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*Muslim Women
as Religious Scholars:
A Historical Survey*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Islamic community in the earliest decades of the seventh century, women have taken a prominent role in the preservation and cultivation of the main sources of Islamic knowledge, i.e. the Qur'an and Sunna. The legacy of women's scholarly activism was later suppressed and weakened, but never entirely extinguished. Through an analysis of women's contributions to the realm of religious sciences, this paper argues for the need for increased women's engagement with the foundational sources of Islamic scholarship. I argue that just as women's voices and intimate engagement with the religious sciences were vibrant and influential in the nascent Muslim community, women scholars of the present era should follow the footsteps of their foremothers. Women's concerted participation within the realm of religious scholarship is essential for enhancing religious knowledge in general and for advancing the role and status of women in spheres where Islamic knowledge is applied.

My essay begins with a concise overview of the foundational sources of Islamic knowledge, followed by an overview of women's engagement therein. Here, I call attention to the early vigor and subsequent decline of women's contributions to the religious sciences and suggest

1 In the preparation of this essay for publication I am grateful to my research assistant, Celene Ayat Lizzio.

that a strong methodology based on the Qur'an and Sunna is one tool in reasserting women's scholarship and reshaping religious discourse. I then devote special attention to 'Ā'isha's efforts to correct misogynistic attitudes that were propagated by some of her contemporaries on women's roles in the society.² Arguing that 'Ā'isha's methodological contribution is a model for how to engage hadith holistically in the light of the qur'anic message and objectives, I stress the contemporary role and import of women's engagement in the tradition of interpretation with the development of religious fields of knowledge.

The importance of women's engagement with the foundational sources

Religious scholarship in Islam is based on the revealed sources including the Qur'an and the collected Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad that clarifies and explains the qur'anic teachings.³ Muslims regard the Qur'an as the ultimate reference for human affairs and believe it to be safeguarded by God from distortion.⁴ The Qur'an regards the Prophet as a role model for humanity (Qur'an 33:21), and hence, from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, the authentic Prophetic Sunna explains, clarifies, and demonstrates how to implement the teachings of the Qur'an. The Sunna has a range of different hermeneutic functions vis-à-vis the Qur'an. For instance, jurists regularly discuss and deliberate how a particular hadith, a reported saying or action attributed to the Prophet, relates to the text of the Qur'an. First, each hadith is evaluated for authenticity on a sliding scale based on the content and the character and reliability of the chain of narrators. Then, if the content

2 'Ā'isha is the daughter of the first Caliph, Abū Bakr 'Abd Allāh bin Abī Quhāfa (573–634 CE). She was characterized by a sharp intelligence and was the source of more than twelve hundred hadith reports. For an account of her life and role in the tradition see Dennis Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of A'isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

3 With occasional adaptation where noted, this study relies primarily on M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Hadith are translated by the author from Hadith Encyclopedia CD-ROM (*Muusa'ū al-hadīth al-sharīf*), edition 2.1 (Cairo: Harf Information Technology, 2000).

4 See for instance Qur'an 15:9. While I am addressing here the role of the Qur'an in deriving legal theory and principles, the Qur'an describes itself with at least thirty-four attributes including *hudā* (guidance) and *dhikr* (remembrance); the role that the Qur'an plays in Muslim life and devotion is multi-fold; for a thorough and skillful treatment of this topic see Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008).

of a reported hadith has no apparent relation to the Qur'an, jurists may accept it as a part of the body of religious law on the condition that it does not directly contradict a more firmly established principle.

Furthermore, the reported action could be general and apply broadly, or it could be a matter that specifically pertained only to the Prophet Muḥammad due to his status as a prophet. Jurists also deliberate whether the action represents simply a custom particular to the time period and geographic locale, in which case it is not necessarily religiously binding on Muslims at large, or whether a given tradition represents a more fundamental religious principle that should be religiously binding. This is merely a simplistic rendering of a complex body of legal theory on the relation between Qur'an and Sunna. A vast array of individual hadith reports comprises the corpus of Sunna, and this corpus differs across sects, schools of thought, and geographic locales.⁵

Across all schools of thought, the underlying esteem for the Prophet is fundamental; he is regarded as model for the conduct aspired to by Muslims. The Prophet was a religious teacher, a moral guide, a statesman, a social reformer, and a committed family member; all of these roles were in the reception and subsequent perception of his prophecy and traditions.⁶ In particular, the role of the women in his household is highly significant, and these women enjoyed exclusive access to intimate knowledge about the Prophet, including information about many of the situations that he faced in his public life as well as in his more private affairs. The critical engagement of these women is exemplary. Upon examination, the Qur'an and Sunna illustrate the enormous role that the female companions and family of the Prophet had on Islamic scholarship by broadening religious knowledge. The Qur'an notes this distinguished place occupied by the women of the Prophet's household and designates the title *Ummahāt al-mu'minīn* (Mothers of the Believers) for the wives of Prophet Muhammad.⁷ Indeed, the Qur'an specifically instructs the women of the household of the Prophet:

5 See Jonathan Brown, *Hadīth: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Banbury: OneWorld, 2009), 150–183.

6 See Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

7 The title is evocative of characteristics such as love, care, intuition, and wisdom. For an account of the role and the involvement of the *Ummahāt al-mu'minīn* in the recording and reciting of the Qur'an see 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Tarājīm sayyidāt bayt al-nubhuwa* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1984), 25.

Remember [and proclaim] what is recited in your houses of God's revelations and wisdom (*wadhkurna mā yutlā fī buyūtikunna min ayāt Allāh wa-l-ḥikma*) for God is all subtle, all aware (*inna Allāh kāna laṭīf khabīr*) (33:34).

Here, A. Yusuf Ali, in his translation of this verse, explains that the command “*udhkurna*” takes the wives of the Prophet as its subject and means not only remember, but “recite, read, make known, and publish the message.”⁸ The verse quoted above is directly following a strong confirmation of the equal merit of men and women who are submissive to God (*al-muslimin wa-l-muslimāt*):

Truly, submissive men and submissive women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, steadfast men and steadfast women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember God often and the women who remember—God has prepared for them forgiveness and a rich reward” (33:35).

The verses mentioned above serve to illustrate the responsibility that God bestowed upon the women of the Prophet's household as well as the equal plane upon which God placed men and women of Muslim character.

The role of women in the preservation of the message of Islam did not merely remain a qur'anic commandment, but according to the earliest Muslim historiography, women had a dynamic role in the initial preservation of the Qur'an. For instance, an original handwritten copy of the Qur'an, out of which all subsequent copies were made during the first Caliphate, was said to be under the preservation and trust of Ḥaḥṣa bint 'Umar (d. 656), the daughter of the second Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644) who married the Prophet shortly after her first husband was killed in the battle of Uḥud (625). According to traditional accounts, women did not simply safeguard the physical copies of the early Qur'an but they also had an active role in its transmission and interpretation, as will be elaborated below. While Sunni authors tend to concentrate on 'Ā'isha and Shi'i literature focuses on Fāṭima (d. 632; the daughter of the Prophet and his first wife Khadīja), the

8 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 11th ed. (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2004), 1067.

women in the Prophet's household contributed greatly to the development of Islamic scholarship, alongside the contributions of many other women in the early Muslim community.

Muslim societies throughout history were not monolithic or static with regard to woman's status. The era, location, political climate, economic factors, regional customs, and local traditions contribute greatly to the expectation, roles, and opportunities for women. Each country, region, city, and even village has its own features. Women's status, civic roles, and political engagements vary greatly from one place to another, even within the same time period. Throughout more than fourteen centuries of Islamic history, diversity and plurality have characterized Islamic cultures and societies. Hence, it is difficult to determine exact reasons for overall dearth of women's engagements in religious scholarship within Muslim societies at large. Less than three decades after the Prophet's death, new concepts and ideals detrimental to women's status were introduced into the social fabric of the early Muslim society. Particularly as the empire of the early Muslims grew and became increasingly urban, Islamic values were put to the test by conflicting tribal and authoritarian forces. As the Caliphate took on dynastic tendencies, submission to the ruler was often deliberately equated with submission to God, and as a result, legitimate protest against political oppression was conflated with so-called chaos-inducing rebellion. In theological discourse, concepts of fate were emphasized over those of human freedom. Women, for the most part, lost the esteemed public roles they had gained under the Prophet and his immediate successors, and by and large, an older, deep-rooted ideal of women as inferior gained greater staying-power within religious discourses and society at large.⁹ While women were still able to exert influence, particularly through their male kin, on the whole women's contributions to public life were drastically curbed, and their epistemic authority regularly regarded as secondary to that of men.¹⁰ As discussed below, the derivation of religious law and trends in exegesis often further inscribed women's perceived inferiority.

9 See the arguments of Mona M. Abul-Fadl, "Revisiting the Muslim Woman Question: An Islamic Perspective," adapted from *Muslim Women Scholars on Women in Islam*, symposium hosted by Chicago Theological Seminary, November 7, 1990, <http://muslimwomenstudies.com/WomRevisit.htm> (accessed June 1, 2011).

10 As discussed in detail in Ahmed Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women in the Medieval Middle East," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 8 no. 2 (2010): 181–216.

In order to illustrate these general dynamics with specific examples, I examine below women's role and contributions to specific fields of Islamic knowledge, namely exegesis (*tafsīr*), hadith scholarship, and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). I then propose means and methodologies relevant to advancing women's contemporary engagement with the tradition by putting forward the example of 'Ā'isha. In my discussion I draw upon early textual sources, including the Qur'ān, hadith collections, biographies of the Prophet (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*),¹¹ political histories of the early Muslims (*al-ṭabaqāt*),¹² biographies of prominent Muslim scholars,¹³ the tradition of jurisprudence (*fiqh*),¹⁴ and Muslim literary culture more generally.

Women and the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis

Exegesis (*tafsīr*) is a field of Islamic scholarship that is impacted by the pre-conceived societal perceptions of women just as much as it can be seen as impacting women's role and status. Methodological trends in classical exegesis fall into at least two categories. The first trend, known as *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* (lit. exegesis by adage), employs the Prophet's words and actions as the framework for textual engagement. In the second trend, known as *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y* (lit. exegesis by opinion), interpretation is based on rational analysis of a variety of sources. The exegesis of Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is considered the backbone of the first school.¹⁵ Ṭabarī's exegesis collected many traditions that entered the Islamic textual traditions through biblical or-

11 For a discussion of Muslim sacred texts as a source of the social history of women see Ragab, 182–185.

12 There are a vast number of biographical compendia that document and gather data regarding events, battles, wars, cities, rulers, and influential people. They represent a rich source for discerning women's history for contemporary authors. For example, 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Abū Shuqqa has presented a comprehensive study of the status of women in the early Muslim community in six volumes entitled *Ṭaḥrīr al-mar'a fī 'aṣr al-risāla* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1990).

13 Muslim historians began collecting biographies of prominent scholars in the second century of the Islamic era; many collections were limited to a specific school of thought. Overall, entries on women were significantly less compared to those of men and exceedingly rare in the collections limited to particular schools of thought; see Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994).

14 For an overview of the legal tradition as a source of women's history see Judith E. Tucker, "And God Knows Best": The Fatwa as a Source for the History of Gender in the Arab World," in *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*, ed. Amira El Azhary Sonbol, 168–79 (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

15 Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Reprinted Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1985).

igins, including traditions that involved women.¹⁶ Throughout his commentary, Ṭabarī records adages simply to express doubts about the veracity of their origins, yet later generations of scholars would quote and incorporate the particular adage as part of the body of authoritative knowledge. Barbara Freyer Stowassar examines the impact of later commentators imparting their biases by drawing on themes of women's defective nature and inherent threat to the social order, and highlights how pre-Islamic traditions, among other factors, provided a repertoire of adages of women as devious, unchaste, and deceitful.¹⁷ She observes that, "medieval Islamic society was patriarchal to a far higher degree than had been the early Islamic community in Mecca and Medina, first recipient of the Qur'an's revelations."¹⁸

However, beginning in the eighteenth century, a different scriptural canon on women gradually began to emerge, driven by a retrieval of exegesis based on reading the Qur'an intra-textually (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān*, lit. interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an). This trend in exegesis called for a critical examination of the extra-textual material that had been previously drawn into the fold of qur'anic interpretation. It also emphasized more emphatically the understanding that passages in the Qur'an illuminated other passages, and that this hermeneutical strategy took precedence over all others. Women participated actively in that reform movement; for example, 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān (1913–1998), a professor of Arabic literature at the University College for Women at Ain Shams University in Cairo, wrote a qur'anic exegesis under the alias Bint al-Shāṭi' which was based on this concept of holistic, intra-textual interpretation.¹⁹

In the later decades of the twentieth century, Muslim women's religious scholarship began to raise difficult methodological questions in the service of building a critical and insightful hermeneutical repertoire to the foundational sources: Who possesses the authority to interpret the Qur'an? What are the limits of qur'anic interpretation? In cases where multiple interpretations are plausible, how is the best interpretation to be determined? How should changes in social expecta-

16 Barbara Freyer Stowassar, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

17 Stowassar, 23–5.

18 Ibid, 21.

19 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li-l-Qur'ān al-karīm*. 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1968).

tions and mores be taken to bear in interpretative strategies? How can women re-approach the Qur'an with renewed vigor and confidence? Is there a "woman's reading" that might substantively differ from a "man's reading" of a given verse? Engaging with these types of exegetical questions became a foundation for women's religious scholarship. Notably, in the early 1990s Amina Wadud advanced this line of inquiry with the first edition of her book *Qur'an and Woman*.²⁰ Azizah al-Hibri, Mona Abul Fadl, Laleh Bakhtiar, Asma Barlas, Nimat Barazanji, and others have also focused on developing hermeneutical strategies for contemporary exegesis. The work of these scholars continues to influence newer generations of women who are building upon this foundation.

Women and the Transmission of Hadith

Women participated greatly in the establishment of hadith sciences, and women hadith transmitters were noted to be particularly trustworthy. According to the renowned hadith scholar Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), there were many men who fabricated hadith; however, no woman was ever accused of fabrication.²¹ Indeed, hadith scholarship was an area of religious knowledge where early Muslim women flourished.²² Fāṭima b. Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Ibn Jawhar (d. c. 1300) is one illustration; a renowned teacher of some of the most prominent hadith scholars of her time, her reputation was such that when she came to Medina for pilgrimage, local students requested that she teach in the mosque of the Prophet and she signed licenses (*ijāza*) for them to transmit her narrations.²³ Another example is Zaynab bint al-Sha'arī (d. 614/1218) who studied hadith under important scholars and in turn taught many reputable students including

20 Amina Wadud, 1st edition: 1992; subsequent editions include Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1994 and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

21 Abū 'Abd Allāh Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Siyar 'A'lam al-nubalā'* 23 (Beirut: Dār al-Risāla, n.d.), 119; see also the full discussion on 119–23.

22 With regard to their role in transmitting hadith, Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi notes that: "There is simply no parallel to this special and valuable role played by women scholars in the development, preservation and dissemination of Islamic knowledge," in *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features & Criticism* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 117.

23 *Ibid.*, 127.

Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282).²⁴ Despite some notable examples, women in hadith scholarship never reached par with men in terms of their numbers. From its heyday among the early generations of women, the tradition of women's hadith scholarship has dwindled, while hadith literature is frequently invoked in order to suppress the role, rights, and status of women.²⁵ Writing against this trend, for example, 'Abd Ḥalīm Abū Shuqqa sought to present a comprehensive account of the status of women in the early Muslim community in six volumes entitled *Taḥrīr al-mar'a fī 'aṣr al-risāla*.²⁶ He included only the authentic hadiths that were narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Other themes of the book highlight collaboration, mutual respect, and successful teamwork among men and women as the perfect component of the model Islamic society. In addition, the recent work of Sa'diyya Shaikh has analyzed several prominent hadith from a Muslim feminist lens, therein providing strategies for engaging with the tradition in ways that highlight women's strengths, assets, and potentials.²⁷

Women and the legacy of fiqh

The urbanization and growth of the bureaucratic and intellectual elite from the eighth through twelfth centuries saw the advent of institutionalized schools of legal thought (s. *madhhab*, pl. *madhāhib*). In an effort to systematize religious law, a body of knowledge referred to as *fiqh* (lit. comprehension) developed in cultural centers in response to local cultural, social, political, and judicial needs. *Fiqh* is the effort of humans to understand and interpret the divine scripture, and then to integrate this understanding into the social fabric and civic institutions of daily life. The term *fiqh* also refers to the vast collection of opinions on the law given across centuries and schools of thought.²⁸ As

24 Muḥammad Akram Nadwī, *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007).

25 The reasons for this decline remain an open area for further scholarship. See related discussions in 'Umar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla, *Ālam al-nisā' fī 'ālam al-'Arab wa-l-Islām* 1 (Beirut: Mu'sassat al-Risāla, 1978), 357–358; see also Siddiqi, 122.

26 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Abū Shuqqa, *Taḥrīr at mar'a fī 'aṣr al-risāla* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1990).

27 Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadith: A Feminist Interpretation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 no. 1 (2004): 99–108.

28 See Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London; Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008), xxvii.

the body of *fiqh* developed in theoretical sophistication, Muslim scholars advanced various frameworks to comprehend the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunna vis-à-vis *al-wāqi'*, a term that in Muslim legal theory refers to the social and material realities of society.²⁹ Thus, the theoretical grounding of religious law was seen to be responsive to social realities. In fact, the law took shape vis-à-vis practical, theoretical, and ideological concerns, and included in its scope factors such as experience, custom, precedent, and public interest.³⁰ The classical method for determining religious law allows for a plurality of opinions among qualified experts.³¹

While their roles may be lesser known and rarely celebrated, women have been legal scholars and have played important roles as legal experts and consultants. For example, a woman mufti is said to have contributed extensively to the establishment of Ḥanbalī legal thought through her documentation of the teachings of Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).³² In Qayrawan (present day Tunisia), mufti Khadīja bint Saḥnūn (d. 270/883 or 4) taught Mālīkī jurisprudence, and she reports that her father, Saḥnūn b. Sa'īd al-Tanūkhī (d. 240/854 or 5), one of the most important jurists of his time, used to regularly consult her for advice on issuing opinions.³³ Faṭīma al-Samarqandiyya (d. 578/1182 or 3) was a renowned Ḥanafī mufti, and before her marriage to 'Alā al-Dīn Abū Bakr Ibn Mas'ūd al-Kasānī (d. 587/1191),³⁴ legal edicts used to be signed jointly with her father 'Alā al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Samarqandī (d. c. 538/1144). Later, legal edicts were signed by all three: Faṭīma, her father, and her husband.³⁵ Al-Imām Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad al-Rāfi'ī (d. 623/1226), a Shāfi'ī scholar,³⁶ is reported to have studied with his grandmother Zulaykha bint Ismā'il b. Yūsuf al-Shāfi'ī, a mufti at the time.³⁷ Despite these examples and other noteworthy individ-

29 For detailed discussions see Taha Jabir al-Alwani, *Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence: Usul al-Fiqh al-Islami*, 3rd ed., trans. Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo and Anas S. Al Shaikh-Ali (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003).

30 For an overview of the development of the law see Bernard G. Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1998).

31 John L. Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 51.

32 Kaḥḥāla, vol. 1, 138.

33 *Ibid.*, 332–333.

34 Ibn al-'Adīm, Kamāl al-Dīn, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fi ta'riḥ al-Ḥalab*, vol. 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 4346–4347.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Ibn Mulaqqin Sirāj al-Dīn al-Shāfi'ī, 25.

uals, the tradition of legal scholarship as a whole is characterized by a dearth of women's voices. This lack of women's representation has deeply affected women's legal rights in many areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and other financial and commercial rights.³⁸ At present, women scholars are gaining modest ground as councils made entirely of male legal scholars are very gradually making moves to include at least one female legal scholar, often to work specifically in the area of "women's issues", i.e. matters of female hygiene and some areas of family law.³⁹

'Ā'isha: Reclaiming a tradition of women's engagement

The legacy of 'Ā'isha is replete with methodological premises for enhancing women's portrayal in the religious tradition and promoting women's engagement with the primary religious sources. Analyses of the critical methodology of 'Ā'isha are not without precedent, and at least three classical Sunni scholars have previously sought to develop this field of study: Abū Maṣṣūr 'Abd al-Muḥṣin bin Muḥammad bin 'Alī al-Baġhdādī (d. 489/1095 or 6) was the first to compile about twenty-five sayings attributed to the Prophet by his Companions which 'Ā'isha had revised in a volume entitled: "*al-Ijāba fi-mā istadrakat 'Ā'isha 'alā al-Ṣaḥāba*" ("*The Answer to What 'Ā'isha Revised from the Companions*"); subsequently, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1370), a prominent scholar of hadith and qur'anic sciences, composed a commentary on al-Baġhdādī's examples.⁴⁰ Finally, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 910/1505), composed another commentary on this material which had come to be known as *istidrākāt 'Ā'isha*, ('Ā'isha's revisions).⁴¹ While few in number, these works confirm the

37 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ḥusn al-muḥāḍara fi tārikh Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira* 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1998), 343. For a mention of subsequent women muftis in Egypt see Amira El Azhary Sonbol, ed., *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) 7–8; see also Afaf Lutfi al-Sayid Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 39–51.

38 For a thorough discussion of this topic see Shaymā' al-Sarrāf, *Aḥkām al-mar'a bayna al-ijtihād wa-al-taqlid: dirāsa muqārana fi-l-shar'i'a wa-l-fiqh wa-l-qānūn wa-l-ijtimā'* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Intishār al-'Arabī, 2008).

39 E.g. "Women Welcome Female Muftis in Syria," *Middle East Online*, March 7, 2008, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=26721> (accessed June 1, 2011).

40 Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Ijāba lil-irād mā istadrakathu 'Ā'isha 'alā al-Ṣaḥāba*, ed. Sa'īd al-Afġhānī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1980).

points made by contemporary Muslim feminist authors,⁴² namely that ‘Ā’isha had a clear conception of how to derive understandings from the Qur’an and Sunna of the Prophet. Her strategies for laying claim to religious authority and firmly refuting misogyny serve as examples of how women can and should bring their critical perspectives to the constitution of religious knowledge.

‘Ā’isha’s used the Prophet’s sayings and the qur’anic teachings as the solid basis from which she launched her dissenting opinions. For instance, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) narrated the following in his *Musnad*:

Two men entered ‘Ā’isha’s house and said: “We heard Abū Hurayra saying that the Prophet used to say, ‘affliction resides in women, donkeys and homes.’ ‘Ā’isha was markedly disturbed by that and said: “I swear by He who revealed the Qur’an upon *Abū-Al-Qāsim* [Muhammad] that he did not speak like this. Rather the Prophet of God said, ‘The people used to say during the *Jāhiliyya* [pre-Islamic era] women, animals used for transportation, and home bring bad omen.”⁴³

To this, ‘Ā’isha recited the verse:

No calamity befalls on earth or in yourselves but it is inscribed in the Book of Decrees before we bring it into existence. Verily, that is easy for Allah. In order that you may not grieve at the things that you fail to get nor rejoice over that which has been given to you. And Allah likes not prideful boaster (57:22–23).

In this example, it was clear for ‘Ā’isha that the qur’anic worldview denounced superstition (e.g. 27:45–47, 36:18, and 7:131), and therefore, a genuine hadith could not contradict the qur’anic worldview. In commenting on this exchange, al-Zarkashī highlights the subsequent wide acceptance of ‘Ā’isha’s reasoning among scholars.

In another example, ‘Ā’isha refuted a misogynistic hadith by evoking the Sunna of the Prophet. In this hadith, narrated by Abū Hurayra, the Prophet is said to have reportedly cautioned against three mishaps, the occurrence of which could invalidate a person’s prayer. These included the passing by of a woman, a beast of burden, or a black dog. To this, ‘Ā’isha exclaimed:

41 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Ayn al-iṣāba fī istidrāk ‘Ā’isha ‘alā al-ṣāḥāba*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Darwish (Maktaba al-‘Ālim al-Qāhira, 1409/1988).

42 On ‘Ā’isha’s skill in refuting misogynistic hadith see Shaikh, 105–106 and Naguib, 42.

Would you equate us with beasts and hounds! By God, the Messenger of Allah used to go about his *ṣalāt* [prayer] as I was stretched on the bed between him and the *qibla* [the direction of prayer]. I felt I needed to go to the restroom and did not want to stay there and cause distraction to the Messenger of God, so I quietly sneaked between his feet.⁴⁴

In forcefully refuting the implicit misogyny of such hadith and in putting its perpetrator to shame, ‘Ā’isha was defending the integrity of the teachings of the Prophet.

‘Ā’isha spent over three decades after the Prophet’s death honoring his legacy by transmitting knowledge, explaining and interpreting, and correcting misperceptions. She was the source of one thousand two hundred and ten hadith narrations of the Prophet, one hundred and seventy four of which were authenticated in two of the most prominent hadith collections: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Muslim*.⁴⁵ Her traditions were transmitted by a great number of the Prophet’s companions and followers.⁴⁶ In her analyses and criticisms of the various hadith narrations, and in her debates with a number of the Prophet’s companions, ‘Ā’isha countered claims insinuating that women were inferior in either religion or intellect. She stressed the importance of narrating hadith in their entirety, highlighting the context in which they were uttered, and verbatim. In her opinion, it was unacceptable to only convey the gist of the hadith, as the meaning was a matter of interpretation and could be modified as a result of the narrator’s limited memory or level of understanding. For instance, it is commonly explained that some Companions of the Prophet used to attend the initial part of the Prophet’s meetings and would miss the latter part, while others came late, hearing only the last of what the Prophet was saying.⁴⁷ Hence, ‘Ā’isha commented on the reports of many who misunderstood the narrative due to tardiness or premature departure.⁴⁸ With a distinctive rhetorical skill, she would tactfully analyze, criticize, correct, and debate in order to expose the weak points in any report she found offensive or otherwise incorrect.

43 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, in Ḥadīth Encyclopedia CD-ROM, ḥadīth #24894.

44 Ḥadīth Encyclopedia CD-ROM, *Bukhārī* #481 and *Muslim* #795.

45 al-Zarkashī, 30–36.

46 *Ibid.*, 34–33.

47 *Ibid.*, 103.

48 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The Islamic tradition places a high priority on piety and the acquisition of knowledge for all Muslims. While men predominate as religious authorities, this has not altogether precluded women from gaining scholarly credentials and expertise. Women scholars have been involved in key areas of religious knowledge, including in exegesis, hadith transmission, and the interpretation of religious law. Especially in contemporary times, women scholars are researching and interpreting the Qur'an and Sunna *and* elevating the quality of the discourse, in particular by bringing to attention issues that previous scholars have not satisfactorily addressed. Many of these women scholars are also involved in building Muslim communities and striving to establish balanced and peaceful societies that live up to the Qur'anic expectation of a community that strives for justice and "the middle way" (2:143).

Inspired by the teachings of the Qur'an, and with determination to understand and preserve the guidance of the Prophet, contemporary Muslim women scholars are mitigating gender bias by providing a more holistic and accurate rendition of Islamic knowledge which has its foundations in the Qur'an, in the authentic Sunna, and in the unity of man and woman (e.g. 4:1 and 49:13). The field of Muslim theology offers new possibilities for women to advance in religious scholarship across domains of expertise. The voices of emerging Muslim theologians are more often than not geared to contemporary realities and seek to articulate ways in which Islam provides resources for addressing social challenges and individual needs. Epitomized by this volume, the field of Muslim women's scholarship draws upon tradition with a critical eye for elevating the status of women and the socially marginalized. Here I have argued that, in particular, 'A'isha's legacy and strategies for engagement provide inspiration for women scholars as they seek to contend with problematic aspects of their religious heritage. For contemporary Muslim women scholars, a foundational understanding of her methodology is vital to a reinvigoration and reformation of tradition.