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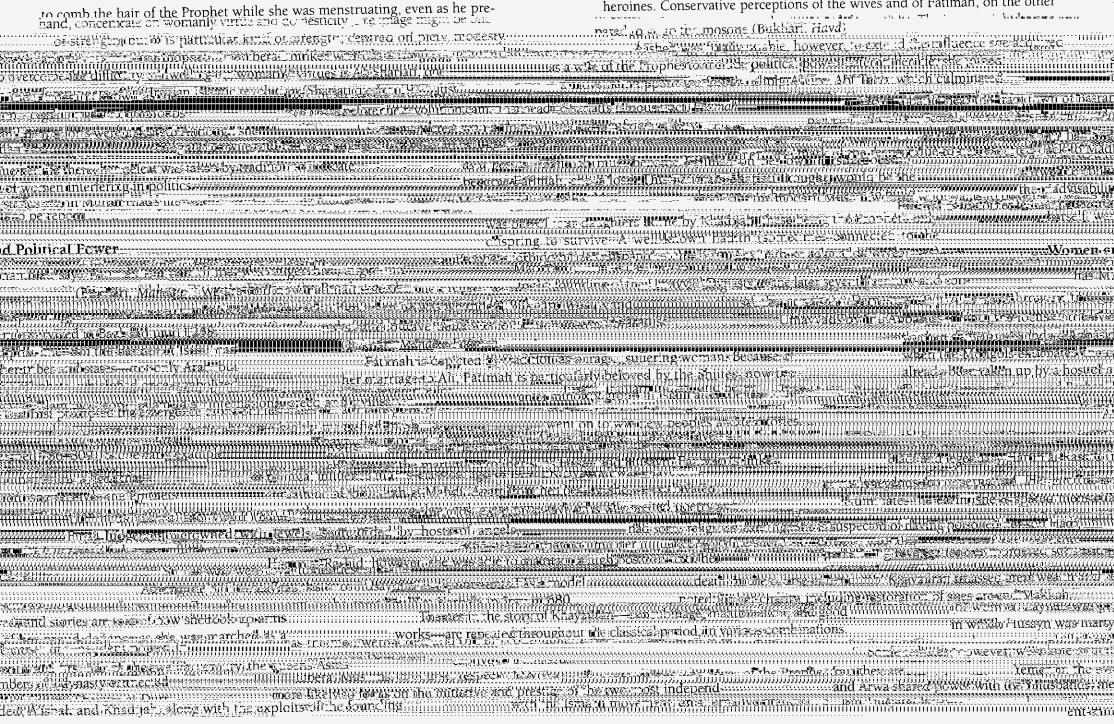
## Symposium on Religion and Politics WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

"Islam and Female Imams"

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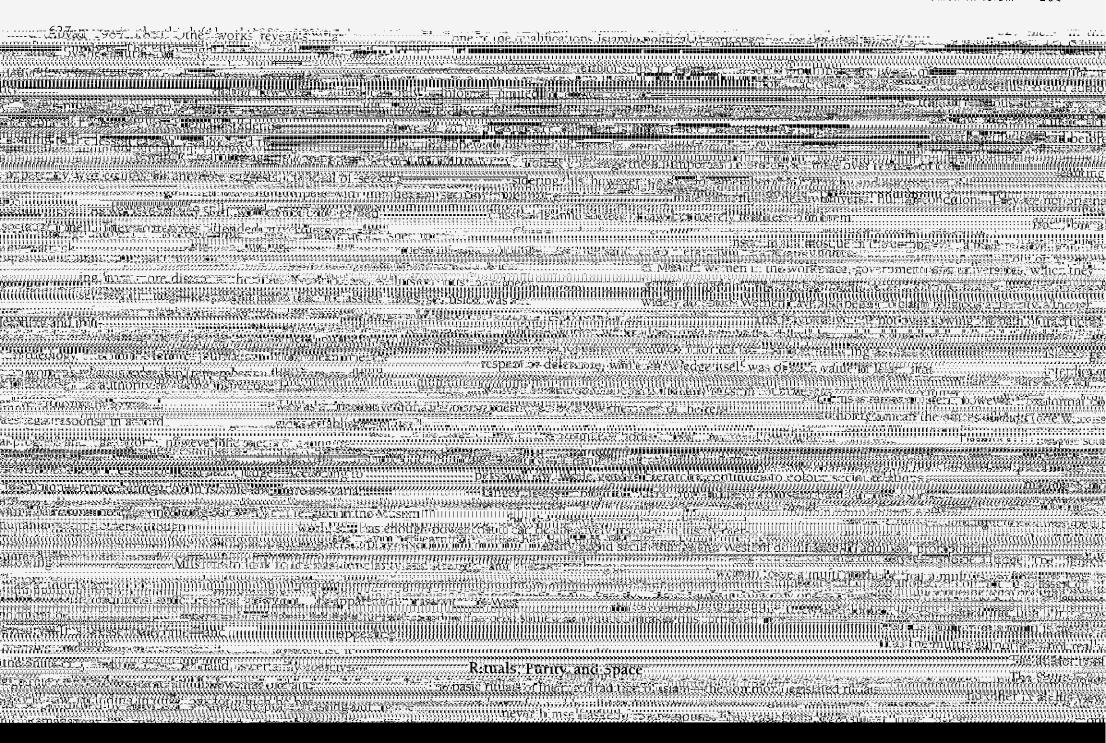
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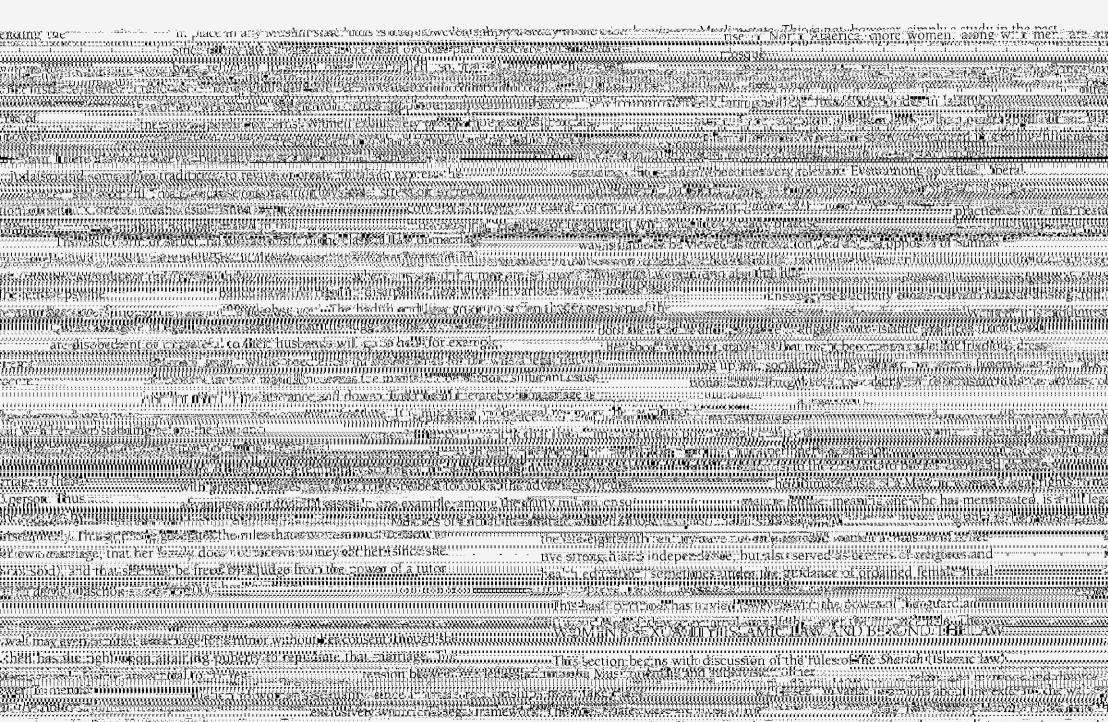
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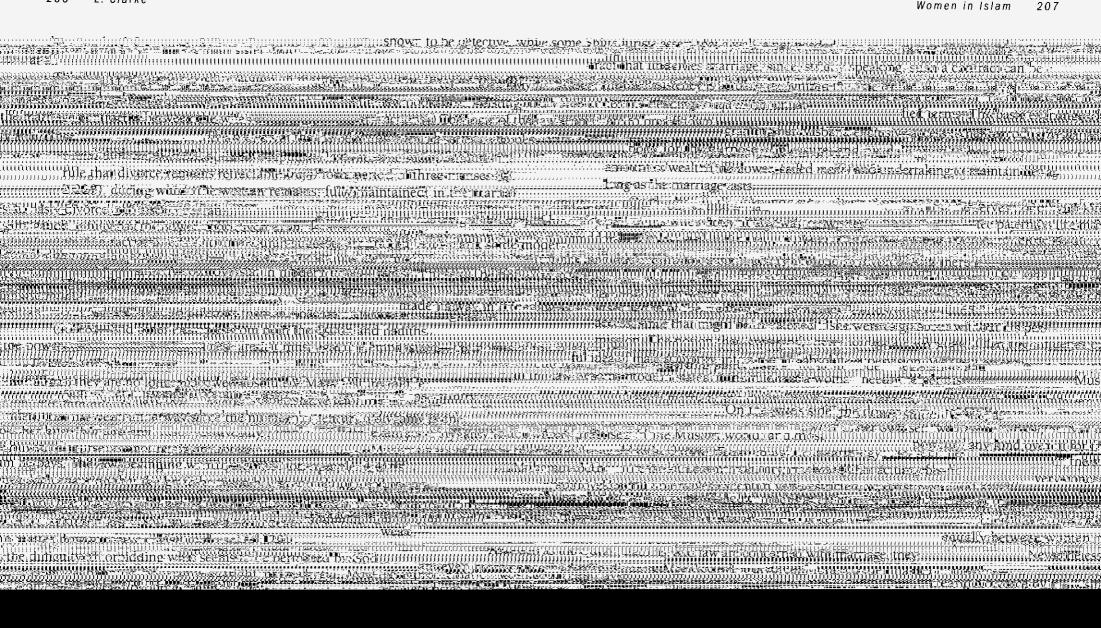
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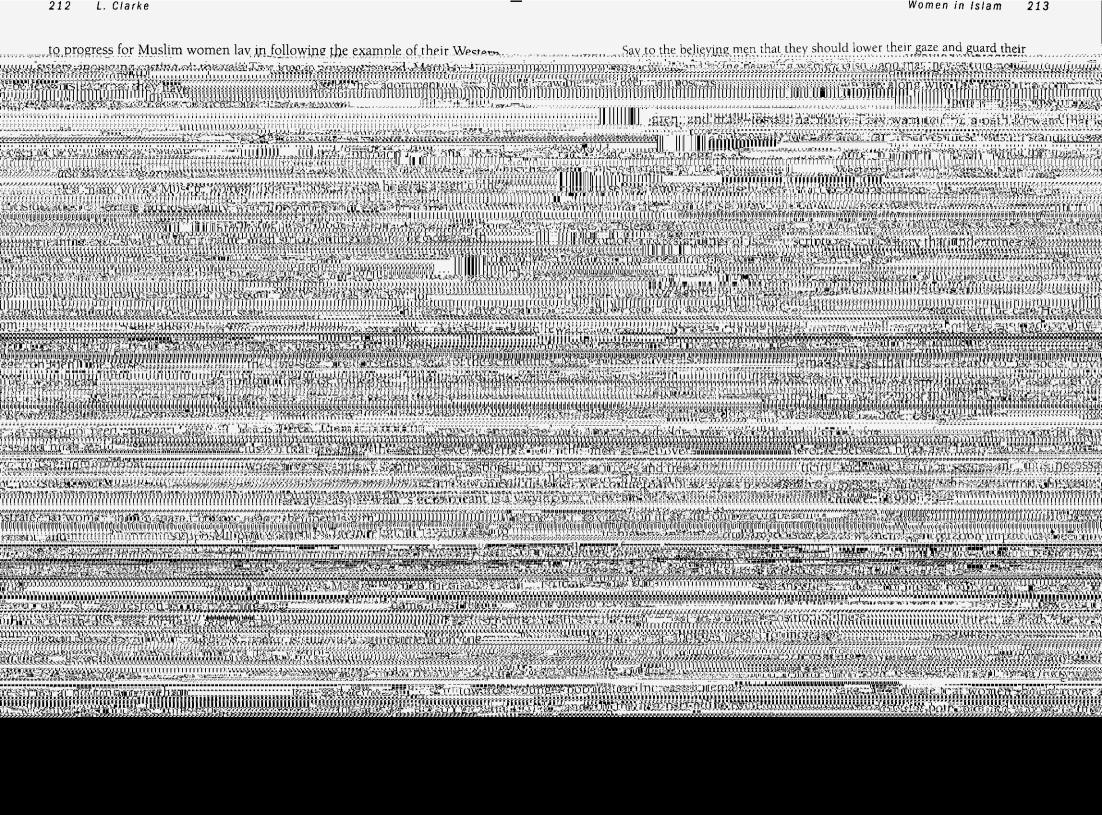
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One day We shall call all people according to their Imams. Whoever is given his book in his right hand will not be subject to the slightest injustice. But whoever was blind in this world will be blind in the next and completely astray from the path. ( 1 1)

March 06, 2008

women is so they will not be prevented — by being blocked from sacred texts or houses of worship and study — from accessing the liberating message of obedience to God alone.

generation, Muslim women are confident that they have a right to study and speak about Qur'an interpretation, the and Islamic law. Confidence springs from the knowledge that it is not an innovation to have women authoritatively and publicly interpreting and teaching Islamic texts; rather, this is a renewal of the spirit of the early Islamic community.

At the same time as there is progress in opening the field of religious scholarship to women, there are significant challenges in developing institutions and forms of religious leadership through which women can exercise authority. Because there is no ordination in Islam and no universally recognized body that legitimizes scholars, scholarly authority is always relational. Bernard Weiss notes with respect to the legal scholars of classical Islam that,

The Muslim jurists enjoyed authority by virtue of the respect accorded to them by the rest of society ... [this respect was] born of genuine confidence in the expertise the jurists possessed, an expertise resulting from years of professional training. The jurists were the ones to whom one could turn when in need of legal advice or assistance. In the eyes of the lay masses, the jurists were indeed what they claimed to be, persons qualified to declare what the law of God was. Thus the social ground of juristic authority meshes with the formal ground.

Here Weiss identifies a number of things necessary for a jurist to be successful, in particular, professional training and the ability to help people with their problems. One limitation for many indigenous American Muslim scholars is that, lacking access to respected and professional Islamic seminaries or colleges, their credentials are seen as (and in terms of technical ability, often are) inferior to those of immigrant scholars. Some have tried to compensate for this deficiency with overseas training, but most Muslim women have not been successful at being accepted at such institutions, or they have found the perspective at these institutions too conservative and not particularly relevant to their American context. As a result, American Muslim women are perhaps even more eager than men to see the development of professional American Islamic educational programs.

Weiss's observation that Muslim religious leaders acquire authority to the extent that they are able to help people with their problems is profound. The ability of leaders to help others depends on a number of factors, including the strength of their social standing, political influence, communication abilities and institutional support. The main challenge for Muslim women, in earlier times and today, is not only to increase their knowledge, but also to increase their authority by attaining a position in society that enables them to effectively help others. Ruth Roded, for example, has shown that medieval Muslim women not only had trouble accessing religious learning as easily as men, but that those who were able to acquire a substantial education were almost completely excluded from holding office.x

This does not mean, however, that only Muslim leaders who hold office have spiritual authority or are able to help people with their problems. Indeed, accepting an official position may diminish a leader's authority, if the position is under the authority of a discredited political regime, or if holding office is seen as an indication of excessive worldliness. In some Muslim communities, complete independence from any institution may be interpreted as a sign of piety, giving such a person a spiritual authority that can be powerful. However, if the community

considers an institution legitimate, there is no doubt that if women are excluded from office	in

wanted to communicate to the Chinese Muslims that we would be combining our prayers according to the prophetic *sunnah* because we were traveling. We said the Arabic work *musafir* "traveler" and immediately the women understood our purpose and made sure that the late afternoon prayer (*'asr*) did not begin in the mosque until we had time to catch up on our delayed noon prayers (*dhuhr*). None of these women, and few from our group, could use the Arabic language for communication. However we all shared common core rituals, identified by the Arabic terms used in the Qur'an and the *sunnah*, and thus were able to both communicate basic information about our worship and were able to pray together.

But there is the catch to this story: if Muslims are so conservative and uniform in their worship, why is it that this exchange I had with Chinese Muslims took place in a "women's mosque," a phenomenon I had never experienced, nor heard of, before traveling to China? A greater paradox was to be found in the fact that, although these women followed the minority Hanafi legal position that women should not pray together in congregation, the woman's mosque was headed by anu ahong, literally, a "woman imam." I had never heard of such a thing — how could I understand this phenomenon within the context of the paradigms of religious leadership I had learned?

To begin to understand this apparent paradox, we might want to consider the relationship between the function and form of the imam. The term "imam" literally means "leader" in the Arabic language and is normally used to signify a person who is a leader in some religious field or practice. For example, a person can be a leader in scholarship; in this sense, the eponyms of the Sunni schools of law are called "Imam" (Ahmed, Malik, al-Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa). The term "imam" also applies to the person who performs the function of leading a congregational prayer. Many statements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad indicate the primary importance of the five daily prayers (salawat) as opportunities for forgiveness, spiritual refreshment and dialogue with God.xiv That these prayers are primarily intended to strengthen the relationship between each individual and his or her Merciful Creator is demonstrated by the fact that they must be attended to whether one is alone or in the company of others. It is not obligatory that these prayers be made in congregation, unless one is in a setting that provides the necessary conditions for congregation. If we examine these conditions set by traditional Islamic scholarship, we see that maintaining a communal unity is an implicit goal. Thus, if one enters a setting where a congregational prayer is being held, one should join the group, and not establish another prayer group or pray by oneself. According to the sunnah of the Prophet, all congregational prayers, even if the congregation is only a few people, need to be led by one person.

Given the importance of congregational prayer in Islam, we expect Islamic traditon to pay significant attention to the requirements for leadership of the prayer. What I find fascinating and significant is that the requirements are almost always relational and contextual

The majority of legal schools consider it "recommended" ( — a technical term indicating a religiously meritorious act) for women to pray together in congregation with one of them leading as imam, if they are not praying with the general (i.e., male inclusive) congregation. These schools base their position on a number of reports that the wives of the Prophet Muhammad led women in congregational prayer. Many of the Hanafi scholars who reject the practice of women praying in congregation do not mention the example of the wives of the Prophet. It seems in this matter, as with a number of other issues, the Hanafi school retains a position that was formulated on the basis of reasoning early in Islamic history when they did not

theologians against the heretics and innovators and things like that. Among the laudable (innovations) are writing books of (religious) knowledge, building madrasas (religious

transmit their faith to their children; Chinese Muslim leaders believed that women needed to be educated in their faith in order to teach their children; in accordance with Islamic (and Confucian) norms of gender segregation, women needed their own space to learn their faith; it was not suitable for men to staff women's mosques; communities appointed female leaders — "imams" — for the women's mosques. All of this was done without violating the traditional rules

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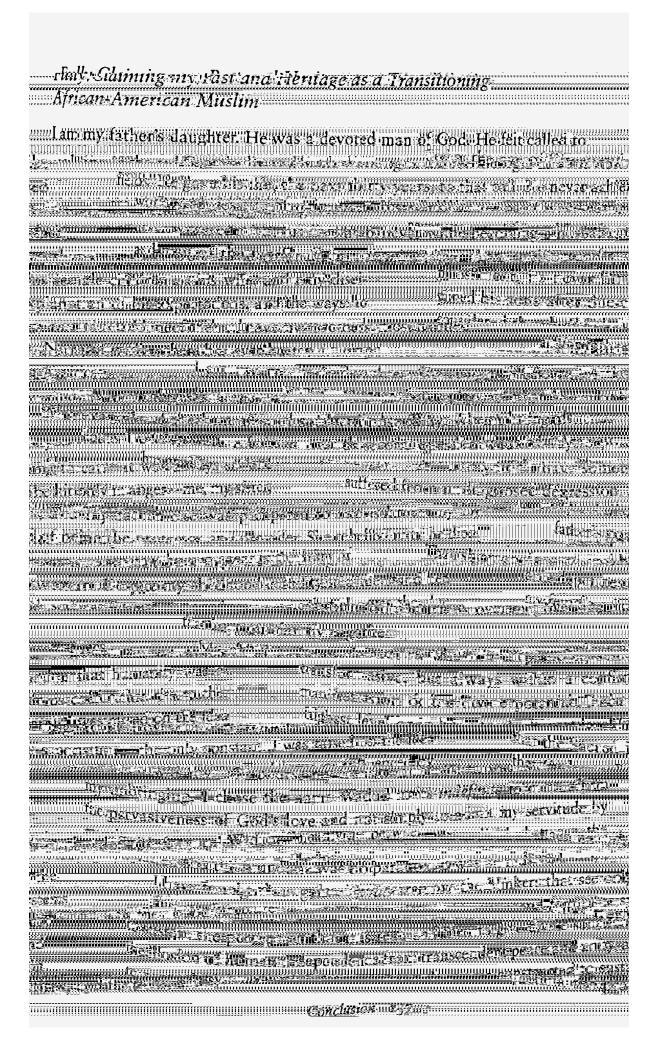
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scholar might respond to this justification saying, "The sources you cite may be authentic, however, you fail to mention that during the time of the Prophet, women not only came regularly to the mosque for prayers, there were also women living in the mosque. All the men of that time

## Conclusion

## Why Fight the Gender *Iihad*?

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