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*Early Community Politics
and the Marginalization
of Women in Islamic Intellectual
History*

Islam's theological history interfaces with political developments in the post-Prophetic era. The roots of many discussions in Islamic theology are found in Islam's political history. Yet a closer analysis of this history reveals that the dynamics of Islamic theology's development do not so much reflect Qur'anic or Prophetic teachings as they mirror the political and economic conditions of the time. At the beginning of the early Islamic era, Muslims were already trying to legitimize their political interests using arguments and symbols drawn from Islamic religious concepts and sources.¹

The first 'aqīda² discussions originated from this aim to legitimize rule. The Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), who, along with the Prophet Muhammad, built up the Islamic community on the ethical foundation of Islam, ultimately destroyed this foundation themselves in the post-Pro-

1 When Mu'āwīyya saw that he would lose the battle of Ṣiffīn, he sent for 'Amr bin al-ʿĀṣ and said to him: "You shall keep 'Alī's followers preoccupied with a matter that will divide them, willingly or unwillingly. You shall call for the Qur'an to judge between us and them." According to 'Amr bin Āṣ, the military superiority of Alī's followers could only be undermined by a ruse (fraud) [Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-Ṭabarī: ta'riḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* 30, *Dhakhā'ir al-'arab* 30 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1960), 258]. They therefore impaled pages of the Qur'an on their spears and thus induced Alī's soldiers to call for the Qur'an to judge. This is not just an isolated example from Islam's history; there are other examples of even the most highly acclaimed Companions confusing their political/military interests with Islam. Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* IV (Beirut: Dār Bayrūt, 1968), 255.

2 'Aqīda (pl 'aqā'id) is the name for doctrinal principles in Islamic theology.

phetic era. These developments in theology arose in response to the Companions' goal of legitimization so that the first *'aqīda* discussions among Muslims resulted from Muslims attempting to justify their deviation from Prophetic teachings. Thus Muslims' principles of belief (*'aqā'id*) and theological schools³ were not born purely out of theological discourse, but rather emerged from the crisis of legitimacy that arose during the post-Prophetic dynasties.⁴

Even before the death of the Prophet, Muslims preserved deep-seated vestiges and influences of pre-Islamic traditions in their decision-making processes.⁵ The Prophet's closest followers often found their solutions that would shape the future of Islamic thought, not in the Qur'an or Prophetic advice, but rather in familiar cultural traditions, which often contradicted Islamic ideals. This conflict of perspectives was later reflected in the hadith.

Departure from and misinterpretation of Prophetic teachings began immediately following the death of Prophet Muhammad and persist until the present. While such differences are widely apparent, they particularly affect the position of Muslim women in Islamic society. This chapter will briefly consider these developments.

Although there are no completely reliable sources to fall back on, the records that are available from the period before the eighth and ninth centuries make it clear that Muslim women's involvement in decision-making processes was just as intensive then as during the Prophet's lifetime.

No account records the Prophet disadvantaging Muslim women in any way. The first generations of women after the Prophet's death continued to exhibit a consciousness of being empowered by Islamic teachings. Religion (*dīn*) in the presence of a still-living and charismatic leader develops in a very dynamic, spiritual way that impacts both men's and women's consciousness without distinction.

The dispute between Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter, and Abū Bakr, the first caliph, may be one of the most important theological debates that demonstrates female empowerment in the new religion's teaching. Fāṭima was not afraid to oppose the Caliph's theological

3 There are various schools of theology within classical Islamic thought that differ in certain matters of doctrine. See W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1962).

4 Ahmet Akbulut, *Sahabe devri siyasi hadiselerinin kelami problemlere etkileri* (Istanbul: Birleşik Yayınları, 1992), 253.

5 For Muslims' post-Prophetic power struggles, see *Ibid.*

arguments and to contradict him using her own rationales. This reflects a strong, and above all, freely displayed self-confidence. For example, Fāṭima laid claim to her father's inheritance, whereupon Abū Bakr cited one of the hadith: "Prophet's do not leave any inheritance. All they leave behind is knowledge", and on that basis he rejected her claim.⁶ Fāṭima tried in vain to persuade him with other logical and theological arguments. When Fāṭima was not granted the right to inherit from her father, she never spoke another word to Abū Bakr until his death. This dispute, which featured both theological and political arguments, finally ended during the reign of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (786–833), who ordered the governor of Medina to return Muhammad's inheritance to the Prophet's family.⁷ Fāṭima also became a central figure in the political opposition to Abū Bakr. Her home was the meeting place of the Companions who organized to oppose the selection of Abū Bakr.⁸

The Prophet's wife, 'Ā'isha, and his daughter, Fāṭima, were certainly not the closest of friends. They held different political and theological positions, but both were actively involved in decision-making processes in the post-Prophetic era. 'Ā'isha was considered an authoritative theologian and legal expert such that no one doubted her theological competence.⁹ According to Ibn Sa'd, 'Ā'isha could pronounce her own opinion without regard for the opinions held by the Prophet's other followers.¹⁰ 'Ā'isha criticized certain Companions' unconsciously misogynistic views and committed herself to the protection of Muslim women, and she was not the only female interlocutor on social issues.

After the events surrounding 'Uthmān's murder, 'Ā'isha played a central role within intra-Muslim conflicts. She was not only a leading theologian, but also a political/military personality. Her actions were not based solely on religious grounds, but also on political ones. Her bitterness against 'Alī since he had recommended that the Prophet Muhammad divorce her after the incident of al-Ifk,¹¹ strength-

6 Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* 8, 28.

7 Aḥmad ibn Yahyā Balādhurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid (al-Qāhira: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1956), 46.

8 Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*.

9 al-Zarkashī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh Badr al-Dīn. *al-Ijāba li-irād mā istadrakathu 'Ā'isha 'alā al-Ṣaḥāba*. Ed. Sa'id al-Afghāni. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmi, 1980), 68–69.

10 Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* 8, 42A.

11 Qur'an 24:17. The slander by which 'Ā'isha was accused of adultery.

ened her political opposition to his Caliphate. For this reason, ‘Alī and ‘Ā’isha’s relationship was very strained. This may also be the reason that ‘Ā’isha joined in solidarity with ‘Alī’s opponents Ṭalḥa and Zubayr.

Since this chapter is not intended to discuss the political circumstances of this period in greater detail, it will suffice to highlight the fact that women in the early Islamic period were heavily involved in political and theological affairs. When one bears in mind that ‘Ā’isha led troops to Basra alongside Zubayr and Ṭalḥa, it is clear that women’s power similarly encompassed multiple social functions.¹²

The active role of women in early Muslim society was not confined to ‘Ā’isha and Fāṭima. Women lived in the midst of the community, and were therefore a part of society’s religious, political, and economic discourse.

Muslim women then confronted the model of the courtly lady as a paragon of high society through contact with the Byzantine and the Persian Empires. This model tried to exclude women from religious discourse in order to theologically legitimize gender roles that favored men and required woman’s submission, reducing her scope to the domestic sphere.

Suddenly Muslim women, who had led troops and had a say in religious discourse, were robbed of social responsibility. At this juncture, a hadith of the Prophet, passed down by Abū Bakra, surfaced: “A people that lets a woman rule over its affairs can only be destined for destruction.”¹³ Yet when we compare this statement to the spirit of the Qur’an or the life and practice of the Prophet, we find obvious contradictions.¹⁴

Al-Ṣuyūṭī similarly reported that the Prophet said: “Do not let yourselves be advised by women. Do not let them resist you, but you resist them, for opposition to women is God’s grace.”¹⁵

Yet in contrast to these and similar hadiths, the Qur’an describes men and women as friends (*walī/awliyā*) or as guides for each other:

12 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī Tārīkh al-Rusul w-al-Mulūk*, no. 30: V.2, 267.

13 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥanbal, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir *Musnad IV* (Miṣr: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1949), 4, 43, 47, 51. Fatima Mernissi discusses the background of this hadith in *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Basic, 1991), p. 49 ff.

14 The time at which this tradition started is noteworthy, as this hadith originated at exactly the same time when ‘Ā’isha assumed a leadership role among the Muslims.

15 al-Suyūṭī, *‘Amal al-Yawm wa-l-Layla II* ed. ‘Ashūr Muṣṭafā (al-Qāhira: Maktabat al-Qur’ān), 147.

The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practise regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise.¹⁶

Such observations are not intended to find fault with the hadith corpus. Yet when we try to understand these texts in light of the Prophet's behavior and in the context of the Qur'an, it is not easy to explain the contradictions.

According to contemporary Turkish theologian, Süleyman Ateş, the hadith discouraging female leadership was directed at 'Ā'isha's role during the post-Prophetic political conflict. It originated because a group of Muslims felt their own interests in community leadership were in danger. If this had really been a saying of the Prophet, 'Ā'isha's leadership would never have been recognized by Zubayr and Ṭalḥa. Ateş therefore doubts the validity of the hadith, which the Qur'an contradicts.¹⁷

Overall, the question of how women could have been excluded from the formational process of religious tradition even during the golden age of Islamic civilization is troubling. How did a male-dominated theology, wherein women were robbed of their common sense, disenfranchised from their social responsibility, and reduced to a self-denying and masochistic experience of naive religiosity come to dominate?

Contemporary scholars of Islam, concerned with women's education in the post-Prophetic era, may consult Shalaby's academic work,¹⁸ which explores Muslim women's education in the Middle Ages. In order to correctly analyze the discrimination against Muslim women in education today, one must trace and then challenge the theological legitimization of this discrimination.

There were only five women in the early Islamic era who could read and write. One of these was Ḥafṣa, the Prophet's wife, who continued to teach children even after she was married to Muhammad. According to available sources, two other women, 'Ā'isha and Umm Salama, could read, but not write. Considering the proportion of men in this era who could read and write, however, the number of women

16 Qur'an 9:71.

17 Süleyman Ateş, *Kur'an-ı Kerim Tefsiri* VI (Istanbul: Marsan Otomotiv 2005), 399-400.

18 Ahmad Shalaby, *History of Muslim Education* (Karachi: Indus Publications, 1979).

is not remarkably small.¹⁹ Yet this number did not increase in the post-Prophetic era, but unfortunately decreased as a theology that discriminated against women, rather than the true message of Islam, became normative.

There is no place in the Qur'an or reliable sources of the Sunna that supports barriers to women in education. The Prophet himself instructed women exactly as he instructed men. After the Prophet's death, however, we see increasing discrimination against women in education, and this discrimination still characterizes theological and religious norms in the minds of Muslims in many parts of the Islamic world. Despite this discrimination, we find that some Muslim women in the Abbasid era attained higher education.²⁰ At this time girls were usually taught at home, either by their fathers or private tutors.

The theological reasoning that prevented women from participating in education was based on the argument, still influential in Islamic countries, that co-education is undesirable, since scholars saw a danger of men being seduced in a mixed-gender environment.²¹

Scholars al-Jāhīz and al-Qābisī are typical examples of this spirit of their times. They recommended that women not learn to read or write. It sufficed for them to be informed about Islamic worship and service.²² Al Qābisī sensed a danger in women learning to read and write, for those who developed intellectual strength could rebel through critique.

But if one ascribes this misogynistic, religiously-legitimized theological position to the time of the Prophet, when "the seeking of knowledge was a duty of every Muslim," one is perplexed in trying to understand the sources of gender discrimination in Islamic theology.

Women's status worsened in the process of the systematic differentiation of Islamic theology. Woman finally lost her place in religious discourse through the canonization of *sharī'a* as the religion practiced

19 Of seventeen who could read and write, five were women.

20 Al-Balādhurī reported from a school with girls and even adult women that girls and boys were taught together in Kufa. Shalaby cites this from from *Kitāb al-Aghāni* in Ahmad Shalaby, *History of Muslim Education* (Kara-chi: Indus Publications, 1979), 191. Al-Jāhīz himself witnessed classes in which children were even taught alongside slaves: Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-al-Tabyīn* II, 2nd ed. (al-Qāhira: Maṭba'a al-Futūḥ al-Adabiyya, 1332/1913), 106.

21 Abū-l-Ḥasan 'Alī bin Muḥammad b. Khalāfa al-Mu'afirī al-Qābisī, "al-Risāla al-Mufaṣṣala li-Aḥwāl-l-Muta'allimīn wa Aḥkām-l-Mu'allimīn wa-l-Muta'allimīn," in *al-Tarbiyya fi-l-Islām*, ed. Aḥmad Fu'ād al-Ahwānī (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1975), 275.

22 Muḥammad Ibn Sahnūn, *Kitāb Ādāb al-mu'allimīn*, ed. Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Mawlā (Algiers: al-Sarika al-Waṭaniyya, 1969), 316.

by Muslims. In fact, the term “*sharī‘a*”²³ did not exist in the early days of Islam. This term, used to describe an ongoing process of religious development, became cemented as a legal system, prohibiting access to Islam’s sources in many areas of life. Innumerable barriers to the Prophet’s way of living and thinking sprang up, such that those who spoke of him diverged further and further from his manner of thinking. When the Prophet was asked about *sharī‘a*, he listed prayer, zakat, and fasting.²⁴ Islamic theologians on the other hand, constructed a rigid legal system from a humane religion, though Muslims knew that religion (*dīn*) and *sharī‘a* were not to be equated. Early on, Abū Ḥanīfa differentiated between the two terms, emphasizing the malleability of *sharī‘a* and the immutability of the principles of religion (*dīn*).²⁵

Later male interpreters’ misapplication of laws relegated women to a marginal role in society and shut them out of public life. But women were not merely shut out; further theological arguments made women’s return to authoritative knowledge impossible. This theological discrimination was impossible to support on the basis of the Qur’an. Numerous hadiths, however, not only emphasized the danger posed by women, but also disqualified them by attributing to them degrading and inferior characteristics.²⁶

Examples of misogynistic hadith that circulated in this age are the following:

“Do not let your women put on new clothes, that they may not leave your homes. When they put on new clothes, a desire arises in their hearts to leave the home.”²⁷

“If a woman should go out with her husband’s permission, she must be careful to cover herself, to behave modestly in public, to bow her head and look at no one, to avoid crowds, gatherings of men, and busy streets, and to return at once upon completing her tasks.”²⁸

The numerous hadiths that were the basis of such formulations made women insecure in their roles, such that an incapacitated, even self-de-

23 Muḥammad ibn Mukarram or Ibn Manzūr et al., *Lisān al-‘Arab* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1981).

24 See Abū Ḥanīfa, *Imam Abu Hanīfa’s al-Fiqh al-akbar Explained*, eds. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Maghnīsāwī, Qārī al-Harawī, ‘Alī ibn Sulṭān Muḥammad, *Minaḥ al-rawḍ al-azhar fī sharḥ al-Fiqh al-akbar*, English Selections (Yorba Linda, CA: White Thread Press, 2007).

25 Abū Ḥanīfa, *al-‘Ālim wa-al-muta‘allim*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid ibn al-Ḥasan Kawtharī (al-Qāhira: Maṭba‘a al-Anwār, 1368/1948), 5.

spising femininity arose in Islamic society. The trend in Islamic theology that confined women to this role then attempted to regulate the tasks of women with respect to male prerogatives:

“A woman may not fast voluntarily without the permission of her husband. A woman also may not let any person enter the home without her husband’s permission.”²⁹

“A woman asked the Prophet: ‘By what acts do we deserve Hell?’ ‘Because you are volatile and ungrateful to your husbands.’”³⁰

“Those women who die while their husbands are pleased with them enter paradise.”³¹

“If I were to command you to bow down before any power other than God, I would order you to bow down to your husbands.”³²

“A woman ought to smile when her husband enters the house; when he leaves she should be silent. If she finds sustenance she may eat; if she finds none, she should be silent.”³³

“All eyes commit *zinā*’ (extramarital sexual relations). If a woman puts on perfume and goes to the places visited by men, she commits *zinā*’.”³⁴

“A straw carpet is more useful than a woman who cannot bear children.”³⁵

We can see that such hadiths, attributed to the Prophet, neither correspond to the Prophet’s way of life nor historical accounts, and furthermore they are not compatible with the context of early Islam. They are inventions of the Umayyad period and other post-Prophetic dynasties,

26 “I have not bequeathed to you anything more dangerous than the wives of women,” from al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Djāmī’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* VI, ed. M. L. Krehl (Leiden: Brill, 1862–1908), 124. “The Devil will undoubtedly come to you in the form of a woman, and in a woman’s form he will leave you. He who desires a woman should go to his own wife. This act relieves the desire.” al-Nawawī et al., *al-Minhāj fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, al-musammā ikhtiṣāran Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 5th ed. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Khayr, 1999), Nikāḥ 2. For further reference: Hidayat Şefkatlı Tuksal, *Kadın karıştı söylemin İslam gelenegindeki izdüşümleri* (Ankara: Kitabiyat, 2001).

27 al-Ghazālī, *Kitābi-i kīmīyā-yi sa’ādat*, 2nd ed. (Tihran: Kitābkhāna va Chāpkhānah-i Markazī, 1333/1954), 178.

28 al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn* II (Cairo: Maṭba’at Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1356/1937), 290.

29 al-Nawawī et al., *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn* I (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat Dār al-Salām, 1998), 324.

30 al-Nawawī et al., *al-Minhāj fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, al-musammā ikhtiṣāran Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: Iman, 132.

31 al-Nawawī et al., *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn* I, 326.

32 Ibid., 325.

33 al-Ghazālī, *Kitābi-i kīmīyā-yi sa’ādat*, 195.

34 Ibid., 4, 278.

35 Ibid. ‘A’isha was childless and among the Prophet’s wives only Khadija and Marya the Copt bore children.

when legal regulations and theological doctrine promoted the intellectual and physical enslavement of Muslim women reflecting a culture of harems, where women needed to be controlled.

Now is the time when the Muslim woman can free herself from these limitations and revive a theological history where she can participate equally and fully. The task at hand is therefore that Muslim women recover this history and purge their consciousness of the accretions of past misogynistic theologizing.

It would be an incorrect assumption to view the discrimination against Muslim women in Islamic theology as a problem that only affects Muslim women. An exploration of the history would allow all Muslims, male and female, to rid the Prophetic heritage of the non-authentic burden of past theological authorities and sources while critically examining the entire theological heritage in the light of authentic sources.

The chapters in this volume allow today's Muslima theologians to speak, critically questioning this history and reflecting anew on Islamic theology in its current context.

