

# Female Religious Authority in Shi'i Islam, Past and Present

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Islamic religious authority is conventionally understood to be an exclusively male purview. Yet when dissected into its various manifestations – leading prayer, preaching, issuing fatwas, transmitting hadith, judging in court, teaching law, theology, and other Islamic sciences and, generally shaping the Islamic scholarly tradition – nuances emerge that hint at the presence of women in the performance of some of these functions. This collection of case studies, covering the period from classical Islam to the present, and taken from across the Twelver Shi'i Islamic world, reflects on the roles that women have played in exercising religious authority across time and space. Comparative reflection on the case studies allows for the formulation of hypotheses regarding the conditions and developments – whether theological, jurisprudential, social, economic, or political – that enhanced or stifled the flourishing of female religious authority in Twelver Shi'i Islam.

As the editors acknowledge, the idea for this volume was born several years before in Qom when Mirjam Künkler was conducting field research on the women's *hawza* Jāmi'at al-Zahrā'. Keiko Sakurai of Waseda University and Mirjam Künkler then set out to convene a

conference on female religious authority in modern Iran, which was held at Princeton University in 2015. The work also benefited from the graduate course 'Female Religious Authority in Islam' that Mirjam Künkler taught on the topic at Princeton University. The volume set out to take stock of the research developments in the field of female religious authority in Shi'ism, to identify lacunae requiring further research, and to further the development of comparative and interdisciplinary research projects incorporating the findings developed there.

Mirjam Künkler (Senior Research Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study) and Devin J. Stewart's (Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Emory University) edited book presents the forgotten history of female religious authority in Islam, providing essential first-hand materials for researchers of Islamic religious authority, Twelver Shi'ism, and especially the role of women in the Islamic tradition. Its key features are case studies of women exercising religious authority, including hadith transmitters, jurists, scholars of religion, women acting as representative for a leading ayatollah, and women judges; addresses the classical, medieval and modern periods; brings together scholars from Islamic Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Anthropology, History and Art History; provides insight into contemporary debates about female religious authority in Islam; and questions assumptions about the inherently progressive agenda of female religious authorities.

This volume comprises, in addition to the introduction, a general overview of the issue of female religious authority in Islamic history and eleven focused studies that treat specific instances or aspects of female religious authority in Twelver Shi'i contexts, bringing together twelve original contributions – chapter 10 (p. 271-297) had already been published and was here reprinted in slightly edited form – that not only enhance our understanding of female religious authority in Twelver Shi'i Islam across time and space but also address wider conceptual debates in Islamic Studies. It is a complement to recent growth in scholarship on female religious authority in Sunni Islam, and by providing opportunity for comparative analysis, it is of equal interest to scholars and students working on Shi'i and non-Shi'i contexts. This book is the first study (not only in English but also in Middle Eastern languages) on the role

of female religious authority in the Twelver Shi‘i tradition from Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, and Umm Salama, one of the Prophet’s wives, to contemporary female authorities such as Nuṣrat Amīn (1886-1983), and Amina Bint al-Huda (1937-1980), sister of the renowned Iraqi scholar Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980), both executed by the Iraqi authorities, as well as the Twelver Shi‘i legal tradition on women.

In ‘Forgotten Histories of Female Religious Authority in Islam’ (p.18-46), Mirjam Künkler presents a survey of various instances in which Muslim women, both Sunni and Shi‘i, have become learned in the Islamic religious sciences and wielded religious authority, concentrating on women hadith experts and women jurists, although she refers as well to women rulers such as Gawhar Shad Bigum (d. 1457), the sovereign famous for the construction of Herat’s Friday Mosque. Overall, she makes the point that the frequent near-complete neglect of women as religious authorities throughout the Islamic world during the various historical periods is belied by an objective consideration of the evidence on the ground, whether historical or contemporary. Rather than a general absence of the phenomenon, there is great diversity across time and space regarding the question of whether women were regarded as religious authorities, and if so, in what function precisely and to what effect. She ends with a plea for the programmatic examination of the factors that enable women to wield authority in some Islamic contexts but not in others.

The remaining chapters of the volume address specific episodes, instances, or portrayals of female religious authority in the Twelver Shi‘i tradition, organized in approximate chronological order. The essays included in this volume cover a wide range in terms of time, space, source material investigated, and forms of religious authority. Chronologically, they cover all Islamic history, from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the nascent Muslim community until the present day. Geographically, they are concentrated in what are considered as the central lands of the Islamic world, treating historical episodes that unfold in the Hejaz, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, drawing on hadith literature, biographical works, anthologies, legal compendia, polemical texts, dedicated treatises, modern institutional records, participant observation,

and paintings. They treat women members of the Family of the Prophet, other women who are associated with the households of the Imams, companions of the Imams, women as hadith-transmitters, judges, jurists, and theologians, women as royal members of Shi‘i dynasties, women as religious teachers and guides, and women as agents of leading jurists. Overall, the studies assembled here demonstrate that Twelver Shi‘ism presents a long and variegated tradition of prominent women figures, whether revered religious icons, historical personages, fictional characters, or combinations of all three, that played important roles regarding religious authority. Like their male counterparts, these women fall into several societal categories that have claimed and wielded different types of religious authority, except the Imamate itself. The studies in this volume also bring out the important point that even within one mode of authority, subsidiary authorities exist, as shown by Liyakat Takim with ‘Female Authority in the Times of the Shi‘i Imams’ (p.105-120).

The book was also an opportunity to convene a virtual talk on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2023, hosted by The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU), which brought one of the editors, Mirjam Künkler, to speak on the topics covered in the book and the research that went into the volume, a virtual talk which can be accessed online.<sup>1</sup>

To conclude this review, it must be stressed that the volume is heavily dependent on Iran and/or Ithna ‘Ashari (Twelver) Shi‘ism, which is understandable considering its historical and contemporary importance (a more adequate title for the book would have been *Female Religious Authority in Twelver Shi‘i Islam*) but reinforces a reified idea of Shi‘ism. The work could have been enriched with case studies from India and Pakistan, which are the second and third largest countries in terms of Muslim population both including considerable Shi‘a minorities, not to mention the fact that throughout its history India had important Shi‘a centers of culture and government, such as the Deccan Sultanates, Bengal, or Awadh. It would also have been a plus if the book had dealt with other Shi‘a denominations or branches, namely Isma‘ilism, and its different ramifications, including the Fatimids and their offspring, the Bohras and the Nizaris, a community which is known for its egalitarian stance

regarding women. Sometimes the reading is encumbered by lengthy and excessive footnotes which, in some cases, are redundant (but this a general problem in the Social Sciences and Humanities). Nonetheless, this book is a substantial and welcome contribution to a growing body of literature on female religious authority in Islam. The introduction and individual chapters, covering a wide temporal and geographical range, address some of major unanswered questions, such as how particular contexts affect women's religious authority. This volume is of importance not just to scholars of gender or Shi'ism, but of religious authority broadly construed. And as the editors remind the reader, only once we have a better account of the variations in female religious authority across space and time, as well as in comparison to their male counterparts in a given context, will we be able to formulate hypotheses as to which conditions and developments – theological, jurisprudential, social, economic, political – particularly enhanced, promoted, or, conversely, stifled the phenomenon.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See <https://acmcu.georgetown.edu/2023/03/08/female-religious-authority-in-shii-islam-past-and-present/>