes along this idea to participants in her lessons. Whether this perception is appropriate or not from historical or Islamic legal points of view is not the point here, but only what women in M-village gain from this perception.

Also noteworthy are Shaima's efforts to develop their legal literacy through the use of the terms *mutashaddid* (extremist), *mutadayyin* (pious), and *bid'ah* (a belief or practice for which there was no precedent in the time of the Prophet) in ways that help women in their daily lives.

Women use the word *mutashaddid* in a negative sense to describe dogmatists who interpret Islam strictly, and more specifically to describe men who want to control or regulate women by interpreting Islam strictly. For example, they say, "Saudi Arabian people are so *mutashaddid* because they forbid women to drive a car and force women to wear the *niqāb*." They never say, "they are so *mutadayyin*" in these negative contexts. To take a simple example, Shaima used *mutashaddid* as follows.

Author: "What are your requirements for choosing a spouse?"

Shaima: "First of all, he should be religious and he should not be *mutashaddid*. If a husband is *mutashaddid*, it is terrible. Originally, Islam permitted one to enjoy life: we could listen to music, have a break, and Islam was not a burdensome religion. But *mutashaddid* men have made simple things more complicated, straitlaced; I cannot breathe easily so I never want to get married to a *mutashaddid* man."

Similarly, the women use the word *mutashaddid* frequently to explain whom they do not want to marry. They say: “*mutashaddid* [men] want to control their wives in the name of Islam” and “it is better if a husband is not *mutashaddid* because they want to forbid everything. Even if Islam allows us to do something, they will not.” In contrast, I never heard men use this term in a negative sense, for instance to say, “I don’t want to get married to a *mutashaddidah* [woman].” In both M-village and Cairo, the women used *mutashaddid* in a negative sense, though it was used more often in M-village than Cairo.

On the other hand, *mutadayyin* has a positive sense and is used by both sexes. Men and women use this word to describe people who pray dedicatedly and practice all *sunnah* fasts, for example. In short, this word evokes an ideal Muslim who has all the virtues valued by Islam. There are no gender and area differences in its use. Both sexes say, “I would like to get married to someone [who is] *mutadayyin*.” In 2001, when Samah’s student participant G was single, she said,

Of course, a *mutadayyin* husband is better. Our lifestyles would be similar so I would not get angry with him much. But the most important thing is that I am sure he will never ill-treat me in married life even though at worst he may get married to another woman. Even if a *mutadayyin* husband likes the second wife more than he does me, he will treat us equally because Islam orders men to do so. At the worst, my marital rights laid down under *sharī‘ah* are guaranteed.

Samah’s student participant H, who is considered a pious woman also said, “I can share my values with a *mutadayyin* man.” As can be seen, informants consider men’s piety as evidence of his good personality and behavior.

In short, *mutashaddid* and *mutadayyin* are pair concepts. Female informants use *mutashaddid* to describe men who interpret Islam in ways that are disagreeable to women, and use *mutadayyin* to describe men who interpret Islam in ways that are agreeable to them.

Another notable word is *bid‘ah*. Young people use this word in a negative sense to describe certain customs which are mainly practiced by older people, especially in M-village. The generation gap seen in the use of this word reveals the influence of Islamic revivals in M-village.



Table 1: Usage of these words

	People Using the Word	People Described by the Word	Frequency (Cairo)	Frequency (M-village)	Meaning
<i>mutadayyin</i>	Both sexes	Both sexes	Used often	Used often	Positive
<i>mutashaddid</i>	Mainly women	Men	Used infrequently	Used often	Negative
<i>bid'ah</i>	Both sexes (young people)	Both sexes (to describe aged people)	Used relatively infrequently	Used often	Negative

These regional differences might be dependent on the strictness of gender norms. Gender norms in M-village are stricter, and men here are more conservative than men in Cairo, so female villagers have to negotiate with *mutashaddid* men on a daily basis. In this situation, they reject customs that are oppressive to women by use of the word *bid'ah*, and protest against men's Islamic interpretation by saying "you are so *mutashaddid*," and so on. They use these concepts effectively, with the aid of Shaima's instruction and advice.

It is in this way that Shaima's activities and lectures—rather unexpectedly—empower women, particularly those who have become accustomed to putting their families' needs before their own. Her activities also encourage women to cultivate positive self-images and self-respect. Because Shaima offers advice to women from an Islamic perspective, her advice has been useful in preventing unreasonable interference in her students' lives by family members. Through her lectures, women get correct information about rights and duties in Islam, which raises their legal literacy concerning *shari'ah* and their self-esteem. In particular, Shaima's introduction of the useful concepts of *mutashaddid* and *mutadayyin* has helped in their negotiations with oppressive customs and men. The men living in this area find it very difficult to go against Islamic value systems and ethics; therefore, through her calculated emphasis on Islamic values, she is able to secure results on a broader social level. Her Islamic educational background both authorizes her activities and voice and ensures her impact.

*Re-examination of the Concepts of Authority and Authenticity  
in the Islamic Context*

A comparison of Samah and Shaima's activities demonstrates the social role of female preachers in Egypt and allows us to re-examine the concepts of authority and authenticity in the Islamic context.

Almost all of Samah's students are in their twenties, highly educated, and from the middle or upper-middle class. They have a close and strong relationship with Samah, so they negotiate with her aggressively in shaping useful Islamic discourses and obtaining interpretations of *sharī'ah*. They discuss the legitimacy of their opinions with Samah, and protest Samah's interpretations as subjective. In essence, they have sufficient legal literacy to negotiate with Samah. Samah replies to their questions eagerly, so, through discussion, they actively make or reconstruct Islamic discourses such that their lives are improved.

On the other hand, in Shaima's case participants are from all generations and large in number, so it is not possible to negotiate with her. Her lectures focus on the practical needs of women in M-village, such as reading and writing, and how to use Islamic discourses when negotiating with family members. In this way, Shaima works as a religiously authorized social worker to give useful advice from an Islamic point of view. In these efforts, Shaima uses the terms *mutadayyin*, *mutashaddid*, and *bid'ah* to good effect.

Table 2: Difference between the two preachers

	Occasion	Participant Ages	Form	Level of Participation	Intimacy	Number of Participants	Islamic Discourses
Samah in Cairo	Participants' Homes	Twenties	Lecture and Discussion	High	High	20–25	Reconstruction and Making
Shaima in M-Village	Village Mosque	Children to over sixty	Lecture	Low	Not very high	35–40	Know their rights under the <i>sharī'ah</i>

From the foregoing, we can conclude the following three points. First, Islamic discourses are a useful resource for women, especially in contexts where (interpretations of) Islam influence social norms and practices. Second, women have developed their legal literacy such that they can use Islamic discourses. Third, women have begun to create

their own Islamic discourses. This means that women have become subjective agents with the power to create, re-write, and use Islamic discourses effectively through changing interpretations and learning more about the range of *'ulamā'* who issue *fatwās*. However, the ability of a woman to use Islamic discourses at a particular level depends on factors such as her legal literacy, access to other resources, social level, education, area of residence, and media access. Therefore, women's circumstances are relevant to their approach towards and ability to use Islamic discourses.

It is noteworthy that both female preachers featured in this chapter sought out formal education in Islamic special schools. Women's access to Islamic knowledge has increased significantly during the twentieth century, especially after the 1961 opening of al-Azhar to women increased female access to formal Islamic education. In this same period, rising literacy rates and innovations in publishing technology mean that the interpretation of the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh* are no longer the exclusive property of the *'ulamā'*.<sup>18</sup> However, as access to training in official Islamic education continues to play a major role in the legitimization of many Egyptian Islamic leaders, women—who have long been excluded from many types of participation in Islamic discourses on account of their gender—risk being further marginalized if they remain without formal Islamic education. Their education means that they are a product of the Islamic knowledge system as well as being integrated into it.

Acquiring authenticity is a necessary condition for any leader's Islamic discourse to have authority. Hannah Arendt's work on religion and authority in the pre-modern era notes that

Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. . . . If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Malika Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952–94)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 no. 3 (1999), 371–99.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 92–93.

In the Islamic context, *sharī'ah* itself is the source of authority. Because *sharī'ah* is divine law for Muslims and is therefore authoritative regardless of state context, would-be Islamic leaders strive to obtain the 'right' and 'legitimate' interpretation of *sharī'ah* through formal Islamic education. Only those who are seen to be authoritative—those who follow the right, authentic, and legal ways—are able to re-write norms and concepts through Islamic discourses, which further explains the attraction of formal Islamic education to aspiring female religious leaders.

In Egypt, the official, government-sponsored Islamic educational system is supervised hierarchically by al-Azhar. Association with al-Azhar and involvement in the scholarly networks surrounding it are crucial criteria in the assessment of religious authority in Egypt. In other words, to gain authority, individuals and groups must recognize and be involved with the official Islamic educational system. Personal charisma, pedigree, significant ties to the networks of '*ulamā*', and belonging to a reputable '*ulamā*' family are relatively less important, as they only enhance the authority of individuals who already have a formal Islamic education. It is important to note that social capital such as the academic background, publicity, and academic career that are needed to obtain Islamic authority in Egypt are acquired, not inherent, and that the educational programs through which individuals acquire these elements have been open to women since 1961.

Women have, therefore, taken the initiative to enter the Islamic knowledge system as a strategic decision, because this system offers their teachings and activities authenticity. For Shaima, an official Islamic educational background guarantees the authenticity of her Islamic discourses in the eyes of the residents of M-village. In the relatively conservative M-village, Islam gives Shaima a platform from which she can promote interpretations of Islam that positively impact the place of women in society. Due to her education and authority, as well as the importance of Islam in the social order of the community, Shaima is able to interpret Islam in a way that is advantageous to women, and yet is also seen as authoritative by the whole community, including conservative men.

The gender gap described by Saba Mahmood—where female preachers are only able to work among women, and not among men, while men can preach to both genders—is further reflected in the cases in this chapter, because the profiled preachers and their discourses are

specifically tailored to the needs of female audiences.<sup>20</sup> This gap means that by contrast, male *'ulamā'* and preachers are for both sexes. This contrast reflects a disparity due to gender. This means that Islamic discourses that are produced by women are marginalized. However, as discussed previously, this situation can paradoxically lead to increased freedom for the female preachers, as their discourses are constructed outside of the realm of male intervention and control, which enables female preachers to interpret Islam in a manner advantageous to women.

Through the creation, customization, and translation of Islamic discourses, women have turned Islam, an abstract idea, into a useful tool to resist the various levels and forms of oppression and control by conservative community members. The two female preachers discussed in this article have entered the arena of Islamic discourses and tried to deconstruct or re-write gender norms and concepts. To support their efforts, they aim to acquire authority and authenticity, which are both important for their survival as leaders, whether they are conscious of it or not. In these cases, Islam is of course not only a useful tool but also an important moral and ethical guide. Through their efforts, these leaders embrace the inherent challenges and rich possibilities of being both a pious Muslim and a woman.

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<sup>20</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 65.

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## CHAPTER 3.3

### TRANSLATING TEXT TO CONTEXT: MUSLIM WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN INDONESIA

Pieterella van Doorn-Harder

#### *Introduction*

Indonesian Muslim women have developed various forms of Qurʾān-based activism since the beginning of the twentieth century, when they started to advocate for women's rights to religious and non-religious education.<sup>1</sup> The term 'Qurʾān-based activism' refers to their frame of reference: Qurʾānic injunctions about justice and equality inspire them to become activists, while their adherence to the core messages of the Qurʾān distinguishes them from 'secular' feminists who may or may not be Muslim, and whose actions are informed by social, political, cultural, psychological, and other theories. Over the course of nearly a century, these activities have grown into multi-tiered networks, many of which are connected to movements such as the Muslim organizations of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which are the two largest reformist groups within Indonesian Islam, as well as Qurʾānic schools (*pesantren*),<sup>2</sup> non-governmental organizations

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this chapter are based on work I have published elsewhere: see Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, "Indonesian Women Activists: Spiritual Callings in Times of Change and Adversity," in *Muslim Women's Spirituality*, ed. Zayn Kassam (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); "Controlling the Body: Muslim Feminists Debating Women's Rights in Indonesia," *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1021–43; "Polygamy and Reality," pts. 1 and 2, CRCS Newsletter April–June 2007, pp. 2–3; October–December 2007, pp. 2–3; and Andrée Feillard and Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, "Une nouvelle génération féministe au sein de l'islam traditionaliste: Une exception indonésienne?" [A new generation of feminists at the heart of traditionalist Islam: An Indonesian exception?] *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée: Féminismes islamiques* 128 (2010–12): 113–34.

<sup>2</sup> In contemporary Indonesia there is a difference between a *pesantren* and a *madrasah*: the term *pesantren* is used for the boarding schools where all specialists of Islam were trained before Muhammadiyah set up alternative schools with mixed curricula. The leader of a *pesantren* is drawn from the 'ulamā'; the students, called *santri*, follow detailed studies of the Qurʾān, Tradition, Law, and *fiqh*. Nowadays, most *pesantren* follow NU teachings and some have opened universities as well. In contrast, the *madrasah* system in Indonesia provides formal and non-formal education. The formal

(NGOs), Muslim universities, and political parties. This paper notes the emergence of two distinct activist movements among Indonesian Muslim women—‘Muslim feminists’ and ‘*shari’ah*-minded activists’—and illustrates the ways in which women from both ends of the spectrum use and transmit their religious knowledge to influence social debates. The paper focuses on the contested issue of polygamy,<sup>3</sup> which has become the linchpin of the debates on women’s rights and Islam in Indonesia. In order to illustrate some of the methods and approaches used during these symbolic battles, the paper discusses how Muslim feminists have addressed the subject of polygamy, which in their minds is directly linked to domestic abuse. Such an analysis highlights how, in the Indonesian context, the proliferation of Islamic education is creating space for the emergence of multiple interpretations of Islamic texts, with the result that there is an active division between two sets of Muslim women groups. Both speak from within Islam, but argue for different interpretations. This scenario differs from most of the other Muslim countries covered in this volume, where the struggle is between secular and Muslim feminists. The growth of Muslim organizations in Indonesia has led to a diversity of opinions within the Islamic groups, and this is also reflected in the complexities of female Islamic leadership and its impact on socioeconomic and political life in Indonesia.

### *The Landscape of Indonesian Islam*

Muhammadiyah and NU represent the two largest groups within Indonesian Islam. Founded in 1912, and inspired by reformist movements from the Middle East, Muhammadiyah has advocated a puritanical return to the original sources of Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*. NU was set up in 1926 as a network for so-called traditionalist Muslims who follow the interpretation of Islam that honors *fiqh* and Sufi teachings and accommodates those indigenous practices that are not explicitly forbidden by Islam. Both organizations have several branches for

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side includes kindergartens and high schools that follow a curriculum providing 80 percent general and 20 percent religious education. *Madrasahs* are regulated by the state, and thus award diplomas and require accreditation, while traditional *pesantren* might choose to stay out of the official system. However, a *pesantren* might open a *madrasah* that imparts a few hours of general education to local students per week.

<sup>3</sup> The correct term, of course, is ‘polygyny,’ but I follow Indonesian practice in using ‘polygamy.’



women, conventionally dividing them into the categories of ‘married’ (‘Aisyiyah, and Muslimat NU) or ‘unmarried’ (Nasyiatul ‘Aisyiyah or NA, and Fatayat NU). One of the main activities of these groups has been to teach women the Qur’ān and related sources via a multi-level system of so-called *pengajian*—study groups whose activities range from memorizing short verses from the Qur’ān to academic presentations on, for example, *fiqh* or *tafsīr*. Directly or indirectly, the majority of these study groups are connected to mosques. Either they physically take place in a mosque or they are organized by women’s groups belonging to a certain mosque network. Consequently, such study groups can be held anywhere: in private homes, schools, *madrasahs*, health clinics, open fields, or even while visiting the famous Buddhist shrine of the Borobudur. However, those *pengajian* that are associated with Muhammadiyah or NU are monitored by these two organizations, all of whose members are active in mosques.<sup>4</sup>

The training of women to teach the Qur’ān takes place in a wide variety of settings. Since the 1920s, Muhammadiyah has developed a large network of schools that offer a combined curriculum of religious and non-religious subjects, some of which are akin to *madrasahs*. For centuries, NU has trained its religious specialists in *pesantren*, where students stayed for periods from one to over twenty years to memorize the Qur’ān and study *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and *tafsīr*. These schools used to be for boys only, but began accepting girls in the 1930s. Since Indonesia’s independence in 1945 the number of women students at the *pesantren* has been growing steadily and women-only *pesantren* are flourishing. And, finally, university-level studies in Islamic sciences are offered by the Islamic State Universities, the Muhammadiyah-run universities, and at a number of private institutions. At all educational levels women are prominent members of the student body.

Due to this extensive network of Islamic education for women, Indonesia can boast a critical mass of women religious specialists. While their preaching and teaching mostly takes place in the conventional venues of mosques, *madrasahs*, *pesantren*, and Islamic universities, many of them are also active in the NGOs that produce the education materials used in these venues. In order to understand the current debates among Indonesian Muslims, we have to keep in

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<sup>4</sup> Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur’an* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

mind that a critical juncture in the country's recent history was the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, which ushered in more transparency in government, greater democracy, and the decentralization of power from the central offices in Jakarta to local administrative units. While encouraging moderate expressions of Islam, Suharto had been absolutely against the introduction of *sharī'ah* law. In the wake of the democratic experiment that came into being after he stepped down, several radical activist groups with a pro-*sharī'ah* agenda, which had been silenced (and often jailed) by the repressive regime, burst onto the scene. As a result, during the past decade intense competition has sprung up between what I describe roughly as pro- and anti-*sharī'ah* advocates. The *sharī'ah* itself is a contested legal proposal: there is disagreement over the types of laws that would be applied in a *sharī'ah*-governed state, and it is also unclear who would enforce it and exactly how the legal process—for example, concerning private matters such as dress and intimacy, or concerning criminal cases—would be applied. Especially between 2000 and 2010, several of Indonesia's counties or districts were applying what seemed to be haphazard collections of rules that often affect women.

The anti-*sharī'ah* advocates represent a broad spectrum of Muslims—from conservative to liberal—and are connected to a range of organizations and institutions. In contrast, those advocating for the national application of *sharī'ah* law tend to be closely connected to radical Islamic splinter groups, such as the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) or the now defunct Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), or to certain Qur'an schools and Muslim political parties. In particular, the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), with a membership derived from, among others, the reformist Muhammadiyah organization, has lobbied to advance claims for imposition of *sharī'ah* using strategies similar to those of the more liberal advocates for women's rights. These pro-*sharī'ah* activists are not only vocal and very well organized, but also dominate several of the parliamentary committees that draft laws affecting women's freedom and agency.<sup>5</sup>

This assertiveness of pro-*sharī'ah* advocates within the formal government sphere has had repercussions for anti-*sharī'ah* advocates who argue for Qur'an-based religious rights for women, but who are

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the political aspects of this competition, see Feillard and Van Doorn-Harder, "Une nouvelle génération féministe."

against national enforcement of *sharī'ah* law. I refer to these activists as 'Muslim feminists' or 'Muslim activists,' while those advocating for enforcement of *sharī'ah* I call 'sharī'ah-minded activists.'

### *Religious Competition*

The religious interpretations that are reshaping Islamic thinking in Indonesia do not conform to conventional notions of 'traditionalism' or 'reformism';<sup>6</sup> rather, new ideological frameworks are emerging that both divide and unite. For example, pro-*sharī'ah* Muhammadiyah and NU members have united within the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), where they now openly advocate their agenda. At the same time, anti-*sharī'ah* members of Muhammadiyah and NU have started to cooperate, and have joined forces, for example, in resisting the pro-polygamy and pro-*sharī'ah* lobby. Thus, the fact that pro- and anti-*sharī'ah* positions cut across organizational, educational, communal, and gender lines has created new forms of intra-Muslim cooperation in which conventional divisions are fading.

We can also observe interesting ideological developments within the organizations themselves: while many young Muhammadiyah members have joined Islamist-minded political parties, male and female Muslim activists who base their actions on reinterpretations of Qur'ānic texts have become influential in the struggle against the nationwide application of *sharī'ah*. Teaching in Qur'ān schools and Islamic universities, they influence thousands of young Muslim minds. Observers of these trends within Indonesian Islam have been struck by the diversity among the movements, with the American anthropologist Robert Hefner, for example, referring to them as "among the most intellectually far-ranging in the world."<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, secular feminists have become aware of the importance of religious knowledge to counter the demands of

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<sup>6</sup> For a review of the differences between the formation of female Islamic leadership in traditionalist and reformist movements in Indonesia, see Van Doorn-Harder, "Competing in Goodness: Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama," chap. 2 in Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Introduction," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27; see also Robert W. Hefner, ed. *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 62–63.

*sharī'ah*-minded activists. Realizing that Islam is a crucial factor in implementing any form of social change in Indonesia, a country with over two hundred million Muslims, secular and Muslim feminists have started to join forces. Some groups are now trying to bridge the frustrating and decade-long gap between Muslim and secular activism by organizing religious courses. For example, feminists at the Fahmina Institute for Religious and Social Studies and Community Development in Cirebon have produced a special course on gender and Islam, designed for activists who lack basic Islamic knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Muslim feminists have been forced to become involved in struggles over topics they considered more or less settled. For example, they now have to react to pro-*sharī'ah*-minded groups that lobby for the application of local *sharī'ah* rules (called *perda*, short for *peraturan daerah*), wage public relations campaigns to promote the practice of polygamy, and push agendas which have consequences for women's bodies, agency, and movement in the public sphere. As a result, Muslim feminists have been forced to adapt their agendas. Thus, we can discern two major trends in Muslim feminist activities. On the one hand, Muslim feminists continue to reinterpret religious texts regarding issues that find little opposition from radical groups since they concern basic human conditions on which all agree. Everyone agrees, for example, that victims of the many disasters that strike the country should receive all types of aid. Qur'ānic-based activism against human trafficking equally encounters little objection from either pro- or anti-*sharī'ah* activists. At the same time, Muslim feminists are drawn into controversial topics to which not just *sharī'ah*-minded men but also *sharī'ah*-minded women object. Many such issues are directly related to women's morality and decency and various aspects of the marriage law.

### *Feminist Movements*

Although the women's branches connected to the Muslim organizations have engaged in mosque-related activities for decades, the foundations for their contemporary activities were laid during the 1970s when Muslim leaders sought to modernize the curriculum of

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<sup>8</sup> K. H. Husein Muhammad et al., *Dawrah Fiqh Concerning Women: Manual for a Course on Islam and Gender* (Cirebon: Fahmina Institute, 2006).

the Institutes for Higher Islamic education (IAIN).<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, the traditionalist NU organization began to initiate discussions concerning the societal significance and role of traditionalist Islam and about possible *fiqh* reform in order to make it a transformative force in society. One of the questions posed was how this exercise could strengthen women's rights.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, in the women's studies centers (Pusat Studi Wanita) which had opened at Islamic universities, women studied the work of an array of Muslim scholars ranging from Fatima Mernissi to Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im.<sup>11</sup>

Inspired by the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, feminist activists translated the conference's recommendations into Islamic-based projects such as those addressing the plight of women guest-workers and the related issue of human trafficking. Ultimately, government policies led to several discreet projects, including the Islamic-based project on women's reproductive rights which evolved from resistance against the government's program on birth control.<sup>12</sup> Discussions about the marriage law—which since the 1950s has been a battlefield between different Muslim views on the woman's proper role—yielded an alternative draft written by feminists, causing a storm

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<sup>9</sup> The Indonesian state runs three forms of higher Islamic education institutions where future leaders and scholars of Islam are trained for government and non-government service: State Islamic Universities (Universitas Islam Negeri, UIN), which are universities with departments where students can study Islam in great detail and become scholars of Islam; Institutes for Higher Islamic Education (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, IAIN), with its local branches; and the Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN), which are comparable to community colleges that only offer religious subjects. In 2007 there were four universities, fifteen IAIN, and thirty-two STAIN. See Hiroko Kinoshita, "Islamic Higher Education in Contemporary Indonesia: Through the Islamic Intellectuals of al-Azharite Alumni," Kyoto Working Papers on Area Studies 79 [G-COE Series 81, August 2009] (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University), available from the website of the Global COE Sustainable Humanosphere project, [www.humanosphere.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp](http://www.humanosphere.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp).

<sup>10</sup> Van Doorn-Harder, "Controlling the Body." See also M. B. Hooker, *Indonesian Islam: Social Change through Contemporary Fatawa* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 36–37; and Van Doorn-Harder, "Polygamy and Reality."

<sup>11</sup> Some of these influential thinkers are: the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, the Pakistani Riffat Hasan and Asma Barlas, the Indian Asghar Ali Engineer, the Iranian Ziba Mir Hosseini, the Sisters in Islam (SIS) in Malaysia, and the American Amina Wadud. To further their hermeneutical skills, feminists consulted the scholarship of innovative scholars such as the Sudanese Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im, the Egyptians Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Hasan Hanafi, the Moroccan Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, the South African Farid Esack, and the French/Algerian Muhammad Arkoun.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalia Sciortino, Lies Marcoes-Natsir, and Masdar Mas'udi, "Learning from Islam: Advocacy of Reproductive Rights in Indonesian Pesantren," *Reproductive Health Matters* 4, no. 8 (November 1996): 86–96.

of debate especially regarding issues such as polygamy and full equality between spouses.<sup>13</sup>

One of the clearing-houses for Islam-based advocacy for women's rights was the Center for the Development of *Pesantren* and Society (P3M). Set up in 1987 to cater to teachers and students in the traditionalist boarding schools, its director, Masdar Mas'udi, together with Muslim feminist Lies Marcoes-Natsir, developed a series of workshops for leaders of *pesantren* focusing on the reinterpretation of women-related *fiqh*. For over a decade the two toured the country organizing dozens of workshops for thousands of *pesantren* leaders and teachers.<sup>14</sup>

Among others, the P3M projects inspired the Fatayat NU (the NU branch for young unmarried women) to explore women's reproductive rights and domestic violence. During their 1991 national congress it was decided that Fatayat chapters in several provinces would research marital problems and forms of domestic abuse that were prevalent in their areas. Abuse was especially found in forced marriages, when the bride was underage, and in polygamous unions. Via frequent workshops and the distribution of pamphlets, the Fatayat chapters raised awareness about problems such as teenage pregnancy, illegal abortion, and marital rape. These activities inspired several of its leaders to push the limits concerning taboo topics such as abortion. In 1998, the national Fatayat office, led by Maria Ulfa Anshor, launched a program which provided grassroots education in eleven provinces regarding reproductive health. Abortion was especially highlighted as a problem many women had to face at some point during their reproductive years. It was common knowledge that a large percentage of maternal mortality was the result of unsafe abortions, undertaken as a last resort by desperate women struggling with poverty, failed birth control, incest, or rape.<sup>15</sup>

By the year 2000, P3M's efforts had resulted in a project to reinterpret the text concerning the status of women in Islam that was most widely used in *Pesantren* education. Written by Kiai Nawawi

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<sup>13</sup> TIM Pengurusutamaan Gender, *Pembaharuan Hukum Islam: Counter Legal Draft Kompilasi Hukum Islam* [Renewal of Islamic law] (Jakarta: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> See Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Ulfah Anshor, *Fikih Aborsi: Wacana Penguatan Hak Reproduksi Perempuan* [Abortion-related *fiqh*: A discourse to strengthen women's reproductive rights] (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2006), 42.

(1813–93), an Indonesian scholar who had spent much of his adult life in Mecca, the so-called *Kitāb ‘uqūd al-lujjain* (Book on the contract between couples) had transmitted extreme misogynistic views to students for over a century. The text had become a virtual blueprint for the *pesantren* teachings that women should live in total submission to men. A group of scholars calling themselves *Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning* (FKKK) analyzed the text for several years and concluded that seventy-five percent of the traditions Nawawi had used as foundations for his arguments were false or weak.<sup>16</sup> In 2002, the findings were published in a book called *Wajah Baru Relasi Suami-Istri* (The new face of the relations between spouses). Notable in this context is how the authors have tried to avoid accusations of *bid’ah* (innovation): their team consisted of male and female scholars, most of whom were trained in the Middle East. The work was translated into Arabic for proper use in the *pesantren* where texts considered authoritative are in Arabic. The book was made available through bookstores, and free copies were sent to all *pesantren* within the NU network.

As a follow-up to these academic projects, *pesantren*-based centers for victims of domestic violence, called Puspita (a contraction of Pusat Perlindungan bagi Wanita), were launched, and in 2009 seven *pesantren* opened feminist institutions, called Puan Amal Hayati. Seven schools is a mere drop in the ocean of Indonesia’s 14,000 registered *pesantren*, but with the distribution of 1,500 copies of the journal *Tantri*, traditionalist Muslim feminists estimate that their ideas reach 7,500 to 10,000 *pesantren* instructors.<sup>17</sup>

Both Puan and *Tantri* have engaged in the debate on polygamy, which has gained their leaders criticism from *sharī’ah*-minded activists and conservative leaders within the *pesantren* who forbid reinterpreting the Qur’ān in their schools. Muslim feminists ascribe this persistent attitude to, among others, the fact that some of Indonesia’s main guiding bodies in Islamic matters have become populated by *sharī’ah*-minded legal scholars. In particular, the success of the *sharī’ah*-minded activists in co-opting the Indonesian Council of Ulema (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) has had far-reaching repercussions, since this body influences the mindset of millions. A 2002 survey by the Center for

<sup>16</sup> Anshor, *Fikih Aborsi*, 196.

<sup>17</sup> Feillard and Van Doorn-Harder, “Une nouvelle génération féministe,” p. 122. See especially the interview by Andrée Feillard with Shinta Nuriyah Abdurahman Wahid.

Research on Islam and Society (PPIM), based in the State Islamic University in Jakarta, found that among 312 randomly selected villages and urban areas in Indonesia, two-thirds of Indonesian Muslims believed that the nation should live according to the rules of *sharī'ah* and that the state should enforce these rules.<sup>18</sup> However, only thirty-six percent of the respondents held the opinion that the state should enforce veiling of women, and even fewer were in favor of applying the *sharī'ah* criminal code.<sup>19</sup>

Although the primary goal of Muslim feminists is to transmit their ideas to teachers of traditionalist *pesantren*, they also aim to reach the majority of students at Indonesia's Islamic State Universities. Most of these universities now have centers for women's studies where part of the staff consists of Muslim feminists holding research posts. Their goal is to infuse the universities' curricula with gender awareness. Research results are frequently published in local and national media, which helps keep discussion alive: for example, a poll carried out by the Women's Study Center at the Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta found that the majority of women interviewed about polygamy supported the practice, but never wanted to be in a union as one of many wives (*dimadu*) themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the venues of *pesantren* and Islamic Universities, Muslim feminists convey their ideas via the many platforms in their respective home organizations, addressing participants in national meetings as well as those attending Qur'ānic studies at local mosques. Further, they have started to spread their message via newspapers, radio and TV, novels, songs, and poetry. While strong in their home bases, their voices are often drowned out in the public media where messages need to be simplified and packaged for large audiences. However, these media activities are limited: as scholars of religion, few Muslim feminists have the skills required to move confidently in the arenas of film, TV, or even radio, whereas *sharī'ah*-minded activists have created scores of new media outlets that are aired and distributed free or for nominal fees. While competing for the ear of the people, both

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<sup>18</sup> The survey was published in the magazine *Tempo*, December 23–29, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Suhadi, "Discourse and Counter-discourse on the Implementation of Shariah Issues in the Post-Suharto Era in Indonesia" (paper read at a meeting of the Indonesia Study Group, Australian National University, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, October 8, 2003), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Inayah Rohmaniyah, July 26, 2007.



sides experience how demanding the audiences can be. Especially in controversial debates such as those concerning polygamy, stars can rise and crash to earth at great speed.

*The Polygamy Debates among Shari'ah-minded Activists*

The issue of polygamy has emerged as crucial in the battleground between those favoring and those rejecting the application of the *shari'ah*. Historically, it was not just practiced by Muslims: several indigenous cultures in Indonesia allowed forms of polygamy as well. Before the fall of Suharto, however, only men belonging to certain circles—such as leaders of conservative *pesantren*, or film and pop stars—openly had more than one wife.

According to the current marriage law (dating from 1974), the basis of marriage is monogamy. Polygamy is restricted to specific circumstances only, such as the inability to conceive or the physical incapacity to fulfill one's spousal duties. Since the permission of the first wife is a prerequisite to marrying a second time, many polygamous marriages are contracted in secret. It took years to overcome the fierce resistance from conservative Muslims before the current law could be accepted. The monogamy clause was officially challenged in 2007 by an individual in Jakarta whose application to marry a second wife failed.<sup>21</sup> The Constitutional Court's ruling on this case, which reconfirmed the legal position of the monogamous nature of marriage, did not deter the pro-polygamy lobby. Those promulgating polygamy assume that a change in the marriage law is bound to occur naturally in tandem with the eventual application of *shari'ah* law. While the basis for the main argument for polygamy remains the Qur'anic text, religious injunctions will not suffice to bring about a change of heart among the Indonesian Muslim public and create a commitment to the practice. Rejection of polygamy is also based on the fact that people witness many of these marriages failing. Feminist scholar Nina Nurmila's fieldwork findings corroborate these impressions.<sup>22</sup> She found

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<sup>21</sup> Sally White and Maria Ulfah Anshor, "Islam and Gender in Contemporary Indonesia: Public Discourses on Duties, Rights and Morality," in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), 147, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

that marriages with more than one wife seldom work out and are rife with domestic problems and abuse. Women who do accept the practice often come from *shari'ah*-minded families or groups; but this background evidently does not guarantee commitment to these types of unions, as in the long run the majority of women (and sometimes men) opt for a divorce. As a result, its promoters need to apply various tactics to convince women (and men) of their vision.

Theoretical studies of fundamentalism maintain that part of the attraction of Islamist movements resides in their emphasis on community, order, moral discipline, and demarcation of boundaries.<sup>23</sup> While critiquing the surrounding culture and dominant religious elites, such movements articulate their agendas within their own social environments, locating themselves in particular social spaces. Exploring a theory of cultural articulation, Robert Wuthnow and Matthew Lawson relate this ordering of social relations to the analytical dimensions of beliefs, values, and symbols that believers should follow. Yet the boundaries thus created are not set, but “determined by the questions being asked by the observer.”<sup>24</sup> This fluidity of boundaries implies competition. Indonesian Islamists have varying agendas, just as Islamists in other places do; however, in competing for new followers, they use the same strategies and similar ideological constructs as their opponents.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the issue of polygamy has not only become a vehicle to test the readiness for the application of Islamic law, but also a test case of how to promote and ‘socialize’ *shari'ah*-inspired practices. Though acknowledging that it is a Qur’anic injunction, many Indonesians are of a divided mind concerning marrying more than one wife.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson, “Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 22. Wuthnow applies the so-called theory of cultural articulation to the phenomenon of fundamentalist movements.

<sup>24</sup> Wuthnow and Lawson, “Sources,” 23, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Cornell, “*Mimesis* and the Logic of Repetition in Islamic Extremism: The Cosmic in the Works of Sayyid Qutb and the Brethren of Purity” (unpublished manuscript, 2009). Cornell refers to the works of Henri Lefebvre, René Girard, and Gilles Deleuze on pseudo-repetitions, mimetic rivalry, and the artistic use of repetition, arguing that Islamic extremist movements use these tactics to create and delineate their agendas.

<sup>26</sup> For example, a poll carried out by the Women’s Study Center at the Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta found that the majority view on polygamy was: ‘polygamy: yes; being one of many wives: no.’ Interview with Inayah Rohmaniyah, July 26, 2007.

Towards the end of 2006, one particular event greatly raised the profile of this issue: the ‘mega-star’ preacher Abdullah Gymnastiar, or Aa Gym, was found to have a second wife by secret marriage. Expressing the delight of many Islamists, an Islamic court in West Sumatra promptly gave him the ‘polygamy award.’<sup>27</sup> But to the Indonesian public this was a sobering moment. Women, the majority of his audience, were most acutely affected by this news. Taking his cue from Sufi doctrines concerning the purification of one’s heart as a prerequisite to drawing nearer to God, Aa Gym had built a media and business empire by preaching management of the heart (*manajemen qolbu*) as the prime Islamic virtue. Via his autobiography, or *qolbugrafi*, he cast himself as the embodiment of this virtue, which he expressed in public by serenading his wife Ninih with love songs.<sup>28</sup>

The news of the second marriage was devastating to Ninih, and the task fell to her to save the image of the perfect family with seven children that her husband used to praise in public. When addressing the crowds of perplexed journalists about the second marriage, she referred to the virtue of *ikhlaṣ* (full dedication to God). Sachiko Murata and William Chittick explain this core Islamic virtue as the ‘human embodiment’ of *tawḥīd* (belief in oneness of God), by purifying one’s religion for God alone.<sup>29</sup> It implies selfless and sincere devotion, and working purely for God without aspiring to outward appreciation or benefit. Ninih referred to this virtue as follows: “This is the most difficult decision in my life; I am forced to practice *ikhlaṣ*. God does not want that His servant has any other love besides Him. But I consider it as a difficult test and hope that God will bless me.”<sup>30</sup>

To help her accept her husband’s choice, female leaders from the pro-*shari‘ah* Prosperous Justice Party have supported Ninih with religious guidance, stressing the virtue of sacrifice and helping her to navigate the intense media attention. Although this is not advertised

<sup>27</sup> “Poligami Award,” *Indonesia Matters* website, December 17, 2006, <http://www.indonesiamatters.com/1014/poligami-award/>.

<sup>28</sup> For an excellent analysis of the phenomenon of Aa Gym, see James B. Hoesterey, “Marketing Morality: The Rise, Fall and Rebranding of Aa Gym,” in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), 90–107.

<sup>29</sup> Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 279, 282.

<sup>30</sup> From the website FaithFreedom.org. <http://indonesia.faithfreedom.org/forum/aa-gym-menikah-lagi-t8205/>. Translated by the author. Four years later Ninih filed for divorce.

in its political program, according to PKS Member of Parliament Mrs. Aan Rohana, one of the party's goals is to "familiarize or socialize the practice of polygamy among Indonesian Muslims."<sup>31</sup> She sees it as a tool to protect women and to pave a woman's road to heaven. "Every spouse has to sacrifice herself and God will reward her. If it is the will of God [*taqdir*] a wife cannot reject it. If she manages to create a harmonious family, she has created a source of blessing."<sup>32</sup>

Another female PKS Member of Parliament, Mrs. Yoyoh Yusroh (d. 2011), defended polygamy during a national TV debate as "a social choice and solution." She considered the practice of great help to widows since "women need a husband and companion...they need to be guided and educated." In her view, polygamy opened up immense spiritual benefits to the husband since he can make his wives happy, help them, and bear their responsibilities.<sup>33</sup> During the same debate, one of Indonesia's most prominent promoters and practitioners of polygamy, Mr. Puspo Wardoyo, also assigned the greater share of spiritual power to men since, in his view, a woman's *taqwa* (piety) depends on her husband.

In spite of her high political position, Mrs. Yoyoh joined Mr. Puspo in presenting reductionist views regarding women's agency. They underscored the fact that the practice provided men with extra opportunities to excel in their spiritual struggles, and assumed that a man's spiritual struggle and burden is heavier than a woman's.

However, not all Indonesians were convinced by these arguments: Aa Gym's popularity plummeted after it became known that he had a second wife. He lost over eighty percent of his audience, and his female fans started an 'instant message' campaign against him. Some

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mrs. Aan Rohana, June 26, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Rachmat Ramadhana al-Banjary and Anas al-Djohan Yahya, *Indahnya Poligami: Menangkap Hikmah di Balik Tabir Poligami; Mengapa Aa Gym Menikah Lagi?* [The beauty of polygamy: Capturing the wisdom behind the screen (veiling) polygamy; Why did Aa Gym marry again?] (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Al-Furqan, 2007), 111.

<sup>33</sup> The debate was aired as "Poligami: Siapa Takut? Perdebatan Seputar Poligami" [Polygamy: Who is afraid? A debate concerning polygamy], SCTV, December 5, 2006. The program is available on DVD and summarized in a booklet with the same title edited by Eka Kurnia (Jakarta: QultumMedia, 2007). The participants in the debate were: Mrs. Yoyoh Yusroh, Member of Parliament for the PKS party; Puspo Wardoyo, married to four wives and the president of Poligami Indonesia, an organization that promotes polygamy; Musdah Mulia, a women's rights activist and professor of Islamic Studies; and MM Billah, a human rights activist and member of the Indonesian Commission for Human Rights, KOMNAS HAM.

writers considered the public outcry to be a blessing, due to the spiritual struggle it unleashed for Aa Gym himself.<sup>34</sup> His high profile, of course, remains an asset to the PKS in preaching its 'soft Islamist' message. It does not advocate *sharī'ah* law officially, but works towards its implementation by recruiting young Muslims and 'socializing' young women into accepting the practice of polygamy.<sup>35</sup>

### *Anti-polygamy Feminist Activism*

The view that women are spiritually weak, espoused by the advocates of polygamy, is curious at best in the Indonesian context, which has a long and strong history of female Muslim religious leaders whose sermons and teachings have influenced the devotional and spiritual practices of millions of women and children. As a result, Muslim feminists are revisiting and refining their arguments as to why they oppose a practice that the Qur'ān allows. They no longer rely solely on the arguments that the Qur'ān admonishes the husband to practice justice towards all women, or that several of the Prophet Muḥammad's marriages aimed at protecting widows and divorcees (Aa Gym's stunningly beautiful second wife is a divorced former soap opera star).

While the pro-polygamy arguments of *sharī'ah*-minded activists such as Mrs. Yoyoh and Mr. Puspo are based on psychology and popular culture, they also have hidden economic, demographic, and social agendas. Seldom do they refer to the Qur'ān, apart from quoting verses that allow the practice of polygamy. At the other end of the spectrum, Muslim feminists such as Musda Mulia, professor at the Islamic State University in Jakarta, cite the authority of the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and *tafsīr* to build their arguments against the practice. They have mined the *ḥadīth* for teachings about equality within marriage, the goal of marriage, and gender justice.<sup>36</sup>

The voices and methods of those advocating against polygamy are just as numerous and diverse as those lobbying for it. One of their most striking arguments is that they consider polygamy to be a form

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, al-Banjary and Yahya, *Indahnya Poligami*.

<sup>35</sup> On recruitment techniques, see, for example, Ulla Fionna, "PKS Gets Serious About Recruitment in Malang," *Inside Indonesia* 92, April–June 2008, <http://insideindonesia.org/>.

<sup>36</sup> Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Hadith and Gender Justice: Understanding the Prophetic Traditions* (Cirebon: Fahmina Institute, 2007).

of domestic violence, or, more precisely, psychological abuse. Moreover, they claim that it is against the Qur'anic teaching that, according to their interpretation, asserts the spiritual equality of the sexes. Referring to the Qur'an, Fahmina scholar Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir claims that the arguments against polygamy presented in the Qur'an outnumber the arguments for it. Although one verse allows it, two remind men that they have to be just, warning of the difficulties of this and saying that in reality men "are never capable of doing justice to their wives even if they try hard."<sup>37</sup>

Several activists, both men and women, have also engaged in the campaign against polygamy, driven by personal experience or by situations they have witnessed in their own circles. For example, Ruqayya, a *pesantren* teacher, was the victim of domestic abuse and decided to speak up when her husband took a second wife. Her case was taken up by Rahima, the Center for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights Issues in Jakarta. Ruqayya's and similar cases became the inspiration for the foundation of Puan Amal Hayati, the *pesantren*-based organization which provides Islamic counseling for victims of domestic violence. Ruqayya has become a high-profile voice against domestic violence and polygamy, encouraging women with her trademark songs, created from Qur'anic verses, that stress equality between men and women.

Much of this struggle centers on the interpretation of Qur'anic injunctions on marriage. While Islamists read in texts such as *sūrah* 4:3 (*al-Nisā'*) that marrying more than one wife is a God-given right, activists point at the texts that remind men to practice justice towards all their wives. These interpretations have inspired activist scholars such as Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin and Musdah Mulia to reconsider the nature of marriage itself.

Musdah Mulia is one of the main architects of an alternative draft for the Indonesian marriage law, which starts with the statement that 'the foundation of marriage is monogamy.' The current marriage law, with its conditional acceptance of polygamy, also considers the wife to be her husband's helper. The alternative draft, by contrast, asserts that "Marriage is practiced from the principles of voluntary choice,

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<sup>37</sup> Abdul Kodir, "Even the Prophet Performed a Loyal Monogamy," published on the website of the Liberal Islam Network, <http://islamlib.com/en/article/even-the-prophet-performed-a-loyal-monogamy/>.

equality, justice, wellbeing, pluralism, and democracy.”<sup>38</sup> Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, one of the researchers at the Institute for Gender Studies at the Islamic State University in Yogyakarta, has suggested that marriage not be considered a legal contract with the potential of being interpreted as a master–servant relation, but as a form of worship (*ibādah*). To be valid, acts of worship have to be performed voluntarily and equally require full dedication to God (*ikhlas*).<sup>39</sup>

During the TV discussion with Mrs. Yoyoh and Mr. Puspo, Musdah Mulia argued (inspired by the classical legal scholar Abu Hanifah), that polygamy was in fact *ḥarām* (illicit), since the practice led to excesses that made it comparable to “praying in clothes obtained through corruption.”<sup>40</sup> The ‘excesses’ in this case referred to findings from a research project which indicated four prevalent negative consequences from having more than one wife: domestic violence, child neglect, family conflicts, and a higher risk of contracting venereal diseases.<sup>41</sup>

In her writings Musdah Mulia has suggested that the core message of the Qur’ān is God’s *tawḥīd*, His Oneness. In her view “*Tawḥīd* is the basis for human devotion to God, and guides humankind on how to establish harmonious relationships among themselves.”<sup>42</sup> *Tawḥīd* liberated human beings from other powers and put them on the path of continuous liberation that evolves via gradual changes. Thus, at a time when men were permitted unlimited numbers of women, the Qur’ān limited the number of wives to four. At the same time, the Qur’ān stresses the principle of justice and indicates that it is almost impossible to practice justice when married to more than one spouse. As proof, Musdah Mulia and other activists point to *sūrah* 4:129: “Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire.” Connecting the idea of *tawḥīd* with that of justice as presented in the Qur’ān, Musdah Mulia argues that “The limitation to four wives was a first step toward the eventual goal of monogamous

<sup>38</sup> TIM Pengurusutamaan Gender, 2004, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, “Marital Rape, Suatu Keniscayaan?” [Marital rape, a certainty?], in *Islam dan Konstruksi Seksualitas*, ed. Edy S. Santoso (Yogyakarta: PSW IAIN, 2002), 128.

<sup>40</sup> Kurnia, *Poligami*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Kurnia, *Poligami*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Musdah Mulia, “*Tauhid*: A Source of Inspiration for Gender Justice,” in Husein Muhammad et al., *Dawrah Fiqh*, 39. See also Van Doorn-Harder, “Controlling the Body.”

marriage as the best guarantee of justice,”<sup>43</sup> and thus concludes that “the Qur’ān favors monogamy over polygamy.”<sup>44</sup> *Tawhīd* eradicates all forms of discrimination and subordination, which is also shown in the respect the Qur’ān shows for a woman’s role as mother, while it “is a reflection of God’s justice that he takes a woman’s physical and mental condition into consideration.”<sup>45</sup> Only after presenting these religious arguments does Musdah Mulia consider the social and psychological consequences of a polygamous marriage, many of which she considers to be psychological violence that destroys a woman’s self-respect.<sup>46</sup>

In part, these last arguments emerge from research on and working with victims of domestic violence. Although such violence is widespread in Indonesia, this is a new area of study and action on a topic that used to be strictly taboo. Women suffer from physical abuse in nearly one-quarter of marriages, and report psychological abuse in nearly half. To address their plight, in 1993 Muslim feminists launched the Rifka Annisa organization to provide legal, physical, psychological, and religious advice for Muslim women. Using newspaper columns, a website, a telephone hotline, and by training special counselors, Rifka Annisa educated medical doctors, judges, and other professionals who worked with such domestic problems.

However, after advocating tirelessly for over a decade, the leaders of Rifka Annisa, as well as those of other organizations such as the Fatayat, realized that at a certain point simply creating awareness was not enough, and that they needed to take their struggle to a legal level if they ever wanted to overcome the limits of their advocacy activities.

### *Legalizing Religious Arguments*

Muslim feminists in many countries have realized that their quest to transform mindsets and societal structures can only succeed if national laws are adapted to modern interpretations of Islam and enforced. Especially in the Indonesian situation, where *sharī‘ah*-minded activists are trying to influence local and national lawmakers, the political

<sup>43</sup> Mulia, “*Tauhid*,” 49.

<sup>44</sup> Musdah Mulia, *Islam Menggugat Poligami* [Islam criticizes polygamy] (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2007), 100.

<sup>45</sup> Mulia, “*Tauhid*,” 56, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Mulia, *Islam Menggugat Poligami*, chap. 3.



aspect of translating activism into law has become a crucial step towards social transformation.

In 2004, Rifka Annisa's lobbying resulted in a national law being passed that allowed victims of domestic violence to bring their case to court.<sup>47</sup> Since domestic abuse can result in unwanted pregnancy, the Fatayat NU connected it with the practice of abortion. In this context, the Fatayat NU joined the secular Women's Health Foundation (YKF) in lobbying for laws that would provide women with access to better care and protection against traditional healers and uncertified medical personnel.<sup>48</sup> In order to guarantee backing from their members, the Fatayat first studied the rulings of authoritative Muslim scholars on the subject and concluded that, in principle, many scholars would allow it within the limits of the time constraints prescribed. To allow women personal choice, National Chair Maria Ulfa published these findings in a book that has become readily available all over the archipelago.<sup>49</sup> In order to get the backing of the male NU authorities, in 2002 the Fatayat requested a *fatwá* from the NU *fatwá* board sanctioning the procedure. At the time, they failed: in the face of the pro-*sharī'ah*-minded lobby that encourages women to have as many children as possible, the majority of male NU leaders did not dare provide legal advice. Yet the lobbying of religious and non-religious groups continued, and in September 2009 Indonesia's parliament accepted a new law. As with the one on domestic violence, it is not perfect and does not address all the demands activists made. Thus, the struggle continues to study more texts and refine the arguments deployed by the movement.

Seeing human trafficking as another form of domestic abuse, the Fatayat NU also started to lobby against this modern-day form of slavery. It had come to the Fatayat's attention in 2001 when one of the speakers at a workshop on child labor described how middle-men recruited teenage girls from small villages. The majority of these girls

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<sup>47</sup> Rifka Annisa, *Tindak Pidana Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan dan Anak* [Criminal acts of violence against women and children] (Yogyakarta: Rifka Annisa, 2006), 40. To the disappointment of Rifka Annisa's leaders, the law did not address the issue of marital rape, and specifically states that intercourse can only be considered forced when it takes place with a woman who is not one's spouse.

<sup>48</sup> Terence H. Hull and Ninuk Widyantoro, "The Right to Choose," *Inside Indonesia* 97 (July–September 2009), [http://insideindonesia.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1237&Itemid=47](http://insideindonesia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1237&Itemid=47).

<sup>49</sup> Anshor, *Fikih Aborsi*.

were Muslim and, as the Fatayat found out, many were Fatayat members. Research in Medan (Sumatra), a so-called 'transit region,' found that recruited girls carrying false papers had as their only original source of identity a Fatayat membership card.<sup>50</sup> Traffickers also often used local Muslim leaders as intermediates in order to lend an aura of credibility to the transaction.<sup>51</sup> In cooperation with several other organizations, in 2002 Fatayat launched an anti-trafficking campaign that culminated in the official request for a *fatwá* during the NU national conference in August 2006. The *fatwá* was issued and condemns all types of exploitation of women, requires officials (including police and religious leaders) to prevent it, forbids all types of illegal marriage (temporary or secret), and warns religious leaders that they could be facilitating the practice without realizing. The Fahmina Institute followed up with an in-depth study to develop anti-trafficking *fiqh* on the basis of *sūrah*s 4:58 and 16:90.<sup>52</sup>

Considering these actions taken in relation to domestic abuse, abortion, and human trafficking, we can observe that for two of the three forms of abuse the Indonesian majority had no problems legislating to curb the practices: according to national law, domestic abuse and human trafficking are now both criminal offenses. This indicates that there is great potential in the strategies developed by Indonesia's Muslim feminists.

### *Translating Activism to Mosque and Madrasah*

Although they have conventionally worked behind the scenes, the debates with *shari'ah*-minded activists have now brought Muslim feminists and their causes onto public podiums. Their ideas continue to

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<sup>50</sup> Interview by Monica Arnez with Indonesian researcher Maryam Fithriati, November 10, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Nur Rofiah, "NU Menyikapi Trafiking" [NU takes a stance on trafficking], *Suara Fatayat* 1, no. 1 (2006): 18.

<sup>52</sup> Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir et al., *Fiqh Anti Trafficking: Jawaban atas Berbagai Kasus Kejahatan Perdagangan Manusia dalam Perspektif Hukum Islam* [Anti-trafficking *fiqh*: The answer concerning certain cases of the criminal trade in humans from the point of view of Islamic Law] (Cirebon: Fahmina Institute, 2006). The authors discuss *sūrah* 4:58, "Allah doth command you to render back your Trusts to those to whom they are due," and *sūrah* 16:90, "Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition."

penetrate the traditional worlds of *pesantren* and mosques, but, due to intra-Islamic competition, their ideas are now being discussed in the media as well. Although the flipside of this exposure is that it makes the feminists more vulnerable and open to criticism (a radical group started a defamatory campaign against Musda Mulia, calling her a lesbian), the Muslim feminists now have more opportunities to present their arguments than ever.

While taking their struggles into the arenas of politics and the mass media, the close study of religious texts continues to provide the Muslim feminists with an authoritative basis on which to counter the arguments of pro-*shari'ah* activists who, according to the feminists, want to deprive women of their basic Islamic rights. Their scholarly toolbox allows the Muslim feminists to expand the range of issues in which they engage beyond the debates on polygamy. Most importantly, their connections with mosques, *madrasahs*, and *pesantren* provide them with large audiences, female and male students, *pengajian* participants, and others. Although it is hard to predict the final outcome of the struggle for women's agency in Indonesia, clearly few Muslim feminists are prepared to hand over women's rights without fighting for alternative options.

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## CHAPTER 3.4

### MAKING ISLAM RELEVANT: FEMALE AUTHORITY AND REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN GERMANY

Riem Spielhaus

As Islam spread to various parts of the world, it was only natural for different traditions to emerge, depending on the climate or the cultural or socio-economic environment or the development of science and philosophy or triggered by practical questions. Among the latter, there was the question if, for whom, and with what conditions the Friday service was obligatory. Of course scholars came to different conclusions, depending on where they saw the meaning in a given context. The Friday service is obviously an occasion to come together as a community, but what constitutes a community? Three, ten, forty? Men? Women? Does it need a village or town, a local or a central mosque? How far are people supposed to travel? Who is qualified to lead the service and to preach? Is the sermon supposed to be in the local language for people to understand and reflect on or something formal in Arabic or some kind of combination?<sup>1</sup>

This quote is from a text entitled ‘Friday Service,’ the first of sixty ‘Friday Thoughts’ (Gedanken zum Freitag) published as part of a compilation of Friday sermons in 2009. The book is a rare example of a printed edition of *khutbahs* in the German language.<sup>2</sup> However, these sermons are not only remarkable because they are in German, but also because of their author—Halima Krausen, a German-born Muslim woman and the leader of an Islamic congregation in the city of Hamburg.

Whereas the 2005 mixed-gender prayer led by a woman in New York fueled active debate on the legitimacy of such a practice, in Germany Halima Krausen’s visibility as a ‘female *imām*’ within the

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is drawn from the first of thirty-five ‘Friday Thoughts’ translated into English and published on Halima Krausen’s homepage, <http://www.halimakrausen.com/e/01friday.htm> (accessed October 2009). For the German language version of the quotation, see Halima Krausen, *Darin sind Zeichen für Nachdenkende: Islamische Theologie—in sechzig Freitagspredigten homiletisch entfaltet* (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2009), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Several mosques and Islamic associations publish Friday sermons on their websites, for instance, the Islamic Center Hamburg (<http://www.izhamburg.com>) and the Turkish-German organization IGMG (<http://www.igmg.de/>).

Muslim community has proved remarkably uncontroversial.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the subject of mixed-congregation prayers under female leadership<sup>4</sup> is an uncontentious issue within Germany's mosque associations. However, for two reasons, Halima Krausen has managed to exercise her authority without stirring active resistance: first, as the leader of the German-speaking Muslim community of Hamburg, occupying a small office in Hamburg's Imām Ali Mosque, she chooses her words and activities very cautiously; second, she has restricted herself to writing Friday services and sermons instead of attempting to lead mixed-gender prayers. Halima Krausen's authority also stems from her status as a designated successor of a renowned male Za'idi scholar in Germany.

This chapter aims to investigate debates on gender, mosque space, and (re)presentation of Islam and Muslims in Germany. Although Halima Krausen is not an immigrant, the context of her activities is shaped in significant ways by the aftereffects of Muslim immigration, the ongoing negotiations over Islam's status as a minority religion,<sup>5</sup> and the institutionalization of Islam in Germany. The first part of this article analyzes specific features of Halima Krausen's authority, in order to articulate a model of female Islamic authority which aims to lead by consensus rather than by assertion. The second half of the paper draws on a survey of mosques and Islamic associations in Germany to show that Krausen's model is just one of many models of female authority emerging within German Muslim communities. It also illustrates how the specific functions of these female leaders are

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the theological debate, see Juliane Hammer, "Reading Gender in the Qur'an: Text, Context, and Identity in the Work of Amina Wadud," in *Zwischen Orient und Okzident*, ed. Anke Bentzin et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 2010), 128–45; and "Performing Gender Justice: The 2005 Woman-Led Prayer in New York," Special issue on Muslims and media, *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 1 (2010): 91–116.

<sup>4</sup> See Christopher Melchert, "Whether to Keep Women out of the Mosque: A Survey of Medieval Islamic Law," in *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam*, ed. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska and Andrzej Pikulski (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 59–69.

<sup>5</sup> The German Islam Conference, a long-term dialogue forum run by the Federal Ministry for Interior Affairs, is currently receiving a great deal of attention; however, the Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs and the governments of some *Länder* (federal states) have also been engaged in negotiations with representatives of Islam, in some cases for longer and with more solid results. The main issue under formal discussion is the acknowledgement of Islam as a religious community with a status comparable to that of Christianity and the Jewish community. This includes setting up contracts between the *Länder* and the representative bodies of religious groups.



shaped by expectations placed on them by the broader German community to act as representatives of Muslim communities.

*Becoming a Religious Leader: The Story of Halima Krausen*

Female Islamic religiosity in Germany has mainly been explored with a focus on the 'daughters of immigrants'<sup>6</sup> and the processes through which they come to acquire and embody knowledge. Several studies of young Muslim women in Germany suggest that the creation of a pious self crafts a self-confident identity which is both Muslim and German.<sup>7</sup> Halima Krausen, however, belongs to a different age group and can by no means be called a daughter of immigrants. The circumstances in which she obtained Islamic knowledge are dissimilar to those of women and youth groups from the so-called second generation<sup>8</sup> of German Muslims. Rather, in her activities she resembles those 'religious experts' who are the central focus of Gerdien Jonker's research on places of Islamic education in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sigrid Nökel, *Die Töchter der Gastarbeiter und der Islam: Zur Soziologie alltagsweltlicher Anerkennungspolitik; Eine Fallstudie* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Jeanette Jouili, "Re-fashioning the Self Through Religious Knowledge: How Muslim Women Become Pious in the German Diaspora," in *Islam and Muslims in Germany*, ed. Ala al-Hamarneh and Jörn Thielmann (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 465–88; Jeanette Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment, and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 617–42; Synnove Bendixsen, "Being Young, Muslim, and Female: Creating Space of Belonging in Berlin," *Berliner Blätter* 37 (2005): 88–98; and Gritt Klinkhammer, "Modern Constructions of Islamic Identity: The Case of Second-Generation Muslim Women in Germany," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://archiv.ub.uni-marburg.de/mjr/klinkhammer.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The prevailing concept of immigrant generations has been heavily criticized lately, because of the underlying notion of integration and its blurred reference to age groups and descent. Furthermore, the term is often used inconsiderately and sustains an unquestioned understanding of Muslims as immigrants.

<sup>9</sup> Gerdien Jonker, "Vor den Toren: Bildung, Macht und Glauben aus der Sicht religiöser muslimischer Frauen," in *Facetten islamischer Welten: Geschlechterordnungen, Frauen- und Menschenrechte in der Diskussion*, ed. Mechtild Rumpf, Ute Gerhard, and Mechtild M. Jansen (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2003), 219–42; "Islamic Knowledge through a Woman's lens: Education, Power and Belief," in *Female Inroads into Muslim Communities: Reconstructions of Knowledge, Community, and Communication*, ed. Gerdien Jonker and Tuula Sakaranaho, special issue, *Social Compass* 50, no. 1 (2003): 35–46. The links between religious authority and conversion remain an interesting, but so far neglected, area of research. Cf. Margot Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," in *Women Embracing*

*At Home in the Mosque*

The image of Halima Krausen on her Facebook page shows her in a long wide cream-colored dress, with an embroidered shawl on her shoulder and a white headscarf, standing beside the *mihrāb* of the Imām Ali Mosque in Hamburg. Her office space is located only twenty meters from this *mihrāb*. The mosque is hosted by Hamburg's Islamic Center (Islamische Zentrum Hamburg, IZH), which has strong ties with Iran. Authorities in Iran advise on the choice of the center's director.<sup>10</sup> Since it was inaugurated, however, the IZH has hosted not only Sunnī worshippers, but also adherents from a wide range of other Muslim communities, among them Yugoslavians, Indonesians, Pakistanis, Afghans, and native German-speakers. Krausen's story of securing a leadership position within this mosque and the center appears to be one of accommodation rather than contestation.

Halima Krausen was born 1949 into a Protestant-Catholic German family in Aachen. On her website she gives a short account of her personal development, saying that she became interested in Islam at the age of thirteen while looking for answers to questions concerning unity and diversity. Once introduced to Islamic texts, she embarked on a sustained commitment to academic learning, a process in which she was later supported by her husband. She identifies "books, journeys, and scholars" as the sources of her knowledge:

Already during my school days I taught myself Arabic and began studying from books, and this process continued with meeting visiting scholars from various schools of thought as well as by travelling both in Europe and in the Middle East, both on my own and with my husband as a most inspiring companion.<sup>11</sup>

Halima Krausen studied Islam, theology, and comparative religion at university, and in addition read Islamic law, theology, and philosophy with Imām Mehdi Razvi, who was engaged in teaching within a

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*Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 192–229; and Hammer, "Performing Gender Justice."

<sup>10</sup> For further reading on the IZH, see Karin Hesse-Lehmann and Kathryn Spellman, "Iranische transnationale religiöse Institutionen in London und Hamburg: Ihr Einfluss auf das interkulturelle Zusammenleben," in *Zuwanderung und Integration: Kulturwissenschaftliche Zugänge und soziale Praxis*, ed. Christoph Köck, Alois Moosmüller, and Klaus Roth (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), 141–62.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.halimakrausen.com> (accessed October 2009).

German-speaking Muslim community at the IZH. From 1984 to 1988 Krausen worked with this group to prepare a German translation of the Qurʾān with notes and commentary. Afterwards, she translated some collections of *ḥadīth* and works of Islamic jurisprudence. In 1996, when Imām Razvi retired from active service, he announced Halima Krausen to be his successor. Razvi's decision was a consequence of the extent to which he had come to rely on Krausen, who for many years had acted as his assistant, standing in for him in lectures many times when he was traveling or sick. She thereby became the director of the German-speaking Muslim community of Hamburg, responsible for counseling and teaching seminars on the Qurʾān in the German language. Her long-term association with Imām Razvi had also gradually built up her acceptance within the community.

Working through the mosque and the center, Krausen has established links beyond the Muslim community in Germany, and particularly with Muslim communities in the UK. She is a founding member of the Inter-Religious Dialogue Circle at the Department of Theology at Hamburg University. Later, she joined another circle that involved Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim experts interested in deepening the dialogue beyond that of a purely intellectual encounter and in developing opportunities for cultural learning in places including Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. In 1993, in association with the Initiative for Islamic Studies, she co-founded an association which concentrates on generating curriculum and learning materials. This also marked the start of a determined effort to teach and counsel beyond Germany, especially in the UK.

Although she takes active leadership positions, Krausen does not, however, advocate a feminist outlook. In this regard, Krausen's work differs considerably from the work of other female scholars such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud,<sup>12</sup> and Rabeya Müller, who engage in explicitly feminist reinterpretations of the Qurʾān. A journalist once quoted Krausen complaining that she is always asked to talk 'about women's stuff' when she would prefer to write theological articles and work for the interest of her broader community—i.e. both men and women.<sup>13</sup> Krausen describes her approach as devoted to striving for

<sup>12</sup> See Hammer, "Reading Gender in the Qurʾān."

<sup>13</sup> Martin Spiewak, "Vorbeter aus der Fremde," *Die Zeit*, September 29, 2006, [http://www.zeit.de/2006/39/Imame\\_2?page=6](http://www.zeit.de/2006/39/Imame_2?page=6) (accessed October 2009).

the ‘ethics of the Qur’an,’ and as a quest to treat all people equally. For her, the basis for this approach rests in the “ontological equality of man and woman in the Qur’an.”<sup>14</sup> Krausen, however, urges her readers and listeners to be critical and questioning:<sup>15</sup>

Should we, like uncritical slaves, obey everything which is declared in the tone of command, without questioning the sense of it? Or should we work towards the Quranic ideal under which men and women are partners (Surah 9:71), with the same moral values and religious duties (Surah 33:35) and the same duty to work together to build a just society?<sup>16</sup>

Her approach is reflected best in her decision to focus on writing Friday sermons instead of seeking to hold the Friday *khuṭbah*, even when offered the chance to do so by her teacher. In an interview she recounts that when Imām Mehdi Razvi announced that he would not be able to hold a service in an interreligious summer school and recommended that she take his place, she insisted on asking all the members of the congregation whether they had any objections. When nobody objected she wrote a sermon overnight, but learnt on Friday morning that two young Muslims had called authorities outside Germany to ask if a Friday service by a woman would be legitimate. On learning this, Krausen refused to conduct the service, and requested that another participant address the congregation. Herein rests the key to understanding the source of her authority: Krausen is clear that she wants to lead by consensus and not become a cause of *fitnah* (rupture in the community). She is willing to give the *khuṭbah*, but only if the whole congregation accepts her in this role. This incident, did, however, lead to her writing the weekly Friday sermons.

After the service, many participants—including the two who had shared their doubts on a woman delivering the *khuṭbah*—asked her to send them the speech that she had not been able to deliver as a sermon. More than seventy texts have been written since then, eventually published as the ‘Friday Thoughts.’<sup>17</sup> At first, Krausen’s sermons began

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<sup>14</sup> Krausen, “Can Women Be Imams?” Analysis piece published on the Qantara website, 2005, [http://en.qantara.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-307/\\_nr-24/i.html](http://en.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-307/_nr-24/i.html). The lecture was recorded in 2006 with a lengthy addition, and the video was for a time available on the homepage of the Radical Middle Way: <http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/>.

<sup>15</sup> Krausen, “Can Women Be Imams?”

<sup>16</sup> Krausen, “Can Women Be Imams?”

<sup>17</sup> This story has been conveyed by other members of the interreligious summer school over the years since the event. The journalist Martin Spiewak relates the story in a 2006 article in *Die Zeit*: see Spiewak, “Vorbeter aus der Fremde.”

to be disseminated via email and on websites,<sup>18</sup> and are today read in mosques, churches, and synagogues. Through her writings, Krausen continues to engage in dialogue with other scholars and authorities. She has also co-written the curriculum for interreligious instruction in the city-state of Hamburg, teaching this material both in Hamburg and in London. A large collection of Islamic teaching materials is available on her website, along with her regular newsletter. Krausen regularly lectures at the An-Nisa Society in the UK, and is one of the thirty-two frequent speakers attached to the Radical Middle Way.<sup>19</sup> She gives regular Saturday lectures in the IZH which are open to all members of the community, provides counseling for community members seeking answers to specific queries, meets with interreligious circles, and writes curricula for the education of school teachers. Until 2008 she also spent eight hours a week instructing students of Islamic Studies in the sources and methodology of Islamic jurisprudence, complementary to their university courses.

Her emphasis on writing and teaching has earned her a reputation as an Islamic scholar. Posters for an evening event in spring 2009, organized by the Radical Middle Way and the An-Nisa Society, presented her as “Shaykha Halima Krausen—Europe’s Leading Muslim Woman Scholar.”<sup>20</sup> At the event itself she was introduced as follows:

Our keynote guest is Shaykhah Halima Krausen. Shaykhah Halima is one of these remarkable individuals: scholar of Islamic studies, a scholar of Arabic and the Qur’ān. She is *imām* of the German-speaking community in Hamburg, Germany. But at the same time Shaykhah Halima is a pioneer in re-contextualizing Islam, making Islam relevant for our time and our place. Her way of teaching is very unique: she loves texts, she loves words, she loves literature, and you will see tonight in her

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, <http://www.sufi-tariqah.de/tarchiv/HalimaKrausen-Al-Fatiha.html> (accessed October 2009), or <http://beta.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/ikhutbah.php?id=31&art=31&vid=61> (accessed May 2011).

<sup>19</sup> The Radical Middle Way (RMW), founded in 2005, “is a revolutionary grass-roots initiative aimed at articulating a relevant mainstream understanding of Islam that is dynamic, proactive and relevant to young British Muslims” (<http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/about>). It has begun to work outside the UK, especially in Africa, through its new branch RMW-international, and organizes conventions to debate urgent social and political matters with prominent Islamic scholars. There are five women among the thirty-two frequent speakers associated with RMW.

<sup>20</sup> The posters are displayed on a publicity video for the event uploaded to YouTube by the Radical Middle Way: see “SHAYKHA UNPLUGGED—A Radical Middle Way tour with Europe’s Leading Woman Scholar,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32rOSHD-y5Y> (accessed October 2009).

approach it's to delve into words and to see the meaning between words and then to open up the floor for engagement and interaction.<sup>21</sup>

In this presentation Krausen is not only called 'imām of her community,' referring to her general leadership,<sup>22</sup> but her methodological approach to Islamic textual sources is honored as well. She describes her teaching approach as systematic: reading the original text verse-by-verse, word-by-word. This includes, first, looking at the broader meaning of the text; second, reflecting on contemporary questions connected to it; and, finally, analyzing the meaning of the words and the semantic fields. According to Krausen, in order to fully understand a statement one must consider the textual and historical contexts in which it is made. Hence, she approaches Islamic texts both literally and by contextualizing them.

Her criterion of right or wrong is shaped not just by textual reasoning but through examining the implications of actions for the collective good of the Muslim community. Responding to a question regarding her opinion of Amina Wadud's attempt to lead a mixed-gender prayer in New York in 2005, she noted:

One conclusion from women leading women-only prayers might be to have segregated prayer meetings as a rule rather than the exception and even set up women-only mosques. No. This is not a great joke of a feminist Western mind, but is being practiced successfully in Central Asia and some other places in the world. Women there, being specifically trained not only to lead prayer and preach sermons, but to teach and counsel women, children. The problem is not one to be solved by referring to texts and precedents, but a question of *istislāḥ*: does this affect the Muslim community in a positive way, by raising women's motivation and level of knowledge, promoting the following generations—or in a negative way, by splitting an already segregated society even more, eventually creating two completely separate intellectual and spiritual worlds?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The introductory address to the event was filmed and uploaded to Youtube: see "Radical Middle Way—Shaykha Halima Krausen," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhvIaF6UE3U&feature=related> (accessed October 2009).

<sup>22</sup> The term 'imām' here refers to the leadership of the community and not the function as leader of the prayer. In a way this is an approximation of an Islamic term to the concepts from within the Christian tradition, as the *imām* is often, in European discourses about and within Muslim communities, understood as complementary to the priest and the rabbi.

<sup>23</sup> Transcribed by the author from a talk by Halima Krausen entitled "Female Imams," formerly hosted on the Radical Middle Way website. For information on women's mosques in Asia see Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, this volume.

Her reasoning indicates that for her the critical issue is not to demonstrate whether women have a legitimate right to do something or not, but to use the full potential of Muslim communities, including the contributions by women, to maximize the collective enhancement. Her main goal, therefore, is that the knowledge and scholarship of women should benefit the whole community. She argues for a greater involvement of women in spreading Islamic scholarship, saying that “the way things are currently handled, a vast educational potential is wasted in the name of religious tradition.”<sup>24</sup> However, she also notes that leading the Friday sermon is not the only means of making that contribution:

Another possibility is given in places where the sermon, the *khutbah*, is considered part of the ritual prayer and therefore held in Arabic, while the community speaks a different language. A pre-*khutbah* talk is then given in the vernacular, after the first call to prayer, that contains elements of teaching, reflection, and supplication. I do occasionally come across women who give such a pre-*khutbah* talk, surprisingly in rather conservative communities. Perhaps this is a way to open up possibilities for meaningful participation.<sup>25</sup>

### *Strategies of Leadership*

The case of Halima Krausen provides a powerful example of how Muslim women in Germany are developing different strategies to achieve positions of leadership and participation in mosques and prayer rooms.<sup>26</sup> The activities and platforms through which Muslim women exercise influence within the Muslim communities in Germany are not, however, restricted to the sphere of the mosque. In fact, they take a number of different forms, including: acting as board members of Islamic organizations; developing curriculum materials for education in mosques and Islamic instruction in state schools, and actively teaching in mosques and women’s centers; production of Islamic knowledge through Qur’ān hermeneutics; crisis intervention in women’s shelters,

<sup>24</sup> Krausen, “Female Imams.”

<sup>25</sup> Krausen, “Female Imams.”

<sup>26</sup> Riem Spielhaus, “Interessen vertreten mit vereinter Stimme: Der ‘Kopftuchstreit’ als Impuls für die Institutionalisierung des Islams in Deutschland,” in *Der Stoff, aus dem Konflikte sind: Debatten um das Kopftuch in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz*, ed. Sabine Berghahn and Petra Rostock (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009), 413–36.

provision of crisis therapy in mosques and women's centers, and private initiatives to rescue women in difficult situations or provide family aid; and interreligious dialogue. The activities of a female Muslim leader in Germany, hence, range from religious activism for better living conditions for women and families in Muslim communities and beyond, to engagement in decision-making and exercising religious expertise.

Halima Krausen, for her part, engages in all these fields, though tries to refrain from the first (board membership) and prefers to concentrate on production and diffusion of religious knowledge. However, to understand the nature of female authority that is emerging within Muslim communities in Germany it will be useful to briefly review the other platforms of leadership used by Muslim women.

### *Muslim Women in Mosques*

Most of the Islamic prayer rooms and mosques of the Turkish umbrella organizations (DITIB, VIKZ, and IGMG), as well as most prayer rooms created by Arabic or Bosnian immigrants, provide spaces for women. For example, more than forty of the eighty prayer rooms in Berlin have a separate women's space. However, interviews with male functionaries and board members showed that male members of the mosques do not know what activities are being pursued in the women's rooms; women, on the other hand, do usually know about the general mosque activities, even though they might not participate in them. Other parishes consciously refrain from installing an extra room for female visitors, because they do not consider this form of gender segregation as necessary or advisable.<sup>27</sup> There are rather few prayer rooms in Berlin that do not provide access for female visitors at all, and these are run entirely by South Asian immigrants.

As Muslim women emphasize, it is only through an ongoing struggle that they can ensure that the issue of women's space in mosques receives significant attention. Even though more than forty of Berlin's

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<sup>27</sup> Gerdien Jonker, "Religiosität und Partizipation der zweiten Generation: Frauen in Berliner Moscheen," in *Der neue Islam der Frauen: Weibliche Lebenspraxis in der globalisierten Moderne*, ed. Ruth Klein-Hessling, Sigrid Nökel, and Karin Werner (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 1999), 49–66; Riem Spielhaus, "Musliminnen und ihr Engagement im Gemeindeleben," in *Islamisches Gemeindeleben in Berlin*, ed. Alexa Färber and Riem Spielhaus (Berlin: Der Beauftragte des Senats von Berlin für Migration und Integration, 2006), 69.



mosques are equipped with a women's section, many of them with separate entrances, they are rarely equipped as well as the men's rooms, as local Muslim women complain. Voices are raised that question why the main section—the prestigious hall—is always dedicated for men; these same voices express dissatisfaction with women being sent to 'their' section, where there actually is a women's compartment to which they can be sent. As one of the exceptions, Hamburg's Centrum Mosque, run by descendants of Turkish 'guest workers,' has a women's space with artistic ornamental paintings on the wall and the ceiling as well as a *mihrâb* and a *minbar*.

Women's spaces in mosques can be understood as 'counter spaces,'<sup>28</sup> manifestations and tools of empowerment rather than of suppression. In this way, rooms created and to a great extent used as places for religious practice provide spaces that enable self-representation and leadership.

#### *Women Leaders in Islamic Organizations*

In recent years, a new trend has emerged within Muslim organizations and mosque associations, whereby women are increasingly striving to become official members of the board; whereas their predecessors were content to limit their participation to informal modes of decision-making. In 2007, the two leading Turkish-Islamic umbrella organizations (DITIB and Islamrat) elected their first female members to their federal boards. Multiethnic associations that were founded during the 1990s, such as Central Council of Muslims (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland) and the Muslim Youth, have had female functionaries at all levels of their organizations from the start.

#### *Muslim Women Organizations*

Muslim women are also creating their own autonomous and independent associations and spaces. Here, structure, space, and decision-making are in the hands of women. Several initiatives of this kind have been running for more than ten years. The Center for Islamic Women's Research and Promotion (Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Nilüfer Göle, "Die sichtbare Präsenz des Islam und die Grenzen der Öffentlichkeit," in *Islam in Sicht: Der Auftritt von Muslimen im öffentlichen Raum*, ed. Nilüfer Göle and Ludwig Amman (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2004), 36.

und -förderung, ZIF) engages in Qurʾān hermeneutics.<sup>29</sup> The Muslim Women's Center for Encounter and Education (Begegnungs- und Fortbildungszentrum für muslimische Frauen, BFmF) offers school and professional education for dropouts, and prepares immigrant women for the labor market, among many other services. The women's network HUDA publishes a quarterly magazine, and all three associations offer crisis counseling on the telephone or in person. None of the Muslim women's initiatives were included in the first phase of the German Islam Conference, which ran from 2006 until 2009 under Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and invited male-dominated Islamic organizations and secular women's activists to represent Muslim women.<sup>30</sup> A representative of ZIF has been a member of an informal circle of parliamentarians from all parliamentary groups in the Bundestag between 2007 and 2009. All the Islamic umbrella organizations in Germany sent female representatives to a dialogue forum held twice a year at the Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs since 2005.

*Speaking for Islam or for Muslims? The Intersection of Authority, Leadership, and Representation*

In recent years, politics concerning Islam in Europe has been shaped by a two-way process: the demand from European societies for representatives of Islam, and the growing number of Muslim associations striving for recognition in the public sphere. This has made the question, Who can speak for Muslims in and beyond the borders of the community? all the more critical in the European context. It addresses issues of belonging as well as questions concerning the mandate to

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<sup>29</sup> An example of their work is their hermeneutic approach to Qurʾānic verse 4:34; see ZIF [Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und -förderung], *Ein einziges Wort und seine grosse Wirkung: Eine hermeneutische Betrachtungsweise zum Qurʾan, Sure 4 Vers 34, mit Blick auf das Geschlechterverhältnis im Islam* (Köln: ZIF, 2005). The ZIF works closely with the Institute for Internal Pedagogy and Didactics, which develops teaching resources and curricula as well as interreligious and intercultural educational theories, currently used in Switzerland and in Berlin for Islamic education.

<sup>30</sup> See Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Islam und Geschlecht unter liberal-säkularer Regierungsführung: Die Deutsche Islam Konferenz," in *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte 37, Juden und Muslime in Deutschland: Recht, Religion, Identität*, ed. José Brunner and Shai Lavi (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 193–95. This has changed in the second phase of the Islam Conference in 2010, that engages women from within Muslim communities including women covered with a headscarf as members of the plenary.

raise political and social claims in the public sphere.<sup>31</sup> While representation (Who can speak for *Muslims*?) differs considerably from religious authority (Who can speak for *Islam*?), they also manifest significant intersections. Werner Schiffauer reminds us that representation always entails an internal and an external layer: the presentation of an interpretation of Islam within a Muslim community and the representation of the community towards society.<sup>32</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that female Muslim leaders in Germany are struggling simultaneously for recognition on two ‘sides’—that is, both in and outside their communities. Often the same women try to address both constituencies at once. Rabeya Müller, a Muslim scholar and activist from ZIF, explained the two sides of the Muslim women’s efforts in a talk at a conference hosted by a foundation of the Social Democratic Party (SPD):

It is necessary that women regain the rights they are entitled to, rights which the Muslim side unquestionably takes as given to women by the Qur’ān, while their realization often leaves a lot to be desired, rights which are again and again demanded by non-Muslim sides from Muslim bodies, while it is often forgotten that the Muslim women’s right of self-determination is such a right, too. Muslim women have to get the chance to find and realize their legal powers on their own. In doing so it has to be considered that whoever really wants to do something for Muslim women and their concerns will have to allow for their own self-conceptions and interpretations. Only then can there be a strong development of Islamic-theological thinking and of the Muslim women.<sup>33</sup>

As Rabeya Müller presents it, the main focus is to develop a hermeneutic of the Qur’ān which is based on the supposition that Qur’ānic revelation provides for gender equity. In Müller’s view, Muslim women are challenged by the need to convince two different target groups

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<sup>31</sup> Gudrun Kraemer and Sabine Schmidtke, “Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies; A Critical Overview,” in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Kraemer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), ix.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Werner Schiffauer, “Muslimische Organisationen und ihr Anspruch auf Repräsentativität: Dogmatisch bedingte Konkurrenz und Streit um Institutionalisierung,” in *Der Islam in Europa: Der Umgang mit dem Islam in Frankreich und Deutschland*, ed. Alexandre Escuduer, Brigitte Sauzay, and Rudolf von Thadden (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 143–58.

<sup>33</sup> Rabeya Müller, “Hermeneutik in der Praxis oder vom Iğtihād zum ġihad?” in *Der Koran neu gelesen: Feministische Interpretationen* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2008), 19.

that Islam accords Muslim women the right to interpret and shape Islamic knowledge and practice. Thus, they face multiple tasks: within the Muslim communities, female leaders are struggling for the right to interpret and practice Qur'anic values as they understand them; and, at the same time, they are fighting for recognition of Islam's liberating impact on Muslim women by broader public and civil society. Women's presence in leading positions and the decision-making bodies of Islamic organizations is crucial for both tasks.

The case of Germany's leading Muslim women shows that leadership cannot simply be equated with scholarship; however, the German case does show that the scholarly and representative functions of leaders are in many cases united in one person. This connection is exemplified by a discussion within a circle of Muslim women's representatives from all over Germany regarding hermeneutic work done on Qur'anic verse 4:34. The brief account of the debate provided below gives an insight into how gender roles are constructed, who is attributed with the legitimacy to interpret religious sources, and who has the power to disseminate these interpretations.

This exchange of views took place in a meeting between the women's commissioners of the mixed-gender Islamic umbrella organizations and representatives of Muslim women's initiatives, in the presence of members of the Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2008. The representative of a mixed-gender organization mentioned that a renowned Muslim scholar had just published a *tafsir* in German, which included a hermeneutic approach to the Qur'anic verse 4:34 that supported an interpretation presented by ZIF a few years ago. She presented this as evidence of the success of the hermeneutic work of the women's center. Members of the ZIF, however, responded critically: first, because the male author had not quoted the previous work presented by the female scholars; more importantly, though, they did not think that the male scholar's adoption of their interpretation was a matter for pride—in their view, it showed that the men had control over Qur'anic interpretations.

So we always need men to confirm our views? Sorry, I cannot accept this. Either we are for equal rights: that means that women have the right to interpret the Qur'an and are granted the same relevance. Or we say: We shall see, let them work and if a man gives his blessing then this is okay.

The director of a Muslim women's educational center then argued for a more pragmatic approach, one of letting the message of female scholars

acquire broader legitimacy through dissemination by male scholars until the Muslim community accepted the works of female scholars. She based her proposal on daily experiences, in which she had seen that verdicts on domestic violence with reference to religious sources only became popularly accepted when formulated by acknowledged Muslim scholars. To be able to implement hermeneutical approaches to gender equity, support by male authority would again be needed until female scholars received full recognition, she argued. In this context, a recurring theme in discussions among female leaders of Islam in Germany concerns how to win men to their cause but also how to ensure that the contributions of women to knowledge production, dissemination, and community development are both accepted and acknowledged.

### *Conclusion*

If, as researchers, we are to understand the connections between mosque space, gender, and authority in the Western European context, we must pay particular attention to two crucial junctions: first, the relationship between the emergence of female religious authorities and the diverse ways in which mosque spaces are used; and second, the social and political links that are developing between the various representatives of Islamic organizations in the course of their engaging in debates with German officials on the recognition of Islam and religious authority.

Gender segregation can lead to both gendered spaces and gendered authority.<sup>34</sup> While male authorities often dominate both gendered spheres, the creation of women's spaces can still be a vehicle for women to become indispensable transmitters of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> However, even if they become recognized as transmitters, the leaders of female religious communities still have to face an arduous struggle to be recognized as leaders in mixed-gender spaces.

The German debate on the representation of Islam at the level of government puts an emphasis on mosque associations and their

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Asma Afsaruddin, "Introduction: The Hermeneutics of Gendered Space and Discourse," in *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies*, ed. Asma Afsaruddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1–20.

<sup>35</sup> Jouili and Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment, and Religious Authority."

umbrella organizations acting as interlocutors on the one hand and on *imāms* as community leaders on the other, this way featuring especially male agents. Furthermore, religious authorities are expected to explain *Islam* and the actions of Muslims in Germany and beyond. They are thereby asked to represent the religion to the German public. In this way, religious authorities and their statements have become subjects of growing importance in public debates. Muslim women who are engaged in Islamic communities and mosques are thus also increasingly claiming space to represent Islam—not just to other Muslim believers but also to the broader European public.<sup>36</sup>

The questions, Who speaks for Muslims? and, Who is accepted to speak for Muslims? have become asked much more urgently in non-Muslim majority countries than in Muslim-majority contexts. In Muslim-majority countries, conflicts primarily concern different interpretations of religion and the rights of subgroups in society; in the German context, however, we see a religious minority that is striving to be acknowledged. The need to bring the problems of Muslims to the attention of German officials and parliamentarians calls for Muslim representative bodies and spokespersons to prove their legitimacy. Speaking *as* a Muslim in the European context always connotes speaking *for* Muslims. So far, female voices from Islamic communities are underrepresented in the public debates, as it is difficult for women to be acknowledged as spokespersons where this requires having the support of a mosque association. The occasional invitations extended by the German government and being acknowledged by the media support women's leadership positions in the Muslim communities. However, active Muslim women argue that government institutions, the media, and dominant feminist groups tend to support anti-Islamic women's rights activists, while questioning the legitimacy of women from within the Muslim communities to act as spokespersons and criticizing them for 'reproducing Islamic suppression.'<sup>37</sup> It remains yet to be seen whether the establishment of four centers for Islamic

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<sup>36</sup> See Schirin Amir-Moazami, *Politisierte Religion: Der Kopftuchstreit in Deutschland und Frankreich* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007); and Spielhaus, "Interessen vertreten."

<sup>37</sup> Amir-Moazami, "Islam und Geschlecht," 195, Anna Korteweg and Gökçe Yurdakul, *Religion, Culture and the Politicization of Honour-Related Violence: A Critical Analysis of Media and Policy Debates in Western Europe and North America* (Thematic Paper for United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2010), 14–20, 32.

theology,<sup>38</sup> between 2008 and 2012, with sixteen chairs will continue to support the dominance of male voices. These centers have been established by the German Federal Ministry for Science and Education's order to educate teachers for confessional Islamic instruction in state schools.

Female religious activities in European Islamic spaces and discourse are multifaceted, both in mixed-gender and female spheres. In order to explore whether the results of existing qualitative studies also hold on a larger scale it will be necessary to develop new research tools, and in particular to carry out quantitative research on the public practice of Muslim women. There is no doubt that Halima Krausen is a special case: nevertheless, as noted above, she represents one among several ways through which Muslim women are gaining and exercising authority in Germany. It is also important to note that—as exemplified by the case of Halima Krausen—many female religious leaders and Muslim women who are engaged in developing and distributing Islamic knowledge in Germany are also involved in transnational networks. These activities seem to be a necessary resource for those who are marginalized in their local and national communities. Although it would demand a rather complex research framework, it would be of great interest to go beyond the local and national borders to study the evolution of global networks of female Islamic leadership.

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<sup>38</sup> In 2010 and 2011 the federal ministry selected the universities of Frankfurt/M. and Gießen, Münster and Osnabrück, Erlangen/Nürnberg and Tübingen, as homes to new centers of confessional 'Islamic Studies' (orig. 'Islamstudien'). All professors that had been appointed by summer 2011 happen to be male. They will provide future teachers and community leaders with Islamic knowledge.

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## CHAPTER 3.5

### ACTIVISM AS EMBODIED *TAFSĪR*: NEGOTIATING WOMEN'S AUTHORITY, LEADERSHIP, AND SPACE IN NORTH AMERICA

Juliane Hammer

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.

Zarqa Nawaz, *Me and the Mosque*, 2005

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.<sup>1</sup> 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’anic interpretations focusing on gender justice, and that the prayer event is an embodiment of such *tafsir* 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.<sup>2</sup>

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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<sup>1</sup> See Juliane Hammer, “Performing Gender Justice: The 2005 Woman-Led Prayer in New York,” *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 1 (April 2010): 91–116.

<sup>2</sup> I discuss these and several additional angles of American Muslim women’s religious authority, interpretations, and forms of self-representation, and activism in my forthcoming book *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, forthcoming 2011).

mother Nabeelah gathered at the West Virginia University School of Law to pray, led by Nabeelah Abdul-Ghafur. This prayer, with a woman leading a mixed-gender congregation, would become a small preview of the woman-led Friday prayer to take place in March 2005. The group then walked to the mosque, entered through the main door, and prayed in the main prayer space.<sup>3</sup>

In early March 2005, Nomani taped her “99 Precepts for Opening Hearts, Minds, and Doors in the Muslim World” on the front door of the mosque in Morgantown.<sup>4</sup> On March 18, 2005, Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, led a mixed-gender congregation in Friday prayers and gave the Friday *khuṭbah*. The event was organized by Asra Nomani, Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, Sarah Eltantawi, and Ahmed Nassef, the co-founder of the progressive Muslim website MuslimWakeUp.<sup>5</sup> The Friday prayer took place in the Synod House of St. John the Divine, an Episcopal cathedral in New York City. From March to June 2005, Nomani’s “Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour” took her to various mosques around the United States where she insisted on praying in the main prayer space, despite protest and resistance from *imāms* and congregations. Nomani also led a mixed-gender prayer herself, at Brandeis University in Boston. This chain of events prompted many discussions and debates among Muslims, both in North America and worldwide, quickly transcending the original focus on women’s spaces in American mosques and even the issue of women’s ritual leadership. The discourses surrounding the woman-led prayer catalyzed intra-Muslim debates on a range of issues from the definition of tradition, the authority to interpret, the participation of women in community affairs, and most generally Muslim approaches to gender roles. Thus, it is not exaggerated to describe the woman-led prayer as a symbolic watershed in Muslim debates on women and gender issues.

Here, the notion of activism as ‘embodied *tafsīr*’ I use in the title needs to be elaborated upon. It is inspired by Sa’diyya Shaikh who

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<sup>3</sup> This overview is based on Nomani’s description of the events in the 2006 edition of her book, *Standing Alone: An American Woman’s Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 243–46, 308–24. Much of it is also chronicled in the 2009 documentary *The Mosque in Morgantown*, directed by Brittany Huckabee, see [www.themosqueinmorgantown.com](http://www.themosqueinmorgantown.com).

<sup>4</sup> Nomani, *Standing Alone*, 324–30.

<sup>5</sup> The web address was [www.muslimwakeup.com](http://www.muslimwakeup.com). Much of the website is not accessible anymore.

has developed the notion of a “*tafsīr* of praxis.”<sup>6</sup> Shaikh, in examining the ethical and exegetical dilemmas of South African Muslim women confronted with spousal abuse, contends that the experiences of the women and their subsequent grappling with Qur’ānic verses such as 4:34, constitute a form of *tafsīr* that is separate from the textual and patriarchal approaches of men in that particular Muslim community. Drawing on feminist theory on experience and female subjectivity, Shaikh argues that Muslim feminist exegetes of the Qur’ān can utilize this practical approach to challenge patriarchal interpretations. She writes:

My approach explicitly foregrounds how a group of Muslim women think and speak in relation to the text and engage God, ethics, and religion through the realities of their suffering and oppression. What they often emerge with is an understanding of Islam that provides a very different ethical and existential vision than that of traditional male scholars, their husbands, and clerics around them.<sup>7</sup>

I want to further the notion of a *tafsīr* of praxis to argue that the activism of American Muslim women (and men) in relation to women’s religious authority and leadership in American Muslim communities, including the woman-led prayer, can be understood as an embodiment of a *tafsīr* of gender justice and equality.

#### *American Muslim Women and Tafsīr*

Qur’ānic exegesis with a focus on the category of gender and carried out by women is a relatively new phenomenon. Women may have historically been involved in the interpretation of the sacred text of Islam, and could acquire various forms and levels of Islamic education in certain time periods. However, the reinterpretation of the Qur’ān from specifically female perspectives is a product of the last two decades or so. Muslim women have attempted interpretations in various parts of the Muslim world, notably in Egypt, Morocco, Indonesia, and

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<sup>6</sup> Sa’diyya Shaikh, “A *Tafsīr* of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community,” in *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire and Sa’diyya Shaikh (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 66–89.

<sup>7</sup> Shaikh, “A *Tafsīr* of Praxis,” 70.

Malaysia.<sup>8</sup> An important group of Muslim women scholars hails from or resides in North America. Scholars in this group have in common several characteristics: they have secular American educational degrees; they have been exposed to and are in complex negotiation with secular feminist theories and groups; and they embarked on their exegetical projects with the intention of challenging and changing existing interpretations. While not all of them actively engage with the term or category of gender, it is clear that their interpretations are based on the notion that gender distinctions exist and are of significance for their understanding of the Qur'ān.<sup>9</sup>

Reinterpretation projects with a focus on women and gender in the American context were pioneered by scholars such as Riffat Hassan and Azizah al-Hibri in the 1970s and 1980s. Hassan and al-Hibri, who both still write but have focused their energies on activist projects, were followed in the 1990s by another group of women scholars, foremost among them Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Nimat Barazangi, and even more recently Kecia Ali.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In Egypt, Zainab al-Ghazālī and Bint ash-Shāṭī' could certainly be described as intellectual predecessors of the women scholars discussed in this essay. Margot Badran describes both as supporting a complementary gender model as indigenous to Islam, and in distinction from an egalitarian 'Western' model. See Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld 2009), 26–38. Interestingly, American Muslim women scholars have not reflected on their historical predecessors in their work and do not seem to perceive their own work as part of the same intellectual trajectory. For a study of Indonesian women and reinterpretation see Pieterella van Dorn Haarder, *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Using the term 'feminist' for the women scholars discussed here or their work is contentious and widely debated. Some, like Asma Barlas, use 'feminist' to describe themselves while others reject the label. I do not apply the term to women scholars who do not use it for self-description.

<sup>10</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press 1999); *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006). For analyses of Wadud's hermeneutical strategies, see Hibba Abugideiri, "Hagar: A Historical Model for 'Gender Jihad.'" especially 90–93, in *Daughters of Abraham*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001); and Asma Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (New York: Oxford University Press), 97–123. For examples of the other women scholars' works, see Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Nimat Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

The specific American context (and freedom) of these women interpreters is acknowledged by Asma Barlas when she points out that the distinctive feature of modern reinterpretations of the Qur'an is direct involvement of the state

in defining the framework for the production of religious knowledge.... In such a milieu, rereading the Qur'an in egalitarian modes is an exercise that has the potential to impinge on the hegemony of the state itself....<sup>11</sup>

Muslim women scholars in North America perceive that they have the freedom to develop their readings of the Qur'an without threats to their safety on the state level, but that they are not free of controversy and community pressures. This position of relative freedom in correlation with readings of colonial and post-colonial history sometimes is the very reason that they are dismissed as agents of 'the West' and colonialism, and their interpretations as intended to destroy Muslim unity and societies. In epistemological terms, much of their work exhibits clear tensions over the utilization of 'Western' hermeneutical methods and theories and traditional Islamic terminology and concepts. In what follows, I will focus on the work of Amina Wadud, who is most directly linked to the events discussed in this essay.

### *Exegetical Methods*

What, then, is new about Wadud's interpretations and how do they differ from the pre-modern *tafsir* tradition? Wadud's Qur'anic hermeneutic is characterized by three features: a thematic approach to the Qur'an, arguments for a historical-critical approach to the text, and the idea of the necessity of a 'conscientious pause.' All three of these exegetical moves can be found in other modern (or modernist) interpretations of the Qur'an.<sup>12</sup> In her appropriation of a thematic approach to the Qur'an as well as in her argument for the historical contextualization of the Qur'an as text, Wadud follows in the footsteps of Fazlur Rahman who was one of the first Muslim scholars active in the

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<sup>11</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> See Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).



American secular academy.<sup>13</sup> Rahman developed what he called the ‘double movement’ in approaching the Qur’ānic text, stating:

Whereas the first movement has been from the specifics of the Qur’an to the eliciting and systematizing of its general principles, values, and long-range objectives, the second is to be from this general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*. That is, the general has to be embodied in the present concrete socio-historical context.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere he argues that the Qur’ān is first and foremost a “book of religious and moral principles and exhortations,” and not a legal document. Regarding the legal injunctions contained in the Qur’ānic text, Rahman states that the historical context of its revelation necessitated accepting the existing society as a frame of reference but that the legal passages in question were to be transcended in their interpretation when society changed. He thus distinguishes between those aspects of the Qur’ān that are eternal and others that are bound by historical circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

While for Rahman, women in the Qur’ān were mostly a passing example in his reinterpretations, Wadud employs both exegetical moves to advance far-reaching conclusions about gender justice and gender equality in the Qur’ān. For the third exegetical move, Wadud draws on Khaled Abou El Fadl’s use of the term ‘conscientious pause.’ Abou El Fadl defines the necessity of this ‘pause’ as caused by a conflict between principles of one’s faith and textual evidence.

Having experienced this fundamental conflict between a conscientious conviction and a textual determination, a responsible and reflective person ought to pause.... I argue that as long as a person has exhausted all possible avenues toward resolving the conflict, in the final analysis,

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<sup>13</sup> For various assessments of Rahman’s significance and his impact on the study of Islam, see Earle Waugh and Frederick Denny, eds., *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Frederick Denny, “The Legacy of Fazlur Rahman,” in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96–108; Abdullah Saeed, “Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur’an,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 37–66.

<sup>14</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 37–39.

Islamic theology requires that a person abide by the dictates of his or her own conscience.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Abou El Fadl offers an approach to the Qur'ānic text that allows any Muslim to object to Qur'ānic injunctions under certain circumstances. Muslim women scholars have also pointed out that, by definition, all *tafsīr* is a product of the backgrounds, values, and circumstances of the respective exegetes and their times.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the exegetical projects of American Muslim women scholars may employ new methods for their approaches to the Qur'ānic text, and bring different sensibilities, values, and even analytical categories to the text, but they are as much products of their own times and circumstances as earlier interpretations were. Women's exegetical projects are most relevant in their significance for Muslim communities and their ability to build interpretive communities which in turn is linked to women scholars' authority, both to interpret and to lead.

### *Interpretative Authority and Community*

Religious authority and associated interpretive communities have been constructed in various ways throughout Islamic history due to the absence of ordained clergy. After the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, the *'ulamā'* emerged as a group and developed discipline-specific methods for approaching texts, deriving interpretations, and for building interpretive communities. Due to teacher–student chains of knowledge transmission and the lack of a standardized curriculum, conceptions of Islamic knowledge stayed fluid and open to a variety of interpretations in the pre-modern period.

In the twentieth century, however, a crisis of authority and post-colonial replacement of the Islamic legal system with European models of nation-state laws has led to the decline, first in importance and then in existence, of the *'ulamā'*, as discussed by Khaled Abou El Fadl in *The Great Theft*.<sup>18</sup> As a result, “virtually every Muslim with a modest

<sup>16</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in Gods' Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Soraya Hajjajji-Jarrah, “Women's Modesty in Qur'anic Commentaries, in *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*, ed. Sajida Sultana Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough (Toronto: Women's Press, 2003), 181–213; and Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, xxi.

<sup>18</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 26.

knowledge of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet was suddenly considered qualified to speak for the Islamic tradition and Shari'a law—even Muslims unfamiliar with the precedents and accomplishments of past generations,"<sup>19</sup> a situation that has led to "full-fledged chaos" with respect to who can exercise Islamic authority.<sup>20</sup> This vacuum has created new spaces in which those previously not represented in leadership circles, especially women, can claim authority. Women intellectuals could be considered part of the new religious intellectuals discussed as competitors to traditional 'ulamā' (see Kalmbach, Introduction, this volume).

It is in the North American context that some women have become prominent Muslim intellectuals. This development can in part be explained through different economic, social, and political opportunities for women, even though gender equality is more an ideal than reality. Another factor could be Orientalist obsessions with supporting purportedly oppressed Muslim women in their quest for liberation.

Zareena Grewal has linked the quest for authentic religious knowledge in Muslim 'heartlands' (by American Muslim seekers) to the crisis of authority in American mosques and communities. The fact that her study included several women seekers illustrates that the quest for knowledge and thus authority does not per se exclude women.<sup>21</sup>

American Muslim women scholars, among them Wadud, have typically studied at American universities. Wadud holds a degree in Islamic studies and has spent time in Egypt and Malaysia. Her 'lack' of traditional Islamic training is one factor leading to continuous challenges to her religious authority, which has sometimes taken the form of questioning her authenticity as a Muslim, and her knowledge of Arabic and the Qur'an. Wadud, who is African-American and a convert, has even experienced blatantly racist attacks, which highlighted long-standing tensions and disputes over authority and authenticity

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<sup>19</sup> Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 38–39. Muhammad Qasim Zaman argues that there has been a 'democratization' of Islamic knowledge and interpretations, but not a vacuum of authority, and that the 'ulamā' have adapted to the challenges of the colonial and post-colonial period better than is often appreciated. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Zareena Grewal, "Imagined Cartographies: Crisis, Displacement, and Islam in America" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006).

between African-American and other Muslim communities.<sup>22</sup> Wadud is keenly aware of these challenges and explains her commitment to her exegetical work as both a personal voyage of faith and her struggle to preserve her faith, and as a direct challenge to the pre-modern interpretive tradition and its lack of space for women. She assumes the authority to interpret the Qurʾān based on her knowledge and faith commitments, and those who follow her interpretations accept her claim to authority. Kecia Ali has argued that perceptions of religious authority, rather than being linked to knowledge, may instead be based on gender and the content of exegetical projects.<sup>23</sup> I would contend that content is even more significant than gender for acceptance and interpretive community building. Muslim women exegetes are faced with the challenge of building interpretive communities and their main obstacle is the very crisis of authority that provided an opening for their exegetical participation in the first place.

#### *Reading Gender Justice and Equality in the Qurʾān*

The hermeneutical tools described above are utilized for the express purpose of locating gender justice and equality in the Qurʾān. For Wadud, gender justice is a function of God's larger prescription of justice as expressed through revelation.<sup>24</sup> This exegetical emphasis on gender justice is then translated into activist projects like the ones described in this essay, while the claim to religious authority embodied in women's *tafsīr* (like Wadud's) provides legitimacy and justification for such activism. The events in 2003–5 resulted in a temporary community and are thus an example of interpretive community building as well.

First introduced in Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman*,<sup>25</sup> the idea of justice in the Qurʾān is further developed in an article in 2000 where she argues that "general discussions of social justice in Islam need to be clearly linked with specific discourses over the rights and wellbeing of

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<sup>22</sup> See Juliane Hammer, "Identity, Authority and Activism: American Muslim Women's Approaches to the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 98, no. 4 (October 2008): 442–63.

<sup>23</sup> Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 155–56.

<sup>24</sup> For a non-Muslim assessment of the question of gender equality in the Qurʾān and its interpretation by Muslim scholars, see Karen Bauer, "The Male is not like the Female (Q3:36): The Question of Gender Egalitarianism in the Qur'an," *Religion Compass* 3–4 (2009): 637–54.

<sup>25</sup> Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*.

women.”<sup>26</sup> In her 2006 book *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud goes on to insist on the “egalitarian tendencies, principles, articulations, and implications” of Islam while acknowledging that both the concepts of Islam and justice “have always been relative to actual historical and cultural situations.”<sup>27</sup> This acknowledgment seems to accept that her interpretations are relative to such contexts as well. Wadud formulates her “Tawhidic paradigm” of horizontal reciprocity as the argument that metaphysically God occupies the highest moral point while human beings are situated on a horizontal axis.<sup>28</sup>

Discussions of gender justice and equality take as their starting point the explicitly formulated spiritual or religious equality of women and men according to the Qur’ān. This spiritual equality, as expressed in identical religious obligations, as well as the Qur’ānic emphasis on individual responsibility for salvation, is then developed into a critique of societal inequality: for if women are equal in the eyes of God, where would the argument for their inequality in human society be derived from? Wadud connects this argument to the concept of *taqwá* which she translates as ‘piety’ and which could also be ‘God-consciousness.’ In citing part of Q 49:13, “Indeed the most noble of you from Allah’s perspective is whosoever (he or she) has the most *taqwá*,” Wadud offers the interpretation that human beings will be judged by God on the basis of their piety and that there is no gender discrimination in such judgment.<sup>29</sup> Spiritual or religious equality is understood to exceed social equality in significance, thus social inequality would constitute a violation of God’s command. This argument has been of particular significance for Muslim women in their debates on the Islamic source for their quest for equality, simultaneously defending Islam against ‘Western’ critiques that label it as misogynist and oppressive for women, and asserting their own faith.

Many American Muslim women scholars, whether they participate in active textual interpretation, base their work on assumptions about the Qur’ān, or engage in ‘*tafsīr* of praxis,’ are also involved in various

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<sup>26</sup> Amina Wadud, “Alternative Qur’anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women,” in *Windows of Faith*, ed. G. Webb (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3–21, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 24–32.

<sup>29</sup> Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 36–37.

forms of activism.<sup>30</sup> Their interpretations, while often carried out by individuals (or as Wadud says ‘lone academics’) have resulted in several forms of interpretive community building: through networks and conferences involving groups of scholars;<sup>31</sup> and more importantly for our context, in the emergence of communities debating gender issues, women’s authority, and access to mosques, as exemplified in the discussions on the woman-led prayer in 2005 and the Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour.

### *Spaces for Women: Mosques and Communities*

The documentary *Me and the Mosque* opens with the following skit by American Muslim comedian Azhar Usman:

You know, there is this hot issue: women in the mosques. What exactly is the issue here? I just don’t get it, I mean, women, they need to pray, this is a mosque, a house of worship. Maybe, the women should be in the mosque. And when the women are in the mosque, they talk about it like it is some special mosque feature, you know: *Māshā’ Allah*, we have *intizam* for ladies, we have a dungeon.<sup>32</sup> It is a very nice dungeon. And *Māshā’ Allah* we have an excellent sound system, but it is not working. And we have a wonderful cooling system during the hot summer months, we have two fans. When it is 116 degrees outside, it is only 99 downstairs.<sup>33</sup>

Zarqa Nawaz uses the clip to introduce the issue of separate spaces for women in North American mosques and the audience visible in the clip clearly recognizes the issue. Nawaz had lamented in the opening that the presence of women was erased from her mosque and many others in North America by the installation of barriers separating men and women during prayer, and by the construction of completely separate and invisible spaces for women in new mosques. Asra Nomani’s march on her own mosque and the subsequent Muslim Women’s

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of various forms of activism, especially as carried out by Wadud, Barlas, and Barazangi, see Hammer, “Identity, Authority, and Activism.”

<sup>31</sup> See for example Gisela Webb, “Introduction: May Muslim Women Speak for Themselves, Please?” in *Windows of Faith* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), x–xix, xv; Amira Sonbol, “Finding Gender Freedom in Forgotten Laws: Scholarship and Activism in the Service of Reforming Personal Status Law,” in *Muslims in the United States: Identity, Influence, Innovation*, ed. P. Strum (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2005), 213–25, 222.

<sup>32</sup> *Intizam* is Urdu for ‘accommodations.’

<sup>33</sup> Azhar Usman, in *Me and the Mosque*, directed by Zarqa Nawaz (2005).

Freedom Tour aimed to highlight this issue of exclusion and erasure by actually walking into the main prayer space of several mosques and insisting on performing prayers there.

### *Women in American Mosques*

Some features of the debate about women's prayer space are unique to the American context. While practices of women's participation in prayer and their architectural expression vary by historical period and geographical context, mosques in the Muslim world share their key function of being spaces for congregational prayers. Muslims in America started rededicating and eventually also designing mosque buildings in the early twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> Mosques were typically built by and (most often) for particular immigrant communities and those communities consisted primarily of men because American immigration laws limited immigration from many countries until the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. Thus, the issue of spaces for women did not become an issue until there was a sizable number of women to attend prayers in mosques. In their minority context, mosques quickly became much more than spaces for communal prayer, as they provided Muslims with physical spaces for community and identity building as well as worship, education, and celebration of religious holidays. After 1965 especially, mosques became one of the focal points of religious education for Muslim children and instruction in Arabic.<sup>35</sup>

Haddad, Smith, and Moore imply that the lack of prayer spaces for women may have been related to the fact that many mosques in the 1970s and 80s were built with financial support from "oil-rich Islamic countries." While earlier mosques were often used for activities such as weddings and sometimes even community dances, more recent immigrants were critical of such practices and demanded conformity

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<sup>34</sup> The first purpose-built mosque was the Moslem Mosque in Highland Park, Michigan, which celebrated its grand opening in 1921. Sally Howell, "Mosque History," in *Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (New York: Greenwood Press, 2007), 432–34. Studies of American mosque history tend to neglect the history of African-American communities, and this essay is unfortunately not the place to correct this error.

<sup>35</sup> See Ihsan Bagby, "Imams and Mosque Organizations in the United States: A Study of Mosque Leadership and Organizational Structure in American Mosques," in *Muslims in the United States*, ed. P. Strum and D. Tarantolo (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003), 113–34, for a more detailed discussion of American mosques as congregations.

with “Islamic norms.” They claim that “national figures” from 2005 suggest that at least two-thirds of women who attend mosques pray in spaces separated from those of men.<sup>36</sup> Opinions on joint prayers spaces and mixed-gender congregations are divided but, importantly, not along gender lines.<sup>37</sup>

Asra Nomani had initiated her quest for space in the main prayer hall earlier in 2003, inspired by her experiences during her pilgrimage to Mecca. Her book chronicles the lessons of her pilgrimage and frames her activism after her return as a sequence of logically necessary steps to achieve her goal, “the struggle for the soul of Islam.” During Ramadan 2003 she was shocked to discover that the newly dedicated mosque of her community featured a completely separate section for women, including what she describes as the “back entrance.” Nomani writes:

I hadn’t attached much significance to the moment when I had stood before the Ka’bah with my family, unhindered by gender segregation, but in a lesson I was slowly learning, I realized there really were no moments from the hajj that were without meaning.<sup>38</sup>

Encouraged by the experience of praying with men in the same space in the mosque surrounding the *ka’bah* in Mecca, Nomani set out to find scholarly support for her instinctive insistence on the right to pray in the same spaces with men. She discovered scholars such as Asma Afsaruddin at the University of Notre Dame who wrote to her that “(w)omen’s present marginalization in the mosque is a betrayal of what Islam had promised women” adding that women in the Prophet Muḥammad’s time were not relegated to the back of the mosque and that no physical separation existed between male and female worshippers.<sup>39</sup> In starting a relationship that in her narrative would come full circle with the woman-led prayer in 2005, Nomani contacted Amina

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<sup>36</sup> Yvonne Haddad, Jane Smith, and Kathleen Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to the discussion of this in *Me and the Mosque*, see also an interesting debate on the issue broadcast on PBS [Public Broadcasting Service], “Women in Mosques,” [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week811/p-cover.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week811/p-cover.html), aired November 12, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Nomani, *Standing Alone*, 198.

<sup>39</sup> Nomani, *Standing Alone*, 199. Nomani also mentions Alan Godlas of the University of Georgia, Daisy Khan of the ASMA Society in New York City, and Ingrid Mattson, professor at Hartford Seminary, and (the first woman) president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).



Wadud and found her support for her quest for equality. Nomani writes,

It was time that we took back our religion. The systematic elimination of women's rights was starting to make sense to me. I was relieved. It was about power and control. It wasn't about Islam.<sup>40</sup>

In this interpretational move, gender equality is equated with joint (and equal) access to space which in turn would have to mean that gender equality is the same as gender egalitarianism.

To those American Muslim women who demanded equal access to their mosques, the lack of space and visibility of women in the mosque was a symbol of the exclusion of women from communities more generally. Thus, achieving connected, accessible, and non-segregated prayer spaces would, in their understanding, recognize their equal rights with men and provide women with equal access to community leadership. Space then becomes a metaphor for rights which in turn need to be actualized through women's leadership.

When Asra Nomani entered her mosque through the main door in Ramadan 2003, and again when she marched with her supporters on the same mosque in June 2004, and then went to other mosques around North America, she actively demanded that women become leaders of American Muslim communities, based on a discourse of equal rights.<sup>41</sup> Nomani does not distinguish between exegetical or ritual leadership and other forms such as communal or mosque leadership in her writings, but instead perceives all dimensions as part of the same issue.

### *Women and Mosque Leadership*

Studies of American mosques and leadership structures have rarely accounted for the roles of women in communal positions such as on mosque boards or other governing bodies. Pervasive congregational models, with mosques either led by a strong *imām* personality or a strong mosque board, tend to blur the boundaries between ritual/

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<sup>40</sup> Nomani, *Standing Alone*, 202.

<sup>41</sup> Those rejecting her demands, especially that for joint prayer spaces, cite arguments that ultimately are about women's sexuality. To claim that men will be distracted by the presence of women is to describe women, as Zarqa Nawaz points out in the quote which opens this chapter, as a distraction or as sexual temptation.

religious and social/communal forms of leadership and the necessary authority to carry out either.<sup>42</sup>

Haddad, Smith, and Moore contend that “until recently women have seldom played institutional leadership roles in their place of worship,” thereby reducing the mosque yet again to a place of prayer, even though it serves many other functions, but acknowledging that small signs of change have begun to appear in American Muslim mosque communities.<sup>43</sup> Women have played important roles in raising and educating the next generation of Muslims, a task that has exerted considerable pressure on Muslim mothers to succeed. Women have (maybe earlier more than now) participated in gender-specific aspects of Muslim community life such as preparing food for functions and events, organizing activities for children, and occasionally at least participating in educational events, and very importantly in raising money for the community.<sup>44</sup> This participation without exerting any direct or formal leadership has reinforced traditional roles for women in mosque communities while also providing social networks and activities outside the home, especially for those Muslim women who do not work outside the home.

Nomani’s narrative of her encounters and struggles with her community tells of her exclusion from the mosque, a decision taken by the all-male board members. Later, one woman was elected to the board, which Nomani perceived as one result of her struggles and interpreted as that woman’s attempt to change the system from within. The same woman then resigned from the mosque board and agreed that the mosque leadership had displayed their intolerance toward women in general by banning Nomani from attending prayers.<sup>45</sup> And while Nomani’s experience with trying to change the situation in her mosque is a tale of struggle and eventual exclusion from that mosque, it is important to remember that a significant majority of Muslims

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<sup>42</sup> Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Perl, and Bryan T. Froehle, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait* (Washington, DC: Council on American Islamic Relations, 2001). Bagby has also offered the two leadership models for mosques based on a congregational model for American mosques. See Bagby, “Imams and Mosque Organization in the United States.”

<sup>43</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America*, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> See Nomani, *Standing Alone*. See also Paul Barrett, *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion* (New York: Picador, 2007), 134–78, and *The Mosque in Morgantown*, directed by Brittany Huckabee (2009), which both chronicle Nomani’s struggles.

in America are not affiliated or connected to a mosque or community center, thus making the struggle for space in the mosque only one aspect of the struggle for authority, leadership, and representation. Very recent scholarly discussions of secular and cultural Muslims have provided blueprints for understanding different kinds of community building, networks, and identity negotiations,<sup>46</sup> which contextualize the following discussion on women's leadership within and outside of mosques.

### *Discourses on Women's Leadership*

American Muslim women have recognized that discourses on women's leadership are part and parcel of their efforts to attain gender equality in their communities. Nomani, in her usual personal style, offers insight into her development as a leader in an essay entitled "Being the Leader I Want to See in the World."<sup>47</sup> The same edited volume also contains her "Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque," in which she states "Women have an Islamic right to hold leadership positions as prayer leaders, or *imāms*, and as members of the board of directors and management committees."<sup>48</sup>

Hibba Abugideiri offers a far more sophisticated argument for women's leadership by problematizing the very notion of 'female Islamic leadership.' She argues that adopting such terminology on the theoretical level assumes that Islamic leadership is in fact gendered, in other words that leadership tasks and areas are distinguished by gender. Historically, she contends, traditional leadership roles have in fact been assigned to men and women, with men being responsible for issues 'of Islam' and women being responsible for issues relating to women. She writes:

In fact, 'Islamic leadership' comes to represent the invisible construct, certainly assumed to be masculine, to which the qualifier 'female' must be added in order to shift the focus from the larger issues to issues exclusive to women.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> See Ruth Mas, "Compelling the Muslim Subject: Memory as Post-Colonial Violence and the Public Performativity of 'Secular and Cultural Islam,'" *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (October 2006), 585–616, for a discussion of secular Muslims in France.

<sup>47</sup> Asra Nomani, "Being the Leader I Want to See in the World," in *Living Islam Out Loud*, ed. S. Abdul-Ghafur (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 139–56. The volume also contains her "Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque," 153–54.

<sup>48</sup> Nomani, "Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque," 153.

<sup>49</sup> Hibba Abugideiri, "The Renewed Woman of Islam," *The Muslim World* 91, nos. 1/2 (2001): 1–18, 2.

This argument is a version of the feminist critique leveled against defining the masculine as normative and the feminine as a derivation or more often an aberration from the norm.

Abugideiri then introduces Amina Wadud, Amira Sonbol, professor at Georgetown University, and Sharifa Alkhateeb (d. 2004), and argues that these three women's acts of intellectual, religious, and social leadership have provided American Muslim women with alternative leadership models. By taking possession of exegesis (Wadud), reformulations of Islamic Law (Sonbol), and women's organizations (Alkhateeb), these new Muslim women leaders have changed the rules of leadership by adopting Wadud's formulation of "gender jihad."

"Gender jihad" seeks greater complementarity between the sexes, and is based on the Qur'ān. In short, it is a struggle for gender parity in Muslim society in the name of divine justice; it is a struggle to end a long-standing gender regime that has paralyzed Muslim women, preventing them from being leaders without having to add the qualifier "female" or "woman."<sup>50</sup>

Notably, Abugideiri, while drawing on Wadud's work, does not adopt her egalitarian language. For her, Muslim women's leadership is religious by virtue of its reference to the Qur'ān and its (often critical and sometimes reluctant) engagement with the Islamic interpretive tradition. She does not make a distinction between different dimensions of leadership.

Ingrid Mattson, as a response to the 2005 woman-led prayer, has formulated an approach to women's leadership that explicitly rejects women's prayer leadership for men, but affirms other forms emphatically.<sup>51</sup> Mattson moves the conversation beyond ritual leadership and towards the—in her view—more important discussion of women's possible and desirable leadership roles. She argues that when Muslim religious institutions do not take Muslim women seriously, they defeat the very purpose of their existence, which is to bring their congregations closer to God. Mosques and communities that turn away women, or frustrate their aspirations as leaders and participants, effectively turn away half of their potential membership. Women in

<sup>50</sup> Abugideiri, "The Renewed Woman of Islam," 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ingrid Mattson, "Can a Woman Be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women's Leadership," <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/muslimwomensleadership.pdf>, accessed August 28, 2009.

leadership positions are necessary to represent the specific needs and perspectives of women which Mattson contends are different from those of men. Muslim women need Islamic knowledge and increased societal authority in order to help bring other Muslims closer to God. Her perspective includes strong encouragement of women to seek knowledge and even chaplaincy training in order to preach and teach (other women). In the final analysis, Mattson rejects women's prayer leadership of men, but supports women's prayer leadership of other women (her example are women's mosques in China). Her argument draws authority from the *sunnah* and established legal principles in the Islamic tradition. She then advocates more inclusion of women in mosque leadership and, in a move away from the mosque, contends that, in American society, women as well as men have other opportunities to build communities and to lead them.

In a similar direction goes the contribution by Zaid Shakir, one of the founders of the Zaytuna Institute in California. Shakir, in an essay entitled "An Examination of the Issue of Female Prayer Leadership," rejects women as *imāms* based on his understanding of the Islamic legal tradition. He critiques the prayer and its organizers for creating disunity in the community and for allowing non-Muslims to exploit the controversy over the prayer to taint Islam. The body of the essay is a legal and historical refutation of the arguments made by the organizers to justify their decisions and the event. However, at the end, Shakir, like Mattson, acknowledges that there are issues with the treatment and status of Muslim women in American Muslim communities:

Saying this, we should not lose sight of the fact that there are many issues in our community involving the neglect, oppression, and in some instances, the degradation of our women. . . . Perhaps, if the men of our community had more humility, we would behave in ways that do not alienate, frustrate, or outright oppress our women.<sup>52</sup>

In the end, it was precisely the alienation and frustration that women and men such as Asra Nomani, Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, and Ahmed Nassef felt in dealing with their mosques and communities that led them to stage the woman-led prayer as a symbolic act of religious protest and civil disobedience. Amina Wadud agreed to lead the prayer

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<sup>52</sup> Zaid Shakir, *Scattered Pictures: Reflections of an American Muslim* (Hayward: Zaytuna Institute, 2005), 167–81.

after being approached by Nomani as a religious scholar with the knowledge of ritual practice to carry out the prayer leadership.

*Leading Prayers and Communities*

The Friday prayer on March 18, 2005, differed from established Muslim practices in several ways: the *imām* of the prayer was a woman, Amina Wadud, who also delivered the *khuṭbah*; the congregation she addressed and led in prayer was not separated by gender; and the *adhān* (call to prayer) was pronounced by a woman as well. It is precisely in these three differences from established ritual practice that the March 18 prayer became an embodied performance of gender justice in the eyes of the organizers and participants. They symbolically challenged exclusively male privileges of leading Muslims in ritual prayers, and they blurred lines of gender segregation in ritual prayers at the same time.

The prayer ceremony and sermon were preceded by a press conference in which several of the organizers including Asra Nomani, Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, Ahmed Naseef, Sarah Eltantawi, and Amina Wadud spoke to the significance of the prayer.<sup>53</sup> Their short comments highlighted different facets of their agenda. Sarah Eltantawi described the prayer as a historic event, namely the first time on historical record that a woman would lead a Friday prayer and give a *khuṭbah*. Asra Nomani explained the significance of the event as one that would take American Muslim women to the front of the mosque,<sup>54</sup> and symbolically at least into leadership positions in Muslim communities, not just in America, but globally. Ahmed Nassef emphasized the fact that it had taken Muslims 1,400 years to come to this point where such a prayer was possible and introduced the idea of equal space in the mosque and the Muslim community for men and women. He pointed

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<sup>53</sup> I am indebted to Brittany Huckabee and Asra Nomani for sharing with me several hours of unedited video footage of the event. I have discussed the intentions of the organizers in attracting media attention elsewhere; see Hammer, "Performing Gender Justice."

<sup>54</sup> This is clearly a reference to civil rights struggles in the United States, especially Rosa Parks who demanded the right to sit at the front of the bus. Nomani has called herself the Rosa Parks of Islam. See Laury Goodstein, "Muslim Women Seeking a Place in the Mosque," *New York Times*, July 22, 2004.

to the inspiring nature of the prayer for those Muslims in America who have not attended communal prayers and have avoided their communities because they do not identify with gender practices in those communities.

Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, editor of *Living Islam Out Loud* and a participant in Nomani's Muslim Women Freedom Tour, argued that "reclaiming the egalitarian roots of Islam" would improve the perilous and unacceptable conditions of many Muslim women in the world. The last to speak at the press conference was Amina Wadud, who described the prayer as an act of Muslim women "reclaiming their full human dignity" and emphasized its grounding in the Qur'an. She also emphatically described herself as a lonely academic, much more comfortable with writing books than with standing in front of journalists or her Muslim congregation. For her the prayer performance would be "an act of devotion to Allah," performed in the same form practiced by Muslims for many centuries.

The intimate link between gender-egalitarian *tafsīr* and the woman-led prayer was nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the *khuṭbah* by Amina Wadud. Not only the form of the *khuṭbah*,<sup>55</sup> but also its message revealed Wadud's vision of spiritual as well as social equality. The *khuṭbah* drew on passages of the Qur'an such as 62:9, 2:255, and 33:35, emphasizing the single soul origin of all humanity, and the fact that some parts of the Qur'an deliberately address both men and women, especially in matters of worship and spiritual equality. Wadud then moved to explain her "Tawhidic paradigm" according to which men and women cannot be situated hierarchically because that would put those in power on par with God. Following a long tradition, the *khuṭbah* called the congregation to reflect on matters of faith but not in isolation from societal and worldly issues.

The discursive reasons for the prayer and the emphasis on the event as an embodiment of women's equality, not only spiritually, but in society as well, brought together a group of American Muslims from different walks of life, and with different levels of knowledge of Islam.

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<sup>55</sup> Wadud has reflected on the fact that after her 1994 *khuṭbah* in South Africa, the entire debate seemed to be about form and not content. The same could be said for the 2005 *khuṭbah* which has not been analyzed in detail despite its significance as an expression of Wadud's *tafsīr*. For her reflections, see Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 162–86.

While leading a congregation in prayers is on the surface an act of religious leadership, it is also an act of societal leadership because those in the congregation are members of larger society. In this understanding, the theoretical distinction between spiritual and societal equality does not hold. If women cannot be equal in human society, God's intent and judgment of their spiritual equality would effectively be suspended. Interestingly, the arguments against the prayer and women's prayer leadership were couched in the same terms as those against women's presence in men's prayer spaces, namely fears of women's sexual attraction and a resulting loss of concentration on the task of prayer. In the ensuing discussion over the prayer, the issue of women's ritual leadership was conflated with related but distinct questions of physical mixing of genders in congregations and more general participation of women in mosques and communities.

### *Conclusion*

American Muslim women have begun to claim the right to advance their own gendered interpretations of Islamic foundational texts. In the context of a series of events that took place in 2003–5, some of these reinterpretations became the basis for acts that in turn challenged established ritual and societal practices regarding women as well as the interpretation of these practices. Gender-inclusive and gender-egalitarian interpretations of the Qur'an assume that the text, at the very least, posits spiritual equality of men and women, which in a historical-critical reading of the text can and should be translated into gender equality in Muslim societies.

The ability of these new interpretations to build interpretive community depends on the ability of the exegetes to claim exegetical and thus religious authority, as well as on accompanying discourses on legitimate religious and communal leadership. The particular and expanded functions of North American mosques and the histories of their communities have allowed for the development of discourses on women's religious leadership within as well as beyond the walls of the mosque. The events described in this essay created a temporary interpretive community united by a shared notion of activism as embodied *tafsir*.



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## CHAPTER 3.6

### WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO MOSQUE SPACE: ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN CAPE TOWN MOSQUES

Uta Christina Lehmann

#### *Introduction*

There is a diversity of positions on gender in the Muslim community in South Africa. The spectrum ranges from gender egalitarian approaches to more conservative understandings. Opinions vary, and this is especially so regarding women's access to public spaces. Whereas women's active involvement in the secular public sphere is by and large accepted, the situation regarding their participation in the religious public space of the mosque is more complex. Traditionally in South Africa, mosque space has been highly male-dominated with limited space for women. However, women have started to push the issue of access and participation in mosques onto the South African Muslim community's agenda.

This paper explores the dimensions and dynamics of debates about women's access to leadership positions within mosques in South Africa by focusing on mosques in Cape Town, and by exploring and comparing responses and reflections on a chain of events (lasting from the early 1990s to 2005) that had a significant impact on gender dynamics and mosque access for women. Two events attracted particular attention from within the Muslim community. In 1994, American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud delivered a talk at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town as part of the Friday sermon, during which men and women prayed on the same floor of the mosque, separated by a rope. Eleven years later Wadud delivered the complete Friday sermon and led the *jum'ah* (Friday) prayer for a mixed-gender congregation in New York. The paper compares public responses and discussions around these two events as reflected in newspaper coverage and through personal interviews conducted in 2005, and argues that the particular question of women's access to and participation in mosques became indicative of the parameters of gender politics in South African Muslim communities.

*The Muslim Community in South Africa*

In order to explore gender politics within the Muslim community in South Africa, and particularly the aspect of women's access to and participation in mosques, a brief socio-historical contextualization is necessary. The Muslim community in South Africa originates from two different immigration waves into the country. The record of the earliest Muslims in South Africa dates back to the arrival of the first colonists at the Cape in the 1650s. These Muslims were part of a large group of immigrants, comprising slaves and laborers as well as prisoners, mainly from Indonesia and Malaysia, who settled at the Cape. A second wave of Muslims arrived two centuries later, in the 1860s, as part of the immigration from India and Pakistan. Today, Muslims originating from the Indian culture are mostly situated in the Northern provinces Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal, whereas Muslims of South and Southeast Asian descent are predominantly to be found in the Western Cape.<sup>1</sup> In both parts of the country, Muslims' religious identities have been conditioned by their diverse cultural backgrounds.

This cultural heterogeneity also impacted upon their experiences during apartheid times. With the implementation of the Population Registration Act in 1950, South Africans were divided into four 'race groups,' the so-called 'Whites,' 'Blacks,' 'Indians,' and 'Coloreds'. This categorization attached Muslims' identity to culture once again. However, not all 'Indians' are Muslims, and furthermore Muslims constitute only a minority of 'Coloreds.'<sup>2</sup> According to Günther and Niehaus the majority of Muslims displayed a strong political passivity

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<sup>1</sup> See Farid Esack, "Liberation, Human Rights, Gender and Islamic Law: The South African Case," in *Islamic Law Reform and Human Rights*, ed. Tore Lindholm and Kari Vogt (Oslo: Nordic Human Rights Publications, 1992), 164.

<sup>2</sup> The Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 defined 'Coloreds' as "not a white person or a Bantu." See James L. Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 31. Until the twentieth century, Muslims falling under this classification were called 'Colored Muslims' or 'Malays,' although they came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, comprising not only South and Southeast Asians but also descendants of Arabs and Khoi-San. For more details on this issue, see Shamil Jeppie and Goolam Vahed, "Multiple Communities? Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa* 7 (2004): 56–62.

in their early approach to apartheid.<sup>3</sup> The conservative *'ulamā'*<sup>4</sup> were largely responsible for such silence, persuading Muslims against active involvement in politics. As well as this, a number of Muslims aimed for dialogue with the government in order to avoid further repression by the apartheid regime.<sup>5</sup>

However, the implementation of the Group Areas Act in 1950 and the following forced removal of black and colored communities from labeled 'white areas' was to be the key impulse for parts of the Muslim community to actively engage in the struggle for freedom. Forced removals led to a dislocation of the mosque community, which resulted in disorientation within the community and was partly responsible for the emergence of Muslim organizations which actively engaged in the struggle against apartheid. This struggle for social justice soon became also devoted to fighting gender discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Muslims' Struggle against Apartheid*

In the beginning it was mainly Muslim youths, specifically college and university students, who engaged in the political struggle against apartheid.<sup>7</sup> Revealing their discontent with the *'ulamā'*'s quest to remain politically aloof, they searched for new ways to approach Islam. In Cape Town they found a leader for such a discourse in the person of *imām* (Islamic leader) Abdullah Haroon.<sup>8</sup> He became a key figure in organizing the Muslim youth in Cape Town in the struggle against social and political oppression. However, he was rapidly targeted by

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<sup>3</sup> Ursula Günther and Inga Niehaus, "Islam, Politics, and Gender During the Struggle in South Africa," in *Religion, Politics, and Identity in a Changing South Africa*, ed. David Chidester, Abdulkader Tayob, and Wolfram Weiße (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), 122.

<sup>4</sup> In Cape Town the *'ulamā'* mainly comprise members of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), a legal body which was established in 1945 "in order to guarantee the Islamic principles and the purity of the religion" for the entire Muslim community in South Africa. See Ursula Günther and Inga Niehaus, "Islam in South Africa: The Muslims' Contribution to the Struggle Against Apartheid and the Process of Democratization," in *Islam in Africa*, ed. Thomas Bierschenk and Georg Stauth (Münster: LIT, 2002), 73.

<sup>5</sup> See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams, and Sermons* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 67.

<sup>6</sup> See Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Günther and Niehaus, "Islam in South Africa," 73.

<sup>8</sup> Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, 54.

the oppressive regime and killed; and the youth felt betrayed when the 'ulamā' kept silent about "the killing of the *imām*."<sup>9</sup> Disillusioned, they turned away from their traditional leaders and formed their own organizations to engage in the struggle.

The first organizations to be formed were the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), founded in 1970, and the Muslim Students Association (MSA), established in 1974. Their members became educated in modern Muslim thought by scholars from the Muslim heartlands. Approaching the struggle against apartheid from such an ideological understanding, these organizations regarded the struggle of Muslims as distinct from the other militant elements of society. Thus, they were opposed to working together with non-Muslim groups and secular liberation organizations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF). In 1980, a small group of activists broke away from the MYM. They formed their own group, the Call of Islam (hereafter "the Call"). Working under the umbrella of the UDF they made a dynamic contribution to the struggle against apartheid. However, as part of their active involvement in the struggle, MYM and the Call developed consciousness around various sensitive community issues, such as equality and women's rights.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Gender Jihād*

The national struggle for liberation was based on a strong sense of justice and human rights. Out of this quest for justice, young Muslims developed an 'Islamic discourse' on human rights, parallel to and overlapping with the general human rights discourse. As the general debates on human rights had led to feminist discourses or demands for women's rights, so too Islamic human rights discourses led to a re-thinking of women's rights within the Muslim community.<sup>11</sup> This re-thinking was again shaped by both international Islamic gender equality discourses and the specific South African feminist discourse. Thus, Muslims in South Africa developed a specific South African

<sup>9</sup> Esack, "Liberation, Human Rights, Gender and Islamic Law," 169.

<sup>10</sup> See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> For a sophisticated summary and assessment of these developments, see Na'eem Jeenah, "The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (2006): 27–41, <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif> (accessed January 13, 2010).

Muslim approach to gender politics, which came to be known as ‘gender *jihād*’<sup>12</sup>—this now widely used term was coined in the South African context. According to Sa’diyya Shaikh, in the South African context the term has been understood as “resistance of Muslim activists to patriarchy and sexism in their religious communities.”<sup>13</sup>

The MYM and the Call were the main two organizations that actively engaged with gender issues and integrated the struggle for women’s rights into their agenda. Soon after its inception, the Call moved to the forefront of the struggle for Muslim women’s rights among Muslim groups. Around 1984 they announced vociferously their “believing in the equality of men and women.”<sup>14</sup> Although they provided no explanation as to what level of equality they sought to bring about, this was regarded as one of the most progressive propositions regarding gender issues during that time.<sup>15</sup> The Call’s commitment to challenging prevailing perceptions of women’s roles in Islam became apparent in their organizational structure. According to Jeenah, gender interaction was free, mixed-gender *ḥalaqāt* (training or discussion sessions) were held, and women members actively engaged in public meetings and workshops on gender discrimination. Moreover, women’s leadership positions were promoted within the organization.<sup>16</sup> However, only a few women made use of their rights. Most of them did not feel comfortable taking leading positions in a still strongly male-controlled environment. From 1989, with the radicalization and politicization of the struggle against apartheid, women’s issues slipped from the Call’s agenda. As they aimed to include the ‘*ulamā*’ in the struggle, the organization started to make compromises regarding the struggle for women’s rights. In 1993 the Call arranged a national meeting for the organization to make a last attempt to achieve women’s empowerment; but the initiative failed.<sup>17</sup>

The MYM faced similar problems. Although since its inception the MYM had included women’s issues on its agenda—such as inviting

<sup>12</sup> See Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women, and Gender Justice,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: One-world, 2003), 159.

<sup>14</sup> Call of Islam, “Call of Islam,” c. 1984: 2, quoted in Jeenah, “The National Liberation Struggle,” 32.

<sup>15</sup> Na’em Jeenah, “A Degree Above: The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in South Africa in the 1990s” (MA diss., University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2001), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Jeenah, “A Degree Above,” 25–26; see also Esack, “Liberation, Human Rights,” 181.

<sup>17</sup> Jeenah, “A Degree Above,” 26–29.

foreign women as guest speakers or campaigning for spaces for women in mosques—their programs revealed a strong belief in gender separation, insofar as men and women should have their separate spheres.<sup>18</sup> However, in the late 1980s the MYM started to re-think its ideology and engaged in the reinterpretation of scriptures for new contexts. This was the beginning of a new phase in its organizational history, as it opened the door for a dynamic women's rights discourse. As part of this development, in 1990 they launched a women's rights campaign which helped sensitize the Muslim community regarding issues such as equal participation within the organization, access to religious education, and access to mosques.<sup>19</sup> Women within the organization became more assertive and started to take their own positions. In 1993, members of the organization formed a Gender Desk and elected a female gender-activist, Shamima Shaikh, as its national coordinator. Under her leadership, and with the support of others such as Farid Esack and Sa'diyya Shaikh, the Gender Desk implemented an education program around its Islamic feminist agenda, campaigned for equal access to mosques, and set up a network with other Muslim women's organizations. However, similar to the case of the Call, the constant dispute with the conservative *'ulamā'*, as well as the continuing male domination within the organization's leadership, preserved conservative perceptions of gender roles which led to repeated compromises regarding their struggle for women's rights.<sup>20</sup> Despite the influence of male authority on gender debates within Muslim organizations, the struggle for women's access to and participation in mosques gained ground and—as the following events highlight—was particularly shaped by women's voices.

### *The Struggle for Mosque Space*

#### *The 23rd Street Mosque Event in 1993*

One of the main events drawing attention to the women's struggle for mosque space took place in the 23rd Street Mosque in Fietas, Johannesburg. In 1993 a group of female MYM activists led by Shamima

<sup>18</sup> Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 117.

<sup>19</sup> Esack, "Liberation, Human Rights," 180.

<sup>20</sup> Jeenah, "The National Liberation Struggle," 34; see also Günther and Niehaus, "Islam, Politics, and Gender," 120.



Shaikh entered the mosque on the first day of Ramaḍān, the Islamic holy month of fasting, and performed their *tarāwīḥ* prayer on the mezzanine level.<sup>21</sup> Although this action caused enormous uproar within the male part of the congregation, the women continued to pray on this level for the next twenty-six nights. However, on the twenty-seventh night of Ramaḍān, which is one of its most spiritually significant nights, the mosque committee decided to accommodate the women outside the mosque in order to provide additional space for the male congregants.<sup>22</sup> The attempt by the women to reclaim their space on the mezzanine level did not succeed. To express their outrage over this forced removal they produced a pamphlet and distributed it in the mosque the following night. The mosque committee responded to this statement in a positive way, and after this event changes were introduced and space for women's participation in the mosque was created. The whole action caused significant media attention, which benefited the MYM as it gained respect in broader South African society. As a consequence the Gender Desk was formed, which started to call not only for 'space in mosques' but for 'equal access to mosques.'<sup>23</sup>

#### *The Pre-khuṭbah<sup>24</sup> Event in 1994*

While women in the northern parts of South Africa still struggle simply to access mosques, in Cape Town most mosques provide facilities for women.<sup>25</sup> In 1994 some Muslims in Cape Town therefore advanced

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<sup>21</sup> The *tarāwīḥ* prayer is an additional daily prayer after sunset in Ramaḍān, where the complete Qur'ān is recited. It is traditionally held in congregation. However, in the northern provinces of South Africa, Muslim women are not part of the *tarāwīḥ* prayer congregation inside the mosque. See Jeenah, "A Degree Above."

<sup>22</sup> See Farid Esack, "Death of a Muslim Joan of Arc," Shamima Shaikh Commemorative Website, <http://shams.za.org/> (accessed January 13, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Jeenah, "The National Liberation Struggle," 34.

<sup>24</sup> The pre-*khuṭbah* is a talk which precedes the *khuṭbah*, the Friday sermon. Muslim minority communities in countries where Arabic is not the dominant language have started the tradition of delivering a pre-*khuṭbah* in a language understood by everybody in order to make the content of the lecture accessible for those congregants who do not understand Arabic. In South Africa the pre-*khuṭbah* is either delivered in English or Afrikaans. In some mosques Urdu is prevalent. The pre-*khuṭbah* is followed by the Arabic *khuṭbah* delivered from the pulpit. For detailed comment on this matter, see Abdulkader Tayob, "The Pre-Khutbah, Khutbah and Islamic Change," *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 8 (August 1994).

<sup>25</sup> See Jeenah, "A Degree Above," 30. These regional differences have to be considered against the broader socio-historical background of Muslims in South Africa as described earlier. I would argue that their different cultural origins impacted upon the

to the next level of the gender *jihād*, and aimed at women's equal access to and participation in the mosque. The most significant event expressing this struggle occurred in August 1994 at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town. The *imām* of the mosque at that time, *imām* Rashied Omar, decided in concert with the mosque board to invite Amina Wadud to deliver the English part of the *khuṭbah* for the Friday prayer.<sup>26</sup> Wadud's action challenged prevailing perceptions around mosque space in two ways. First, a woman not only gave a lecture inside the mosque, but also delivered it prior to the sacred Friday prayer, until then a male prerogative.<sup>27</sup> Second, Wadud addressed the whole congregation from the main prayer area of the mosque. Men and women shared the same floor, only separated by a rope.<sup>28</sup> After Wadud concluded her talk, *Imām* Omar proceeded with the Arabic part of the *khuṭbah* from the pulpit and led the prayers. For the following discussion of the reactions to the event it is noteworthy that the Claremont Main Road Mosque community originally did not distinguish between the *khuṭbah* and the pre-*khuṭbah*. They only designated Wadud's sermon a pre-*khuṭbah* after the event, and from then on followed the practice of a two-part sermon. Wadud's reaction to this strategy is best described in her own words:

Like the *hijab*, certain semblances reflecting the patriarchal conservative norm are maintained to allay traditional sensitivities, while attempting to challenge other aspects of the status quo. . . . the woman who delivered the address was not given the status of a *khatibah* (*imāma*). Instead, her *khuṭbah* was relegated to the status of lecture. Despite this tactic, many, including myself, would acknowledge my address as the *khuṭbah*.<sup>29</sup>

The reaction to the event was twofold. On the one hand, Muslims supported the decision and welcomed this action as an important step

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creation of specific gender constructs, which in turn led to different understandings of women's position in mosques.

<sup>26</sup> Wadud originally came to South Africa for two reasons. First, she had accepted an invitation to participate in the conference "Islam and Civil Society in South Africa," organized by the University of South Africa in Pretoria (UNISA). Second, she had been invited by the Da'wah movement (IDM) to undertake a two-week lecture tour in South Africa. For more details on the circumstances of her stay, as well as a full transcript of her speech, see Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 163–68.

<sup>27</sup> See Faiza Shaikh, "Muslim Women's Rights to Mosque Space" (MA diss., University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban, 1998), 30.

<sup>28</sup> Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 177–78.

towards gender equality in the community.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the event caused a major commotion within Cape Town as well as in the broader South African Muslim community. In particular, the *'ulamā'* and the MJC (Muslim Judicial Council) opposed this break with tradition and condemned Wadud's action.<sup>31</sup> Protests were organized, and some turned into outbreaks of violence.<sup>32</sup> Although the event at the Claremont Main Road Mosque was a great step forward in the struggle for Muslim women's rights, especially in terms of Muslim women's participation in the mosque, the reluctance to change within the community proved to be stronger. The practices of a woman delivering the subsequently named *pre-khuṭbah*, and men and women sharing the same prayer space, were not adopted outside the Claremont Main Road Mosque.

#### *The Mayfair Congregation in 1995*

It was again the MYM who spearheaded a further action towards women's equal access to mosques. In 1995, female and male members of the MYM started an alternative prayer congregation. Every Friday they gathered in the offices of the MYM in Johannesburg for the *jum'ah* prayer. Additionally, they met there for the daily *tarāwīḥ* prayers during Ramaḍān. The number of participants ranged from fifteen to twenty-five, with women constituting about half of the congregation.<sup>33</sup> In this exceptional congregation a non-hierarchical approach to mosque space existed. Women were equally included in all the mosque activities. The underlying belief of such an approach was that God had bestowed equal responsibilities on men and women regarding their spirituality.<sup>34</sup> This all-inclusive understanding of leadership seems to be the most

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<sup>30</sup> Fahmi Gamielien, *The History of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, Its People and Their Contribution to Islam in South Africa* (Cape Town: Claremont Main Road Mosque, 2004), 81–82. However, Wadud subsequently criticized the incident, because after listening to the responses to the event by members of the community she realized that most progressive male Muslims paid more attention to the form of the lecture than to its content. See Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 178–79.

<sup>31</sup> Shaikh, "Muslim Women's Rights," 30.

<sup>32</sup> See "Anti-Wadud Protestors Desecrated Mosque," *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 8 (August 2, 1994); and "Imam Receives Death Threats," *Cape Times* (Cape Town) (August 1, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Informal talk with Farhana Ismail, September 2005.

<sup>34</sup> See Shaikh, "Muslim Women's Rights," 31.

revolutionary of contemporary Muslim approaches to gender issues up to the present day.

The group did not seek publicity for their actions and thus it was not popularized in the same way as the 2005 *khuṭbah* event (see below). The congregation disbanded after two years and the participants moved to another mosque in Johannesburg, Masjid-ul-Islam in Brixton. Here they faced various limitations on their gender-egalitarian arrangements, especially in terms of leadership. Women's claims for equal access and participation in the mosque had only just got going in this mosque, and the women prayed in the upstairs gallery. In 2001, the mosque committee consulted with its congregants about the possibility of creating space for women in the main section of the mosque.<sup>35</sup> Jeenah narrates the outcome of the decision as follows:

The decision was made. But there was lots of caution about how to implement it. Particularly since a number of women objected. However, the board has finally taken a decision. From the 1st Ramadan, women will be in the main section of the *masjid* [mosque]. For the most part, there will be a 'partition' less than waist high. And for a couple of rows at the back, there will be a higher partition. The latter is because some women have indicated that if there is no partition they will not attend. So we are trying to accommodate them as well.<sup>36</sup>

This statement highlights the fact that the level of desired access to mosque space varies among women. Whereas some women show active engagement in the struggle for equal access and participation in the mosque, others do not regard themselves as part of this struggle.

#### *The khuṭbah and the Woman-led Friday Prayer Event in 2005*

In March 2005 Amina Wadud publicly delivered the *khuṭbah* and led the Friday prayer for a mixed-gender congregation in New York. Her action caused an enormous uproar in the Muslim community worldwide and brought the issue of women's access to and participation in mosques into global Muslim consciousness and debate. The boundaries of gender politics were challenged. The media in particular played

<sup>35</sup> See Jeenah, "A Degree Above," 109.

<sup>36</sup> Informal talk with Na'eem Jeenah, September 2005.

a role in highlighting the event as the ultimate step in the struggle for women's equal rights in mosques.<sup>37</sup>

Regarding the outcome of this event and its impact on the Muslim community in South Africa, certain facts merit attention. First, the event took place in North America, where the Muslim community faces a cultural, socio-political, and religious situation distinct from that of South African Muslims. Second, the act was an open and very public event. Furthermore, it did not take place inside a mosque, but in a house linked to a church.<sup>38</sup> Finally, whereas in South Africa the struggle for women's access to and participation in mosques evolved out of the community's gender *jihād* as part of the national liberation struggle, such an organic context was not part of the 2005 event. These facts have to be taken into account when approaching the related debates within the South African Muslim community.

### *Public Discourses and Debates*

Many of the events described above were extensively discussed in the public sphere, namely in a variety of newspapers in South Africa. In what follows I offer an analysis of the debates about the 1994 pre-*khuṭbah* event and the 2005 woman-led prayer and *khuṭbah*, based on two major local newspapers (*Cape Times* and *Argus*) and the two main South African Muslim newspapers (*Muslim Views* and *Al-Qalam*). The events attracted different degrees of media attention; however, both debates reflect positions, opinions, and underlying assumptions regarding the issue of women's rights to mosque space in different ways.

*Cape Times* and *Cape Argus* approached the pre-*khuṭbah* event in 1994 from a very sensational point of view, locating the event within

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<sup>37</sup> Amina Wadud repeated her action twice. In October 2005 she delivered the Friday sermon and led the prayer for a mixed-gender congregation at the Islamic Feminism Conference in Barcelona, Spain. See Husain al-Qadi, "Amina Wadud Repeats Stunt in Masonic Hall," *Ummah Pulse*, October 18, 2008, [http://www.ummahpulse.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=457&Itemid=71](http://www.ummahpulse.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=457&Itemid=71) (accessed January 13, 2010). Three years later, in October 2008, Wadud delivered the *khuṭbah* as part of the annual conference of the Muslim Educational Centre Oxford (MECO). See Natalie Hancock, "Woman to Lead UK Muslim Prayers," *BBC News*, October 16, 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/oxfordshire/7673845.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/oxfordshire/7673845.stm) (accessed January 13, 2010). However, these events did not attract as much attention from the Muslim world as the New York incident.

<sup>38</sup> See Diana L. Eck, "Amina Wadud," The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/reports/view/111> (accessed January 15, 2010).

society's wider struggle towards equality as part of the democratization process following the country's first democratic elections in April 1994.<sup>39</sup> With regards to the 2005 event, a lack of reporting in the secular public media is recognizable. The main reason for this is likely that the event did not take place in South Africa and did not seem to affect broader Cape Town society. Although the 1994 event also had little impact on broader society, it may still have been regarded as a significant step for the liberation and equality of women in South Africa. Furthermore, it was a local event, causing tensions within the local community and involving local public authorities.

The Muslim newspapers reflected on both of the events in a more extensive manner, treating them as a matter of women's leadership inside the mosque. They issued news reports on both of the events, explained the context, and presented arguments from different parties, reflecting different perspectives and opinions. The broad spectrum of answers represented in the discussion not only demonstrated the emotionally loaded nature of the events but also revealed the different understandings of gender and related issues concerning women's access to and participation in mosques within the South African Muslim community.

The analysis of the coverage of these events in the media is augmented with reflections on the events expressed in interviews conducted in Cape Town in the autumn of 2005 with five area *imāms* and four Muslim women from the local Muslim community. Together, the two sets of data demonstrate that the discourse on female access to mosques in South Africa cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of the South Asian Muslim communities.

### *Interpreting Religious Texts*

The '*ulamā*' are still regarded as the main authority on religious and legal matters in Islam in South Africa.<sup>40</sup> They are trained in religious knowledge and Islamic jurisprudence and often decide on legal issues

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<sup>39</sup> James Aranes, "A Step Forward as US Muslim Woman Gives Sermon at Claremont Mosque," *Cape Argus* (Cape Town), August 13/14, 1994.

<sup>40</sup> See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

arising in the community. The Claremont Mosque event challenged the exclusive claim of men to religious authority. The *Cape Times* reported: "The Claremont Mosque invited her [Wadud] as an authority in Islam and Muslim women's issues."<sup>41</sup> Yet the newspaper also mentioned members of the MJC who did not acknowledge Wadud as a "bona fide authority of Islamic jurisprudence."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, *Muslim Views* presented an article in which Wadud's action was opposed and Imām Rashied's authority as a religious leader to take this innovative step was questioned:

In addition we also need accountability to an established authority. Otherwise you now find for example the case at Claremont mosque where the Shaykh allowed a woman to give the Friday Sermon. . . . We not only need accreditation but also a "Shaykh's roll," similar to that of lawyers, doctors etc. Otherwise our Shaykhs have a free hand in what they decide for us and we have to follow like blind sheep.<sup>43</sup>

By presenting such an understanding without giving a counter-voice, *Muslim Views* again revealed its partial approach to the issue.

*Al-Qalam*, on the other hand, presented an article by a lay Muslim who criticized the claim to sole religious authority by the 'ulamā'. The author argued that authority on religious matters does not rest exclusively in the domain of the 'ulamā' (as represented by the MJC).<sup>44</sup> Instead, everyone who acquires the necessary religious knowledge should have the right to express himself in the mosque, address the congregation, and take leadership positions. Here, the question of women's access to such religious knowledge arises. In South Africa, religious knowledge is predominantly a male privilege and women have little access to extensive religious education.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the possibility of leadership positions for women inside the mosque seems to be marginal. The newspaper responses, however, did not acknowledge such structural issues and their implications.

The responses in the media and interviews demonstrated the mixture of approaches towards the interpretation of religious texts that Muslim

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<sup>41</sup> "Woman Makes Islam History at City Mosque," *Cape Times* (Cape Town), August 13, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> "Imam Receives Death Threats," *Cape Times*, August 1, 1994.

<sup>43</sup> Rashied Davids, "A Renewed Call for Accreditation," *Muslim Views* (Cape Town) 7 no. 8 (August 1994).

<sup>44</sup> Ali Ismail, "MJC Pamphlet is Full of Distortions," *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 8 (August 1994).

<sup>45</sup> See the discussion below.

communities use in order to defend their position on allowing female preachers within this traditionally male-dominated religious sphere. These responses can be categorized as ‘positive tradition’ and ‘negative tradition.’ Positive tradition consists in the responses that refer to the example of the Prophet to build support for the action. Tayob, for example, responded to the above-mentioned lead article in *Muslim Views* and corrected its false reporting on the event as follows:

No, they did NOT pray on top of each other. NO, they were not even touching each other as they stood on either side of a line of desks. YES, they were all on the same floor like the masjid of the Prophet.<sup>46</sup>

This understanding is based on several *ḥadīth*<sup>47</sup> reporting on women’s presence in the mosque during the lifetime of the Prophet.<sup>48</sup> Another aspect of the positive-tradition approach, drawing on the Islamic legal tradition and applying this to the question of women’s equal rights to mosque space, was expressed by—among others—the *imām* of the Claremont Mosque as follows: “that which is not expressly or impliedly forbidden is permissible in Islam.”<sup>49</sup> As explained above, the pre-*khuṭbah* did not exist in early Islam. Its prohibition can therefore not be found anywhere in the Qur’ān or *sunnah*.<sup>50</sup> This would lead to the conclusion that the pre-*khuṭbah* was and continues to be permissible. Against the backdrop of such reasoning, respondents emphasized the fact that Wadud delivered a pre-*khuṭbah*, not the entire *khuṭbah*.<sup>51</sup> The pre-*khuṭbah* was seen as technically not part of the *khuṭbah* by some of the ‘*ulamā*.<sup>52</sup>

The second approach to the religious texts, termed negative tradition, was adopted by the opponents of the event. They supported their rejection by pointing out its unprecedented character: “Never in

<sup>46</sup> Abdulkader Tayob, “Taking to Task,” *Muslim Views* (Cape Town) 7, no. 8 (August 1994).

<sup>47</sup> Sayings or traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Louay Safi, “Women and Masjid,” Islamic Research Foundation International, Inc., [http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles\\_301\\_350/women\\_and\\_masjid.htm](http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_301_350/women_and_masjid.htm) (accessed January 13, 2010); and Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, “The Excellence of Standing in the First Row (in Salat),” *Witness-Pioneer: A Virtual Islamic Organisation*, <http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/hadeeth/riyad/08/chap194.htm> (accessed January 13, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> “A Small Cape Town Mosque Makes World Muslim History,” *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 8 (August 2, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Life and traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad.

<sup>51</sup> See Ismail, “MJC Pamphlet is Full of Distortions.”

<sup>52</sup> See Jeenah, “The National Liberation Struggle,” 34–35.



history of Islam was leadership given to women... This is definitely going against the laws of Allāh.<sup>53</sup> The opponents of the event appealed to the principle that an action is disallowed in Islam unless it is specifically mentioned as allowed. Here, since no significant traditions in Islam affirmed the action, it should be considered as prohibited.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding the 2005 event, the responses in the newspapers revealed a similar approach. Supporters of the event defended it by pointing to the right given by Allāh and the Prophet Mohammed. Opponents condemned the action by stating that it had never happened in Islam and, its permissibility having not been recorded, it was therefore prohibited.<sup>55</sup>

Shuaib Manjra, a follower of positive tradition who wrote a letter to the editor in *Muslim Views*, pointed to the *ḥadīth* of Umm-i-Waraqah to justify a woman's *imāmate* (leadership). In this *ḥadīth*, an elderly woman was (in one interpretation) directed by the Prophet to lead her household or 'the people of her area' in prayer.<sup>56</sup> *Muslim Views* simultaneously published a full-length article by Hina Azam, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Texas, Austin, who contested this argument and offered several counter-interpretations of the *ḥadīth*, according to which the Umm Waraqah *ḥadīth* does not serve as evidence for a woman's *imāmate*.<sup>57</sup> Azam provided an extensive explanation of the principle that, unless evidence is recorded allowing the action, it is prohibited. Here *Muslim Views* appeared to be biased in terms of the space it gave to different perspectives. It presented Azam's anti-position at length, in contrast to only a relatively short letter by Manjra supporting his position. It also favored the negative opinion of an American scholar over that of a local Muslim, and selectively published a piece that was, in the US context, part of a larger debate online.

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<sup>53</sup> Zeba Desai, "Claremont Shocked Muslims Worldwide," *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 8 (August 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Aroon Khota, "Why Not Shoulder to Shoulder," *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 8 (August 1994).

<sup>55</sup> "Wadud Addressed," *Muslim Views* 20, no. 6 (June 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Nevin Reda, "What Would the Prophet do? The Islamic Basis for Female-Led Prayer," *Muslim WakeUp*, [http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2005/03/women\\_imamat.php](http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2005/03/women_imamat.php) (accessed May 17, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Hina Azam, "Critique of Argument for Women-Led Friday Prayers," *Muslim Views* (Cape Town) 19, no. 5 (May 2005): 27–29.

The interview responses also drew on the Qur'ān and *sunnah* to justify their positions; their views showed a diversity on the subject that was similar to that noted in the media. Most respondents were of the view that the Qur'ān is completely silent on the issue of women's access to mosques as well as on women's mosque attendance at Friday prayers. Two *imāms*, however, stated that the Qur'ān places obligation for attending the Friday prayer only on men, but denied any textual evidence prohibiting women's mosque attendance. One of the *imāms* highlighted women's menstruation and their role in preparing food for the community on Friday as reasons for the lack of such an obligation for them.

However, one respondent, the *imām* of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, stated that it is incumbent on women to attend the *jum'ah* prayer, quoting the following verse from the Qur'ān (62:9):

O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allāh, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew!<sup>58</sup>

He emphasized that this verse addresses all believers, including men and women equally. Most participants, however, pointed to the *sunnah* of the Prophet as the main evidence supportive of women's access to mosques. One of them, for example, explained:

The Prophet said: "Do not prevent your women from coming to the mosque" and in the time of the Prophet himself, women used to pray behind the men, in the same mosque with no division in between, because the law said that men stand in front and women behind the men. And they shared the same space; they shared exactly the same space.<sup>59</sup>

Four respondents, all members of the Claremont Main Road Mosque at the time, referred to the *ḥadīth* about an incident where a woman stood up inside the mosque and objected to a speech by the later caliph 'Umar on the limitation on the dowry. Considering religious practices during the formative years of Islam as precedent-setting for

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Shaheed Gamiendien, *imām* of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, Cape Town, September 2005. For the quotation, see Abdullah Y. 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 2004), 1468–69. Interestingly, Amina Wadud used the same verse in her 2005 *khuṭbah* to make a similar argument. See Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 249.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Faaik Gamiendien, *imām* of the Masjidul Sunni, Cape Town, September 2005.

the Muslim community, participants used this narrative to justify women's rights to mosque space in the present. Two interviewees, a female community member and an *imām*, furthermore indicated that the Islamic legal rulings in the *sharī'ah* contain no bar against women's access to mosques. Such an understanding was in accord with the reality of Muslim life in Cape Town, where most mosques were granting access to Muslim women and providing facilities for them for the Friday prayer.

Whereas the interviewees' approaches to the texts were uniformly positive regarding women's access to mosque space, there was more complexity on the topic of women's leadership inside the mosque. Only four respondents explicitly pointed to textual sources in regard to this issue. Two female respondents mentioned the *ḥadīth* narrating that the Prophet said:

The *imām* of a people should be the one who is the most versed in the Qur'ān. If they are equal in their recital, then the one who is most knowledgeable of the *sunnah*.

These two respondents then explained that Muslim women did not have adequate access to religious knowledge. Such an understanding was shared by most participants. This seems to imply that women have the capability to take leadership positions in the mosque, but that lack of education prevents them from doing so. One of the female respondents, however, said that "even if a woman was more knowledgeable than a man then according to orthodox Islam she still could not lead [the prayer]."<sup>60</sup> Such an approach supports the conclusion that the mosque is a gendered space and that inside this space the prayer constitutes a male domain.

These theological understandings were expressed by participants when they referred to the event in 2005 and the issue of a woman delivering the *khuṭbah* and leading the *jum'ah* prayer. Participants showed a different textual approach to the issue of a woman delivering the pre-*khuṭbah*. Here one *imām* stated that because "nothing is in the text" (as the pre-*khuṭbah* is an innovation of the last century) the action is permissible.<sup>61</sup> Such an understanding supports the above-mentioned positive tradition approach.

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Maheerah Gamielidien, Cape Town, September 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Rashid Omar, *imām* of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, Cape Town, September 2005.

*Culture and Tradition*

The notion of tradition and culture emerged from all narrations as a main theme regarding women's access to and involvement in mosques. The different cultural backgrounds of Muslims in South Africa appeared to have some role in shaping the different approaches to women's access to and participation in mosques. All of the respondents emphasized the fact that Muslim women had general access to mosques everywhere in Cape Town, whereas they still struggled for it in the northern parts of the country, in areas such as Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal. This access of women to mosques in Western Cape was attributed mostly to the influence of Malay culture. Malay culture was viewed as open and vibrant, and as providing space for women's active participation within the community. This general openness of the Malay culture was reflected in greater women's access to mosques in the Cape. In contrast, Muslims in Natal and Transvaal originate from Indo-Pakistan and are viewed as more patriarchal, having higher restrictions on women in public as well as in private life. This 'Indian conservatism' was used as the primary explanation for women's limited access to mosques in the northern provinces.<sup>62</sup> As noted by one of the respondents:

There is a very conservative position from the Tablighī Jamā'at, an Islamic movement that originated in India, which is more prevalent in the northern parts of our country, that is 'women should stay at home' and therefore you find a lot of institutions or mosques that don't have access for their women.<sup>63</sup>

Among the cultural differences between 'Indian Muslims' and 'Malay Muslims,' some respondents furthermore pointed to different regional manifestations of Islamic thought. They indicated that the Malay Muslims in the Western Cape follow the Shāfi'ī school of Islamic law and its approach to *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). According to them, the Shāfi'ī school's interpretation of the religious law is less restrictive in its approach to women. Indian Muslims in the north follow the Ḥanafī school, which participants regarded as more limiting of women in public life. Thus, the Indian–Malay cultural differences, including the Shāfi'ī–Ḥanafī ideological distinctions, emerged as a significant

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Maheerah Gamiendien.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Firdouza Waggie, Cape Town, August 2005.

explanation for the different levels of women's access to and participation within mosque space.

*"Invisible Women": The Socialization of Gender Constructs*

The findings suggest that the Islamic beliefs of the different Muslim communities in South Africa are closely tied to their cultural practices and notions of patriarchy. This, as indicated in the views of one respondent, leads to internalization of gender norms which do not allow questioning of male domination in the exercise of religious authority:

Women [in Cape Town/South Africa] seem to have fallen into the role that their 'being Muslim' is private; it's never a public matter. So when they exercise their rights to be Muslim, they go into a private mode.... They've accepted the fact that the mosque is not necessarily always acceptable to women. In the Western Cape, even when they have access to a mosque, women stand at the back. This is not necessarily a problem.... But the thing is about how they feel about that. When they go to the mosque women don't feel that they can be visible... when they go to the mosque they feel they should hide themselves; even though they are properly covered. They will talk and they will speak on any platform, as a politician, as an actress, as a director but when it comes to the mosque it becomes taboo for women to speak. It's psychologically based. Where women are conditioned and socialized from birth to take the back seat. It has absolutely nothing to do with Islam. It's got more to do with the traditional role of women in a patriarchal society.<sup>64</sup>

*Sexualized Sacred Space*

The issue of mosque space as sexual terrain—the idea that “the presence of the opposite sex means a major distraction”—was one of the key issues regarding the legitimacy of a greater leadership role for females in the mosque sphere that emerged from this discourse initiated by the Claremont Main Road incident. In one article, an attendee at Wadud's pre-*khuṭbah* critically challenged the argument that a woman addressing men or leading the prayer “was likely to arouse their sexual interest

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Maheerah Gamielidien.

and distract them from their spiritual devotion.”<sup>65</sup> The women quoted in the media themselves seemed aware of the possible temptation that can be caused by the female body, and it was suggested that they would become “distracted by the thought of someone viewing what is private to them” and “feel uncomfortable and exposed performing *salāh* (prayer) on the ground floor.”<sup>66</sup>

Provocation of sexual desire was central to the shaping of discourse over the legitimacy of female leadership in mosques. The general belief was that the men are easily moved to sexual desire when interacting with women. Women were thus viewed as more likely to stimulate sexual desires than to be able to promote spiritual enlightenment. In such a discourse, women seemed reduced to the bodily, and deprived of a spiritual capacity, while men were projected as overtly sexual beings with little control over their sexual desires.

The discussion presented by the Muslim newspapers revealed the mosque as a contested sexual space and reflected the dominant understandings among many Muslims in South Africa of the “*masjid* as a male domain.”<sup>67</sup>

The notions of the mosque as gendered sacred space and women’s embodiment in this space also emerged as a striking common theme in the personal narratives. All interview respondents regarded gender separation inside the mosque as very important. Most of the respondents, both men and women, explained this view by reference to the physical expression of worship in Islam, as mentioned earlier. Similar to the argumentation in the Muslim newspapers, some of the interview participants implied that men would feel distracted by women sharing the same space, and bending down next to or in front of them.<sup>68</sup> This was also reflected in several statements that women felt uncomfortable in praying alongside or (even more so) in front of men, and had little confidence in their ability to give speeches in front of men, let alone to lead the prayer.<sup>69</sup> During the *khuṭbah* and the Friday prayer the *imām* addresses the congregation from the front, standing on a pulpit and

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<sup>65</sup> Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Sexual Men and Spiritual Women,” *Al-Qalam* (Qualbert, South Africa) 20, no. 9 (September 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Said Keeran, “Wadud Contradicted,” *Muslim Views* (Cape Town) 19, no. 6 (June 2005); Tayob, “Taking to Task.”

<sup>67</sup> Shaikh, “Sexual Men and Spiritual Women.”

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Imām Faaik Gamiieldien.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Maheerah Gamiieldien.

thus is very visible. This visibility was at the heart of the controversy over a women's right to give the *khuṭbah* and lead the prayer.

The 'visibility' issue, however, seemed to play no role in the greater acceptance of a women's right to give the pre-*khuṭbah*. This indicates that in the dominant Muslim mindset, a pre-*khuṭbah* is not the *khuṭbah* and thus is not part of the formal Friday prayer ritual. It thus shows that it is in the domain of what is seen as authentic ritual that no concessions are being allowed for female leadership.

### *The Community Context*

Regarding the events in 1994 and 2005, almost all the interview participants claimed that the Cape Town Muslim community in general had (at the respective times) not been prepared for such steps. Other issues, it was felt, should have had priority over advancing to women's leadership. Participants stated that the community had only just started to engage in a process leading step by step to the 'ideal' of gender equality inside the mosque. This process manifested greatest progress in the Claremont Main Road Mosque, where by the time of the interviews women were regularly delivering the pre-*khuṭbah*.

It became evident that the first step in such a process was understood as women's empowerment outside the mosque, particularly in the home. Participants stated that some women were still fighting for their basic rights in marriage, and that in general the image of women as second-class citizens was prevailing. According to most participants, as long as inequalities outside the mosque continued to exist, the struggle for gender equality inside could not succeed.

In order to advance to women's empowerment inside the mosque, women needed first to be able to enter this space. In accordance with that, access to mosque space was regarded as the most important step in women's empowerment. The fact that most mosques in Cape Town were already providing facilities for women supports this view. The importance of access was especially highlighted by the responses to the 2005 event. Almost all of the participants explained their objection to Wadud's action in New York by reference to the fact that only a few mosques in North America grant any access to women.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> This view was expressed, for example, during an interview with Imām Shaheed Gamielien.

Besides access, all the interview participants regarded the lack of religious education for women as the main source of disempowerment. Some respondents supported the idea of women scholars and women lecturers inside the mosque; however, most of them only encouraged activities in which women lectured solely to other women. Only participants from the Claremont Mosque supported the idea of women lecturing to men or mixed congregations. Again, only the Claremont Mosque congregation took the fight for women's equality inside the mosque to a higher level in ensuring women's access to the main prayer space, actively engaging women in the mosque committee, and giving women the opportunity to deliver *pre-khuṭbahs*. However, by the end of the research period, the step of appointing a woman as an *imām* had not been taken by any mosque in Cape Town.<sup>71</sup> Even the two female interviewees who at that time were members of the Claremont Main Road Mosque explained that their community was not ready for such an action.

The reasons why other mosques had not taken steps towards the *pre-khuṭbah* and the *khuṭbah* were seen by all the interviewees—except for the members of the Claremont Main Road Mosque—as reactions to the 1994 and 2005 events. The statements revealed that most *imāms* had not addressed the issue within their own congregations. In addition, lay Muslims were not educated enough regarding the legal aspects of the matter. The lack of education, and the fact that they “haven't really engaged with women's issues in the religious context,” explained the emotional nature of many reactions.<sup>72</sup> Some respondents further argued that the majority of Muslims relied on media representations of the events, which were misleading at times. Negative reactions were also caused by the non-interactive approach adopted by the MJC. One *imām* representing the MJC acknowledged that this behavior had been incorrect:

We should actually place on record that it could have been dealt with in a better way. Because Islam, the Qur'an, always appeals to the strength of intellectual ability. And we do not always exercise the Qur'an's call to

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<sup>71</sup> The situation had not changed as of June 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Firdouza Waggie.



reasoning. In that regard there should have been more reasoning; there should have been more intellectual discourse.<sup>73</sup>

This statement revealed a shift in consciousness by some of the *imāms*, and maybe also among the religious scholars. This shift also became apparent regarding the permissibility of the issue itself. Most participants initially opposing the event in 1994 admitted that in hindsight they regarded the issue of women delivering the pre-*khuṭbah* as unobjectionable.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, the practice of a woman delivering the pre-*khuṭbah* had—up until the end of my research period—not been adopted by any other Cape Town mosque, and had only been continued at the Claremont Mosque.<sup>75</sup> Interview participants explained this seeming contradiction by claiming that the pre-*khuṭbah* issue was a specific matter for the Claremont Mosque. The members of the Claremont Mosque pointed out that well-established community interactions, open debates, and regular consultation with the board and the *imāms* had enabled the community to take such a step in 1994. Nevertheless, although the Claremont community was regarded as ready for a woman's *imāmate*, responses revealed that the community was not able to transfer its readiness onto the broader Muslim community in Cape Town and South Africa.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored women's access to and participation in mosques in Cape Town. As part of the broader gender *jihād*, women's claims for mosque space emerged largely within youth organizations actively opposing the apartheid regime. In the 1990s, women in particular became active and spearheaded access-claiming events. Among others, the event in 1994, in which Amina Wadud delivered the pre-*khuṭbah* in the Claremont Main Road Mosque, pushed the issue of women's access to and participation in mosques to the center

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Imām Igsaan Hendricks, deputy president of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), Cape Town, September 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Imām Faaik Gamieldien.

<sup>75</sup> The situation had not changed as of June 2009.

of community attention. In Cape Town in particular it led to heated debate, revealing a broad spectrum of positions on gender issues.

As the Mayfair congregation case illustrates, elements within the South African Muslim community had already challenged existing perceptions of leadership in mosques in the 1990s. However, it was only in 2005, when Wadud delivered the *khuṭbah* and led the Friday prayer for a mixed-gender congregation in New York, that women's leadership became a salient international issue. Local media responses and interviews with community members in relation to both the 1994 pre-*khuṭbah* and the 2005 *khuṭbah* events revealed the boundaries of communal politics on gender. Mosque space continues to be highly contested and gendered.

The issue of a woman delivering a pre-*khuṭbah* is within the 'thinkable' range of community consciousness, since it is not considered to be part of the ritual dimension of the Friday sermon. However, a women's *imāmate* is far more hotly contested. Ritual leadership is still regarded as the final expression of male 'ownership' of mosque space. A multiplicity of related factors, such as different approaches to textual sources, tradition, and culture, as well as the internalization of specific gender roles, continue to impact on gender-sensitive issues, such as women's rights in mosques. Nevertheless, a process of change regarding these matters is visible within the community. In this process, issues such as women's education on religious questions and their empowerment in the domestic realm emerge as priority issues. It became clear that only when a congregation was explicitly engaging in gender issues more broadly, as was the case in the Claremont Main Road Mosque, could further steps towards women's equal rights in mosques become possible.

This study reveals the framework in which this community operates. One of the most significant aspects emerging from the study was that women have accepted the status quo regarding mosque space: they have internalized their 'invisibility' in the mosque. The reasons for this need further investigation. Is this internalization primarily attributable to socialized gender roles and cultural traditions? If so, this would lead to a further question regarding why this feeling of women's invisibility in mosques is also perceptible in the Malay community in Cape Town, which is often referred to as open and women-friendly. Another issue requiring further research is the notion of sexual distraction by the opposite sex inside the mosque. Here, it is of particular interest whether this line of argument, when deployed by

men, is being used as an excuse to protect what has until now been a male domain. This notwithstanding, it is clear that many Muslims regard the issue of women's access to and participation in mosques as a crucial site of contestation for the coming years.

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CONCLUSION:  
FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN MOSQUES:  
AN EVOLVING NARRATIVE

Masooda Bano

Traditions, at times, do record sudden shifts,<sup>1</sup> but in general institutional change is an incremental process: the shifts are gradual, making predictions about the ultimate consequences of a process of change difficult.<sup>2</sup> The role of the mosque as the central base for the exercise of religious authority in Islam became manifest within the life of the Prophet.<sup>3</sup> The search for authentic interpretations of the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, a process that became progressively more complex for each subsequent generation of Muslims, resulted in *madrasahs* emerging as the other central platform for the exercise of Islamic authority<sup>4</sup> by the tenth century.<sup>5</sup> The *madrasahs* are where, to borrow from Zaman,<sup>6</sup> the custodians of Islamic tradition, namely the ‘*ulamā*’, are trained. The celestial hierarchy of ‘*ulamā*’, operating from within this mosque–*madrasah* complex, has by no means been static in its outlook over the centuries,<sup>7</sup> but it has remained exclusively male. The opening up of this formal sphere of Islamic authority to female leaders across different

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> The status of the mosque as the community center, a court, and a religious school for the teaching of the Qurʾān became established with the importance placed on Al-Masjid al-Nabawi by the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>4</sup> Since the ‘*ulamā*’ leading the *madrasahs* are also often the *imāms* (prayer leaders) in neighboring mosques, and often a *madrasah* develops as an extension of a mosque, the two are in most contexts closely related but distinct institutions.

<sup>5</sup> With its emphasis on intermediate and advanced religious study, the *madrasah* was always distinguished from the institutions for elementary religious instruction, such as the *kuttāb*, which provide facilities to learn to recite or memorize the Qurʾān. As Hefner and Zaman note, while *kuttāb*-like institutions emerged in the first century of the Islamic era, the *madrasah* developed only three centuries later; the *madrasah* is thought to have originated in the province of Khurasan in eastern Iran. See Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Q. Zaman, *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Q. Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*.

country contexts is indeed indicative of important shifts within the working of Islamic authority; it is, however, equally suggestive of changes in the socioeconomic contexts of Muslim societies.

The emergence of female leaders and preachers within the formal sphere of the mosque and *madrasah*, barring a few exceptions (see Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, Künkler and Fazaeli, Chapter 1.5, van Doorn-Harder, Chapter 3.3, this volume), is a phenomenon which owes its birth to the 1970s. This shift can be viewed through two related but distinct conceptual lenses: (1) Why has this formal sphere for the exercise of Islamic authority stayed closed to females for nearly ten centuries? (2) Why has this formal sphere for the exercise of Islamic authority opened up to females now, when for so long it managed to exclude them? Whichever of the two approaches is adopted, the importance of this question for the understanding of contemporary Islamic authority and contemporary Muslim societies is clear; but each approach has distinct methodological demands. The former demands a detailed historical analysis of the exercise of Islamic authority across different contexts and times; the latter is more tuned to the interests of political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists keen to observe the phenomenon in its living form in specific contexts. Fitting more neatly within the latter conception, this volume has attempted to portray how Islamic authority is being lived and contested in diverse contexts and how it is constantly evolving. The multiple forms in which female leaders are exercising the right to speak for Islam and the different ends to which they are putting this authority to use—from consolidating the traditional male hierarchy to fighting for the right to lead the Friday prayers in mixed congregations—means that it is difficult to make predictions about the ultimate shapes and consequences of these shifts for the future faces of religious authority in Islam and the shaping of Muslim societies. It is evident, however, that the narrative of female leadership in mosques and *madrasahs*, being constantly evolving, calls for continuing scholarship on the subject in order to keep pace with its development.

This volume results from an intellectual project which was driven by the impulse to address three core concerns: (1) What created the space for the emergence of female authority within the formal sphere of the mosque and *madrasah*? (2) What attributes helped this authority assert itself vis-à-vis different constituencies, such as the ordinary public, the *'ulamā'*, and the state? (3) How is this authority being used? Is it being used to reinterpret the Islamic texts and argue for renewed

gender dynamics within Muslim societies or is it in effect reinforcing the patriarchal power structure often supported by the male religious elite?<sup>8</sup> The cases covered in this volume, which present a rich diversity from Muslim countries and from within Muslim communities living in non-Muslim majority countries, make it clear that there is no single answer to these questions.

Indeed, there are many common factors shaping the phenomenon across the different contexts; however, it is evident that the commonalities do not allow us to identify a linear evolutionary path for these movements. Instead, the evidence suggests that female leadership in mosques and *madrasahs* will continue to take different forms, and that these female leaders and preachers will put their newly acquired power at the service of very different goals. What we can, however, predict is that the specific form adopted in a particular context will be as much an outcome of the socioeconomic and political context, domestic as well as global, as of the intellectual caliber and leadership qualities of the women who come to exercise that authority.

The agency of the women in all the cases covered in this volume is striking—even in cases where these female leaders and preachers are still seen to be following a script carefully penned by the male *'ulamā'*, we see complex maneuvering to secure more power and authority. The language of negotiation in such contexts might rely exclusively on strictly orthodox interpretations of Islamic texts, but the women's willingness to adopt that language should not lead us to ignore or discredit their efforts to assert their authority. Further, it is also clear that the sociopolitical context in which these women operate will be key to determining the ends to which they will use their authority. Whether they consolidate the traditional male hierarchy of *'ulamā'* or rival it, whether they prioritize asserting their authority as interpreters of Qur'ān or *ḥadīth* or leaders of mixed congregations, whether they decide to focus on promoting personal piety or join militant initiatives, these decisions will be a product of the socioeconomic and political context in which they are to operate.

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<sup>8</sup> For a powerful defense of the position that the marginalization of women witnessed in many Muslim societies is a result of the control of Islamic texts by male religious elites, rather than something inherent to the principles of Islam, see Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993).

This concluding chapter draws together the common themes emerging from the papers in this volume through a study of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah, a female *madrasah* in Pakistan established in 1986 whose teachers and students entered into an armed resistance against the Pakistani state in 2007. The resistance, which initially started as a protest against the federal government's move to demolish those mosques and *madrasahs* in Islamabad that had encroached on public land by expanding beyond their officially allocated space, quickly developed into a vocal demand for national-level imposition of *sharī'ah* and was crushed only after a controversial military operation resulting in eighty-nine deaths.<sup>9</sup> Although it rests at the extreme end of the spectrum of cases covered in this volume—both in terms of the extent of the authority enjoyed by a female preacher and the ends for which such authority is utilized—and thereby arguably constitutes an exceptional case, Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah's extreme context and the rapid shift in its way of working makes it a powerful example with which to conclude. This is for two reasons: first, given its commonality with many of the cases covered in the volume, it helps revisit the core themes emerging across the chapters; second, and arguably more importantly, by recording that an ordinary female *madrasah* can choose to take up arms against the state, and by documenting some of the factors that led to that shift, the analysis helps record the complexity of this new phenomenon and the unpredictability of the outcomes it can generate, thereby making the need to understand these movements all the more evident.

The analysis in this chapter draws on fieldwork conducted with the leadership and students of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah between January and July 2007, the time during which they were engaged in armed resistance against the state, and follow-up interviews with the *madrasah* leadership during 2008 and in December 2009. These follow-up field visits also included visits to some of the branches of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah established after the 2007 operation; their number stood at twenty-three in late 2009.

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<sup>9</sup> This is the figure officially admitted by the state. The constitutional legitimacy of this operation still remains contested in the Supreme Court (Suo Motu Case No. 9/2007 and Const. P. 54/2007); many also argue that state could have opted for other ways to avert this violent outcome.



*Umm-i-Hassan: Exercising Extreme Authority*

Starting in January 2007, Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah and its female head, Umm-i-Hassan, became a focus of media attention in Pakistan and abroad.<sup>10</sup> Right in the heart of Pakistan's capital city Islamabad, less than two kilometers from Constitutional Avenue, which hosts the highest symbols of state authority (the parliament, the judiciary, and the diplomatic enclave), Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah, one of the largest and more prestigious female *madrasahs* associated with the Deobandī *wafāq* launched an armed resistance against the state. The *madrasah* students and the leadership called for the imposition of *sharī'ah*. The resistance, which gripped international attention, was apparently triggered by the state's decision to demolish mosques in Islamabad that were encroaching on public land.<sup>11</sup>

The federal government had prepared a list of eighty-six mosques in Islamabad whose main buildings or extended portions thereof, often containing a *madrasah*, had crossed the officially designated land area. By January 15, 2007, four mosques had already been demolished; Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah, which had gradually evolved as an extension of the Red Mosque—Islamabad's central mosque—was on this list. The resistance, then, was apparently a response to an explicit threat from the government. Indications that the *madrasah* was next on the list of the mosque-related compounds to be demolished led to the female students from the senior classes of the *madrasah* taking over a children's public library located in a narrow strip of land between the Red Mosque and Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah. The library was adjacent to the Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah building. The resistance started with the girls taking over the library by blocking the entrance and refusing to let any outsider enter; both the print and electronic media were quick to splash images of female students covered from head to toe in full-length

<sup>10</sup> For a taste of the global media coverage received by the resistance, see "Army Ready to Storm Mosque as Conflict Grows," *Guardian* (London), July 4, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jul/04/pakistan.topstories3>; "Chronology of Lal Masjid Clashes," *Times of India*, July 10, 2007, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2190609.cms>; "Profile: Islamabad's Red Mosque," *BBC News*, July 27, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/6503477.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6503477.stm).

<sup>11</sup> Most mosques are built gradually as the mosque acquires more donors and patrons, so mosques often encroach on public land; but since they provide a public service such encroachment was not taken seriously by the government until 2006.

black *burqa*'s, their faces hidden behind veils of the same color, around the world.

In interviews with the media and the author, the *madrasah* leadership attributed the initiation of this resistance to the students; it was argued that the students were perturbed by the prospect of their *madrasah* being demolished, and that the *madrasah* leadership had found it difficult to dissuade them from resisting the state action. It soon became evident in the interviews and in statements issued by the government ministers and officials involved in the negotiations, that the principal of the *madrasah*, Umm-i-Hassan, a female preacher in her late thirties, was clearly one of the central figures in this resistance. Though the media interviews were always given inside the *madrasah* and always involved a large group of *madrasah* teachers and senior students who all actively contributed, it was mostly the statements by Umm-i-Hassan that filled the media reports.

Umm-i-Hassan became a household name in Pakistan during this period; among those sympathetic to the demands of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah, she was appreciated as an intelligent and articulate woman; the critics, however, attributed multiple questionable motives to her. Each day the demands of the Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah students, as vocalized to the broader public through Umm-i-Hassan, kept growing. The initial demand that the government withdraw the demolition orders became a bold call for national-level enforcement of *shari'ah* law. Most importantly, within days of initiating the resistance, these students also started to act as a public vigilance group: they made visits to video shop owners in the immediate neighborhood, counseling them to give up occupations that promote immoral values, and they forced a brothel owner to close down her business.<sup>12</sup>

As the demands for imposition of *shari'ah* from the Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah students became more vocal and their actions in support of a public piety drive became more belligerent, so did the counter-campaigns by feminist groups and Western-styled human rights NGOs.<sup>13</sup> These protests, a few staged right outside the front gate of the Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah, asked the state to check the aspirations of the *madrasah* leadership in

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<sup>12</sup> These actions were widely covered in the Pakistani and Western media: see, for example, "Pakistan 'brothel woman' released," *BBC News*, March 29, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6507205.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6507205.stm).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, "Protests Against Taliban-style Radicals in Pakistan," *Global Politician* website, April 23, 2007, <http://www.globalpolitician.com/22679-pakistan>.

imposing this public piety campaign, which violated the basic individual freedoms of others. The state response to the resistance was controversial.<sup>14</sup> In the initial period, the federal government, led by General Pervez Musharraf, responded by at times entering into dialogue and at other times issuing ultimatums and warning of dire consequences; but for most of this six-month resistance, the government did not take any serious action to crush the movement. However, on July 4, 2007, without issuing an ultimatum, the government launched a full-fledged military operation and the entire Red Mosque and Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah complex came under siege.<sup>15</sup> On the morning of the fourth day of the siege the government launched an assault which, according to the government's own admission, led to eighty-nine deaths;<sup>16</sup> the use of phosphor bombs disfigured the dead bodies to such an extent that most remained unidentifiable.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah provides a striking opportunity to understand the central concerns of this project: namely, what establishes the authority of the newly emerging female leadership within mosques and *madrāsahs* and to what ends that authority is being used. What, after all, enabled Umm-i-Hassan to exercise this authority vis-à-vis the students, where many risked their lives to stand by her in a resistance that from the beginning had little chance of success? The demands of Umm-i-Hassan's authority were exacting on many counts. Not only did these girls risk their lives, they also risked social stigmatization and exclusion from their own families and extended kinship networks. To become active agents involved in armed resistance against the state, making radical statements in the media, and being photographed while holding long bamboo sticks to assert their capacity for

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<sup>14</sup> Fieldwork suggests that the government's initial lenient attitude to the resistance and then sudden move to a heavily armed operation remains a contested issue.

<sup>15</sup> Members of the delegation that met Maulānā Ghāzī the night preceding the operation later admitted in media interviews that the two sides had agreed on certain terms that could have resulted in peaceful surrender. However, General Musharraf did not accept those conditions and instead issued orders to initiate the operation at dawn.

<sup>16</sup> The *madrāsah* leadership claims the figure to be much higher; a senior police official on duty admitted handing out 1,000 *kaffans* (burial wraps) to the military troops, none of which were returned (interview, December 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Why the government initially showed leniency in handling this resistance and then suddenly opted for violent confrontation is an issue that needs serious attention in any analysis of the role of Muslim states in the rise of Islamic militancy. Such an analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

self-defense, are not the attributes that traditional Pakistani families, socialized into valuing women primarily for their docility and piety, ordinarily approve for the young female members of their societies—least of all the families sending girls to *madrasahs*.

Female *madrasahs* are valued for the sense of piety and moral training they instill in the girls, and not for making them aggressive or assertive.<sup>18</sup> The fact that even after the *madrasah* was put under siege a large number of the female students<sup>19</sup> refused to leave—in spite of government ultimatums and at times against the wishes of their parents—shows their depth of loyalty to Umm-i-Hassan. Debates on the concept of authority have long recognized the difference between *authority* and *power*. Drawing on Max Weber's classification, Kramer and Schmidtke<sup>20</sup> describe authority as "the ability or chance to have one's rules and rulings followed, or obeyed, without recourse to coercive power. It is indeed the very absence of coercion that for Weber distinguished authority (*Autorität*) from power (*Macht*)." Authority, then, requires the ability to mobilize voluntary allegiance, while power is not shy of deploying force to win obedience.

The fact that the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah involved the exercise of authority and not power was also manifest in the responses of its students and teachers in the post-operation period. Even after the July 13 military operation, when Umm-i-Hassan was in government custody, a large group of students and teachers regrouped at Jāmi'ah Sumai'ah, a female *madrasah* related to Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah, within a week after the military operation was completed.<sup>21</sup> This group steadily

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<sup>18</sup> Masooda Bano, "Empowering Women: More than One Way," *Hagar: Studies in Culture, Politics, and Identities* [Special Issue: The Politics of Gendered Development] 9, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Once the *madrasah* was under siege, the government issued many ultimatums to the students to exit it. The parents, most of whom were relying for news solely on the media, rushed to Islamabad from their respective hometowns and gathered outside the *madrasah* to collect their children; many girls, however, did not leave. The government initially took the position that the *madrasah* leadership was keeping the students hostage by force. However, media interviews with the students after the operation, as well as the fieldwork for this study with *madrasah* teachers and students in 2008 and 2009, saw the students and teachers reject these claims. Some students that I had interviewed inside Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah in 2007 were acting as teachers during my 2008 and 2009 fieldwork.

<sup>20</sup> Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, "Introduction," in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authority in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Jāmi'ah Sumai'ah was one of the female *madrasahs* that was loosely affiliated with Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah at the time of the resistance. Only a few days after the operations, I

increased in number once Umm-i-Hassan was released. At the time of the last fieldwork visit, completed in January 2010, Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah had already established twenty-three new branches, with constantly increasing requests to establish new ones from communities across Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> Thus, one important question is: How was Umm-i-Hassan able to establish such authority? And equally important is the question of what made her choose to use that authority for an outcome that, as we will shortly see, incurred serious personal loss, both material and emotional. Situating the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah in the overall landscape of the *madrasah* hierarchy in Pakistan helps better appreciate the complexity of these two questions and their answers.

*Situating the Case: Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah and the Madrasah Hierarchy in Pakistan*<sup>23</sup>

Pakistan has 16,000 registered *madrasahs*, of which close to 25 percent are female.<sup>24</sup> In line with the general trend noted in this volume, female *madrasahs* in Pakistan are a recent invention; while male *madrasahs* emerged in South Asia in the twelfth century,<sup>25</sup> it was only in the late 1970s that female *madrasahs* started to become visible in Pakistan. There are five umbrella organizations for *madrasahs* (*wafāqs*) in Pakistan which have a state-recognized right to establish *madrasahs*. Wafāq-ul-Madāris al-Salfia (Ahl-i-Hadīth) was established in 1955, Wafāq-ul-Madāris al-'Arabiah (Deobandī) in 1959, Wafāq-ul-Madāris al-Shī'ah (Shī'i) in 1959, Tanzīm-ul-Madāris Ahl-i-Sunnah-wal-Jamā'at

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was personally able to conduct interviews with some students and teachers of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah at Jāmi'ah Sumai'ah. Also, the first interview I did with Umm-i-Hassan after her release took place at Jāmi'ah Sumai'ah.

<sup>22</sup> Such claims are easy to verify. On a research visit to one of the *madrasahs* established by a former student of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah in Mianwali, I personally saw her father (an *imām* in the local mosque) request the teachers of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah accompanying me on the visit to give this *madrasah* official status as a branch of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah.

<sup>23</sup> This section is based on fieldwork in *madrasahs* from across the five *wafāqs* in Pakistan, which was conducted as part of a bigger study on Pakistani *madrasahs* carried out by the author between 2007 and 2009 with support from Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). See Bano, "Empowering Women" and "A Response to Modernity: Why Muslim Females Opt for *Madrasah* Education in Pakistan," Working Paper, DFID Religions and Development Research Consortium (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Bano, "Empowering Women."

<sup>25</sup> N. Ali, *Musalmān-i-hind kī tārikh-i-ta'lim* (Karachi: Salman Academy, 1963).

(Barelvi) in 1960, and Rabātah-ul-Madāris al-Islāmiyah in 1983. Across the five *wafāqs*, 20–25 percent of the total affiliated *madrasahs* are female. As in many other cases noted in this volume, the story of the rise of female preachers in Pakistani *madrasahs* is of emergence not by assertion but by facilitation.

‘*Ulamā*’ from within some elite male *madrasahs* initiated the move to establish female *madrasahs* starting in the late 1970s,<sup>26</sup> primarily in response to growing opportunities for women in the secular education system. Rather than letting their wives and daughters be lured by the promises of Western-style modernization being made by the state, these ‘*ulamā*’ preferred to create space for these women within the religious hierarchy. Initially only a few ‘*ulamā*’ ventured into this arena; however, once a few *madrasahs* were established, the ‘*ulamā*’ community in general recognized that females could be even more effective in spreading the Islamic message than males, as they are embedded in the local community and ‘like to talk’ (see Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, this volume). Most female *madrasahs* in Pakistan are thus led by wives or daughters of male ‘*ulamā*’, and in general are a sister concern of male *madrasahs*. They therefore also reflect the hierarchy of the male *madrasahs*, with bigger female *madrasahs* often being attached to more reputable male ones run by prominent ‘*ulamā*’, normally in bigger cities.<sup>27</sup> The female *madrasahs* in Pakistan thus display a clear hierarchy. The bigger *madrasahs* are in the majority of cases concentrated in the cities, have a larger number of students, and place higher emphasis on educational training, the seriousness of which matches that of the *murshidah* program in Morocco (see Rausch, Chapter 1.2, this volume); while the rural *madrasahs* in general bear close similarity to the workings of the *madrasah* in Bijnor, India, captured by Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery (see Chapter 2.1, this volume).

The caliber of the women leading these *madrasahs* varies, as does the quality of Islamic education imparted. But irrespective of their placement in the religious hierarchy, female *madrasahs* across the five *wafāqs* hold very similar conceptions of the idealized role of Muslim women. As noted in most examples documented in this volume, these women are not as yet venturing into reinterpreting the religious texts to negotiate new roles for women; in general they reinforce the

<sup>26</sup> Bano, “A Response to Modernity.”

<sup>27</sup> Bano, “Empowering Women.”

traditional value structures and argue for segregated spheres for men and women.<sup>28</sup> As in many other cases where the space for the emergence of these women within mosques or *madrasahs* has been created consciously by the male ‘*ulamā*’, the women in Pakistani *madrasahs* adhere to orthodox conceptions of the woman’s role, which is argued to be that of a wife and a mother.

In common with another theme discussed in this volume (see Jaschok, Chapter 1.1, Pierce, Chapter 2.8, this volume), the models these women aspire to emulate belong to the earlier periods of Islam rather than those of modern feminist scholars or activists. In particular, the wives of the Prophet, Khadijah and ‘A’isha, and the Prophet’s daughter Fātimah epitomize the conception of the ideal woman within female *madrasahs* in Pakistan. The girls coming to these *madrasahs* are normally from lower-middle-income backgrounds; but they are not the poor, nor is poverty the primary reason for their entry into the *madrasahs*, since female *madrasahs* do charge fees.<sup>29</sup>

Up until January 2007, Jāmi‘ah Ḥafṣah seemed to be no different from any other *madrasah*, and thus reflected many of the trends noted in other studies in this volume. Jāmi‘ah Ḥafṣah was one of the most reputed female *madrasahs* belonging to the Deobandī school of thought. It had over 3,500 students from across Pakistan, 150 female teachers, and it also met the most critical requirement for attaining elite status within the *madrasah* system: the ability to confer degrees in *Takhassus* (a research degree equivalent to MPhil or at times PhD-level research). The *madrasah* leadership also acted as mentor to smaller *madrasahs*, and provided training and guidance on issues of *madrasah* management as well as academic matters such as the training of teachers. The students were articulate, performed well in exams, and by the end of their courses were confident about preaching Islamic precepts to others on return to their communities.

The *madrasah* was also no different in terms of its leadership’s aspirations in asserting the right of females to exercise Islamic authority. In common with other female *madrasahs* in Pakistan, its educational program trained women to play the traditional role of an idealized daughter and mother. Its leadership recognized the superiority of the scholarly credentials of the ‘*ulamā*’—in fact, ‘*ulamā*’ associated with

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<sup>28</sup> Bano, “Empowering Women.”

<sup>29</sup> Bano, “A Response to Modernity.”

the Red Mosque taught Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah students for the final grades. This, then, was a *madrasah* established through the active involvement of the male leadership of the Red Mosque. Umm-i-Hassan, the head of the *madrasah* from its inception until the 2007 resistance, had opened it at the prompting of her father-in-law—Maulānā Abdullah, the first *imām* of the Red Mosque and a very prominent Deobandī 'ālim—and her husband—Maulānā Abdul Azīz, the current *imām* of the Red Mosque. Up until January 2007, Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah was invisible to the country's secular elite, but among *madrasahs* it commanded respect as a place of excellence.

Its commonality, with respect to origins and ways of working, with other ordinary female *madrasahs* in Pakistan makes the importance of understanding this case very clear. At one level it helps us understand the factors that can make an otherwise normal female *madrasah* become militant; at another, it demonstrates the unpredictable outcomes that can result from the growing popularity of female Islamic educational movements. The teachers and students of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah took on many constituencies at the same time: (1) the military government; (2) secular members of the public and those who sympathized with their demands but not with their methods; (3) their families and extended family networks, as some teachers and students stayed in the *madrasah* during the resistance despite being advised otherwise by their parents; and (4) the religious community, since the *madrasah* was expelled from the Deobandī *wafāq* after the failure of the attempts by the *wafāq* leadership to convince the *madrasah* leadership to stop the resistance. Why did these pressures on the students have no bearing when tested against the demands of loyalty to Umm-i-Hassan?

### *Consolidating Authority*

#### *Adoring Perfection: The Bond of a 'Spiritual Mother'*

Observation of the interaction between the students and Umm-i-Hassan reveals that her individual charisma was central in exerting her authority vis-à-vis the students. The complexity of her relationship with the teachers and students can be captured in her reference to them as her 'spiritual daughters' and her preference for calling herself their 'spiritual mother.' In line with the general evidence presented in this volume, the ability to exercise this authority had much to do with her individual caliber. An analysis of the factors shaping



Umm-i-Hassan's strong bond with the students suggests that the ability to win strong loyalty requires the capacity to manifest multiple attributes, such as textual knowledge, personal signs of piety, strategic interpersonal skills, and sound managerial expertise. Umm-i-Hassan is an articulate speaker, has good knowledge of popular Islamic texts,<sup>30</sup> engages in logical reasoning, and responds not just to the religious but arguably all the different needs—personal, social, and emotional—of her students. Her personal attributes seem closest to those of the leader of the Qubaysīyyāt (see Islam, Chapter 1.6, this volume), or the *murshidahs* in Morocco (see Rausch, Chapter 1.2, this volume): i.e. women who are not necessarily reinterpreting the Islamic texts but are very capable of exerting their authority, though Umm-i-Hassan's scholarly credentials are probably the weakest out of these three cases.

Married at the age of sixteen, Umm-i-Hassan was taught mainly by her husband, rather than having acquired religious education in a formal seminary, such as in the case of the Iranian scholars profiled by Künkler and Fazaeli (see Chapter 1.5, this volume), nor is she in a position to command a scholarly position within the ranks of '*ulamā*'. A specialist in neither *fiqh* nor *sharī'ah*, Umm-i-Hassan nevertheless demonstrates enough knowledge of the Qur'ān and popular Islamic texts in South Asia to claim scholarly authority in the eyes of her students and other female teachers at the *madrāsah*. During her lessons, as well as in informal discussions with the students or in media interviews, she frequently draws on verses from the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* to render religious legitimacy to her arguments. These repeated references to the core Arabic texts, and the popular Islamic texts in Urdu penned by Pakistani or Indian '*ulamā*', are central to establishing her authority vis-à-vis the students as a legitimate interpreter of Islamic values. Thus, even this otherwise extreme case seems to support Kramer and Schmidtke's position that in the monotheistic religions founded on revealed scripture, the ability to compose and define the canon of 'authoritative' texts and legitimate methods of interpretation remains a crucial factor in defining the right to claim authority.<sup>31</sup>

This case, however, also reveals an interesting nuance to this argument, namely, the different forms of knowledge that can be used to

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<sup>30</sup> This is different from being a scholar of Islam, as is expected from the '*ulamā*', as the following discussion will show.

<sup>31</sup> Kramer and Schmidtke, "Introduction."

claim textual authority. Textual authority in Islam is normally associated with the ability to interpret the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* in the light of the complex commentaries produced on them over the centuries. While the Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah syllabus does indeed cover some of the texts viewed as authentic in traditional Islamic thought for studying the *ḥadīth* (such as *Sahih Bukhari*), the texts most commonly referred to in day-to-day discourse are the more easily accessible books written by Pakistani 'ulamā' in the Urdu language. In a context where these women are being newly exposed to formal Islamic education, the sophistication of the scholarship they acquire is thus limited. The textual knowledge possessed by Umm-i-Hassan and her students was shaped by popular and easily digestible popular Islamic texts and not necessarily by the books which one would expect to be studied by the 'ulamā'. The ability to demonstrate this knowledge was, though, central to establishing her authority to speak for Islam.

The consolidation of Umm-i-Hassan's authority, however, required many other complementary attributes, the most important of which was the embeddedness of religious authority within strong relational networks, akin to Jaschok's description of the role of *ahong* in China (Chapter 1.1, this volume). The relationship of the students and the teachers with Umm-i-Hassan is embedded in many overlapping relationships and is not just based on religious and textual knowledge. In line with her claim of being their 'spiritual mother,' she acts out the holistic model of a good life for them. As explained by some of the teachers at Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah who were formerly students in the same *madrasah*, since the spiritual dimension is meant to shape each and every aspect of the believer's life, the bond of spiritual mother and daughter becomes arguably even stronger than that of flesh and blood. Acquiring this role of a spiritual mother thus requires Umm-i-Hassan to respond to the girls' multiple needs, many of which extend far beyond the strictly defined realm of religious education.

For urban neighborhood women, as revealed by Rausch's work in Morocco (see Rausch, Chapter 1.2, this volume), Umm-i-Hassan acts as a model of personal piety capable of engaging with modern times. She is confident and articulate, and engages in modern activities such as appearing on television for interviews, but is also very strict about observing proper full *purdah*, including the use of *naqāb*, and demonstrating her personal piety. For women from the rural areas, on the other hand, she is the first person to invest seriously in their personal grooming; she teaches them such fundamental things as how to

maintain basic hygiene, the intricacies of urban dressing, and how to talk politely. Here she plays a role akin to that of the *ustānīs* in Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey's case study (see Chapter 2.1, this volume), who convert the rural patriarchy into an urbane one. For those who come from homes in crisis, she plays the additional role of a psychological counselor. During interviews, Umm-i-Hassan often identified troubles at home caused by issues such as delays in marriage, tension with sisters-in-law, and other relational tensions, as important factors in making some girls come to the *madrasah*. For them, Umm-i-Hassan, in addition to being a teacher, also becomes a source of shelter capable of providing much-craved peace of mind.

In addition to being a good teacher, Umm-i-Hassan also won students' confidence by virtue of her personal attributes. She is known to be very *sughaar* (well versed in most homely affairs). During interviews, girls highlighted how she gives very good tips on how to preserve food; at another point I commented to a teacher, whom I had always found engaged in some tailoring activity on my evening visits to Umm-i-Hassan, that she must have a very keen interest in tailoring. She in turn replied, "I am just a learner trying to stitch clothes for some of the teachers; the real expert is Umm-i-Hassan. She is a brilliant tailor and she constantly has to guide me in the process."

There were repeated references to her multiple virtues, placing her alongside the women most idealized in South Asian Muslim culture—namely, the women from Maulānā Ashraf 'Alī Thanawī's *Bihishti Zewar*,<sup>32</sup> who epitomize the conception of an ideal Muslim women in Pakistani *madrasahs*. These are women who live simply, save on their family income by efficient utilization of resources and self-discipline, and who also live a pious life driven by the Qur'ānic principles. It was clear that Umm-i-Hassan was also very good at nurturing relationships. She is assertive but loving in her interactions with students and teachers. Some of the teachers stay with her in her house. The bond she forms is that of a disciplining mother: she is firm on issues of principle but is also gentle and accommodating of the demands of her 'spiritual daughters.'

Last but not least, she has a strong appeal for her students because she presents an image of a happy woman: a woman who is confident

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Alī Thanawī's Bihishti Zewar; A Partial Translation with Commentary* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1990).

and by no means intimidated by men, but who by choice respects the gender roles prescribed by Islam—a woman who dares to challenge the state, but who is also happily married and takes pride in talking to her students about the bliss of a happy married life.<sup>33</sup> She is clear in her mind that she chose to live by her husband's ways and found happiness in it:

I was married at the age of sixteen after having done matriculation. My father wanted me to carry on with secular education. My in-laws however wanted me to do religious education. I had no pressure but I knew that if I opted for the secular option, then the difference in the outlook of me, my husband, and my in-laws would grow with time, so I opted for the religious education option. I was taught by my *maulānā sāhib* [her husband].<sup>34</sup>

On another occasion, I found her telling her students that *maulānā sāhib* likes her to wear the color pink. She thus constantly exemplifies to her students and teachers that it is possible to be happy in a marriage shaped by Islamic principles; this helps limit the appeal of feminist notions of equality for these students.

Umm-i-Hassan thus represents a case of an authoritative female preacher. She shows agency, intelligence, and conviction in the supremacy of Islamic beliefs. Thus, as argued in other writing on the subject,<sup>35</sup> religious authority can assume a number of forms and functions, and multiple factors can shape the basis of this authority. The case of Umm-i-Hassan suggests that an authority that has a strong following draws on multiple sources of legitimacy: a bond between the teacher and the student shaped exclusively by educational interests is not as strong as a bond in which the leader has been able to embed that teaching process in a dense set of other relationships. The source of Umm-i-Hassan's authority is thus embedded in multiple relationships. It results from a combination of factors, namely, religious knowledge, personal embodiment of piety, the ability to relate to both spiritual and this-worldly needs of her students, the willingness

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<sup>33</sup> Her lectures and talks with students as well as formal interviews often make references to the *maulānā sāhib* (her husband). These references normally reflect mutual affection and appreciation, a sense of being equals, but also her willingness to accept his superior wisdom and her religious obligation to consult him before taking a major decision.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Umm-i-Hassan, Islamabad, December 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Kramer and Schmidtke, "Introduction."

to groom students in all aspects of their lives, and providing evidence through personal behavior that following the word of God can lead to a happy life.

### *The Radicalizing Context*

The complex relationship between religion, law, politics, and society has long been a focus for scholars interested in the study of Islamic authority, and the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah shows that the dynamic interface between these societal factors is equally relevant to understanding the emergence of female leaders and preachers in mosques and *madrasahs*. If the Muslim women in Holland (see Dessing, Chapter 2.2, this volume), Sweden (see Karlsson Minganti, Chapter 3.1, this volume), and other European contexts are agreeing to take on the role of speaking for Islam in response to the demands of their host communities, and the emergence of 'gender jihad' within Muslim groups in South Africa is a byproduct of the broader anti-apartheid struggle, then the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah lends final credence to the argument that the ends considered suitable to be pursued by a given authority structure will be shaped heavily by the context in which that authority structure has to operate. Just like the women in Swedish and Dutch mosques rising to present a modern face of Islam in response to the demands of the broader European communities, Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah shifted from being a regular *madrasah* to one taking up arms in resistance to the state primarily in response to the post-September 11 political context in Pakistan.

The justification for the resistance was initially couched in terms of the need to resist a specific government action, namely, its move to demolish certain mosques. However, this discourse was from the beginning embedded in the strong sense of injustice felt by Islamic groups in Pakistan due to the hostile attitude of the Musharraf government toward the *madrasahs* after becoming part of the US-led 'war on terror.' The demolition of mosques and *madrasahs* was seen as part of the bigger agenda to marginalize Islam and those who speak on its behalf. Other state measures viewed as suggestive of this end were the military operations being conducted in the tribal belts of Pakistan to target al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. These operations, in the view of the *madrasah* leadership and students, were resulting in deaths of innocent civilians. Another sign of the state's unjust practices was

perceived in the policy of handing over Pakistani nationals suspected of terrorism to the US government without being brought to trial in country. Musharraf's government was seen to be 'selling Pakistanis' to the US in order to secure personal financial rewards. Musharraf's own admission in his autobiography that the Pakistani officials were handsomely rewarded by the CIA for handing over Pakistani nationals suspected of militancy without giving them a trial at home did not help.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the mobilization of the students was not exclusively around the state action to demolish the mosque and *madrasahs*; the real mobilizing power came from a narrative of gross injustice that was developed by weaving together all these signs of the state's persecution of those who claim to stand for Islam. This narrative proved very potent for the students and teachers in the *madrasah*, many of whom came from the Pakhtūnkhuwa (formerly North West Frontier Province) and the tribal belt, and vouched for the truth of these claims to their colleagues.

The discourse of injustice triggered by the 'war on terror' measures implemented by the US and Pakistani governments became particularly troubling due to the possibility of making easy links between this perceived sense of political injustice and the discourse of socio-economic injustice faced by the people day to day. The failure of the Pakistani state to fulfill the promises of modernity, as in other Muslim states, lent credibility to the Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah leadership's claim that "The poor are being crushed; we are asking for *shari'ah* because it is the call for justice." The shift was thus a result of frustration with the domestic political context, the military regime's unwillingness to listen, and the perceived bias of global politics. Thus, although Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah was an exception within cases of militant Islam in terms of its gender, the factors propelling the movement shared two of the fundamental causes that are thought to underpin the rise of militant Islam in general: state failure and a sense of global injustice. It was this context that enabled Umm-i-Hassan to extend the sphere of her authority into radical political activism. The efforts by the leaders of Muslim states and Western governments to limit the influence of Islamic groups, at times by force, ends up creating opportunities for the consolidation of authority by the very religious leaders the state wants to see weakened.

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<sup>36</sup> Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

The local and global contexts in which these female leaders exercise their authority thus has, and will continue to have, a crucial role in determining the ends these authority figures choose to pursue.

*Alliance with Male Orthodoxy*

The other common theme emerging across the papers in this volume that is further supported by the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah is the need to recognize that these female leaders are in most cases not emerging or operating in complete isolation from the established male religious elite. These women preachers are actively embedded within the broader Islamist networks, through kinship networks and relational ties. The role of the male leadership of the Red Mosque in establishing Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah has already been noted; what also needs to be acknowledged is the active role played by the 'ulamā' of the Red Mosque in supporting the actual resistance. Umm-i-Hassan was undisputedly the central figure in this resistance, but she was not working in isolation. She had the full support of the *imām* of the Red Mosque, i.e. her husband, Maulānā Abdul Azīz, and his younger brother, Maulānā Abdul Rashīd Ghāzī. Maulānā Abdul Azīz kept a low profile during the resistance, but Maulānā Abdul Rashīd Ghāzī took an active role in spearheading the movement, supporting Umm-i-Hassan by giving media statements.

Further, the students of Jāmi'ah Farīdīah, the male *madrasah* run by the Red Mosque though located at some distance from it, also became active members of the resistance during this period. They patrolled the roads around the *madrasah* to protect the female students from the police and other state agencies during the six-month resistance. Many of them camped in the Red Mosque compound during this period. In terms of actual loss of life during the military operation, it was the male students from Jāmi'ah Farīdīah who bore the highest cost. Umm-i-Hassan's only son, Hassan, as well as Maulānā Abdul Rashīd Ghāzī, both died in the military operation.

Thus, the movement could not have gone this far without the active support of the 'ulamā' of the Red Mosque and the male students of Jāmi'ah Farīdīah. It is, however, important to emphasize that this strong support from male members related to Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah should not be interpreted as denying all agency to Umm-i-Hassan and the female students; they were certainly not playing into the hands of the male

'*ulamā*'. All along, the resistance remained focused on Umm-i-Hassan and the female students of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah. Jāmi'ah Farīdīah rarely featured in the debates over Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah and the Red Mosque debacle. The resistance is remembered primarily as a movement of women supported by the male '*ulamā*', and not vice versa. The importance of Umm-i-Hassan's role in leading this resistance is also recorded in the publication of over one hundred books and items of popular literature that have emerged on Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah in Urdu. There is also a rich diversity of posters and music developed to honor Umm-i-Hassan and Maulānā Abdul Rashīd Ghāzī. The vast collection of posters and songs created by the sympathizers of the resistance also constantly eulogize her role as the main spirit behind it.

The other evidence of the agency of women involved in the resistance comes from the different ways Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah and Jāmi'ah Farīdīah engaged with the Wafāq-ul-Madāris al-'Arabia after the operation. During the operation, Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah was expelled from the membership of the *wafāq* on the grounds that it refused to stop the resistance despite being advised to do so by senior *wafāq* members. After the operation, in view of the strong public sympathy it generated for Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah, the *wafāq* leadership was keen that it return to the fold. However, Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah refused to rejoin. In the words of one of the teachers, "they want us back, but we say why should we join, they did not support us at the time when it was important."<sup>37</sup> Instead, Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah has chosen to start issuing its own degrees rather than stay affiliated with the *wafāq*. This is a significant act of defiance against the established Deobandī hierarchy in Pakistan, as the *wafāq* leadership constitutes most of the senior Deobandī '*ulamā*'. Umm-i-Hassan, as leader of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah, has chosen to resist this hierarchy; her husband, however, as head of Jāmi'ah Farīdīah, despite harboring equal resentment against the established Deobandī hierarchy for abandoning them, has found it difficult to make such a bold statement of defiance.

This embeddedness of these female leaders within the traditional male hierarchy can thus at one level be seen as a sign of the limits of their authority, especially when compared with cases where women have established a claim to religious authority entirely on their own standing—such as in the case of Amina Wadud. However, this

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, Multan, December 2009.



observation should not lead us to overlook the ways in which this embeddedness within the male hierarchy can arguably make these female movements more powerful than it might appear. The influence of these female preachers can actually become far greater when supported by the traditional male hierarchy;<sup>38</sup> Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah could not have turned the resistance into a globally noticeable phenomenon without the backing of the 'ulamā' of the Red Mosque, yet at the same time it is in a position to resist the established Deobandī hierarchy in a way that its male counterpart cannot. The dynamics of their embeddedness in the traditional male hierarchy is thus much more complex than is sometimes recognized.

### *Sacrifice Consolidates Authority*

Finally, the case also demonstrates that the actual deeds of those wanting to exercise religious authority are just as important in winning followers as their ability to demonstrate knowledge of the religious texts. Farhan Nizami, in his historical analysis of the working of 'ulamā' in South Asian *madrasahs*,<sup>39</sup> notes how authority was not just based on textual knowledge but was equally shaped by the everyday life of the 'ālim. The simple ways of life evinced by the saints and 'ulamā' have often been interpreted by followers as evidence of their commitment to religious precepts. The case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥḥah similarly confirms that personal sacrifice is one of the most potent tools for consolidating religious authority. After the military operation, one of the most important factors that helped build the credibility of Umm-i-Hassan and the Red Mosque leadership was the death of her son and Maulānā Abdul Rashīd Ghāzī.

During the six-month period of the resistance, many people had come to suspect the motives of Umm-i-Hassan and the Red Mosque leadership for staging it. Even many of those who supported their demands were not convinced of their methods. Not many expected them to succeed in their attempt to influence the state; most could see that attempts by a single *madrasah* to reform state policies by force

<sup>38</sup> See Hammer, Chapter 3.5, this volume, on the limits to Wadud's authority.

<sup>39</sup> Farhan A. Nizami, "Madrasahs, Scholars, Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and Upper Doab 1803–1857" (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 1983).

were bound to fail. Some attributed purely materialistic motives to Umm-i-Hassan and the 'ulamā' of the Red Mosque, such as the fear of losing land in a prime area of Islamabad. Many others argued that they were staging this resistance in connivance with the Pakistani intelligence agencies, who wanted to show the US that it needed to keep supporting the military government if it did not want radical groups, like the one in the Red Mosque, to take over Pakistan.

Thus, while secular groups criticized the resistance from the outset, even among the ordinary public largely sympathetic to Islamic values, the resistance became controversial as time passed. Once the military operation took place, however, public sentiment took a very different course. The operation was widely condemned and the sign of its political significance was evident in the decision by the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), one of the two largest political parties in Pakistan, to make condemnation of the Red Mosque operation central to its electoral campaign. This shift in the public mood was closely tied to Maulānā Ghāzī's decision to fight to the end. The fact that Umm-i-Hassan lost her son in the resistance and that Maulānā Ghāzī fought to the death (he was being interviewed on the phone by TV and radio channels till the last moment) suddenly removed doubts about the intentions of Umm-i-Hassan and the Red Mosque leadership in staging the resistance. Many of the songs prepared in honor of Umm-i-Hassan note how she made the ultimate sacrifice, that of her only son, to advance the cause of Islam. The political context that causes these female preachers in mosques and *madrāsahs* to make such sacrifices is thus more likely to strengthen than to weaken their powers.

### *Ways Forward: The Impact of Female Authority*

Juxtaposed with the cases presented in this volume, the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥafṣah, by virtue of focusing on a female preacher who exerts a great deal of authority and who chose to exercise that authority in pursuit of an extreme end, has helped spell out the complexity of these movements. Most of the leaders covered in the volume possess one or another of the attributes that enabled Umm-i-Hassan to consolidate her authority, and the more powerful female leaders profiled in this volume draw on a combination of these authority-forming attributes just as Umm-i-Hassan does. The emergence of these female preachers and leaders in all cases is greatly shaped by the peculiarities of their

local context as well as general trends in global politics. Most of these women-led initiatives are closely tied to the existing male religious hierarchy, but the cases also illustrate that the existence of these links does not automatically imply a relationship of subservience. Being embedded within the male religious hierarchy helps these women gain popular legitimacy with the masses; this enables these female preachers, in trying to win the loyalty of their followers, to borrow some of the established legitimacy of the male hierarchy. Women leaders and preachers, such as Amina Wadud, who attempt to secure the right to religious leadership by operating from outside the domain of the established male religious hierarchy, might be more able to spell out new conceptions of Islamic authority but they also face severe challenges in gaining popular appeal for their conceptions of religious authority. The volume has also identified that personal sacrifice—whether in everyday life, or in the manner of one’s death—can help consolidate authority in a way that the ability to demonstrate command of the text alone can never do. The key question to address now is what predictions the case of Jāmi‘ah Ḥaḫḫah, in combination with the other cases in this volume, allows us to make about the future impact of these movements.

*Social Ramifications: Withering Harmony?*

The volume has been concerned with understanding the three main dimensions of the working of female Islamic authority, namely: what helped create the space for the rise of female preachers within the formal sphere of religious authority; what factors have enabled these women to consolidate their authority; and how are they using this newly acquired authority. As seen throughout, and as magnified in the case of Pakistan, it is clear that the agency of the women in staking and legitimizing their right to exercise Islamic authority, even in the context where the initial space has been created by men, must be fully recognized. In case after case, we have seen that once the male religious hierarchy has adjusted to make space for women—even if the adjustments are initiated by the male *‘ulamā’*—it is difficult to curb women’s agency. Thus, while evidence suggests that the role these women will potentially play in leading to alternative interpretations of Islamic texts regarding women’s rights might be limited, it is easy to see that whatever path they might choose to follow, it will have implications both for the nature of Islamic authority and the working of Muslim societies.

If these women leaders and preachers support alternative interpretations of the Islamic texts then they are likely to meet resistance from male *'ulamā'*, and possibly even from within the broader Muslim public, as seen in the case of the limited enthusiasm for Amina Wadud's mixed-congregation prayers (see Hammer, Chapter 3.5, this volume) and the resistance to 'gender jihad' in South Africa (see Lehmann, Chapter 3.6, this volume). However, this is not the only form of rupture they can cause vis-à-vis the established male religious authority. Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah, though working in close alliance with the male leadership of the mosque, has set an example of causing fractures in formal male religious authority by refusing to return to the fold of the Wafāq-ul-Madāris even though its male counterpart, Jāmi'ah Farīdīah, could not afford to challenge the *wafāq* authority directly, and chose to stay within the system. Thus, even those female leaders and preachers who enter the system through the support of the male *'ulamā'* may end up having very unexpected implications for the shaping of Islamic authority in the future.

At the same time, the growth of powerful female figures claiming the right to exercise Islamic authority—the majority of whom, as seen in the cases in this volume, still defend the orthodox interpretations of Islamic texts on the subject of the appropriate role for Muslim women—has the potential to polarize the public sphere in Muslim societies, as these women are often quite vocal in their critiques of the Western-styled feminist movements being advanced by the state, NGOs, and donor agencies. Even during the Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah resistance, this mutual intolerance was visible in the women's rights NGOs' decision to protest against Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah and then to support the military operation, irrespective of its lack of constitutional legitimacy. The release of Umm-i-Hassan and the rising number of branches of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah remains a serious concern in the view of many women's rights activists in Pakistan. The opposing agendas of these two types of women-led initiatives can lead to a clash if the two do not learn to accommodate each other.

Arguably, then, in whatever direction these movements might evolve, they will upset some of the existing power structures: sometimes within the religious hierarchy, and at other times vis-à-vis feminist groups. But whether such differences will actually result in as extreme an outcome as the case of Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah will be determined by the sociopolitical context. The signs are that in most cases these

women will prefer to follow a more moderate path. As more educated women join these movements, these female leaders and preachers are facing increasing demands for providing solutions from within the Islamic texts which help cope with the realities of modern life. Their choice to take a radical extremist path will most likely result from complete intolerance by the state and secular groups, rather than being an inevitable result of the internal dynamics of these movements.

*Will They Step into Electoral Politics?*

As these women leaders gain more power to influence the religious beliefs of their fellow Muslim women, the other legitimate question for the future is the potential role they may play in influencing political processes and electoral politics in their home countries. The resurgence of political Islam, visible especially since the 1970s, has shown how Islamic texts can be used to justify a close link between religion and politics. The intellectual contributions of twentieth-century Islamic ideologues, such as Maudūdī of *Jamā'at-i-Islāmī* or Syed Qutab of the Muslim Brotherhood, or Khomeini's conception of *Valeyat-e-Faqih*, provided the Islamists with a convincing set of arguments to justify their attempts to capture state power, whether through mobilizing a mass popular revolution or actual engagement in the electoral process. The question, therefore, is whether these female leaders and preachers will in coming years also find the logic of capturing state power through electoral process to establish a society on Islamic principles more convincing than developing a pious society through focusing on inculcating personal piety in their members. There is already some evidence that Islamic political parties such as *Jamā'at-i-Islāmī* in South Asia actively recruit female members to influence the electoral decisions of women. After the military operation, *Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah* became an emotive point of reference for the ordinary public and an important feature of the electoral campaigns of political parties in the 2008 elections; further, *Jāmi'ah Ḥaḥṣah* students actively mobilized their immediate communities to vote the Musharraf government out. Thus the role these women leaders and preachers can potentially play in shaping the outcomes of voter politics remains an important area of research for the future.

*Will They Learn to Speak to Each Other?*

Finally, the other interesting issue to keep under observation is whether these female preachers and leaders emerging across the Muslim world as well as in Muslim communities in the West will start to talk to each other or work toward a global alliance. At present these movements work mostly in isolation; links between them are rare. Will they start speaking to each other? And, if so, what implications will this have for the future of these movements, the consolidation of Islamic feminism, and its ability to displace Western feminism as the idealized goal for all societies? The chances are that at some stage they will learn more about each other, and also about the benefits of intercommunication; but, as in the case of male Islamist movements, most will continue to evolve differently in different country contexts, depending on the socioeconomic make-up of their particular society. These and many other questions can only be answered as these movements mature. What this volume has, however, established very clearly is the importance of recognizing the potential implications these female leaders and preachers have for the future shaping of Islamic authority and socioeconomic life in Muslim societies. The scholarship on the subject must therefore keep evolving—for these movements certainly will.

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## GLOSSARY

### *Terms Describing Female Leaders and Leadership*

A wide variety of terms are used to describe female leaders and leadership activities in the languages used in this volume. This thematic section of the introduction attempts to capture the diversity of terms that could be translated by English words such as ‘scholar,’ ‘preacher,’ ‘teacher,’ or ‘communal leader.’ Inevitably, there is some overlap between the titles that appear in the categories, especially between the second—ritual leadership, which generally implies public leadership of prayer in formal religious spaces—and the third—preaching and teaching, which here is treated more generally. It is also important to note that use of these terms shifts in important ways over time and space; while some of these shifts are captured here, these terms need to be read and interpreted in the context of each chapter.

In some cases, women are known by terms similar to those used for male leaders, with or without feminine endings attached. In others, women are known by less formal titles, for instance, ‘miss,’ ‘sister,’ or ‘auntie,’ either through their own choice or because of the resistance of others to addressing them more formally. Several terms are linked to words used to refer to wives of male religious officials.

Also notable are the terms that are missing from this list. Women in many communities perform religious and communal leadership roles that do not have a well-defined title, perhaps because the role is less visible or has not been formally recognized by the community. These roles include organizing or translating religious lessons, writing about Islam in print or virtual media, mediating between cultures or religions, and transmitting Islam to the next generation. Also evident from this survey is the number of terms used for male leaders that do not have a female equivalent, because women either do not fulfil the role or are not given the title. These include *qādī*, *marja’-i taqlīd*, *mufī*, *mullā*, *mu’adhdhin*, and—except in a handful of cases—*imām*.

*Terms Used for Female Scholars*

<i>‘ālimah</i>	(Arabic) female version of <i>‘ālim</i> , can refer to a learned woman
<i>āyatullāh</i>	(Arabic and Persian) an honorary title in contemporary Shī‘ī circles, conferred upon a <i>mujtahid</i> or <i>mujtahidah</i>
<i>hafiza</i>	(Bosnian) female reciter of the Qur’ān
<i>hoca</i>	(Turkish) religious scholar, teacher, educator; can be used instead of <i>imām</i> to refer to male and female community leaders
<i>lārd</i>	(Swedish) learned person; scholar who teaches, preaches, and gives advice in mosques and Muslim associations, but does not lead prayer or deliver the Friday sermon
<i>mujtahidah</i>	(Arabic, Persian) female version of <i>mujtahid</i> , a jurist qualified to practice <i>ijtihād</i>

*Terms Used for Female Ritual Leaders*

<i>ahong</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) generic title for female and male religious leaders in China who often supervise the religious affairs of mosques; a transliteration of the Persian term <i>ākhūnd</i> , referring to religious leaders of all levels, more common among Chinese Muslims than the Arabic term <i>imām</i>
<i>bula</i>	(Bosnian) traditional name for a female ritual leader and instructor, current usage can have pejorative connotations
<i>imāmah</i>	(Arabic) the female form of <i>imām</i> , or prayer leader; used rarely in the communities discussed in this volume; male form of this term is used by some in Sweden for women who advise and lead prayers for other women
<i>khaṭīb</i> , fem. <i>khaṭībah</i>	(Arabic) preacher, often one who gives the Friday sermon
<i>murshidah</i> (pl. <i>murshidāt</i> )	(Arabic) female version of <i>murshid</i> , or leader, spiritual guide, often in Sufi circles; also state-sponsored religious authorities in Morocco

*shaykhah* (Arabic) female version of *shaykh*, an individual with religious knowledge; also a pre-Islamic honorific title with wider applications

*Terms Used for Female Teachers and Preachers*

*abla* (Turkish) lit. elder sister; used unofficially by some Turkish men to refer to official female religious leaders instead of *hoca* or *vaize*; also used in some European Turkish communities for religious leaders

*abystay* (Tatar) female religious figure providing religious instruction to women

*ānisah* (pl. *ānisāt*) (Arabic) equivalent to female honorific titles such as ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’ but often used as a title of respect to refer to female religious teachers

*bayan vaiz* (Turkish) female preacher employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs

*bībī khalfa* (Tajik/Uzbek) Central Asian female religious expert, spiritual guide, and ritual leader, found most commonly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

*dā‘iyah* (Arabic) female preacher

*duktūrah* (Arabic) a woman who has a PhD; in Saudi Arabia, this term is most often used for religious leaders who have this degree

*föreläsare* (Swedish) lecturer active in mosques and Muslim association premises

*imāmah* (Arabic) see above; used in one of the German communities discussed in this volume to refer to a female religious teacher and communal leader

*jiaoyuan* (Chinese-Mandarin) teacher of Islam, title used at times in place of (*nü*) *ahong*

*jiaozhang* (Chinese-Mandarin) teacher of senior rank, title used at times in place of (*nü*) *ahong*

*junshi* (Chinese-Mandarin) female Islamic scholars of high standing

*kadrolu* (Turkish) tenured preacher employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs

*khaṭīb*, fem. *khaṭībah* (Arabic) preacher, often one who gives the Friday sermon

- lärare* (Swedish) teacher giving lessons (*dars*) in mosques and Muslim associations
- mu'allimah* (Arabic) lit. teacher, tutor, instructor; female version of *mu'allim*
- mudarrisah* (Arabic) lit. teacher; a woman who teaches children and teenagers in a Qur'ānic center; female version of *mudarris*
- muṭawwi'ah* (Arabic) private female instructor in Saudi Arabia before the development of public education; now a very pious woman calling others to the strictest application of Islamic principles; masculine form also refers to a member of the religious police, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Repression of Vice (*hay'at al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-al-naḥī 'an al-munkar*)
- nyai* (Indonesian) female preacher
- otin* (Tajik/Uzbek) Central Asian female religious expert, spiritual guide, and ritual leader, used most commonly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan
- otin-oyi* (Tartar) similar to *abystay*, used by Muslims in Central Asia for female religious figures and teachers
- shimu* (Chinese-Mandarin) female relatives of male *ahong/nü ahong*
- shiniang* (Chinese-Mandarin) female relatives of male *ahong/nü ahong*
- shuwwāfa* (Arabic) women who serve as experts on spirit possession, and as healers and ritual leaders, including in Morocco
- sözleşmeli* (Turkish) female preacher employed under contract by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
- syster* (Swedish) lit. sister; the most common title for female peers and youth leaders used by Muslim youth activists in Sweden
- ustādhah* (Arabic) very common form of address for female religious leaders in Saudi Arabia who do not have a PhD
- ustānī* (Urdu) female teacher
- vaize* (Turkish) female version of *vaiz*, a female preacher employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
- yenge* (Turkish) lit. sister-in-law, used unofficially by some men to refer to official female religious leaders instead of *hoca* or *vaize*

*Terms Used for Female Community Leaders*

- dawa-ansvarig* (Swedish) general term for a person responsible for the activities of a Muslim youth association, including education and *da'wah* strategies
- hoca* (Turkish) see above, also used in Germany instead of *imām* to refer to male and female communal leaders
- hodžinica* (Bosnian) wife of the *hodža* (Islamic teacher), often accompanying him at domestic rituals
- ledamot* (Swedish) general term for commissioner, member of the board
- mojahida* (Swedish; Arabic: *mujāhidah*) female form of *mujahid* (fighter engaged in *jihād*); a woman within the Swedish youth activist community who puts effort into her personal piety, education, and profession, and into performing *da'wah*
- muṭāwi'ah* (Arabic) see above
- ordförande* (Swedish) general term for a chairperson or the highest officer in a Muslim youth association board
- (*nü*) *shetou* (Chinese-Mandarin) (female) member of women's mosque management committee, China

*List of Institutions and Organizations*

- al-Azhar Egypt's premier Islamic educational institution, founded in the 970s; in 1961 it was expanded to include non-religious faculties similar to other Egyptian universities
- BFmF (Begegnungs- und Fortbildungszentrum für muslimische Frauen) Muslim Women's Center for Encounter and Education, a multiethnic association in Cologne, Germany, which provides an array of services assisting the integration of Muslim women
- Dār al-Iftā' Egyptian institution founded by the state in 1895 through which the Grand Muftī issues official *fatwās*; part of state efforts to increase control of Islamic scholarship
- Daru'l 'Ulūm Deoband large Indian theological seminary founded in 1867 in Deoband, a small town in western Uttar Pradesh, and famed for its reformist stance

DIK, Deutsche Islam Konferenz	German Islam Conference, governmental forum for structured communication between Muslims and the German state, founded in 2006
DİTİB	(Turkish: Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği, DİTİB) Turkish Islamic Association of Religious Affairs, one of the leading Turkish–Islamic umbrella organizations in Germany, founded in 1984
Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı HUDA	Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs women’s network in Germany, offering telephone counseling and publishing a quarterly called <i>Huda</i>
IAIN	Indonesia’s Institute for Higher Islamic Education
IGMG	(Turkish: İslamische Gemeinschaft Millî Görüş, lit. National Vision) one of the leading Turkish–Islamic umbrella organizations in Germany
IS	(Islamiska Samarbetsrådet) Sweden’s Islamic Collaboration Council
Jami‘at al-Zahrā’	Iran’s largest theological seminary for women (founded in 1985); from the mid-1990s, an institution preparing women for <i>tabligh</i>
Jamā‘at-i-Islāmī	largest Islamic political party in Pakistan and Bangladesh
Jāmi‘ah Ḥafṣah	one of the largest <i>madrasahs</i> for female students in Pakistan
Jāmi‘ah Farīdīah	male <i>madrasah</i> linked to Jāmi‘ah Ḥafṣah
Jāmi‘ah Sumai‘ah	sister <i>madrasah</i> of Jāmi‘ah Ḥafṣah
Madrasah al-Qarawiyyīn	Moroccan institution providing Islamic education since 859 in Fez; known in French as al-Karaouine; elevated to university status in 1957, when non-religious subjects were added
Mazāhir-i ‘Ulūm	Indian theological seminary in Saharanpur, in Uttar Pradesh; an offshoot of Daru’l ‘Ulūm seminary in nearby Deoband, also founded in 1867

MUI	(Majelis Ulama Indonesia) National Board of Indonesian 'Ulamā'
Muslim Youth	organization for young people, both male and female, with branches throughout Europe, including a German section founded in 1994
P3M	Center for the Development of Pesantren and Society, Indonesia
PPIM	Center for Research on Islam and Society, Indonesia
Rabātah-ul-Madāris al-Islāmīyah	umbrella organization for <i>madrasahs</i> affiliated to Jamā'at-i-Islāmī in Pakistan
SMR	(Sveriges Muslimska Råd) Council of Swedish Muslims
SST	(Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund) Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities
SUM	(Sveriges Unga Muslimer) Sweden's Young Muslims
Tablīghī Jamā'at	(lit. society for spreading faith) transnational missionary movement founded in 1926 in north India that focuses its efforts on Muslims considered in need of self-reformation and renewal
Tanzīm-ul-Madāris Ahl-i-Sunnah-wal-Jamā'at	umbrella organization of <i>madrasahs</i> affiliated to the Barelvi school of thought in Pakistan
UIN	Islamic State University, Indonesia
VIKZ	(Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren, Turkish: İKMB, İslam Kültür Merkezleri Birliği) oldest Turkish-Islamic umbrella organization in Germany, founded in 1973 and linking more than 300 mosques
Wafāq-ul-Madāris	umbrella organization of <i>madrasahs</i> linked to the al-Arabiah Deobandī school of thought in Pakistan
Wafāq-ul-Madāris al-Salfia	umbrella organization of <i>madrasahs</i> linked to the Ahl-i-Hadīth school of thought in Pakistan
Wafāq-ul-Madāris al-Shī'ah	umbrella organization of <i>madrasahs</i> linked to the Shī'ah school of thought in Pakistan

ZIF	(Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und -förderung) Center for Islamic Women's Research and Promotion; an organization which engages in Qur'ān hermeneutics
ZMD	(Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland) Germany's Central Council of Muslims, one of the leading Islamic umbrella organizations in Germany, founded in 1987

*Terms in Foreign Languages*

' <i>abāyah</i>	(Arabic) black wrap or cloak worn by women; black overcoat worn by women in Saudi Arabia
<i>abla</i>	(Turkish) elder sister
<i>abystay</i>	(Tatar) female religious figure who provides religious instruction to women
<i>adab</i>	(Arabic; Urdu) etiquette, politeness, good manners
<i>adhān</i>	(Arabic; Turkish: <i>ezan</i> ) the audible call to ritual prayer for Muslims
' <i>adl</i>	(Arabic) justice, especially that of God
<i>ahl al-kitāb</i>	(Arabic) lit. people of the book, or non-Muslims following religions with revealed scriptures including Christians and Jews
<i>ahong</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) generic title for female and male religious leaders in China who often supervise the religious affairs of mosques; a transliteration of the Persian <i>ākhūnd</i> , more common among Chinese Muslims than the Arabic term <i>imām</i>
<i>aḥadīth</i>	see <i>ḥadīth</i>
<i>akhlāq</i>	(Arabic; Urdu: <i>akhlāq</i> ) ethics, morals, virtues, good character
' <i>ālim</i> (pl. ' <i>ulamā</i> ')	(Arabic) religious scholar
' <i>ālimah</i>	(Arabic) female version of ' <i>ālim</i> '; can refer to a learned woman
' <i>ālimah fāzilah</i>	(Urdu) woman trained in Arabic, Persian, and advanced Islamic studies
<i>Allāh</i>	(Arabic) word for God used in Islam



- Amir al-mu'minīn (Arabic) commander of the faithful, a title adopted historically by various caliphs and claimed by some contemporary leaders and monarchs, including the current king of Morocco, Mohammed VI
- 'ammī (Arabic) paternal uncle
- anāshīd (Arabic) plural of *nashīd* or religious song
- ānisah (pl. ānisāt) (Arabic) equivalent to female honorific titles such as 'Miss' or 'Mrs,' but often used as a title of respect to refer to female religious teachers
- 'aqīqah (Arabic) one of the *sunnah*, where a baby's birth is celebrated by butchering goats or sheep, two for a boy or one for a girl
- 'aql (Arabic) rational intellect or intelligence
- Ash'arī (Arabic) Sunnī school of theology arguing, in opposition to the Mu'tazilah, that human reason is incapable of establishing certain types of truth with absolute certainty
- auto-socialisation (French) self-directed acquisition of knowledge
- 'awrah (Arabic) intimate, seducing; in legal contexts, the part of the body that must remain covered, including the genitals
- āyah (Arabic) lit. sign, token, or miracle; also verse of the Qur'an
- ayatullah (Persian, Arabic) lit. sign of God; title given to high-ranking Shī'ah cleric
- Baqar-'id (Urdu) annual Islamic festival in which livestock are sacrificed
- barakah (Arabic) blessing, often in a Sufi context
- bayan vaiz (Turkish) female preacher employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
- bid'ah (Arabic) innovation; heretical doctrine
- Bihīstī Zewar (Urdu) lit. heavenly jewel; title of advice manual for Muslim women originally published in Urdu in the early twentieth century in India
- bula (Bosnian) traditional name for a female ritual leader and instructor, current usage can have pejorative connotations
- burqa' (Urdu) garment that completely conceals a woman in public; in northern India, the *burqa'* is

	usually a lightweight black coat and head covering with transparent face covering
caliph	see <i>khalīfah</i>
<i>cemaat</i>	(Turkish) Islamic group or movement
<i>chandā</i>	(Urdu) donation, subscription, contribution
<i>chi nietie</i>	see <i>nietie</i>
<i>dā'iyah</i>	(Arabic) female preacher
<i>dalīl</i>	(Arabic) evidence
<i>dār, dūr tahfīz</i> <i>al-Qur'ān</i>	(Arabic) in Saudi Arabia, Qur'ānic centers where girls learn the Qur'ān and <i>Sunnah</i> ; lessons for girls often take place in public schools after school hours
<i>dars</i>	(Arabic) general term for lesson, class
<i>dars-i khārij</i>	(Persian) lit. outside study, lessons for advanced <i>hawza</i> students
<i>da'wah</i>	(Arabic) missionary work inviting or calling others to Islam; can be aimed at conversion, correcting practice, or even at correcting negative representations of Islam in the public sphere
<i>dhikr</i>	(Arabic) remembering or reminding; Islamic devotional practice
<i>dihātī</i>	(Urdu) villager, often with negative connotations compared with urbanites
<i>dīn</i>	(Arabic) religion or faith, usually implying the religion of Islam
<i>dopattā</i>	(Urdu) lit. two breadths of cloth; large headscarf worn by women used to conceal their hair, bosom, and sometimes face in South Asia
<i>du'ā'</i>	(Arabic) supplication
<i>duli</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) independent, self-sufficient
<i>dunyā</i>	(Arabic) the temporal world, its material objects, and its characteristics; usually used in opposition to the spiritual world or eternal afterlife
<i>dženaza</i>	(Bosnian) funeral ceremony
<i>edep</i>	(Turkish, Bosnian) see <i>adab</i>
<i>ezan</i>	(Turkish) see <i>adhān</i>
<i>falsafah</i>	(Arabic) philosophy
<i>fang</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) mosque neighbourhood/ parish

<i>fatwá</i> (pl. <i>fatāwá</i> )	(Arabic; Turkish: <i>fetva</i> ) non-binding legal opinion
<i>fetva</i>	(Turkish, Bosnian) see <i>fatwá</i>
<i>fetva nöbeti</i>	(Turkish) work shifts for the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs' preachers to answer religious questions by phone or in person
<i>fiqh</i>	(Arabic) Islamic jurisprudence
<i>fitnah</i>	(Arabic) upheaval, chaos, rupture in the community
<i>Frauentreffen</i>	(German) women's meeting; coffee party
<i>fulian</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) official women's organization
<i>gedimu pai</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) the oldest (traditionalist) Sunnī tradition in China; a transliteration of the Arabic term <i>qadīm</i>
<i>ghusl</i>	(Arabic) complete ritual ablution, required especially after sexual contact, giving birth, or menstruation; see also lesser ablution, <i>wuḍū'</i>
<i>hacı</i>	(Turkish; Arabic: <i>hajjī</i> ) one who has made the <i>hajj</i> pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>ḥadīth</i> (pl. <i>aḥadīth</i> )	lit. discussion; traditions of Prophet Muḥammad, authoritative reports of his deeds or sayings; for the Twelver Shī'ites the word also depicts the traditions and sayings of the twelve Imams
<i>Ḥāfiẓ Qur'ān</i>	(Urdu) lit. guardian of the Qur'ān; a person who has memorized the Qur'ān
<i>hailifan</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) student of Qur'ān, China
<i>hajj</i>	(Arabic) annual pilgrimage to Mecca required of all Muslims once in their lives if they are financially and physically able
<i>ḥalāl</i>	(Arabic) permitted or lawful; often contrasted with <i>ḥarām</i>
<i>ḥalaqāt</i>	(Arabic) gathering or meeting, usually for discussing Islam
<i>ḥalaqāt taḥfīẓ al-Qur'ān</i>	(Arabic) in Saudi Arabia, Qur'ānic circles for girls in private homes to teach the Qur'ān and <i>sunnah</i> , before the development of public education for girls
<i>Ḥanafī</i>	(Arabic) the most prevalent of the four Sunnī schools of law; its contemporary influence is due in part to its historic prevalence within

	large Muslim empires, including the Ottoman Empire
<i>hao bidaerti</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) laudable innovation; <i>bidaerti</i> is a transliteration of the Arabic term <i>bid'ah</i>
<i>ḥarām</i>	(Arabic) forbidden, prohibited; often contrasted with <i>ḥalāl</i>
<i>hatib</i>	(Turkish, Bosnian) male Islamic teacher with formal education
Ḥavvā'	(Persian; Arabic: Ḥawwā') Eve
<i>ḥawzah</i>	(Persian and Arabic) full term <i>ḥawzah 'ilmiyyah</i> ; complex of Islamic seminaries, particularly in Shī'ī contexts; for instance, <i>ḥawzah-yi 'ilmīyyah-yi Qūm</i> , the name of the (scientific) religious seminaries in Qom
<i>hazrat</i>	(Tartar) honored judge
<i>ḥijāb</i>	(Arabic) lit. cover, screen; modest dress seen by many to be required by Islam, often used to refer to a woman's head covering or headscarf
<i>ḥikmah</i>	(Arabic) lit. wisdom; also science, philosophy, or metaphysics
<i>Hinterhofmoschee</i>	(German) backyard mosque
<i>hizmet içi eğitimi</i>	(Turkish) practical training for Turkish state-sponsored preachers
<i>hoca</i>	(Turkish) religious scholar, teacher, educator; in Turkish communities in Germany used instead of <i>imām</i> to refer to male and female communal leaders
<i>hodža</i>	(Bosnian) male Islamic teacher with or without formal Islamic education; honorary title; see also <i>hoca</i>
<i>hodžinica</i>	(Bosnian) wife of <i>hodža</i> , often accompanies husband at domestic rituals
<i>ḥujjatulislam</i>	(Persian) lit. proof of Islam; in modern day Iran, a middle-ranking cleric
<i>ḥukūmah</i> , pl. <i>ḥukūmāt</i>	(Arabic) government
<i>'ibādah</i>	(Arabic) worship activities
<i>ibtidā'i qa'ida</i>	(Urdu) introductory Urdu primer widely used in <i>madrasahs</i> in India

- ihtisas eğitimi* (Turkish) specialization training for Turkish state-sponsored preachers
- ijāzah* (Arabic) license or certification; in context of Islamic education attests ability to transmit a text, teach a subject, or fulfil a particular role requiring Islamic knowledge
- ijmāʿ* (Arabic) authoritative consensus on a legal question: one of the four *uṣūl*, or sources, of Islamic Law
- ijtihād* (Arabic) lit. self-exertion; the act of interpreting religious sources on an individual and independent basis, based on the interpretation and application of the four *uṣūl*, or sources, of Islamic Law; discussed in opposition to *taqlīd*
- ikhlāṣ* (Arabic) purity, innocence; loyalty, allegiance; sincere devotion
- ʿilm* (Arabic; Turkish, Bosnian: *ilm*) religious knowledge
- imam* (Turkish, Bosnian, German, English) see *imām*
- Imām* (Arabic) in Shīʿah Islam, one of the twelve leaders of the Muslim community after the death of Muḥammad; also used in contemporary Iran to refer to Ayatullah Khomeini
- imām* (Arabic, Turkish, Persian) lit. the one who stands in front; a religious leader in charge of a mosque, often the person who leads Friday prayer; in some contexts, can also refer to a community leader
- imāmāh* (Arabic) the female form of *imām*
- imāmate* (Arabic) Arabic term (*imām*) with English language suffix, meaning religious leadership
- in shāʾ allah* (Arabic) God willing
- insān* (Arabic) man
- intizām* (Urdu) accommodation, order; (Arabic) *intizām*, order, regularity
- ʿirfān* (Arabic) knowing or awareness, related to mysticism; see also *maʿrifah*
- irşad* (Turkish) religious guidance
- isnād* (Arabic) chain of transmission, also *silsilah*
- istişlāḥ* (Arabic) a method employed by Muslim jurists, related to the idea of common good, to solve problems that find no clear answer in sacred religious texts
- ʿizzat* (Urdu) honor, esteem, reputation, dignity

<i>jahāz</i> (pl. <i>jahāzāt</i> )	(Urdu) dowry or bride gift given to a bride by family or friends
<i>jāhīl</i>	(Urdu) ignorant, illiterate, uncivilized, ill-mannered, uncouth
<i>jamā'ah</i>	(Arabic) a group, organization, or congregation; often used by followers of a specific group to refer to its own members or congregants
<i>jamā'atī</i>	(Urdu) member of a group or congregation
<i>jihād</i>	(Arabic) struggle
<i>jīngtāng jiaoyu</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) mosque-based religious education
<i>jum'ah</i>	(Arabic) Friday, day of weekly Islamic communal prayer
<i>ka'bah</i>	(Arabic) Islamic sanctuary in Mecca
<i>kadrolu</i>	(Turkish) tenured preacher employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
<i>kāfir</i>	(Arabic) infidel
<i>kalām</i>	(Arabic) Islamic theology or thought
<i>kāmīl</i>	(Arabic; Urdu) lit. perfect, accomplished, learned; Islamic qualification roughly equivalent to BA in India
<i>ketīng</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) private quarter of <i>ahong</i>
<i>khalīfah</i>	(Arabic) caliph, ruler of the Islamic community
<i>khāndān</i>	(Urdu) family, lineage, dynasty
<i>khaṭīb</i> , fem. <i>khaṭībah</i>	(Arabic) preacher, often one who gives the Friday sermon
<i>khul'</i>	(Arabic) a divorce granted on the condition that the woman abandons the property rights written into her marriage contract; in Egypt, depends on a legal revision of 2000
<i>al-khulafā'</i> <i>al-rāshidūn</i>	(Arabic) lit. rightly-guided caliphs; refers to first four successors to the Prophet Muḥammad
<i>khums</i>	(Arabic) lit. fifth; religious tax paid by the Shī'ī on their annual earnings
<i>khūsh akhlāq</i>	(Urdu) urbane, cultivated
<i>khushbakhtī</i>	(Persian) happiness
<i>khuṭbah</i> (pl. <i>khuṭab</i> )	(Arabic) public lecture or sermon, typically the main weekly sermon given by a <i>khaṭīb</i> (often the <i>imām</i> ) during the Friday communal prayers at the mosque

<i>kurta</i>	(Urdu) over-shirt, tunic
<i>lao pai</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) alternative name for <i>gedimu</i> Sunnī tradition in China
<i>Laṛkīon kā Islāmī Course</i>	(Urdu) Islamic Course for Girls; title of a series of books widely used in north Indian <i>madrasahs</i>
<i>libaidian</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) prayer room
<i>lungī</i>	(Urdu) sarong-like garment worn mainly by rural Muslim men in northern India
<i>madhhab</i> (pl. <i>madhāhib</i> )	(Arabic and Persian) school of law
<i>madrasah</i>	(Arabic; Urdu) religious school teaching the Qurʾān and Islamic jurisprudence; in Arab countries, a school
<i>maghrib</i>	(Arabic) the fourth of five daily Islamic prayers, said after the setting of the sun
<i>maʿhad al-islāmīyah,</i> <i>maʿhad al-dīn</i>	(Arabic) lit. Islamic or religious school; 'Islamic special school' in Egypt
<i>māhir</i>	(Urdu) lit. expert, master, skilled; Islamic qualification roughly equivalent to Class 12, the final year of schooling before university, in India
<i>mahr</i> (pl. <i>muhūr</i> )	(Arabic) dowry, money paid or gifts given to the bride by groom upon marriage
<i>maḥram</i>	(Arabic) immediate (unmarriageable) family members
<i>majbūrī men</i>	(Urdu) out of necessity
<i>majlis</i>	(Arabic) lit. a place where one sits; meeting, assembly; parliament
<i>maktab</i>	(Arabic, Persian) school; see <i>matkab khanih</i>
<i>maktab khānah</i>	(Persian) elementary Qurʾānic schools
<i>Mālikī</i>	(Arabic) one of the four Sunnī schools of Islamic law
<i>mandūb</i>	(Arabic) meritorious act
<i>manṭiq</i>	(Arabic) logic
<i>marabou</i>	(French) saint; religious teacher, often from the Sufi tradition
<i>maʿrifah</i>	knowledge, cognition, especially of God; see also <i>ʿirfān</i>
<i>marjaʿ-i taqlīd</i> (pl. <i>marājaʿ-i taqlīd</i> )	(Persian) source of emulation

<i>marja'iyat</i>	(Persian) institution of supreme authority in Shī'ah Islam
<i>masjid</i>	(Arabic) mosque
<i>maulavī/maulavī sahab</i>	(Urdu) male preacher or <i>imām</i> of a mosque
<i>mawlid</i>	(Arabic) commemoration of the birth of Muḥammad or a Sufi saint
<i>medresa</i>	(Bosnian) see <i>madrāsah</i>
<i>medžlis</i>	(Bosnian) community or congregation, see Arabic <i>majlis</i>
<i>mevlud</i>	(Bosnian) see <i>mawlid</i>
<i>mihrab</i>	(Arabic) niche in a mosque denoting the direction of prayer
<i>minbar</i>	(Arabic) mosque pulpit used for the Friday sermon
<i>mu'allim, mu'allimah</i>	(Arabic; Bosnian <i>muallima</i> ) lit. teacher, tutor, instructor; in Urdu, a medium-level teaching qualification, equivalent to a BEd, for teaching Urdu and 'this-worldly' subjects in India
<i>muezzin</i>	(Turkish; Arabic: <i>mu'adhdhin</i> ) one who gives the call to prayer
<i>muftī</i>	(Arabic; Turkish: <i>müfti</i> ) jurist qualified to issue non-binding legal opinions; can denote a high-ranking state religious official
<i>muftiate</i>	(Tartar) council of <i>muftīs</i> ; office of a <i>muftī</i>
<i>mujtahid, fem.</i>	(Arabic, Persian) a Shī'ī jurist qualified to practice <i>ijtihād</i>
<i>mujtahidah</i>	
<i>mūlid an-nabī</i>	(Arabic, colloquial) see <i>mawlid</i>
<i>mullā</i>	(Arabic) cleric
<i>muqaddimah</i>	(Arabic, Persian) lit. introduction; first cycle of ḥawzah education
<i>murshid, fem.</i>	(Arabic) leader, spiritual guide, often in Sufi circles; also state-sponsored religious authorities in Morocco
<i>murshidāt</i>	
<i>mutadayyin</i>	(Arabic) pious
<i>mutashaddid, fem.</i>	(Arabic) individual who interprets Islam in an extreme or dogmatic manner
<i>mutashaddidah</i>	



<i>muṭawwi'ah</i>	(Arabic) private female instructor in Saudi Arabia before the development of public education; now a very pious woman calling others to the strictest application of Islamic principles
<i>nafs</i>	(Arabic) soul
<i>nāẓira</i>	(Urdu) sight-reading
<i>nei</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) feminine or familial sphere
<i>nekī</i>	(Urdu) piety, virtue, goodness
<i>nietie</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) alms, act of benevolence, originally from an Arabic term; <i>chi nietie</i> signifies the corrupt use of alms
<i>nikāh misyār</i>	(Arabic) travel marriage
<i>niqāb</i>	(Arabic) face veil
<i>niyyah</i>	(Arabic) intent
<i>nüsi</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) women's mosque
<i>nüxue</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) female <i>madrasah</i>
<i>opérateur islamique</i>	(French) Islamic operator; person who deal with Islamic knowledge
<i>otin-oyi</i>	(Tartar) Similar to <i>abystay</i> , used by Muslims in Central Asia for female religious figures and teachers
<i>pājāma</i>	(Urdu) loose trousers worn in South Asia
<i>pāk</i>	(Urdu) holy, pure, spotless
<i>pengajian</i>	(Indonesian) Qur'ān study groups
<i>perda, peraturan daerah</i>	(Indonesian) local <i>sharī'ah</i> rules
<i>pesantren</i>	(Indonesian) Islamic boarding school where specialists of traditional Islam in Indonesia are trained
<i>pardah</i>	(Urdu) lit. curtain or screen; used to connote a range of practices including veiling and seclusion of women
<i>pusat studi wanita</i>	(Indonesian) women's study center
<i>qāḍī</i>	(Arabic) judge
<i>qadr</i>	(Arabic) fate
<i>qamīṣ</i>	(Urdu) knee-length dress worn mainly by schoolgirls and Muslim women and girls with <i>salwār</i> or <i>pājāma</i> and <i>dopattā</i> in South Asia

<i>qārī</i>	(Urdu) a man trained to recite the Qurʾān
<i>qaṣba</i>	(Urdu) township or large village, especially inhabited by respectable families
<i>qawāʿid</i>	(Arabic, Urdu) rules or drills; in Urdu can refer to a guttural style of Qurʾān recitation that is uncommon in South Asia
<i>qiblah</i>	(Arabic) the direction for Muslims' ritual prayer facing Mecca
<i>qīngzhen nūsi</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) women's mosque
<i>qiwāmah</i>	(Arabic) guardianship, often male guardianship of women and minors
<i>qiyās</i>	(Arabic) logical conclusion, one of the four sources ( <i>uṣūl</i> ) of Islamic Law
Qurʾān	(Arabic) central religious text in Islam
Ramaḍān	(Arabic; Turkish: Ramazan) ninth and holiest month of the Islamic lunar calendar when Muslims must refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex during the day, and from acting unkindly or harboring negative thoughts at any time
<i>ribāt</i>	(Arabic) religious retreats
<i>riwāyat</i>	(Arabic) lit. "narrative"; transmission of religious knowledge
<i>roza namāz lāʿiq</i>	(Urdu) "capable of fasting and praying"
<i>ṣahābah</i>	(Arabic) companions of the prophet Muḥammad
Ṣaḥwah	(Arabic) Islamic awakening movement in Saudi Arabia, from the 1960s onward
Salafī	(Arabic) Islamic movement emphasizing the practices of early Muslims
<i>ṣalāh</i>	(Arabic) practice of formal prayer in Islam
<i>sancong</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) female dependency on father, husband, and son
<i>sarī</i>	(Urdu) long piece of cloth, attire worn mainly by Hindu women in India
<i>ṣavāb</i>	(Urdu) religious merit, reward for faith or good works
Şeyhülislam	(Turkish) the highest official religious position in the Ottoman Empire
<i>shalwār</i>	(Urdu) loose trousers, worn by Muslim women along with <i>qamīṣ</i> and <i>dopattā</i> in South Asia

<i>sharī'ah</i>	(Arabic; Urdu) Islamic law
<i>shaykh, shaykhah</i>	(Arabic) an individual with religious knowledge; also a pre-Islamic honorific title with wider applications; in Arabia, al-Shaykha refers to royal or aristocratic families and not religious figures
Shī'ah, Shī'ī	(Arabic) lit. followers, from <i>shī'at</i> 'Alī or followers of 'Alī; the second-largest segment of Muslims, who argue that successors to the Prophet Muḥammad must come from his family instead of his companions
<i>shirk</i>	(Arabic) associating partners to God
<i>shuifang</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) ablution room
Shūrā-yi Nigahbān	(Persian) the Guardian Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran
<i>side</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) core Confucian concepts of virtuous feminine conduct
<i>siheyuan</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) traditional Chinese architecture: inner courtyard framed by outer buildings
<i>silsilah</i>	(Arabic) chain of transmission, see also <i>isnād</i>
<i>sipāra</i>	(Urdu) a thirtieth part of the Qur'an
<i>sīrah</i>	(Arabic) literary genre consisting of narrative histories of Muḥammad's life and prophetic activities in the context of the Islamic religious tradition
<i>soch samajh kar</i>	(Urdu) "having thought and understood"
<i>sohbet</i>	(Turkish) lit. chat, conversation; religious gathering often held in a home
<i>souper canadien</i>	(French) shared meal
<i>sözleşmeli</i>	(Turkish) female preacher employed under contract by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
Şūfī	(Arabic) devotional and mystical current within Islamic tradition, often focusing on the hidden, inner esoteric instead of the visible exoteric
Şūfī-shaykh	(Arabic) leader of a mystic order
<i>sum'ah</i>	(Arabic) honour, reputation
<i>sunnah</i>	(Arabic); lit. habit, custom; life and traditions of the prophet Muḥammad used as one of the four <i>uṣūl</i> of Islamic Law, see also <i>ḥadīth</i>

Sunnī	(Arabic) lit. people of tradition or orthodoxy, from <i>ahl al-sunnah</i> , the people of tradition; the largest segment of Muslims who supported successors to the Prophet Muḥammad chosen from among his companions by the community
<i>suṭūḥ</i>	(Persian) lit. surfaces of the texts; the intermediate cycle of <i>ḥawzah</i> education
<i>tablīgh</i>	(Arabic, Persian, Urdu) propagation, spreading the faith
<i>tafsīr</i>	(Arabic) Qur'ānic interpretation, exegesis, and commentary
<i>tajwīd</i>	(Arabic) art of reciting the Qur'ān according to specific rules
<i>taklīf</i>	(Arabic, Persian) task, duty; maturity
<i>taqlīd</i>	(Arabic) emulation of past practice, held up in opposition to <i>ijtihād</i>
<i>taqwā</i>	(Arabic) piety, devoutness, God-fearing
<i>tarāwīḥ</i>	(Arabic) additional prayers overnight during Ramaḍān
<i>tarikāt</i>	(Turkish) see <i>ṭarīqah</i>
<i>ṭarīqah</i>	(Arabic) a Sufi spiritual order or brotherhood often centered around a specific spiritual leader or teacher, and part of a larger network of brotherhoods with shared practices and rituals
<i>tawḥīd</i>	(Arabic) unity of God
<i>tefsīr</i>	(Turkish) see <i>tafsīr</i>
<i>tekija</i>	(Bosnian) Sufi meeting place, lodge
<i>tespih</i>	(Bosnian) prayer beads; also used to refer to recitals and repetitive prayers
<i>tevhid</i>	(Bosnian) prayers in commemoration for a dead person
<i>teyze</i>	(Turkish) maternal aunt, often used figuratively
<i>‘ulamā’</i>	see <i>‘ālim</i>
<i>ulema</i>	(Turkish, Bosnian; Arabic: <i>‘ulamā’</i> ) see <i>‘ālim</i>
<i>ummah</i>	(Arabic) the world community of Muslims
<i>‘umrah</i>	(Arabic) non-mandatory lesser pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>ūnānī</i> (or <i>Yūnānī</i> )	(Urdu) lit. Ionia; refers to a system of Greco-Arabic medical practice mainly associated with Muslims in South Asia

<i>‘urf</i>	(Arabic) custom or customary law
<i>ustānī</i>	(Urdu) female teacher
<i>uṣūl al-fiqh</i>	(Arabic) principles or sources of jurisprudence
<i>vaaz</i>	(Turkish) a session in which a male or female preacher preaches
<i>vaiz</i>	(Turkish) a preacher, male or female, employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
<i>vaize</i>	(Turkish) a female preacher employed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs
<i>vehabi</i>	(Bosnian) see Wahhābī
<i>vilāyat-i faqih</i>	(Persian) guardianship of the religious jurist; doctrine of the jurist’s mandate to rule advanced by Ayatullah Khomeini
<i>wafaq</i>	(Urdu) umbrella organizations of <i>madrasahs</i> belonging to five different schools of thought recognized by the Government of Pakistan
<i>wai</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) public or masculine sphere
Wahhābī	(Arabic) follower of the teachings of Muḥammad Ibn ‘Ibn al-Wahhāb, an eighteenth-century Arabian Islamic reformer, who stressed the unity of God and the importance of ending practices seen to direct worship away from God such as visiting saints’ tombs and praying for intercession
<i>woer’ci</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) sermon delivered by an <i>ahong</i> , originally transliterated from an Arabic term
<i>wucai</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) virtue of female ignorance
<i>wuḏū’</i>	(Arabic) partial ritual ablution, see also full ablution, <i>ghusl</i>
<i>xuanyutai</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) raised platform for giving sermon
<i>yādnāmih</i>	(Persian) memoir
<i>yaodian</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) prayer niche, indicating direction of Mecca
<i>yenge</i>	(Turkish) sister-in-law
<i>yicong</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) women’s dependency on husband’s family
<i>yihewani pai</i>	(Chinese-Mandarin) reformist Sunnī tradition that entered China in the late nineteenth century; <i>yihewani</i> is a transliteration of the Arabic term <i>ikhwān</i> , meaning brothers

- zāwiyah* (Arabic) Sufi center or school, used in contemporary Morocco instead of historical term *ribāṭ*  
(Urdu) school or collegiate mosque, teaching Islamic religion but in contemporary India also sometimes non-religious subjects such as English, Hindi, and mathematics
- ženski tevhid* (Bosnian) *tevhid* gathering for women only
- zhongyuan diqu* (Chinese-Mandarin) central China, includes provinces of Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, Shandong
- zhuma* (Chinese-Mandarin) Friday day of prayer; transliterated from Arabic term *jum'ah*
- zindagināmah* (Persian) biography
- zikr* (Turkish, Bosnian) see *dhikr*

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