Call for papers for a workshop on

''Ālimahs, Muhaddithahs, and Mujtahidahs':
The Past and Present of Female Religious Authority in Shi'i Islam

Funded by Princeton University's Center for the Study of Religion (CSR),
the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), and
the National Institutes for the Humanities of Japan (NIHU)

To be held at Princeton University, March 6-8, 2014

Conveners: Mirjam Künkler (Princeton University, USA) and Keiko Sakurai (Waseda University, Japan)

In most contemporary Muslim societies, women face great obstacles to serve as religious leaders – be it as fatwa-issuing muftis, judges of religious law, teachers in institutions of higher religious learning, or recognized scholars of Islam – despite the facts that most schools of jurisprudence recognize women as muftis, and that, historically, local Muslim communities did recognize women as religious scholars and leaders over sometimes substantial periods of time.

The significant role of women in participating in, and shaping, the scholarly tradition through the centuries is still hardly reflected in either Western scholarly or public perceptions. Nearly all classic accounts of religious authority in Islam proceed from the assumption that this authority is male.[1] The possibility that women might exercise various aspects of religious authority is usually not discussed. Yet, when we dissect religious authority into its various manifestations (leading prayer, preaching, issuing fatwas, transmitting hadith, judging in court, shaping the Islamic scholarly tradition), nuances emerge that call the exclusively male character of religious authority in Islam into question.

Out of all the roles relating to religious authority, women's role as transmitters of *hadith*s is to date most thoroughly researched.[2] The in depth surveys of the biographical dictionaries of the 10th-15th centuries by scholars such as Ruth Roded, Jonathan Berkey, Renate Jacobi, Mohammad Akram Nadwi, Khaled Abou El Fadl,[3] Devin Stewart, Irene

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[1] For an overview of the literature, indicative of the assumed male gender of Islamic authority, see Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Brill Academic Publishing, 2006; Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500,* Berkeley 1972 [with the exception of the chapter by Fernea & Fernea]; Hamid Dabashi, *Authority in Islam. From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads,* New Brunswick/London 1989; Stephen Humphreys, "A Cultural Elite. The Role and Status of the 'Ulama in Islamic Society," in idem, *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry,* rev. ed., Princeton 1991, pp. 187-208; Muhammad

[2] For an early review by twentieth century scholars on women as *muhaddithat*, see Ignaz Goldziher, 'Women in Hadith Literature', *Muslim Studies*, vol. II (Chicago: Aldine Publications Co., 1968), 366-368, who notes that '*musnidas* are common up to about the tenth [sixteenth CE] century, and this title occurs very frequently in the lists of authentications in manuscripts and in *ijazas*.'

[3] Khaled Abou El-Fadl for instance notes, "it appears that certain families from Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad made a virtual tradition of training female transmitters and narrators, and that these female scholars regularly trained and certified male and female jurists and therefore played a major contributing role in the preservation and transmission of Islamic traditions." Ibid, "Legal and Jurisprudential Literature: 9th to 15th Century." *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*. General Editor Suad Joseph. Brill Online,

Schneider and Asma Sayeed, have catalogued the hundreds of women identified as outstanding teachers and scholars of hadith,[4] and recent scholarship has shed light in particular on the differences between the Sunni and Shiʿi tradition regarding the acceptability of women to function as hadith transmitters.[5]

Apart from transmitting religious knowledge, women also exercised roles closer to its production, as theologians, muftis and jurists. As Khaled Abou El Fadl notes, "in addition to the preservation and transmission of traditions, a careful reading of biographical dictionaries reveals a large number of women who are described as jurists (*faqihāt*), and who are asserted to have attained a level of competence that qualified them to issue fatwas."[6] Judging from the work of Roswitha Badry, such female jurists appear to be particularly prevalent in modern Iran post-1500s, where references to *mujtahidas* (women who have attained the qualification to engage in *ijtihād*), are not uncommon in accounts of Shiʿite clerical families.

A shortcoming of extant studies is that they nearly exclusively focus on women in one place (typically Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, or Nishapur) and usually around a relatively short time frame (~30-100 years), and thus can neither offer diachronic accounts nor analyses of geographic variation. For instance, cursory evidence suggests that -unlike their Mamluk counterparts- women in the Persianate world were not excluded from the *madrasa* environment, and that they also more frequently engaged in juristic scholarship than their Arab contemporaries. For the case of modern Shiʿism, we have ample evidence of women being referred to as jurists in the Iranian context from the 16th century onwards, but not in the Shiʿite communities of what is today Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, suggesting that the Iranian context, and not necessarily the Shiʿite context, may be unique. By bringing together scholars who have authored authoritative case studies, the conference will

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2012. In a similar vein, in his overview of the history of women as Hadith scholars, Mohammad Akram Nadwi shows that "in the formative period of Islam, the period of the Companions and Successors, women scholars are not only great in number but also great in prominence [and] great in their authority. Men go to them to learn, and doing so is normal." Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, (Oxford/London: Interface Publications, 2007).

[4] See Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections. From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who*, (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994); Irene Schneider, 'Gelehrte Frauen des 5./11. bis 7./13.Jh.s nach dem biographischen Werk des Dahabi (st. 748/1347)', in *Philosophy und Arts in the Islamic World. Proceedings of the 18th Congress of L'Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants held at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Sept. 3-9, 1996)*, eds. U. Vermeulen & D. de Smet. (Leuven, 1998), 107-121; Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo, A Social History of Islamic Education,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); Richard W. Bulliet, 'Women and the Urban Religious Elite in the Pre-Mongol Period', in *Women in Iran, From the Rise of Islam to 1800,* ed. Guity Neshat and Lois Beck, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 68-79; Renate Jacobi, "Der Gelehrte und die Dichterin. Eine Seelenfreundschaft im mamlukischen Ägypten," in *Studien zur Semitistik und Arabistik. Festschrift für Hartmut Bobzin.* Ed. By Otto Jastrow, Shabo Talay, and Herta Hafenrichter, Wiesbaden 2008, S. 183-203;Renate Jacobi "Gelehrte Frauen im islamischen Spätmittelalter," in *Nonne, Königin, Kurtisane: Wissen, Bildung und Gelehrsamkeit von Frauen in der frühen Neuzeit.* Ed. by Michaela Hohkamp/Gabriele Jancke, Königstein 2004, 225-246; and Roswitha Badry, 'Zum Profil weiblicher 'Ulama' in Iran: Neue Rollenmodelle für 'islamische Feministinnen'?', in *Die Welt des Islams* XL, no. 1. (March 2000), 7-40.

[5] Devin Stewart, "Women's Biographies in Islamic Societies: Mirza 'Abd Allah al-Isfahani's Riyad al-'Ulama'," in *Rhetoric of Biography: Narrating Lives in Persianate Societies*, ed. by L. Marlow. Harvard University Press, 2011; and Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[6] See Abou El Fadl, *Legal and Jurisprudential Literature*.

provide a space where these variations can be assessed, and where it can be debated whether, for instance, women indeed had better access to the *madrasas* of medieval Persia than those under direct Abbasid control, whether women were indeed more accepted as authors of juristic thought in the Sunni than the Shiʿite tradition, but are more prevalent as juristic thinkers in modern Iran than in Arab lands, and if so, what the likely reasons for each of these variations may be. Only once we have a better account of the variations in female religious authority (across space and time, as well as always 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, and, conversely, stifled the phenomenon.

Proceedings

Draft papers will be due one month prior to the workshop and will be circulated among all paper givers and registered participants. During the workshop, we will dedicate one hour per paper to the presentation and discussion.

Publication Plans

As a result of this conference, we would like to publish selected papers in a special journal issue or an edited book volume. The workshop also has the aim of taking stock of the research developments in the field on female religious authority in Shiʿism and establishing a research network of those scholars working on the issue in diverse geographic environments and across various time frames. The network can then identify possibilities and occasions for further research collaborations and the development of larger, comparative and inter-disciplinary research projects incorporating the findings developed here.[7]

Submission of Abstracts

Interested parties are asked to submit abstracts of around 300 words (addressing also the source material and methodology used), and biographical information of ~150 words by November 1, 2013 to kuenkler@princeton.edu and keiko.sakurai@waseda.jp. Subsidies for travel and accommodation will be available.

We invite paper proposals that focus on Shiʿite female religious authority across any time period. Please note that this conference will not deal with the phenomenon of religious activists or leaders who are not religious authorities (e.g. women who are leaders of religious organizations or NGOs, but who do not exercise theological or juristic authority). Paper proposals on the following mojtahedas and 'ālimahs are particularly welcome:

- The wife and daughters of Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 1067),
- The daughters of Mullāh Sadrā,

[7] The conference will follow three other events with related interest, albeit bringing together different constituencies: a conference of graduate students and junior scholars held at the University of Oxford in 2011, on female religious leadership more generally (including leaders of religious movements, thus not only theological and jurisprudential authorities); a conference comparing advocacy for female religious authority in Islam and Catholicism held at the University of Roehampton, London, in September 2012, bringing together scholars and activists; and a graduate student conference on female religious leadership in Islam held at UCSB in March 2013.

- Āmina Begum Majlesi, sister of Mohammad Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1699), who authored the extensive *hadith* Compendium *bihār al-anwār*, daughter of Mohammad Taqi Majlesi (d. 1659), wife of Mohammad Sāleh Māzandarāni,
- Hamida Ruydashti Esfahāni, d. 1676-7, (daughter of Sharif b. Mohammad Ruydashti, a student of Shaykh Bahā'i's, as well as her daughter Fātima (d. after 1690-1),
- The daughter of Behbahāni (d. 1790), Āmina Begum Hā'eri (d. 1827-28),
- Nasma Hātun (d. ca. 1878), daughter of Shaykh Ja'far Kāshef al-Gitā', married to the *usuli* scholar Sayyid Mohammad Taqi Najafi Esfahāni.
- Ayatollah Sayyid Hosayn Borujerdi's mother, Āgā Begum Tabātabā'i (d. 1905/1906),
- Umm Kulthum Rawgāni Qazvini (d. 1902-03), wife of Ibrāhim al-Musawī Zanjāni, (on her, see his Tārikh-e Zanjān: 'olamā' va dāneshmandān, Tehrān: Ketābforushi-ye Moṣṭafavī, 1352 [1973],
- The Kuwaiti mojtaheda Fātima Lāri (b. 1911-2), from Laristan, daughter of Hajj Sayyid 'Ali,
- The aunt of Nosrat Amin (Bānu Isfahāni, d. 1983),
- Analyses of Sakhāwi's 12th volume (Note the work done by Angela Degand on this topic in the 1980s. German, not translated.).

Sources:

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Qavimi, Fakhri, *Kārnāmah-ye zanān-e mashhur-e Irān dar 'elm, adab, siyāsat, maẕhab, honar, ta'lim va tarbiyat az qabl az Eslām tā 'aṣr-e ḥāẕer* / mo'alef va gerdāvarandah Fakhri Qavimi (Khashāyār Vazirī). Tehrān: Vezārat-e Āmuzesh va Parvaresh, 1352 [1973].

Zanjānī, Ebrāhīm al-Musavi. *Tārikh-e Zanjān: 'olamā' va dāneshmandān,* Tehrān: Ketābforushī-ye Moṣṭafavī, 1352 [1973].