

Can Women Serve as Imams?

Hamza Yusuf

For Muslims, prayer leadership is necessary to fulfill the confirmed sunnah of congregational prayer, as well as the obligatory Friday sermon and prayer. The majority of jurists consider the role of imam to be better than any other duty associated with the prayer, including that of the muezzin.

In a tradition related by Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī (d. 74 AH/693 CE), the Prophet ﷺ said, “If there are three people, let one of them lead the others in prayer; and the one most worthy of that is the most learned among them (*aqra’uhum*).”¹

Prayer leadership, known in Arabic as *imāmah*, is a verbal noun; its transitive verb form means “to intend,” and it has a second meaning, “to advance ahead of.” In its intransitive form, the verb means “to become a mother.” Its two primary verbal nouns are *imāmah* and *umūmah*; the first denotes “advancement” and “prayer leadership”; the second denotes “maternity” and connotes “motherliness.”²

The jurists of Islam have two technical uses of the word *imāmah*. The first, *imāmah al-kubrā* (greater leadership), refers to “the sovereign right to general administration of the affairs of people on behalf of the Messenger of God ﷺ.”³ This is reserved for the Muslim caliphate, which was formally abolished in 1924.⁴ The second technical use of the word *imāmah* is in the term *al-imāmah al-ṣuḡhrā* (lesser leadership), and refers to the act of the imam who leads a congregation in prayer, whether in a mosque or any other place. The position is defined as “the contingency of one devotee’s prayer on that of another with certain conditions that the sacred law has set down.”⁵ Hence, a person is not considered an imam unless a follower’s prayer is contingent upon his prayer.

(left)

MIHRAB OF THE SULTAN
HASAN MOSQUE CAIRO

While scholars differ as to the conditions of the *imāmah*, the canonical schools of Sunni jurisprudence require that an imam fulfill the following four conditions:

- 1) Islam. An imam must be a Muslim if he is to lead others in the seven⁶ obligatory prayers and the supererogatory congregational *tarāwīḥ*,⁷ eclipse, and other supererogatory (*nāfilah*) prayers, such as *tahajjud*.⁸
- 2) Sound reason (*‘aql*). An imam must be of sound mind.
- 3) Maturity (*bulūgh*). An imam must reach puberty before he can lead the prayer. The Shāfi‘ī school, however, does permit one who has not reached puberty to lead the prayer as long as he can distinguish between right and wrong (*mumayyiz*). Such a person must be between seven and ten years of age, which is by when children are expected—but not obliged—to pray all five daily prayers.
- 4) Manhood (*dhukūrah*). Prayer leadership must be performed by males for either men only, men and women together, or women only. (The last case has certain conditions in some schools.)⁹

In Support of Female Imams

Of the four canonical Sunni schools, only the Ḥanbalī school deems it permissible for women to lead men in prayer. There is also a minority opinion in the Shāfi‘ī school that permits it. In the Ḥanbalī school, the permissibility is contingent upon the leadership being for a specific reason and, according to Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), it is only in the case of supererogatory prayers, such as *tarāwīḥ* prayers. In Ibn Taymiyyah’s famous collection of legal opinions, he relates,

Imam Aḥmad permitted women to lead men in prayer according to the soundest position within his school for a specific need (*li ḥājah*). For example, if a woman is educated, and the men are illiterate, she can lead them in *tarāwīḥ*.¹⁰ [The proof for this] is that the Prophet ﷺ permitted Umm Waraqah to lead the members of her household in prayer. He even assigned for her a muezzin, and she would [lead the prayer] from behind them. She did this for a specific purpose.

A proof can be found in this hadith for those who maintain that a person can pray in front of the imam for a specific reason. This ruling is notwithstanding the hadith, “A woman should not lead a man in prayer.”¹¹ However, without a doubt, women leading men in prayer is proscribed by the majority of scholars. In fact, the scholars are in agreement¹² that a woman may not lead men in obligatory or supererogatory prayers. Thus, if the men prayed behind a woman, knowing the imam is a woman, their prayer is invalid by consensus [of the later scholars with the exception of the Ḥanbalīs in the case of *tarāwīḥ* prayers led from behind by a learned woman among illiterate men]. However, Ashḥab (d. 204/820) [a Mālikī] stated that if a man prayed behind someone not realizing that the person [leading] was a woman, and then time elapsed until the time of prayer was finished, and he realized only then that he had prayed behind a woman, his prayer is complete (*tāmmah*) [and valid].¹³

Although Ashḥab is a scholar of considerable weight in the Mālikī school, it rejected this particular opinion. According to the dominant Mālikī position, a man’s prayer behind a female imam is invalid

irrespective of the time elapsed, and he is required to make up such a prayer.

It is difficult to claim consensus on the prohibition of women leading men in prayer for the simple fact that two highly authoritative imams in Islamic history, both of whom were considered independent scholars (*mujtahid muṭlaq*), could not accept the other scholars’ legal judgments without their own independent investigation and subsequent conclusions. Rarely in Islamic history have scholars reached the rank of independent scholarship, as this station is reserved only for those who have achieved the highest levels of scholarship and piety. The two in this case are Abū Thawr (d. 240/854) and Imam al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). According to Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) of Spain,

There is a difference of opinion concerning the prayer leadership of the woman. The majority of scholars (*jamhūr*) adhere to the ruling that it is not permissible for a woman to lead men in prayer. Moreover, scholars dif-

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ferred as to whether a woman may even lead other women as well. Imam al-Shāfi‘ī [d. 204/820] permitted it, and Imam Mālik [d. 179/795] prohibited it. Among the scholars, Abū Thawr and al-Ṭabarī deviated [from the majority opinion] by maintaining the permissibility of female prayer leadership in absolute terms [whether leading men or women]. The majority of scholars agreed that it was impermissible for a woman to lead men. According to their reasoning, had it been permissible, there would have been transmission of such [practice] from the first generation of Muslims. Furthermore, it is



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WOMEN STUDENTS AT ZAYTUNA

known that the practice of the women [at the time of the Prophet ﷺ] was to place themselves behind the men. It is impermissible for women to place themselves in front of the men, and this [ruling] is based on the Prophet's statement, "Have the women in the rear [of the mosque] where God has placed them." However, some scholars permitted women to lead other women in prayer because they are all equally lined up in their respective prayer lines, as well as the fact that it has been transmitted that some of the first generation of women indeed did that. As for those who permitted a woman's prayer leadership, they based their ruling upon the sound narration that Abū Dāwūd [d. 275/888] relates about Umm Waraqah ؓ which states the Prophet ﷺ used to visit her at her home, and assigned a

muezzin for her who would call the azan (*adhān*) for her, and ordered her to lead the members of her household in prayer.¹⁴

Al-Ṭabarī, one of the greatest scholars of Qur'an, was initially an adherent of the Shāfi'ī school and later became so learned that he was unable to follow the opinions of Imam al-Shāfi'ī without contention and hence became an independent scholar (*mujtahid mutlaq*) and founded the Jarīriyyah legal school. Unfortunately, his school died out by the tenth century, and his legal works were largely lost due to the Mongol destruction of the major libraries of the East. All that remains of his legal views are in his extant commentary on the Qur'an, some fragments of his books, and some quotations from him related by scholars. He was often harassed by religious zealots who thought him a deviant, stoned his house, and attempted to prevent him

from teaching. The perpetrators were often some of the beleaguered and intransigent followers of the minority Ḥanbalī school, who took umbrage that Imam al-Ṭabarī considered Imam Aḥmad (d. 241/855) a scholar of hadith and not a jurist.¹⁵

The other independent scholar who considered female prayer leadership of men as lawful was Abū Thawr, who lived in Baghdad and was a companion of Imam al-Shāfi'ī. Abū Thawr is also the founder of a school of law that is no longer extant and, unfortunately, survives only in fragments. The great hadith scholar, Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965) says of Abū Thawr, "He was one of the spiritual leaders of this world in legal knowledge, scrupulousness, and virtue. He authored many works and derived many meanings from the hadith."¹⁶ The great Mālikī scholar, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070), says about Abū Thawr, "He was well-versed and of excellent methodology in what he related, save that he had some deviation in which he departed from the majority of scholars."¹⁷ His school survived into the tenth century and was particularly widespread in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Although both these scholars viewed a woman leading men in prayer as valid, information about the conditions in which they considered this valid could not be found. It is known, however, that these scholars' proof was the hadith in Abū Dāwūd's compilation in a chapter entitled, "The Prayer Leadership of Women" (*imāmat al-nisā*), referred to as "*ḥadīth Umm Waraqah*." According to the hadith, "The Messenger of God ﷺ used to visit her [Umm Waraqah ؓ] and assigned for her a muezzin and told her to lead the members of her household in prayer." The narrator, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khallād, added, "I saw her muezzin who was an extremely old man." Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350) comments,

This hadith establishes that the prayer leadership of women and their congregation is sound and confirmed by the command of the Prophet ﷺ himself. And among the women who led other women in prayer are 'Ā'ishah ؓ and Umm Salamah ؓ, who led both obligatory prayers and *tarāwīḥ*. And al-Ḥāfiẓ in the *Talkhīṣ al-ḥabīr* stated that

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when 'Ā'ishah ؓ led other women, she stood in the midst of them [and not out front]; this is related by 'Abd al-Razzāq and also by Dāraqūtnī [d. 385/995] and al-Bayhaqī [d. 458/1066] from the hadith of Abī Ḥāzim from *Ra'itah al-Ḥanafīyyah* on the authority of 'Ā'ishah ؓ that she led other women and was in the midst of them in an obligatory prayer. Also, Ibn Abī Shaybah [d. 235/839] and al-Ḥākim [d. 405/1014], by way of Ibn Abī Laylah on the authority of 'Atā' on the authority of 'Ā'ishah ؓ, relate that she would lead the women in prayer but stand with them in the prayer rank. And in the hadith about Umm Salamah ؓ, it is related also that she stood among [the women that she led in prayer]....

I say that it is clear from these above-mentioned narrations that a woman may lead other women in prayer, and that she should stay in the middle of the rank with them and not stand in

front of them. It is stated in al-Subul, "This narration [of Umm Waraqah ؓ] is textual proof of the validity of a woman's prayer leadership among the inhabitants of her home, even if there are men among them, for Umm Waraqah had a muezzin, and he was an old man according to the narration. The apparent meaning of the hadith is that she led him and her young servant boy (*ghulām*) as well as her bondsmaid in prayer. The validity of such a prayer was held by Abū Thawr, al-Muzanī [d. 264/878], and al-Ṭabarī, but the overwhelming majority of scholars disagreed with them. A narration also is related from ʿAbd al-Razzāq [d. 212/827], in his *Muṣannaf*, that Ibn ʿAbbās ؓ said, "A woman may lead other women, but she leads from the middle of the prayer rank."¹⁸

In his opus *Flām al-Muwaqqiʿin*, Ibn al-Qayyim also vociferously defends the right and recommended practice of women leading other women in prayer:

[An example of some scholars' rejection of a clear, confirmed *sunnah*] is the rejection of the recommendation of women praying together in congregation as opposed to praying separately. Indeed, this [*sunnah*] is found in the collections of hadith that mention that the Messenger of God ﷺ used to visit Umm Waraqah ؓ, who was a student of Qur'an during his lifetime, [see the same hadith above], and he "permitted her to lead her household (*ahl dārihā*) in prayer." Moreover, Ahmad mentions that, "ʿĀ'ishah led the women

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in obligatory prayer, but led them from within the prayer line [not out in front]." Imam al-Shāfiʿī also relates that Umm Salamah ؓ led women in prayer and prayed in the middle [of the line]. In this regard, had there only been the hadith, "Congregational prayer is more meritorious than individual prayer by twenty-seven degrees of

merit," it would suffice as proof. These confirmed traditions refute any ambiguity that might be construed from the statement of the Prophet ﷺ, "A people will not prosper by consigning their affair to a woman," as this hadith applies only to political authority, the caliphate, and affairs of court. As for matters concerning the transmission of hadith narrations, legal testimony, fatwa, and prayer leadership, it does not apply to any of those matters. Oddly, the very same scholars who do not permit the *sunnah* [of women praying in congregation with a female imam] permit women to serve as judges in the affairs of Muslims. So how is it they can prosper while appointing a woman as judge in their affairs, but claim that the same woman will not benefit her sister Muslims if she leads them in prayer?

These points clearly indicate that, historically, a woman was seen as capable of doing all the same functions as a man in both religious and secular matters, with the sole exception of holding the highest office in the land (*al-imāmah al-kubrā*). It is also clear that the few accepted scholars who held the sound opinion that women's prayer leadership is permissible based upon necessity adhered to the principle

of women leading from within their own ranks and not stepping out in front of the prayer lines. This is the accepted form that women who lead other women in prayer have practiced throughout Islamic history. The multiply-transmitted (*mutawātir*) practice of the entire Muslim community throughout the ages is to have men in their ranks separate from the women in theirs unless necessity dictates otherwise, as in the case of Mecca.

While a majority of scholars have said women cannot lead men in obligatory prayer, they have differed on the ruling of women leading supererogatory prayers and also of women leading other women in obligatory prayers. Three of the four Sunni schools' imams, Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767), al-Shāfiʿī, and Ahmad, consider valid the prayer leadership of women for other women, in both the obligatory and supererogatory prayers. All three used as proof for this the hadith of Umm Waraqah ؓ found in *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. The Ḥanafī school considers women leading other women as discouraged (*makrūh*) due to the inherent frailty or female "impediment" (*naqs*) in women (caused by menstruation, lochia, and hemorrhagia). The reason is that the shariah places restrictions on devotional practices—such as recitation of Qur'an—during women's monthly cycles. Another example is that women calling the azan or *iqāmah*¹⁹ before beginning the prayer is discouraged.²⁰ It is also discouraged for a woman to break prayer rank with other women when leading them.

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did, according to sound narrations—and not out front as a male prayer leader does. There are minority Mālikī opinions that do permit it. For example, Ibn Ayman al-Mālikī permitted women to lead other women in prayer. However, according to the dominant position in the Mālikī school, a woman may not lead the prayer under any cir-

cumstance—she may not even lead other women. Though aware of the hadith relating to the prayer leadership of women, Imam Mālik generally did not base rulings on solitary hadith narrations if they did not conform to the normative practice of the scholars of Medina, which he considered more authoritative than sound hadith that had not reached the status of the infallible multiply-transmitted (*mutawātir*) narrations. This methodology is a serious point of contention among the imams and a main reason why Imam Mālik differed with the others in light of sound hadith.

Besides the issue of women imams, there are other differences amongst the various schools concerning the conditions of prayer leadership. For example, in an intriguing early polemic, al-Fandalāwī (d. 541/1146) of the Mālikī school sees a compelling contradiction in the Ḥanafī argument of his time in which the prayer leadership of a profligate (*fāsiq*) was considered sound:

Imam Abū Ḥanīfah prohibits a woman from leading men in prayer and permits it for other women [but discourages it]. If you ask the Aḥnāf [Ḥanafī scholars] why they prohibit a woman from leading men, they don't really have any way to answer except to say

that she is “lacking” (*nāqīṣah*).²¹ If you then ask them, what is her impediment, they reply, “The impediment of womanhood vis-à-vis manhood, as well as her impeded place in society and her degree (*darajah*).”²² Our reply to them is that the religious impediment of profligacy certainly warrants much greater concern than any religious impediment inherent in womanhood because the impediment of womanhood does not remove a woman’s status of uprightness nor invalidate her legal testimony, whereas profligacy does both! So, it is obvious, [if they prohibit the prayer leadership of a woman due to the impediment of womanhood], they should be consistent and prohibit the prayer leadership of a profligate, given that his moral impediment [is far greater than a woman’s physical impediment], in that his sound social standing is lost due to his profligacy, and his legal testimony has no weight [as opposed to a woman whose frailties as a woman do not impede her religious status at all].²³

Here, arguing against the Ḥanafī school’s permission of the prayer leadership of a profligate, al-Fandalāwī defends his own school’s opposing position. What is of interest here is that, by his reasoning, one may easily argue that the Ḥanafī position should be consistent and *allow* a woman to lead the prayer, given that her womanhood is less an impediment to worship than a man’s moral shortcomings.

Women in the Mosques

The infallible *mutawātir* hadith are the sources from which we obtain the rulings of prayer and matters related to the mosque. For this reason, the striking similarity among mosques and their practices worldwide—is one aspect of Islam that

distinguishes it from every other major world religion. While the architecture of mosques differs greatly, there are numerous universal aspects: the absence of pictures, the basic design, the qibla, the mimbar, the open space, the lack of furniture, and the lining up of people in straight rows. Normally, the rows are comprised of men in the front and women in the back. In some mosques, women are to the sides with a barrier separating the two

sexes, and in other mosques, the women pray in a different room. The variations that have kept the men and women apart are a direct result of multiply-transmitted infallible narrations that cannot be denied by anyone who has given hadith study the least amount of attention. Historically, no one, male or female, has been recorded as having argued for the mixed congregation of men and women during prayer.

Unfortunately, in some areas, women are excluded from mosques altogether,

which contradicts the multiply-transmitted practice of the Prophet ﷺ. In his collection of infallible hadiths, Shaykh Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Kattānī, one of the greatest scholars of the twentieth century, states,

The legislation of the permissibility of women going to the mosques and praying in them is multiply-transmitted.... The Prophet ﷺ says, “Do not prohibit the maidservants of God from worshiping in the houses of God....”



‘Ā’ishah, the Mother of the Believers ﷺ, as well as Jābir ﷺ, relate from the Messenger of God ﷺ, “The most rewarding prayer ranks of men are in the front and the least rewarding are in the rear, and the most rewarding prayer ranks of women are in the rear and the least rewarding are in the front. Women, when the men prostrate [in front of you], lower your gaze, for you should not be exposed to the men’s private parts due to the limited loin-clothes they are wearing.” Abū Dāwūd ﷺ relates that ‘Umar ﷺ prohibited men from entering through the women’s door. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) states, “Had prayer in their homes been better, the Prophet ﷺ would not have allowed the women to waste their time and wear themselves out, nor would he have caused them to lose some merit [by letting them go to the mosque], if there was not some extra virtue [in their being allowed to do so].” Abū Ḥanīfah and Mālik, however, opined that prayer in their homes was more virtuous and meritorious [for women]. Abū Ḥanīfah deemed it discouraged (*makrūh*) for women to go to the mosque for congregation or for Friday prayer. Mālik said, “We do not prohibit them from going to the mosque. A young woman should go every once in a while and a mature woman go [as she pleases] but not back and forth incessantly.”

Ibn Ḥazm goes on to mention the narration of ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Mundhir al-Anṣārī from his paternal aunt or grandmother, Umm Ḥamīd, that the Prophet ﷺ said [to the women], “Your

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prayer in your house is more rewarding for you than your prayer with me.” [Ibn Ḥazm] said that ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd is unknown, and we should not leave multiply-transmitted narrations for narrations from people who are not known. As for the statement of ‘Ā’ishah that al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) mentions, “Had the Prophet ﷺ seen the unprecedented behavior of the women after him, he would have prohibited them from going to the mosque,” we just do not know what these women had done that the women were not doing during the time of the Prophet ﷺ. Certainly, nothing could be worse than fornication, and that happened during the time of the Prophet ﷺ, and people were punished for it, but that did not cause him to prohibit the women from going to the mosque. Scholars agree that the Prophet ﷺ did not prohibit women from praying with him in his mosque, nor did the rightly-guided caliphs after him prohibit this. Surely, God knew what the women were going to do after the Prophet ﷺ, and, in spite of that, He did not reveal anything to his Prophet ﷺ that prohibited women from [going to the mosque].”

The mother of believers, Umm Salamah ﷺ, states that the women during the time of the Prophet ﷺ “would say their exit *salām* and then get up and leave, whereas the Prophet ﷺ and the men who prayed with him remained still for however long God willed them to.” This is related by al-Bukhārī. In a hadith related by Abū Qatādah, the Prophet ﷺ states, “I sometimes get

up to pray, and I desire to extend the length of the prayer, but I hear a child crying and hasten the prayer due to my abhorrence at causing the child’s mother any grief.” In the *Muḥallāh*, Ibn Ḥazm states, “The aggregate of narrations supporting the women’s presence at the Prophet’s congregational prayers is infallible (*mutawātir*) and of the utmost reliability. No one can deny this except an ignoramus.”²⁴

It is clear from these statements that women cannot be prohibited from attending mosques. The barriers between men and women found in mosques throughout the world today did not exist during the time of the Prophet ﷺ and well into the early period of Islam. But these barriers are not a prohibited innovation; they are based on custom and a respect for women’s spiritual privacy. In modern times, in some places, there are Muslim men who do not respect women’s space by lowering their gaze, and their behavior causes some women to wish to isolate themselves. Such isolation is incongruous with the place of women in modern society, which, for better or for worse, is in sharp contrast to the premodern world.

It is also important to note that the current separation of men and women in mosques is undoubtedly from the multiply-transmitted, infallible Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. We do not need to search further; it is unconscionable for Muslims to change the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. *Mutawātir* actions have the authority of the Qur’an in Islamic juristic methodology. Thus, to deviate from the practice of the Prophet ﷺ by mixing men and women in

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prayer or placing women in front of men would constitute a prohibited innovation and fall under the category of condemnable acts by shariah. Placing the women’s congregation parallel with the men would not invalidate the prayer, but would constitute a discouraged innovation (*bid‘ah makrūhah*).²⁵ ‘Ā’ishah relates a hadith recorded by both Muslim

(d. 261/875) and al-Bukhārī, in which the Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever innovates a matter in this affair [of religion] that is not of it shall have it rejected.” In Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Jābir relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, “The best of speech is the Book of God, and the best guidance is that of Muḥammad, and the worst of affairs is unprecedented ones, and every unprecedented [religious] matter is an innovation, and every innovation is deviant.”²⁶

On Women Leading the Congregational Prayer

One simple reason exists for the prohibition of women leading the Friday congregational prayer: it is agreed upon by our rightly-guided scholars that this prayer is not binding upon women. Ibn Mundhir states, “It is the consensus of the community of Islam that Friday congregational prayer is not binding upon women.” This is based upon the Prophet’s statement ﷺ, “Whoever believes in God and the Last Day is obliged to pray the Friday congregational prayer, except for a woman, a traveler, a servant, a sick person, [or a child, also by consensus].” None of these people can lead the Friday congregational prayer, except for a male traveler, according to some schools, and that is because the afternoon prayer (*zuhr*) is binding upon him, and in praying

the Friday congregational prayer, he fulfills the obligation to pray *zuhr*. However, Imam Mālik and the scholars of his school do not permit a traveler to lead the Friday congregational prayer because that prayer is not an obligation on the traveler; he may perform it only as an extra act of devotion, according to the Mālikīs.

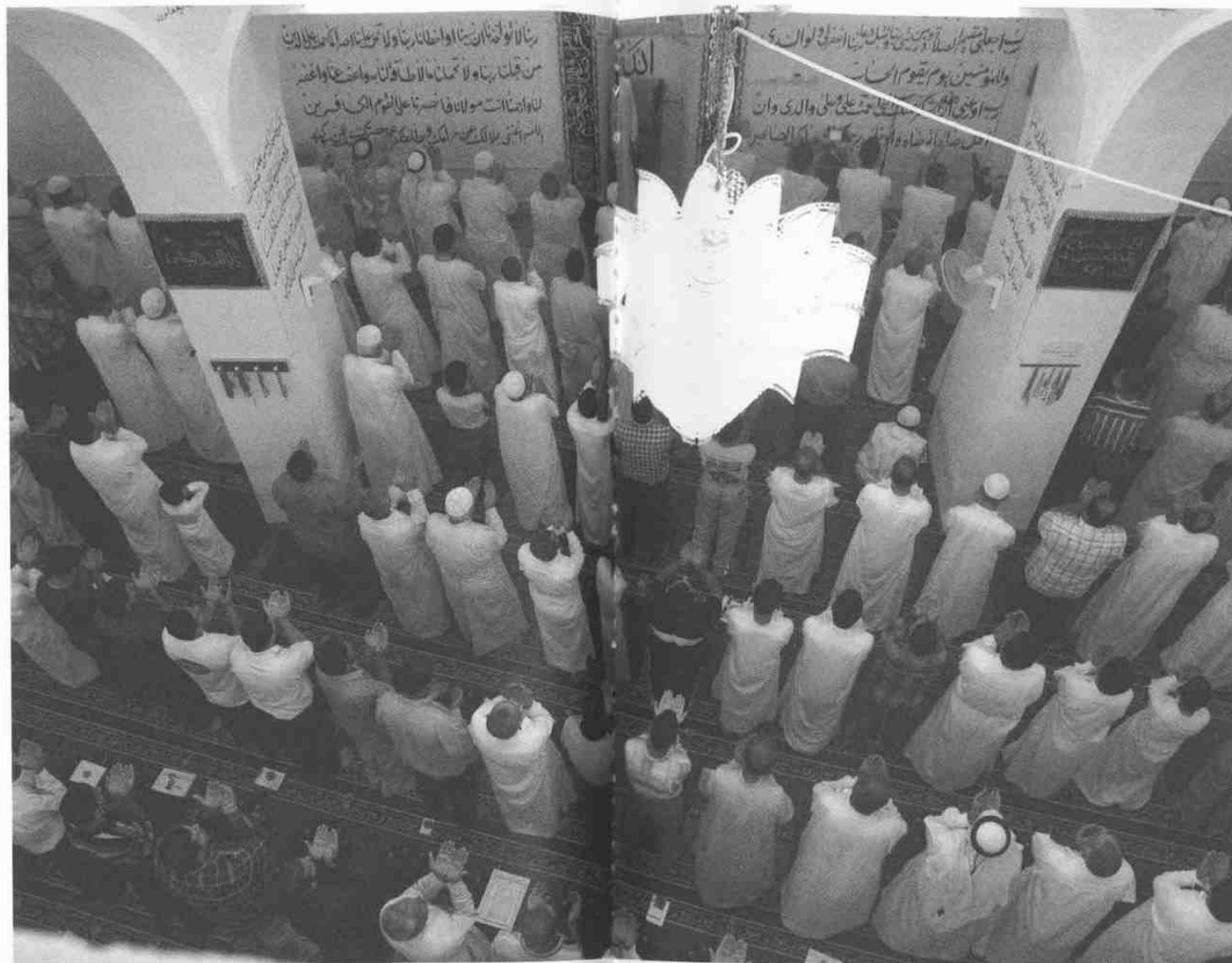
Interestingly, the Orthodox Judaism ruling on the number of persons that make up a minyan (*jamā'ah* or congregation) in Halakha law is that a woman is exempt from many of the commandments but none of the prohibitions; this ruling provides ease in her ritualized devotional duties so that she has more time for her duties at home as a mother and a wife:

The main time-bound positive mitzvah from which women were exempt was the obligation to pray in the evening, the morning, and the afternoon. Though a man could pray at home it is judged better to pray with a *minyan* (quorum), the smallest communal unit.... These are the rules that still govern orthodox practice. A woman may pray in the synagogue at specific times, but she is not obliged to. Because she is not obliged, she may not be counted in a *minyan* of those who are obliged, nor may she lead others who are fulfilling their obligation. The Talmudic principle is that only a person who is himself obligated to perform a mitzvah (obligation) may perform that mitzvah on behalf of someone else.²⁷

It appears Orthodox Judaism has the same principle that Islam has concerning women and the congregational prayers. In Traditional Christianity, women were not allowed to officiate services due to Paul's injunction that women remain silent in the churches. In contrast, Islamic tradition did not silence women in the mosques but established proprieties that were observed

throughout the early part of Islamic history. Women were not only encouraged to attend lessons in the mosques, but many actually taught, especially in the sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina.

Laws of modesty are often cited as "evidence" against women leading prayers.



Some say that a woman's voice and appearance may distract a man from his prayers. In the Jewish tradition, in consideration of the "dignity of the community," women are not allowed to read from the Megillah in the presence of males, or to read from the Torah scroll in the presence of a male minyan. Interestingly though, the same Talmudic passage which discusses the "dignity of the community" makes plain that a woman is eligible to read. At present, Orthodox Judaism does

not allow a female to be a rabbi or a cantor. From the non-Orthodox viewpoint, new circumstances dictate that customs and even laws must be abandoned, as they are now viewed as only suitable for the patriarchal societies of the past. Each Reform synagogue is autonomous in

deciding its practices. In many, but by no means all, synagogues today, women lead the prayers and read from the Torah, and are counted in a minyan, and there is no balcony or area for them to sit separately from men.

Prayer in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Islam in relation to other Abrahamic faiths is that Muslims pray, fast, pay zakat,

and make pilgrimage to Mecca in the identical manner in which their Prophet ﷺ did. If one goes to any mosque on Friday, one will find an imam giving a sermon (*khuṭbah*), the features of which must mimic the Prophet's own sermon in order to be valid. The imam will often have a staff, wear a turban and cloak, and utter formulas that have been uttered since the time of the Prophet ﷺ. Regardless of the contents of an imam's sermon, he will pray two cycles of prayer in which he will recite verses most Muslims have heard thousands of times because they are the ones the Prophet ﷺ preferred to recite; the prayer will involve standing, reciting the sura *al-Fātiḥah* (The Opening), bowing, prostrating, and sitting; it will be completed by saying, "*as-salāmu 'alaykum*" (peace be upon you); during the prayer, the imam and the rows of men and women behind him will all face towards Mecca; the worshippers will perform the prayer at a prescribed time involving the passing of the sun beyond the meridian point; and, at least three people will be present, as that is another condition that validates this prayer.

No other religion has this uniformity and consistency in its worship. Churches do not have a prescribed form of Sunday worship. The preacher may sing, play music, or read from the Bible. The Bible he—or she—reads from may be deemed unacceptable by other denominations and will most likely not be in the original Hebrew or Aramaic language in which it was written. The congregation may face Jerusalem or not.

There are also many different types of synagogues. In some, people express their devotion to the religion of Moses ﷺ by dressing in Polish hats of the eighteenth century and wearing European overcoats from a bygone era. There may or may not be music. While there is immense diversity

of practice and form, not to mention content, most attendees of the church will not know in what language Jesus ﷺ actually prayed, or for how long he prayed.

The Muslim prayer is not determined by any individual school or scholar or even group of scholars. All of its essential components are agreed upon by all schools within the fold of Islam, including the Sunnis and Shias. Muslims are blessed with a unity that no other religion has, as we have the same sources and the same set of practices, no matter how much we differ on the details. The Prophet ﷺ said, "I have left you on a clear path; night and day are the same on it." He also said, "I have left two things—if you cling to them you can never stray: the Qur'an and my practice."

Conclusion

While no consensus concerning women's leadership in prayer was ever achieved in the Islamic tradition, scholars mention only a handful of jurists who validated women leading the prayer: Among them were Abū Thawr, al-Ṭabarī, al-Muzanī, and Ibn 'Arabī al-Hātimī.²⁸ But other scholars rejected the proof offered by these scholars, and Ibn 'Abbās ﷺ himself indicated that women may lead only women. According to the majority of scholars, the hadith indicating that Umm Waraqah ﷺ led men in prayer in her house is problematic; it is not clear if Umm Waraqah ﷺ led the men since it is not stated whether the muezzin prayed with her or on his own. Moreover, this instance may very well have been among the special dispensations (*khaṣā'is*) that the Prophet ﷺ bestowed upon certain people. For example, the Prophet ﷺ deemed the testimony of Khuzaymah ﷺ equivalent to that of two men. Scholars agree with the soundness of the narration but confer that it applied only to that particular person. Furthermore, while Aḥmad

and some other Ḥanbalīs conferred that women may lead men in voluntary prayers in special cases, there is absolutely no textual evidence found in hadith literature to support women leading the Friday congregational prayer or any prayer outside of her home. Also, as the Ḥanafī scholars explained, a woman's impediment (*naqṣ*) to devotion warrants that she not lead men in prayer. The sound hadith clearly refers to menstruation as an impediment to a woman's devotion.

In addition, the Friday congregational prayer is not obligatory upon women (or on the sick, children, or slaves) and those who are exempt from Friday prayers cannot lead the prayer. The same ruling is given by Orthodox Jews for the prohibition of a woman leading others in required prayer service:

A woman may pray in a synagogue at specific times, but she is not obliged to [like Muslim women who may go to a mosque but are never obliged to]. Because she is not obliged, she may not count in a minyan of those who are obliged, nor may she lead others who are fulfilling their obligation.²⁹

But the main reason that female prayer leadership of men is not valid is because it is a clear innovation (*bid'ah*) in the religion. While it can be argued that women leading men in prayer has some basis, given the opinions of a few scholars concerning the hadith of Umm Waraqah ﷺ, there is no proof whatsoever for women leading the Friday congregational prayer in Islamic history. Thus, women leading the Friday congregational prayer can only be seen as an innovation in the religion with absolutely no precedent. By consensus, the first three generations of Muslims are the best people in the history of Islam, and, with the possible exception of Umm Waraqah in the privacy

of her home, none of the women from that time are known to have publicly led men in obligatory prayers. According to a sound hadith narrated on the authority of 'Ā'ishah ﷺ, the Prophet ﷺ stated, "Whoever introduces something new in this matter of ours [i.e. the religion] shall have it rejected."

As for the other daily prayers (besides the Friday congregational prayer), again, no evidence exists to suggest that the Prophet ﷺ, who championed the rights and spiritual equality of women, permitted female leadership in the mosque. Unless a person has achieved the status of independent scholarship,³⁰ he or she is not permitted by normative Islam to derive his or her own legal rulings from the Qur'an or the Sunnah. The Qur'an says, *Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know*,³¹ and criticizes those who bring controversial matters into public discourse instead of deferring to those in authority:

*And when some matter of security and alarm comes to them, they broadcast it; whereas had they only referred the affair to the Messenger and those with authority among them who are able to derive the appropriate response, they would have found out about it. And if not for the blessing and mercy of God on you, most of you would have followed Satan.*³²

While this verse refers to wartime situations, the principle is applicable in other areas: matters important to the community must be turned over to those able to discern the right responses, i.e., the rightly-guided scholars of our tradition and the living scholars who remain connected to them by their licensing chains.

In another verse of the same chapter,

AN UNFORTUNATE
MODERN TREND HAS
BEEN TO REJECT
HADITH AND HOLD ONLY
TO THE QUR'AN. BOTH
THE QUR'AN AND THE
SUNNAH REJECT AND
WARN OF THIS TREND.

the Qur'an states, *O you who believe, obey God and obey the Messenger and those who have authority over you. And if you differ concerning something, then refer it back to God and the Messenger, if you believe in God and the Last Day.*³³ There are two important points worth adumbrating here. The first is that "those who have authority" refers to both rulers and scholars, according to the great exegetes of Qur'an, including al-Ṭabarī and al-Naṣafī (d. 710/1310). Scholars have authority due to their knowledge. The Qur'an asks, *Are they the same, those who know and those who do not know?*³⁴ The second point is that *refer it back to God and the Messenger* means referring to the Book and the Sunnah after the Prophet's death. This is a clear refutation of those who refute the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ, for God could have simply said, "refer it back to the Book of God," or simply, "refer it back to God," but instead, He demands people refer to the Sunnah as well, as the Prophet ﷺ was sent to explain the Qur'an to us and to guide us.

The Prophet ﷺ said, "The most upright and trustworthy people of each generation will carry this religion." No authority in Islam is open to anyone, male or female, who is not willing to exhaust his or her energies in the acquisition of knowledge from the work of previous scholars.

An unfortunate modern trend has been to reject hadith and hold only to the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and the Sunnah reject and warn of this trend. The Qur'an clearly states, *Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it, and whatever he prohibits you from, abandon it.* A miraculous hadith states,

I have been given the Qur'an and its like [my Sunnah]. But the time is coming

when a man whose stomach is satiated will recline on his fancy sofa and say, "You should hold to this Qur'an; whatever you find it permits, consider permitted, and whatever you find it prohibits, consider prohibited." But what the Messenger has prohibited is no less authoritative than what the Qur'an has prohibited.³⁵

According to another sound hadith, the Prophet ﷺ states,

Does one of you think that he can recline on his ornamented couch believing that only God has prohibited things in the Qur'an? Indeed, I have, by God, commanded and prohibited and warned about things, and this is like the Qur'an and more.³⁶ I say, God has not permitted you to enter the houses of the People of the Book,³⁷ unless they permit you, nor can you strike their women, nor consume their agriculture, if they live in covenant with you [and are not belligerent].

All the aspects of Islam, such as its historical tolerance to other communities, its protection of the Jews, and its offer of refuge to them during the Spanish Inquisition, are due to the Sunnah of the Apostle of God ﷺ. Kindness towards children and women, kindness towards animals, and the charitable acts of establishing water stations for wayfarers that are found throughout the lands of Islam are all from his encouragement ﷺ. The richness of Islam is in the richness of his life, words, and practice, and those who love him most have historically honored this religion and instilled in others a love of it and a desire to enter into its bounty and peace. Attacks on his established practice are witting or unwitting attempts to unravel the wondrous tapestry of Islam.

One should not pick and choose what one likes and call it religion. "Heresy" is from a Greek word meaning "to choose for oneself." The heretic chooses what suits him and discards what he finds disagreeable. "Islam" means "submission," and submission is meaningless unless we give up something. And in the giving up of our opinions and desires, we are the winners; it is in submission that we are set free to fully achieve our humanity, and this is done in following—while retaining our own individuality—the extraordinary example of the Prophet ﷺ, which is inestimable in its reach and scope.

We have been clearly warned by the Prophet ﷺ about changing or altering his religion. People who do this are deprived of the thirst-quenching drink from his basin (*hawḍ*) of life-giving water as pure as paradise itself. According to a sound narration in the *Muwatta'*, on the Day of Judgment, the Prophet ﷺ will see a group of Muslims at a distance and call them to come and drink with him, but the angels will inform him, "They changed your way after you departed." And he will say, "Away, away! Leave me!"

Ibn 'Abbās ؓ was once asked about the verse, *Take care of your own souls, and the error of others will cause you no harm.*³⁸ He replied,

I asked an expert; I asked the Messenger of God ﷺ [what the verse means], and he replied, "When you see people obeying their irrational urges, and this world preferred over the next world, and every opinionated person enamored of his own opinion, take care of your own soul, and do not concern yourselves with the general population."

Perhaps the time has come for us to tend to our own souls.

NOTES

- 1 Imam Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 1, (Beirut: Maṭba'at al-Ḥalabī), 464.
- 2 The adverb of place in Arabic, *amām*, comes from the same root, and means "in front of." The active participles of the verb *amma* are many, but the most prominent are *umm*, which means "mother," "source," "foundation," and "matrix"; *imām*, which means "exemplar," "prayer leader," and "head" (as in leader); and *ummah*, which means "nation," "community," and "religious community." (An *ummah* is a group of people with a collective purpose, hence the relationship between *ummah* and *umm*.)
- 3 Ibn 'Ābidīn, *al-Mawsū'ah al-fiqhiyyah*, vol. 2 (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Awqāf, 1983), 204, 205.
- 4 One possible exception is the current leader of Morocco, who retains the title *amīr al-muminīn* (Emir of the Believers). Although the title retains the idea of the political sovereign of a Muslim state, it does not have the technical meaning of caliph, whether that sovereign claims the caliphate or not.
- 5 Ibn 'Ābidīn, *al-Mawsū'ah al-fiqhiyyah*, vol. 1, 368-369.
- 6 The seven obligatory prayers include the five daily prayers, the Friday congregational prayer, and the funeral prayer.
- 7 Prayers performed in Ramadan after the obligatory night (*'ishā*) prayer.
- 8 Prayers performed after the obligatory night (*'ishā*) prayer any day of the year.
- 9 Other conditions exist, such as ability to recite the Qur'an, certain health requirements, ability to fulfill the pillars of the prayer (*arkān*), fulfillment of the conditions of the prayers' validity, i.e. *wuḍū'* etc., and finally intention. Scholars differ on the obligation of intention when one leads the prayer, i.e. whether or not it is binding to intend leadership.
- 10 The actual wording in the fatwa is ambiguous: he does not indicate that Imam Aḥmad prohibited a woman from leading men in the obligatory prayer. According to another statement of Ibn Taymiyyah, "Illiterate men can be led in prayer by a learned woman in supererogatory prayers during Ramadan, according to the strongest position related on the authority of Aḥmad; as far as leading other supererogatory prayers [such as the eclipse prayer], there are two narrations [in the school, one prohibiting and the other permitting it]." See Shaykh Ṣādi Abū Jayb, *Mawsū'at al-ijmā'*, vol. 1 (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 148.
- 11 The hadith, "A woman should not lead a man in prayer (*lā ta'ummanna imra'ah rajulan*) is found in Ibn Mājah's (d. 273/886) collection in the Ḥalabī edition, vol. 1, 343. The hadith critic, Imam al-Buṣīrī says in *al-Zawā'id* that the hadith's chain is weak due to the weakness of two transmitters in the chain, 'Alī b. Zayd b. Jad'ān and 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-'Adawī. It is important to note that while weakness does not mean fabrication, weak hadith are not used as authoritative proof for a legal or creedal position (outside of the Ḥanbalī school).
- 12 The word used is *ittafaqū* which means, "they agreed," and has less weight than *ajma'ū* which means, "they reached consensus." *Ittafaqū* is the appropriate choice of words here, as there have been dissenting voices, although few and far between, who disagreed, which makes it impossible to say there is unanimous consensus among the scholars.
- 13 Ṣādi Abū Jayb, *Mawsū'at al-ijmā'*, 148.
- 14 Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid wa nihāyat al-muqtaṣid* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Hazm, 1999), 123.
- 15 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal is a notable jurist and the founder of his own school of Islamic jurisprudence. He is, however, more noted for his hadith knowledge than for his legal opinions, which due to his vast knowledge of hadith, vary on many of the same issues. His school was never practiced widely. Due to the Ḥanbalī position against speculative theology and the Ash'arī school, the Ḥanbalīs were often ridiculed by the ignorant adherents of the other schools. It should be noted that the Ḥanbalī school was traditionally a scholar's school and had many notable adherents whose scholarship is of the highest caliber.
- 16 Ibn 'Ābidīn, *al-Mawsū'ah al-fiqhiyyah*, vol. 1 (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Awqāf, 1983), 336.

- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *ʿAwn al-maʿbūd sharḥ sunan Abī Dāwūd*, vol. 1-2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1990), 211-212.
- 19 *Iqāmah* is the second call to the congregation announcing the beginning of prayer. This second call is given at the moment the prayer is to begin. The words of the *iqāmah* are similar to those of the *azan* (the first call to prayer), with the addition of the words “Prayer has begun.”
- 20 *Marāq al-falāḥ*.
- 21 The word *nāqishah* in Arabic generally means “in want of” or “lacking.” However, it is closer in meaning to “impeded” or “constrained” in this context. The Prophet ﷺ clarified that the *naqṣ* is due to the menstrual cycle and other impediments to worship that God had decreed for women. Hence, the want is not a shortcoming in a woman’s nature or being; rather, it is a trial from God related to her physiology and is no indication of her spiritual state with God.
- 22 The degree refers to the verse from the Qur’anic chapter, “The Cow” (*al-Baqarah*): *Women have the same rights as men in relation to their responsibilities, and men have one degree over them [in authority]* (2:228). The “degree” is highly debated. I prefer Ibn ʿAbbās’ position رضي الله عنه, which is that it is the degree of capitulation on a man’s part in that he fulfills all of his duties towards his wife but does not expect fulfillment of his rights from her.
- 23 Imam Yūsuf al-Fandalāwī, *Tahdhīb al-masālik fī nuṣrat madhhab Mālik*, vol. 2 (Morocco: Maktabat al-Awqāf, 1998), 187.
- 24 Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Kattānī, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār fīmā tawātarat min al-akhbār* (Casablanca: Dār al-Jadīdah, 1996), 167-169.
- 25 In the mosque where I pray the Friday congregational prayer, the women pray parallel to the men with a window between the two. The reason for this is simply that the building was bought and turned into a mosque, and this was the most suitable arrangement. To do otherwise would have created a serious space problem. This resolution to the space issue was the most reasonable.
- 26 This hadith is absolutely sound, but it concerns matters of worship, and scholars have clearly defined that “every” (*kull*) in the hadith means “every innovation” that is not “of the religion.” This construction is known grammatically as “*amm makḥṣūṣ*” or “specified generality,” and is used in the Qur’an many times. For example, the Qur’an states, *Everything was destroyed*, which does not mean literally “everything in the world,” but is specific to the area contextualized in the verse (46:25). What is intended in this particular hadith is “the majority of innovated matters” (*ghālib al-bidʿah*). Hence, examples of such innovations would include praying five prayer circuits, praying *fajr* after the sun rises, specifying that men and women should pray side by side, and a woman leading prayer in front of other women in clear violation of the established Sunnah of ʿĀʾishah and Umm Salamah رضي الله عنهما.
- 27 C. M. Pilkington, *Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 76-77.
- 28 There may be others, but I found no other sources.
- 29 C.M. Pilkington, *Judaism* (New York: Contemporary Books, 1995), 76.
- 30 A *mujtahid muṭlaq* (independent scholar) is one who has reached the highest level of scholarship. He or she may not follow the opinions of our righteous predecessors in his or her understanding and interpretation of the law, as he or she is obliged to derive rulings directly from the Book and the Sunnah.
- 31 Qur’an 21:7
- 32 Qur’an 4:83
- 33 Qur’an 4:59
- 34 Qur’an 39:9
- 35 Sharaf al-Dīn al-Ṭibī, *Sharḥ al-Ṭibī ʿalā mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah), 1:356-357.
- 36 “And more” refers to his complete understanding of the Qur’an and its translation in his practical life. God knows best.
- 37 Jews, Christians, and by extension the Zoroastrians and other religions including the Buddhists and Hindus who have entered into a covenant with the Muslims according to Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfah.
- 38 Qur’an 5:105