

## **Imam Shafi‘i: Scholar and Saint**

*Kecia Ali*

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Kecia Ali has performed a great service for Islamic studies by harmonizing early sources with the most compelling recent scholarship to produce a biography of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘i (d. 204/820), one of Islam’s most important figures. His life is presented in a tightly organized and lucid way, accessible to non-specialists or undergraduates, useful for graduate students, and a fine source of reference for scholars.

This book consists of an introduction and six chapters. The first chapter covers his early years in Arabia, and the second discusses his transformation from “Student to Shaykh.” Chapters 3 through 5 present al-Shafi‘i’s legal

theories and methodologies, and chapter 6, the final chapter, studies the popular cult that has grown up around him, thus delivering on the title's promise. Also included are three pages of suggested "Further Reading," along with why these works are pertinent, an invaluable extra measure that students will find particularly helpful. Needless to say, the bibliography is long and rich, giving a final affirmation to the author's mastery of her subject.

Throughout her study, Ali exhibits an acute awareness of the ideological agendas of the early biographers who have shaped perceptions of the imam. Her critical approach to traditional reports concerning his formative years (the oft-referenced Bedouin years, for example) allows her to question without discarding altogether some of the more famous episodes in his life. She ultimately suggests that what is most crucial for our understanding of al-Shafi'i's development was his encounter with Malik and his thought, an engagement so deep that he almost certainly had to have spent at least ten years under the elder scholar's tutelage. These critical years laid the groundwork for the scholar he would become.

Ali's discussion of the imam's early years allows for insights into his intellectual development that are useful to students, who usually encounter him as a full-blown authority. Al-Shafi'i's constant engagement in debate and disputation with Malik, and later with other Hanafi authorities like Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani (d. 189/805), caused him to emerge as a master of argumentation who was, as Ali astutely highlights, deeply concerned with harmonizing any possible contradiction in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

With regard to al-Shafi'i's legal thought, Ali has provided a concise and accessible yet nuanced presentation. She relies on newer scholarship, such as that of Ahmed El Shamsy and Joseph Lowry, to contest assumptions about the imam's work. One of these assumptions is the assertion that he could not possibly have authored the *Risālah* and the *Umm*; another is his "invention" of the Four Sources. El Shamsy has traced the *Risālah* through quotations in early works, showing it to date very closely to al-Shafi'i's lifetime. As for the *Umm*, El Shamsy had found ample evidence for its compilation from lecture notes taken by Rabi' (d. 270/883) and his students.

Meanwhile, Lowry has provided the basis for a fundamental rethinking of al-Shafi'i's role in elaborating the Four Sources methodology that characterizes "mature" Sunni jurisprudence: reliance on (in descending order) the Qur'an, the Sunnah, consensus, and analogy. *Bayān* (the normative statement constituting God's communication to humanity) is actually the centerpiece of the imam's theory, and he refused to grant authoritativeness to

anything other than revealed texts. Since he considered the prophetic hadith to be part and parcel of the revelation, he insisted that the Sunnah be valued as a source of law “co-equal to the Qur’an” (p. 54). This was his most enduring innovation, one that had radical implications for the entirety of Islamic intellectual history, for this climate of sacralizing the hadith led to its enshrinement by the pen. Ali contends that the veneration for even weak reports over non-revealed sources assured al-Shafi‘i’s role in the hadith canonization movement:

Canonization and writing ... constitute a mutually generating complex in the history of early Islamic law: the former endows the revelatory sources with authority and meaning, and the latter encases them in a stable form that lends itself to systematic analysis. (p. 115)

A major tool in al-Shafi‘i’s arsenal was his expertise in the Arabic language. His extreme interest in notions of the general and unrestricted, the apparent and ambiguous, enabled him to place grammatical terms at the service of jurisprudence. Ali cogently describes how all of these became tools for elaborating the *bayān*, and how al-Shafi‘i took full advantage of any ambiguity in the language of revelation to widen his ability to interpret it with flexibility. This point is key due to its importance in contextualizing both modern hermeneutics and debates on the role of the early articulators of Islamic law. Ali is subtle yet firm in depicting al-Shafi‘i’s role as interpreter.

The imam’s love for Arabic would seem to have had ideological implications as well, for his belief in its superiority translated into what may well have been a deep-seated belief in the Arabs’ superiority generally. One interesting section details the contents of his will. The author presents this document for what it is: an invaluable social artifact that provides fascinating glimpses of his personal life. In al-Shafi‘i’s careful designation of funds and arrangements for his slaves, including an Andalusian wet-nurse and a concubine, we encounter first hand “someone utterly at ease with the social inequalities of his era” (p. 41). Although he is clear about his beliefs with regard to his superior social status (and his distaste for free Arab women marrying non-Arabs), he is unconflicted about his own (ongoing) sexual relationship with a slave girl who would have been deemed wholly inferior in status.

To its credit, this work deals with the “saint” status of al-Shafi‘i in popular Muslim consciousness, a factor rarely addressed in scholarly works on this subject. It is here that we come to understand, to some extent, the deep-seated affection for the imam that many Muslims retain, as well as the historical factors that contributed to his status, including the desire of various

rulers to attain blessings and renown by building his tomb complex. Ali offers readers a glimpse into that tomb as she discusses the intercessory requests, both spoken prayers and written entreaties, that earnest believers have addressed to him. She alludes as well to the popular pairing of al-Shafi'i with the renunciant Sayyida Nafisa (d. 208/824) and lucidly explores how particular biographical events become pertinent to the debates of a given era: Modern proponents of female-led prayer accentuate reports that the Sayyida Nafisa led the imam's funeral prayer, while medieval biographers, concerned more with spiritual authority, were keen to point out her mentorship of the scholar. In highlighting these strategies, the author accentuates the subjectivity of the act of biography, bringing home her own awareness of the fraught nature of her task.

My criticisms of this book are few and minor. First, Ali has chosen to use the translations for certain book titles in a rather inconsistent way: *Risālah* vs. *Summation of Knowledge* vs. *Kitāb al-Tārikh al-Kabīr* vs. *Shafi'is Virtues*. It seems that it should perhaps be all or nothing on this front; non-specialists who are unfamiliar with the early corpus may be distracted, while scholars who are intimate with only Arabic titles might question certain word choices, particularly for those works that have yet to be translated and have not acquired a static and accepted title. Additionally, there are a few almost negligible errata (pp. 33, 35, and 55) and an incorrectly transliterated Qur'anic term on p. 63: *muḥṣināt* should read *muḥṣanāt*.

Finally, I have what is certainly a serious issue (as opposed to a quarrel) with the author, for there are many instances when a citation would have been welcome. Ali, for her part, goes above and beyond, offering to respond to inquiries for sources personally. But this is a task no busy scholar should be forced to take on, for it could easily have been solved by tucking a set of end-notes into the back.

*Imam Shafi'i: Scholar and Saint* would enrich any undergraduate syllabus for an Introduction to Islam, an Islamic Law, or even a world religions class. Designed to be accessible to non-specialists, it should make its way speedily into library collections worldwide, from the public library to the local mosque to the private collection of the curious layperson. That said, it is due to Ali's deep erudition and mastery of her subject that the work proves to be of immeasurable worth for scholars as well.

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