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Saffiya Zainab Latif

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The Thesis Committee for Saffiya Zainab Latif
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

She was a Pious Devotee: Piety, Authority, and Women in Medieval Islam

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

____
Hina Azam

____
Samy Ayoub

She was a Pious Devotee: Piety, Authority, and Women in Medieval Islam

By

Saffiya Zainab Latif, BA

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Dedication

For the best worshipper I have ever known,

My grandmother, Jamila Latif

Whose memory inspired this work.

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Abstract

She was a Pious Devotee: Piety, Authority, and Women in Medieval Islam

Saffiya Zainab Latif, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Hina Azam

This thesis centers on the study of Muslim women's piety in the medieval period. Specifically, I examine the biographies of saintly women as found in the work of the 15th-century Shāfiʿī scholar, Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥiṣnī. In his *Kitāb al-muʾmināt wa'l-ṣāliḥāt wa'l-ayqāẓ min al-mahlūkāt* (The book of faithful and righteous women, cautious of spiritual vices), one encounters descriptive accounts of pious female devotees performing incredible feats of ritual worship like excessive weeping and continuous prayer. I argue that these pious practices, operating as a form of social power, granted women a degree of social autonomy and religious influence amongst their male peers. In particular, women's ritual acts enabled them to bypass certain gender-based norms enshrined in the law and achieve spiritual equality, if not superiority, over men. I situate my historical analysis of women's piety in the context of contemporary scholarship on Muslim women, which has tended to focus on women's place and power through the lens of the law and

its subsidiary discourses. I argue that an exploration of non-legal discourses, such as the one under study, offers alternative understandings into women's social function and roles in medieval Islam. Finally, this project raises critical questions concerning the possible relevance of piety, as a form of social and religious capital, to the project of developing contemporary Muslim women's religious authority and power.

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Introduction

Piety and Power

> ʿAmmār b. al-Rāhib, who was among the agents of God Most High in this life, said, "I saw a poor woman[1] in my dream—she was a regular participant at our *dhikr* circles. I said to her, "Hello, O poor woman, hello!" She replied, "Not quite so O ʿAmmār! That indigent woman you once knew has departed and in her place has come the enriched and great one!"[2] I asked, "How is this?" She responded, "What would you ask about one for whom all of Paradise is made permissible?" I said, "How is this? May God have Mercy on you." She replied, "Through [attendance at] the circles of remembrance, and steadfastness to the Truth."[3]

This account, found in the fifteenth-century biographical book of pious women by the scholar Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥiṣnī (d. 829/1426), reveals a historical picture of Muslim women's influence and authority quite at odds with the one painted by modern scholarship on Muslim women. Here, a saintly woman who we are told is a regular participant at male *dhikr* gatherings appears in the dream of an apparently well-known Sufi ascetic, ʿAmmār b. al-Rāhib. In this dream, ʿAmmār greets this "poor woman"

[1] ʿAmmār b. al-Rāhib identifies this woman as "*miskīna*," which I have rendered here as "indigent/poor woman," following the common definition of this term. It is less likely that "*miskīna"* refers to this woman's personal name given that most of the women in al-Ḥiṣnī's biographical work are described using similar appellations but remain predominately nameless.

[2] *Al-ghanī al-akbar*

[3] Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, ed. Ahmad Farīd Mizyadī (Beirut, 2010), 71.

enthusiastically, suggesting that they were familiar acquaintances. She informs ʿAmmār that she has attained a higher spiritual standing than when ʿAmmār had presumably last seen her. When ʿAmmār asks how this was so, she rephrases his question into one of religiously instructive value, revealing that it was through her attendance at *dhikr* circles and steadfastness to the truth that she was able to ascend from the materially "indigent one" to the spiritually "enriched one." These are the general qualities of the one who enters paradise.

Although this entire exchange takes place in a dream, what seems to stand out in this narrative is the apparent normative ability of a medieval Muslim woman to engage with non-familial men and enter male-dominated spaces, apparently unfettered by legal constraints, and to offer authoritative religious advice to a male peer. Given scholarly and popular perceptions about the dearth of women's religious authority and agency in medieval Islamic society, how is it that this woman is able to act in ways that seemingly contradict such narratives? For instance, how is this woman is able to provide religious and spiritual counsel to a man in a predominately patriarchal Islamic society?

No mention is made of her religious knowledge as a possible source of her unique privileges, nor is there word of her connection to an elite and scholarly family. Rather, what seems to distinguish this woman and afford her social and religious standing, if not authority, is her pious practice, here reflected in her active membership at *dhikr* circles. This is to say, it is her piety, which her contemporaries recognize and valorize positively, that grants her socio-religious status. It is this notion of piety as a foundational and operational source of power for Muslim women that is the subject of

the present study. In seeking to understand the significance and function of Muslim women's piety in medieval Islamic society (c. 1500 C.E.), I aim to investigate the following questions: What were the defining features of Muslim women's piety? Were gender, social class, and family status determining factors in Muslim women's participation in pious life? How did piety function as a source of socio-religious capital and how might it have contributed to Muslim women's ability to gain and exercise power in the religious realm? It is my contention that a study of medieval Muslim women's pious practices may offer valuable insight into women's social lives, particularly their place and role in pre-modern Islamic society.

The State of the Field

I contend that a historical analysis of Muslim women's lived social practices may yield considerable insight into how Muslim women might have garnered and exercised religious authority. Regrettably, however, the overwhelming tendency of modern scholarship on Muslim women has been to analyze women's place and power in Islam vis-à-vis the Islamic legal and exegetical traditions. This primacy given to law and its subsidiary discourses in the study of pre-modern Muslim women has had two perhaps unintended consequences: First, it has taken the legal-textual tradition as somehow solely representative of Muslim women's status and agency in pre-modern Islamic society and second, it has marginalized, if not altogether excluded, non-legal discourses in assessing the lives of Muslim women. The unfortunate result is that we are

left with only a limited glimpse into the complex and multilayered history of pre-modern Muslim women.

This obsession with Islamic law extends beyond the study of Muslim women to the state of the field of Islamic studies more generally. Shahab Ahmed, in his magnum opus, *What is Islam?,* identifies this problem as one of a "widespread tendency to identify authentic and normative 'Islam' with Islamic *law*."[4] Ahmed writes:

> This totalizing "legal-supremacist" conceptualization of Islam as *law*, whereby the "essence" of Islam is a phenomenon of prescription and proscription, induces, indeed *constrains* us to think of Muslims as subjects who are defined and constituted by and in a cult of regulation, restriction, and control. As a matter of social analysis, it fails to come to terms with...the pervasive historical fact of real societies in which Muslims who were very much in the "social mainstream" set up, valorized positively, celebrated, and lived by norms that were in theoretical and practical contradiction of the totalizing legal discourse that we are told…is "the core and kernel of Islam.[5]

In positing the "law=Islam" construction, Ahmed explains that scholars ultimately "endorse just one authority claim among many within the human and historical phenomenon of Islam" and thus, fail to account for the "full and central

[4] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 117.
[5] Ahmed, 120.

participation of other normative discourses in the construction of Islamic realities."[6] The same can be said for scholars of women and Islam, who, by only engaging legal and exegetical discourses in their study of Muslim women, inadvertently cede legitimacy to the very legal traditions whose authority they wish to undermine. In other words, by taking a law-centric approach to the study of Islam, they assume the centrality and normativity of the Islamic legal tradition, thereby deemphasizing and disregarding other discourses of analysis, which may prove helpful in rethinking the place of women in Islam.

It is important to note, however, that the overemphasis on Islamic law today by scholars of Islam is not exactly misplaced. In large part, scholars are reacting to the process of codification of Sharī'a laws in modern Muslim nation-states—especially within the realm of personal status and criminal law, which has resulted in a near distortion of traditional Islamic legal thought and practice. Today, many Muslim women suffer under what can be termed inegalitarian and misogynist legal systems throughout the Muslim world. However, some scholars have argued that these contemporary legal systems are not actually representative of how Islamic law functioned in its pre-colonial formulations. In his study of the Islamic state, Wael Hallaq opines, "…the pre-nineteenth century Sharī'a shares very little (if anything at all) with its present forms as remanufactured at the hands of the modern nation-state."[7] Hallaq goes on to make the provocative claim that not only was the application of pre-

[6] Ahmed, 123-129.
[7] Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2014), 184.

modern Islamic law more egalitarian to women, but also superior to any extant legal system.[8] Judith Tucker more or less confirms this position in her socio-historical study of fatwa collections from seventeenth and eighteenth-century Syria and Palestine. Although Tucker does not absolve pre-modern Islamic legal systems of its androcentrism, she argues that the legal flexibility and judicial activism of an uncodified legal network of muftis, qadis, and kinship groups, served as a counterbalancing force to the gender discrimination embedded within the law. For instance, in the context of divorce law, Tucker writes:

> The unequal and gendered nature of divorce was not…changed in any fundamental way, but the muftis, the courts, and the members of the general population interacted to soften gender privilege and provide women with more latitude in matters of divorce than one familiar with the bare outlines of the law might have initially expected.[9]

But such a network of legal support may be considered one of the bygones of a pre-modern past: Tucker writes that today, due to the codification of Islamic law, "the legal system that permitted such flexibility is nowhere to be seen, nor is it really conceivable in the context of contemporary society."[10] Thus, the focus on law on the part of contemporary scholars of Islam, especially scholars of women and Islam, is

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[8] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 184-5.
[9] Judith Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 112.
[10] Tucker, 186.

made comprehensible in light of the poverty of modern Islamic legal thought and practice and the activist desire to reappraise, reinterpret, and reformulate law for the betterment of society.

Leaving context aside, however, the fact still remains that a law-centric approach to Islamic history lends itself to a rather incomplete, if not incorrect, historical reading of the lives of Muslim women and also of Islamic society—one in which women's lack of legal power resulted in their social and religious marginalization. This of course is not to say that the law can never serve as evidence of social reality—indeed, Islamic legal literature can speak to the patriarchal norms and practices of the time—but rather, that it only offers a single representation of a multifaceted history.

Theory and Methodology

In his foundational work on Islamic law, *Sharia: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Wael Hallaq asserts that modern scholarship on Islam has neglected to include alternative conceptions of power in understanding women's roles in pre-modern Islamic society. Hallaq avers:

> Historians have paid attention to the gendered fabric of the Muslim social order, of family, marriage and divorce, but this very attention has been driven—on nearly all methodological and interpretive levels—by modernly defined frames of analysis where, for instance, power at large…is delimited by, and inferred from, material, economic and political structures. These are the very notions and structures upon which capitalist and power-defined modernity rests, but these

> also became the enshrined parameters and substrates of historical analysis. While it is undeniable that such approaches to the history of the Other are highly productive, they cannot suffice in gauging either the spectrum or the magnitude of privilege, prestige, status, rank or epistemic authority. For moral, religious, epistemic and other types of socially based powers operated with efficacy but have received, in current scholarship, next to marginal attention. If the underlying common concern of this Islamicist scholarship is to measure the extent of female legal power in the gendered world of Islam, it has greatly neglected *the moral, the religious and to some extent the socio-structural foundations of power*, aspects that the modern analysis of power has, perforce, left largely underdeveloped.[11]

Here, Hallaq is suggesting that a full appraisal of Muslim women's power should include not only its legal dimensions, but also moral and religious forms of power. It is with this holistic outlook in mind that I embark on my study of Muslim women's pious practices. An intellectual foray into moral and religious forms of power will serve as a corrective to the overemphasis on legal traditions, which may not be fully illustrative of the lives of Muslim women.

In order to construct a general portrait of medieval Muslim women's pious practices, I will use the biographical work on pious women, *Kitāb al-muʾmināt wa'l-*

[11] Wael Hallaq, Sharīa: Theory, Practice, Transformations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 184, (emphasis added).

ṣāliḥāt wa'l-ayqāẓ min al-mahlūkāt (The book of faithful and righteous women, cautious of spiritual vices) by the abovementioned fifteenth-century scholar, Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥiṣnī. Al-Ḥiṣnī was a prominent Shāfiʿī legal scholar based in Damascus, who studied under a number of well-known jurists and theologians. He authored many legal commentaries and religious works, including one in which he famously launches an attack of Ibn Taymiyya's theological claims.[12] In his *Kitāb al-muʾmināt*, one finds descriptive accounts of female devotees performing incredible feats of ritual worship like prolonged fasts and frequent pilgrimage. Although al-Ḥiṣnī culls his stories of pious women from Ibn al-Jawzi's earlier thirteenth-century biographical dictionary, the *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa*, his choice to recycle these accounts in an entire monograph devoted to the subject suggests that they were still socially and culturally relevant two centuries later.

Al-Ḥiṣnī's biographical work is divided into three major sections. The first section provides a brief introduction to the text. Following the introduction are biographical accounts of saintly women, which constitutes the bulk of the work. For my purposes here and given the limited scope of this paper, I have chosen to focus only on a handful of accounts, which reflect some of the main motifs of piety found throughout the work. In the last section, al-Ḥiṣnī's deals with vices that are spiritually destructive to one's religious growth according to Sufi thought. This section, more hortatory in nature, enumerates the common types of spiritual diseases that plague aspiring ascetics, such as

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[12] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 5-6. For a biography of al-Ḥiṣnī, see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ,* XI, 76-7.

jealousy or arrogance, and strongly urges and warns women to eschew such spiritual vices.

In his preface, al-Ḥiṣnī reveals some of the possible reasons for writing a book of this nature. He first establishes religious precedent for his authorial decision to compose a book exclusively addressed to and about saintly women. He asserts that God has addressed both men and women in the Qurʾān, quoting the now so-called "egalitarian" verse of the Qurʾān in which God affirms the spiritual equality of the sexes[13]:

> For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.[14]

He then explains that there are many verses like this in the Qurʾān; perhaps suggesting that since God has addressed both men and women, it is necessary for him to do so as well. He writes that he had previously composed a biographical work on righteous men, but had not yet done so for women:

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[13] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 11.

[14] Qurʾān, (33:35). For all of my translations of the Qurʾān, I have used Abdullah Yusuf Ali's widely used translation, *The Holy Qurʾān: Text, Translation, and Commentary* unless stated otherwise.

> I mentioned stories about men in my book, "Biography of the Righteous," but I did not write about virtuous women; so, in the pages that follow, I want to mention the biographical stories of righteous women. Perhaps by mentioning [these stories], the conditions of those who listen to them will change like those before them. There is no doubt that the mentioning of their conditions is inspiring and will be a motivation [for women] to catch up to their pious female predecessors…[15]

It seems al-Ḥiṣnī is explicit about his purpose for writing this book. He intends for aspiring female ascetics to learn from and emulate the pious practices of their female forebears recorded in these accounts, so that they, too, can achieve a higher spiritual station. His move to address a female readership, perhaps uncharacteristic of male biographers, indicates a perceived level of literacy among Muslim women at the time, which likely had some reality to it. It also further suggests that there was an important social value placed on women's pious practices during this time. Though al-Ḥiṣnī unequivocally directs his commentary to women, using the female plural pronoun in Arabic, one wonders whether al-Ḥiṣnī might have also envisioned his book for a male readership, given that all of the narrators in these accounts about women are men. Men also appear to be the ostensible recipients of knowledge in these stories: saintly women are frequently depicted as instructing naïve or ignorant men in spiritual matters. Moreover, the question of who historically read al-Ḥiṣnī's work – men, women, or

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[15] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 11-12.

both? – adds to the possibility that al-Ḥiṣnī might have also intended that male ascetics should learn from the ritual practices of saintly women. Nevertheless, al-Ḥiṣnī's primary audience is women whom he exhorts to greater acts of piety by learning from the ritual practices of their pious female predecessors.

In reading al-Ḥiṣnī's biographical accounts of virtuous women, one immediate observation is that the women featured in these stories are predominately nameless. Al-Ḥiṣnī begins his biographical section with entries of famous early Muslim women, such as the wives of the Prophet, who he references explicitly by name. Following these early prominent women, al-Ḥiṣnī identifies medieval saintly women in generally three ways: First, he might refer to them based on where they were from geographically or where their male narrators encountered them. So, for instance, a title of a narrative account might be, "a devotee from Baṣra" or "a devotee found circumambulating the Kaʿba."[16] Second, al-Ḥiṣnī might mention women using vague appellations, such as "a [pious] devotee," or "a [religiously] obedient devotee"[17] Finally, al-Ḥiṣnī might identify women based on their familial relationship to a man, like saying she is the wife or mother of so and so. This latter category mostly applies to women related to famous or well-known men.

One also notes that al-Ḥiṣnī's text is rife with hyperbolic and supernatural content. For example, pious women are narrated as performing seemingly superhuman feats of ritual worship, and possessing mystical knowledge and abilities.

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[16] *ʿābida bi-l-baṣra* and *ābida kānit bi-l-ṭawāf*
[17] *ʿābida* and *mutīʿa al-ābida*

Given the distinct form of al-Ḥiṣnī's accounts, it is perhaps easy to want to dismiss his work as folklore or parables of fictional saintly women, rather than actual biographical literature. However, Felice Lifshitz has problematized the decision on the part of historians to label certain medieval work as "hagiography" rather than actual historiography, viewing such a decision as an anachronistic application of modern empiricism or positivism. She explains that not only did the category of "hagiography" not exist until the nineteenth century, the traits generally used by modern historians to distinguish "hagiography" from historiography in the medieval Christian context, the former being "literary" or "moralizing," were historically present in both genres.[18] Furthermore, she writes that the "genuineness of the possibility of such [mystical and supernatural] occurrences was very much taken for granted by all levels of society"[19] and only in the context of twelfth-century scholastic philosophy did such supernatural content come under scrutiny as being "superstitious" and eventually in later centuries, untrue.[20]

The same can arguably be said for the Muslim context, in which the notion that such hyperbolic and mystical occurrences were true persisted much longer than in Western Europe, continuing possibly until around the mid-nineteenth century when Islamic modernist thinkers like Syed Ahmed Khan and Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani challenged these previously accepted beliefs.

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[18] Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994): 100-101.
[19] Lifshitz, 104.
[20] Lifshitz, 105.

That being said, rather than thinking of al-Ḥiṣnī's text as a composition of fictitious moralizing tales, a more productive way of approaching his work is to view it as a collection of actual biographies of real-life women, whose extraordinary acts of piety were taken as axiomatic and intended for emulation by pre-modern Muslims. It is in this light that women's namelessness in al-Ḥiṣnī's text might be explained. As scholars of medieval Islam have suggested, women's names were often not recorded in the sources so as to maintain and protect the privacy of women's personal lives. This also falls in accordance with the Qurʾānic approach, which is that virtually all women are left nameless except for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Muslim exegetes similarly posited that the reason for the Qurʾān's omission of female names was to honor and protect the privacy of Muslim women. Thus, although pious women in al-Ḥiṣnī's work are predominately nameless and are narrated as engaging in mystical activities, this should not be construed to mean that these were not real women in history. Their stories were undoubtedly intended to motivate Muslim women to greater acts of piety, but this should not diminish the credibility of such reports as sources of biographical history. I would argue that such biographies serve to illustrate the exemplary practices of pious women, particularly those practices that were given value by pre-modern Muslims and, as will be borne out in the following pages, contributed to Muslim women's ability to gain religious influence and social autonomy.

Note on Limitations

Due to limited writing space and time, there are several areas in this paper that require further research and development. First, while I analyze the possible meaning and significance of some of the narrative accounts found in this biographical text, I have not conducted a socio-historical survey of the political, social, and cultural context surrounding the production of this work. Such an investigation may shed light on other possible motivations for al-Ḥiṣnī's compilation of this work, and the ways in which this work was read and consumed by pre-modern Muslims. Second, a comparative textual analysis between Ibn al-Jawzi's and al-Ḥiṣnī's respective biographical works is required in order to gain insight into al-Ḥiṣnī's authorial selection of accounts: Which biographical accounts does al-Ḥiṣnī choose to recycle from Ibn al-Jawzi and why? Third, as mentioned previously, I only focus on a certain number of accounts dealing with some of the major motifs of piety found in al-Ḥiṣnī's text. I have not, however, touched upon all modes of pious expression extant in this work and thus, my study should not be considered exhaustive. Finally, the topic of how women historically acquired power through their pious practices deserves to be treated in greater depth, e.g., how did women's piety grant them power and authority in realms beyond the spiritual, like the political or legal? Though such areas of research are not within the scope of this paper, my analysis may still be considered a preliminary investigation into some of these questions.

The layout of this paper is fairly simple. In Chapter One, I will flesh out my usage of the term, "devotional piety," taken from Megan Reid's pioneering study of

medieval Muslim male piety to describe women's pious practices. In order to explain how women derived religious authority from their daily pious regimen, I will draw from Aria Nakissa's theoretical conceptualization of "habitus" as a pedagogical and purificatory process by which Muslim jurists acquire the requisite amount of authority to interpret religious texts. I will also elucidate how such acts of piety arose out of a creative interpretation and expression of the prophetic model of piety, which served as the normative and authoritative model of practice for all pious Muslims. The term "gender" will arise frequently throughout this paper, and thus I will explain and justify my usage of this term as a useful analytical category in describing Muslim women's status and place in Islamic society. Chapter Two will focus on two main themes of piety found in al-Ḥiṣnī's work: excessive devotion and nighttime prayer. I will argue that these extreme ritual practices granted women an elevated place in society as influential religious and spiritual leaders. Chapter Three will take up two other motifs of piety that abound in al-Ḥiṣnī's narrative accounts of godly women: pious weeping and circumambulation of the Kaʿba (*ṭawāf*). I will explain how these features of piety especially seemed to allow women to depart from established gender norms and acquire an elevated spiritual position in society. In Chapter Four, I will analyze one account that involves a saintly women's interaction with supernatural beings (*jinn*) and argue that this pious ability in particular represented a marker of women's spiritual superiority and concomitant religious authority.

Finally, in the last chapter I will draw conclusions about the link between Muslim women's pious practices and religious and moral authority. I will also raise

questions about the possible significance of these historical conclusions for contemporary Muslim female scholars and activists living in the West. My purpose here is to situate this historical analysis of women's piety in the context of modern Muslim women's claims to religious authority and authenticity. Ultimately, I hope to provide a more composite picture of Muslim women's social roles and agency in pre-modern Islamic society, one in which the law does not act as the primary arbiter of what constitutes pious and moral conduct.

Chapter One: Piety, Authority, and Gender

Defining Piety

Piety appears to be a broad term that can refer to a diverse set of ritual practices and spiritual dispositions. Megan Reid has noted the various styles and trends of piety obtaining in medieval Islamic society: "juridical piety, Sufi piety, Ḥanbalī piety, learned piety, antinomian piety, the piety of hadith folk…and so on."[21] Despite these disparate modes of piety, Reid identifies a common category of pious expression popular in medieval Islam. She writes:

> What draws together the variety of ascetics, jurists, hermits, and other religious figures in medieval Islamic society is something I will call devotional piety. I take this phrase from the Arabic word *taʿabbud* (bodily devotion; supererogatory worship), which so frequently appears in descriptions of holy people, rather than from *taqwā*, another word also translated as piety but which may be more precisely defined as piousness or a god-fearing attitude. Devotional piety is in a sense an umbrella term for a diffuse set of attitudes in medieval Islamic culture, attitudes that are expressed through personal religious practice and that I believe lie at the heart of both individual asceticism.[22]

According to Reid, devotional piety emphasizes the body in the performance of ritual acts of worship e.g., supererogatory prayer, perpetual fasting, vows of solitude

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[21] Megan Reid, *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7-8.
[22] Reid, 8.

and seclusion, and other forms of bodily asceticism.[23] The saintly women present in al-Ḥiṣnī's work engage in similar, if not equivalent, bodily acts of worship e.g., excessive prayer and fasting, pious weeping, frequent pilgrimage, and so on. Therefore, I will use the term devotional piety to describe medieval Muslim women's pious acts and behavior. I find this term especially apt since it refers to outward ritual practices that grant the appearance of piety as opposed to more inward and abstract conceptions of piety that may not be as visibly apparent like, as Reid suggests, "a god-fearing attitude." Though the women under study may be referred to as "devout" or "[religiously] obedient," their piety is clearly manifested through bodily engagements with the Divine.

The Link between Piety and Authority

As will be demonstrated in this essay, medieval Muslim women's pious practices granted them a degree of religious autonomy and authority. Though the link between piety and religious authority was central to the pre-modern Islamic episteme, scholars of Islam have hardly explored this foundational relationship. To my knowledge, Megan Reid is the only scholar to have undertaken an in depth historical treatment of this subject. In her book, *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam*, she argues that bodily acts of piety, not merely textual knowledge alone, invested Muslim scholars and laypeople living in the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras with religious authority.

According to Reid, medieval Muslim scholars were recognized more for their

[23] Reid, 8.

pious acts than their religious knowledge. Reid writes that the illustrious thirteenth-century jurist, Imam al-Nawawi was known less for his legal scholarship than his countless personal virtues like "his fearlessness in challenging the sultan's authority; his daily fasts and dislike of fancy foods; his preference for threadbare clothing, his having no servants; [and] his scrupulosity in rejecting gifts and bribes."[24] The notion of piety as a potential marker of one's religious authority influenced non-scholarly classes as well: Reid notes that the governor of Damascus, Tankiz al-Husami, adopted the pious titles of "al-Zahidi" (the ascetic) and "al-Abidi" (the devotee) in an effort to buttress his political and social clout.[25] Reid also describes the bodily piety of a number of famous female religious authorities, though her work primarily focuses on the piety of medieval Muslim men. Although women were largely excluded from scholarly disciplines like legal interpretation, they participated freely in other pious fields like hadith transmission and religious teaching. The prominent hadith transmitter, Zaynab Bint al-Wasiti (d. 1392) was known best as "a devotee, fasting by day and praying by night, humble and charming."[26] Zaynab's ability to maintain a congenial attitude while consistently fasting was in itself a virtuous act that others sought to emulate. Perhaps more interesting was the devotional piety of the religious teacher, Umm Kulthum. Her grandson, the Qadi Najm al-Din Muhammad Ibn Zuhayra, relates:

> She spent a whole year married to her husband, the Qadi Shihab al-Di Ahmad

[24] Reid, 40.
[25] Reid, 26-27.
[26] Reid, 79.

> Ibn Zuhayra, without letting him see her face. And he lived with her until the day she died having never seen her brow or glimpsed her hair. Nor did he ever see her eat. If she saw one of her daughters go out without their heads covered, she would beat them for it.[27]

Umm Kulthum's unparalleled modesty raises the question of whether this form of pious expression was the distinct province of women. On this subject, Reid notes "Women were prevented by social custom and Islamic law from wearing scanty clothing – which among men was among the most obvious markers of asceticism. Men who wore short garments or a single garment as a sign of contentment with poverty and hardship were not considered immodest."[28] Thus, one notes that there were apparent differences between the pious traits of men and women; however, Reid affirms that women excelled in ritual acts of supererogatory worship just as much as their male peers. Though participation in pious life was not always "genderless," women were "deeply involved in acts of supererogation and asceticism and were as heartily praised for them as were their male peers."[29]

In his ethnographic study on the practice of Islamic law in contemporary Egypt, Aria Nakissa focuses on the interconnectedness between piety and interpretive authority. He argues that for pre-modern and contemporary Muslim jurists, a pious disposition modeled on prophetic practice (*sunna*) presupposes proper interpretation of

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[27] Reid, 53.
[28] Reid, 52-53.
[29] Reid, 55.

sacred texts. Building on extant theories of knowledge and practice in Islam, Nakissa draws on the Aristotelian notion of "habitus," which he defines as a "set of practice-induced dispositions"[30] to describe how Muslim jurists, both past and present, refashion their dispositions in accordance with the character of the Prophet.[31] This transformation is achieved by following a strict disciplinary regimen wherein Muslim scholars meticulously imitate the Prophet's daily habits including his "particular dietary etiquette, dress, postures, familial relations" and so on until one's and attitude is brought in line with that of the Prophet.[32] Nakissa writes that Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), reflecting this practice, is reported to have been so concerned with imitating the Prophet that he "refused to eat watermelon on the grounds that the Prophet had never done so."[33]

According to the Islamic narrative, the Prophet serves as the normative model for emulation since he is considered to be the perfect human being. Muslim scholars cite the oft-quoted Qurʾānic verse, "In the Messenger of God there is a good exemplar for you,"[34] the logic being that God sent the Prophet as an authoritative model and as such, his characteristic traits and daily habits have divine sanction. Thus, contemporary Egyptian Muslim jurists believe that by remolding their character to match that of the Prophet, they will be able to accurately discern and interpret God's divine intent.[35] Conversely, if a scholar's dispositions do not mirror that of the Prophet and God, he or

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[30] Aria Nakissa, "Islamic Law and Legal Education in Modern Egypt" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 134.
[31] Nakissa, 72-73.
[32] Nakissa, 108.
[33] Nakissa, 110.
[34] Cited in Nakissa, 118.
[35] Nakissa, 118-119.

she will issue misguided legal opinions. One contemporary Azhari scholar asserts, "Those of wicked character cannot properly engage in juristic reasoning because corrupt hearts produce corrupt legal opinions."[36] Another scholar similarly contends that one must "purify his heart of all corruption, filth, malice, jealousy, as well as wicked belief and disposition, such that it is suited to receive and retain knowledge" since "knowledge…is not sound except upon purifying [the heart] of filthy attributes and the uncleanliness of evil and base dispositions."[37]

Thus, Nakissa demonstrates the deep connection between pious ethics and interpretive authority: Muslim scholars consider a pious character—modeled after prophetic practice—to be a precondition to legitimate and correct interpretation of sacred texts. It follows, then, that a scholar may either gain or lose religious authority depending upon his or her level of perceived piety. Nakissa writes, "to be fully trustworthy, opinions must be issued by scholars characterized by scrupulous piety."[38] For instance, Nakissa cites an account involving two prominent contemporary legal scholars in which the notion of piety as integral to interpretive authority is made abundantly clear:

> Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti had come to be concerned by some of the rulings recently issued by his counterpart 'Abdullah bin Bayyah. These rulings struck al-Buti as overly permissive, so he went to pay bin Bayyah a visit. When al-Buti walked in upon bin Bayyah he found him earnestly worshipping God

[36] Cited in Nakissa, 103.
[37] Cited in Nakissa, 112.
[38] Nakissa, 125.

> through the recitation of verbal formulae (al-dhikr). Impressed by bin Bayyah's worship, al-Buti's fears were allayed. Even though he personally did not agree with all of bin Bayyah's rulings, once he ascertained the piety of their issuing source he knew they were worthy of respect.[39]

Although al-Buti is critical of Bin Bayyah's recent legal rulings, he finds his sincere act of ritual worship, rather than his legal acumen, sufficient to support his interpretive authority and by extension, his legal opinions.

Overall, Nakissa's findings are consistent with Reid's: piety, and not learning alone, invests one with religious authority and makes one worthy of emulation. However, Nakissa's work is predicated more on theory rather than historical research and thus his framing of pious practice as stemming from a strict adherence to the prophetic model does not entirely align with Reid's understanding of pious expression. In Reid's view, pious activities, in part, arose out of a "personalized relationship with Islamic ritual law" in which there was ample room to creatively expand on the prophetic model of piety.[40] Though the Prophet remained the original source of inspiration for righteous practice, Muslims consistently ventured beyond the parameters of the *sunna*, tending towards extremes in their ritual worship. For instance, though the Prophet was known to have urged moderation in fasting, medieval Muslims participated in continual yearlong fasts. Some antinomian Sufi practices even seemed to contravene the prophetic model. This clearly accords with the pious practices of medieval Muslim women found

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[39] Nakissa, 125-6.
[40] Reid, 212.

in al-Ḥiṣnī's work. While these women seem to derive inspiration from the Prophet and other pious forebears like the wives of the Prophet, they also creatively reinterpret and reinvent these historical models to produce new understandings and practices of devotional piety and asceticism. Indeed, both Reid and Nakissa attest in their respective works, that Muslims could gain religious authority and influence as a result of their pious behavior and actions.

On the Usage of Gender

Throughout this essay, following Joan Scott, I employ the term "gender" as a way of denoting "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes."[41] Thus, I use gender as an analytical tool to sometimes measure Muslim women's agency and empowerment in Islamic history, similar to the ways in which the social constructs of class and race have been used to signify and analyze systems of power. However, I take caution against reading modern assumptions of misogyny and sexism into the sources in order to preclude anachronistic understandings of Muslim women's roles and status in medieval Islamic history. Scholars such as Julie Meisami and Asma Sayeed have been attuned to the dangers of misreading historical sources to accord with one's modern biases or personal agenda.[42]

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[41] Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1067.

[42] See Julie Scott Meisami, "Writing Medieval Women: Representations and Misrepresentations," in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, ed. Julia Bray, 47-87 (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 18.

While I agree with this position and commend their endeavor to engage with the sources on their own terms, I also perceive a certain limitation to categorically refusing – as both of these authors do – the use of gender as a category of analysis. For example, in Sayeed's attempt to account for the prodigious disparity between men and women's participation in hadith transmission, she finds every possible, even obscure, explanation for women's comparative lack of participation when one very simple factor, inter alia, may have been the discrimination of women based on their gender. Similarly, while Meisami may be correct in suggesting that an "ideology of gender" never existed in the Islamic past, the prevalent view in medieval Islamic history that women were intellectually, physically, and spiritually inferior to their male counterparts makes it difficult to explain this inequality outside of the modern notion of "gender." Moreover, to claim that medieval Muslims did not possess a self-evident concept of gender is to make an assumption without adequate historical substantiation. Both authors neglect to provide historical evidence for their positioning and instead base it on an ideological aversion to the use of modern analytical categories. Therefore, in this present study, I will often make use of the term "gender" to elucidate how medieval Muslim women were constructed as being different from men, and how, through their pious states and practices, they were able to breach certain social constraints and surpass men in the realm of religiosity.

Chapter Two: Excessive Devotion and Nighttime Prayer

For devout medieval Muslim men and women, the body was the locus of pious expression. Medieval devotees would often push their bodies to extremes in ritual worship out of penitence and fear of the next life. Of the many forms of pious exertion, the practice of supererogatory prayer was the most common since the Prophet was known to have regularly observed additional prayers, especially the nighttime prayer. This latter type of prayer was given special weight by medieval devotees due to the Qurʾān's elevation of it over all other acts of voluntary worship.[43] In al-Ḥiṣnī's biographical work of the lives of pious female worshippers, one finds many accounts of women who devote themselves to prolonged supplication and nighttime prayer. Their strenuous acts of worship attract public attention, praise, and even the concern of family members but nonetheless; they persist in prayer, emphasizing the impermanence of this life as opposed to the next. What is of interest in all of these entries is women's ability to engage in ritual worship without any apparent impediments. These women perform intense feats of devotion, such as staying awake all night in prayer or reciting the Qurʾān continuously, without the hindrance of domestic and conjugal duties. In this vein, Megan Reid writes "there were no inherent impediments faced by female

[43]"Establish regular prayers - at the sun's decline till the darkness of the night, and the morning prayer and reading: for the prayer and reading in the morning carry their testimony. And pray in the small watches of the morning: (it would be) an additional prayer (or spiritual profit) for thee: soon will thy Lord raise thee to a Station of Praise and Glory!" in Qurʾān (17:78-79).

worshippers when it came to supererogatory fasting and prayer, for example, and many women were noted for their devotion to these forms of worship."[44]

These accounts pose a potential challenge to the popular claim of contemporary scholarship on Muslim women, which asserts that pre-modern Muslim women had to seek permission from their husbands before engaging in acts of voluntary worship.[45] In her important book on domestic violence in Islam, Ayesha Chaudhry, for instance, writes:

> As shadow deities, husbands mediated their wives' relationship with God. They were responsible for ensuring that their wives fulfilled their obligatory religious duties, such as praying five times a day and fasting in the month of Ramaḍan. They could also prohibit their wives from undertaking supererogatory devotional activities, such as fasting and praying outside the prescribed times. *If wives wanted to engage in such supererogatory acts, they were first required to obtain their husbands' permission*…If a wife undertook supererogatory devotional acts despite her husband's disapproval, such acts counted against her in the diving reckoning.

While this ruling may be stipulated in the technical discourses of law and exegesis, extending this order to the sphere of non-legal discourses may lead to over-determined understandings of women's ritual devotion. Contrary to the notion that

[44] Reid, 52.
[45] Ayesha Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42, (emphasis added).

women were required to seek permission from their husbands prior to engaging in ritual practice, the women in al-Ḥiṣnī's accounts appear to rule their domain, determining their own time for worship and at times also overseeing and enforcing the religiosity of their husbands. In one such account, a woman frequently awakens throughout the night to pray, and each time, prods her husband to get up and perform the nighttime prayer with her:

> Al-Bazzār said: "Riyāḥ al-Qaysī married a woman, and consummated the marriage with her. When he awoke [in the morning], she was working on making dough." She said, "Do you think this woman is sufficient for you?" She continued, "I see myself married to Riyāḥ [the relaxed and easygoing one], I do not see myself married to *jabbār ʿanīda* [the overpowering and stubborn one]!" When it was night, he [Riyāḥ] slept in order to test her. She awoke for the first quarter of the night[46], and then she called him, "Wake up O Riyāḥ!" He replied, "I'm waking up!" Then she awoke for the second quarter of the night and called him, "Wake up O Riyāḥ!" He said, "I'm waking up!" Then she awoke for the third quarter of the night and called him, "Wake up O Riyāḥ!" He said, "I'm waking up!" Then she said, "The night has passed, and the best worshipers have been camping outside[47] and you are still sleeping?! Oh my, who is it that

[46] In Islamic legal literature, the nights were generally divided into three or four parts from sunset until dawn for devotion.
[47] This is a metaphor for the army staying awake on a night shift.

> convinced me to marry to you?" Then she awoke for the last quarter of the night.[48]

The woman depicted in this account is clearly a strong and independent figure. There is no mention of her husband preventing her from voluntary prayer. Though the text states that her husband goes to sleep at night in order to "test" her (presumably to see if she would wake up on her own for the nighttime prayer), it is she who assumes the responsibility of waking her husband and ensuring he performs his supererogatory prayers. She even chides him for not rising on his own and playfully laments her marriage to him. Her question to her husband in the beginning (i.e., are you satisfied with me as a wife?) is in a sense rhetorical and suggests her own expectations of her marriage with him; namely, that her husband ought to be pleased with her as a wife since his name means the relaxed and easygoing one and not the severe and stubborn one. The entry then shifts to Riyāḥ as the primary narrator:

> Riyāḥ said: I married a woman who, after performing the night prayer, would beautify herself and wear the best clothing. Then she would come to me and say, "Would you like something?" When I would say, "yes," she would be with me [have sexual relations with him] and if I said, "no", she would remove her beautiful clothing [and dress for prayer], and then stand in line to pray until morning.

[48] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 71.

> Riyāḥ said: Once, I worried about a matter of the *dunyā* [this life]. My wife said, "Do I see you worrying over a matter of the *dunyā*? They made me marry you under a false pretense [I am disappointed in you]." Then she took a thread from her veil and said, "The *dunyā* is less valuable than this." May God be pleased with her. And God knows best.[49]

Through Riyāḥ's own account, we learn about his relationship and opinion of his wife. It is worth noting that he does not reveal his wife's name, perhaps in order to protect the privacy of his family. Nonetheless, although nameless in the account, his wife possesses a striking and dominant personality. He narrates that after performing her obligatory prayer and before engaging in voluntary prayers, she would ask if he desired anything from her, making sure her wifely duties to him were fulfilled. If he said yes, the implication was that she would be intimate with him and if he said no, she would commence her nightly ritual worship. Here one could argue that Riyāḥ seems to govern his wife's engagement with God since it is his response to her question which necessarily determines whether she engages in supererogatory worship or not. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that it is not Riyāḥ who relays his needs to her, but rather, she who goes to him, asking if he desires anything from her. It is she who initiates the possibility of sexual intimacy, *not him*. Of course, this could easily be read as her fulfilling her domestic obligations to her husband and this may be so, but there is no sense in which she appears hindered from engaging in ritual practice due to her

[49] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 71.

husband’s intervention. There is no mention of Riyāḥ directly obstructing her from worship. On the contrary, her conjugal duties appear to be commonplace and for her, may simply represent another facet of pious life. Riyāḥ clearly praises his wife for her exceptional piety, which to him, also seems to encompass her excellence as a wife. She is also far from docile or submissive to her husband: she rebukes him for concerning himself with a matter of the *dunyā*. Like a teacher providing a lesson to her student, she extracts a thread from her veil and compares it to the *dunyā*, demonstrating to her husband the transience and insignificance of this life when compared to the next. He then attributes to her the common honorific given to pious people, “May God be pleased with her.”[50]

In another case, we come across a woman identified simply as the wife of al-Jounī who stands in prayer for so long that she suffers physical discomfort. Her husband attempts to intervene and urges her to discontinue her prolonged prayers, but she refuses to comply and instead, imparts a spiritual lesson to him:

> Her son said: My mother used to pray until she would wrap garments around her legs [to support her standing for long], so her husband said to her, “Don’t do this!” She said, “This [standing in prayer], in comparison to standing on the Day of Judgment[51] [*qiyām fi al-mawqif*] is a small matter.” So he was silenced. And God knows best.[52]

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[50] *Raḍī Allāhu ʿanhā*
[51] In Islamic eschatology, this is when all of humanity will be brought before God and judged for their deeds.
[52] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu’mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 72.

This woman directly contravenes her husband with regard to engaging in supererogatory worship. Although, in this instance the husband's interference is not related to conjugal duties but instead stems from a concern over his wife's poor physical state, it is still significant that his wife ignores his request and persists in voluntary worship. She goes on to explain that her standing for the sake of God in this life is insignificant when compared to the interminable amount of standing that will occur on the Day of Judgment. Her husband does not seem able to argue with this line of reasoning since he is immediately silenced. Here it is worth noting that the pious woman in this account is identified not only as a wife, but also a mother. Her son is the one who transmits information about her personal piety outside of the home. This is somewhat of a rare occurrence in al-Ḥiṣnī's biographical work in which women are primarily identified as nameless devotees or the wife of so and so. Laury Silvers notes that this absence effectively "downplays the women's identities as mothers or grandmothers and thus erases their social bonds."[53] While this may very well be the case, especially so for social historians seeking to learn more about medieval Muslim women's personal lives, it is important to keep in mind the aim of such literature. As stated previously in the introduction, little information was given about women's personal lives perhaps in order to maintain their privacy and more importantly because such information was usually not relevant to the overall objective of the work in

[53] Laury Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women," in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 40.

question, which in al-Ḥiṣnī's case seems to be to motivate women, and possibly men to greater acts of piety.

Elsewhere in al-Ḥiṣnī's work, a devout woman identified as the mother of al-Ḥasan and ʿAli is recognized for her nighttime prayer and pious weeping:

> She used to wake up for the first third of the night, the second third, and the final third of the night and she used to weep during the night and day out of fear of God Most High.
>
> A man said: I saw al-Ḥasan after his death in a dream. I asked, "What ever happened to your mother?" He said, "She replaced weeping with everlasting happiness." And God knows best.[54]

Once again, we find a woman who is recognized for her excessive devotion and nighttime prayer. She rises throughout the night (here the night is divided into three portions) for prayer and weeps, day and night, out of fear of God. For medieval Muslim female devotees, weeping was a favored mode of pious expression and will be discussed at length in the following chapter. As in the previous account, this woman is identified as a mother; in fact, rather than being named solely in relation to her husband, this woman is named explicitly as the mother of two children, Umm al-Ḥasan wa ʿAli. A man who is most likely a non-maḥrām or nonrelative since he is unnamed and does not address Umm al-Ḥasan directly, inquires about her status from one of her sons in a

[54] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 54.

dream, thus suggesting that this woman was known for her extraordinary devotional piety beyond the household. Her son, al-Ḥasan immediately responds concerning his mother's weeping further suggesting that this man was aware of his mother's pious practices. Al-Ḥasan explains that his mother substituted her weeping for infinite happiness in the next life; in other words, his mother was divinely rewarded for her pious efforts. Here again we see the narrative trope of highlighting the importance of the next life (*al-ākhira*) over this life (*al-dunyā*), which perhaps serves as a source of spiritual motivation for aspiring devotees. The fact that this man views all of this in a dream strengthens the supposition that this woman was renowned for her piety since one of the marks of saintly people was their miraculous ability to visit other pious people in dreams. Pious medieval men and women seeing the Prophet appear in a dream was the most common example of this phenomenon.[55]

In all of the aforementioned biographical entries, one finds that al-Ḥiṣnī is silent. He does not offer his own commentary or remark and instead seems to allow these accounts to speak for themselves. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the spiritual message in all of these reports seem to be straightforward and not in need of explanation. This makes the rare instances when al-Ḥiṣnī does opt to comment, as in the following account, all the more curious. In this passage, a man seeks out a female devotee widely known for her excessive prayer and supplication:

[55] For more on the place of dreams in Islam, see Ozgen Felek, *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

> Saʿīd b. ʿAṭaʾ said: It was mentioned to me that there lived a devout woman in Baṣra. I went to her and found her praying, and so I departed [and returned later]. When she was finished [praying], she asked me, "What is your name?" I said, "Saʿīd." She said, "O Saʿīd, everything that distracts you from God is unfortunate and calamitous." Then she turned towards prayer and left me.[56] And God knows best.
>
> I said,[57] "In this story is a great warning. Whoever takes this advice will not find any free time except that in it is God's pleasure and satisfaction. So upon you is to hold fast to this advice, and how blessed is this advice! May God accept our deeds and works towards this end. And God knows best.[58]

Many insights can be gleaned from this account. Here a woman identified simply as "a devotee from Basra", not as a wife or mother as in the previous accounts, is recognized for her devotional piety in the form of excessive prayer. She is so well known for her piety that a man named Saʿīd catches wind of her fame and travels to Baṣra in search of her. Although the text does not specify the exact reason for Saʿīd wanting to meet her, one can assume that he hoped to learn from her pious example. Unsurprisingly, when he arrives, he finds her immersed in prayer and decides to return

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[56] She became so absorbed in her prayer it was as if she had physically departed from him.

[57] This is al-Ḥiṣnī speaking.

[58] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 75.

later. Like many of the solitary ascetics in these accounts, she is found worshipping freely, and seems unhindered and undistracted by social duties. When she completes her ritual worship, she inquires Saʿīd's name (perhaps so she can address him personally) and then offers unsolicited spiritual advice. She counsels Saʿīd that anything that diverts him from God is not only unproductive, but also disastrous for his state in the next life. Afterwards, she abruptly returns to prayer and "leaves him," hinting towards her total engrossment in worship and driving home her point that time should be spent wisely in the service of God.

Al-Ḥiṣnī then contributes his own voice to the narrative. He urges his readers to take heed of the lesson in this story, which he views as self-evident: people should not engage in activities that distract them from worshipping God since this is calamitous for one's position in the next life. He explains that whoever follows this piece of advice will always be in the active pursuit of God's pleasure, even in one's spare time. Al-Ḥiṣnī then addresses aspiring female devotees directly, asserting that it is incumbent upon them to adhere to this advice since it is of tremendous value. He concludes with a supplication that God accept the efforts of all those who work towards this pious goal.

Here a few questions come to mind: What is the purpose of al-Ḥiṣnī's commentary? Why does he choose to comment on this specific account as opposed to others? It is clear that al-Ḥiṣnī wishes to stir female readers to higher spiritual stations by increasing and perfecting their devotional piety. What is not so clear, however, is his reason for commenting on this particular account. But given the content of this account, one might speculate that al-Ḥiṣnī saw this report as especially instructive to illustrating

the overall objective of medieval Islamic piety; that is, to fill up one's time with worship in this life so that one may reap the spiritual rewards in the next. Indeed, as we will see, all of the pious activities of female devotees encapsulated in al-Ḥiṣnī's work take place against the impending backdrop of the Day of Judgment. Female devotees are acutely aware of and guided by the knowledge that their actions have real consequences in the eternal realm. It is also possible that al-Ḥiṣnī made note on this account arbitrarily or for some other unknown reason. Whatever his authorial intent may have been, this particular story still neatly epitomizes the central aim of medieval devotional piety.

For medieval Muslim women, excessive devotion and nighttime prayer was a primary mode of pious expression. Female devotees engaged in prayer, day and night, for extended periods of time, and were widely recognized and praised for these pious acts. Sometimes male family members attempted to intervene in their ritual practice out of concern for their health, but these women ignored their pleas and resolutely carried on in worship. Although a number of these women were wives and mothers, they did not seem to be hampered by conjugal and household duties. If anything, their social obligations – far from defining and constraining them – were viewed as constitutive of their pious regimen and merely another means of achieving a lofty position in the next life. The juxtaposition of the temporal world with the eternal one is the common thread that ties these accounts together and as will be seen, remains the dominant theme in other accounts of women's piety. In the following chapter, I will discuss two other modes of women's pious expression: pious weeping and circumambulation of the

Kaʿba. These pious activities in particular seem to enable women to depart from gender norms enshrined in the law and importantly, grant women a degree of religious autonomy and authority in medieval Islamic society.

Chapter Three: Pious Weeping and Women in Ṭawāf

In the previous chapter, we found that medieval female devotees were distinguished for their excessive devotion and nighttime prayer. Many of these women did not view their social obligations as incongruent with their ritual practices and performed their domestic duties in tandem with their voluntary prayer. In the following accounts, however, women's pious practices seem to enable them to act in ways that contravene legal norms governing women's social place and roles. In particular, the practices of pious weeping and circumambulation of the Kaʿba (*tawāf*) granted women not only social recognition but also a degree of socio-religious agency and influence among their male peers. One finds surprising accounts of female devotees rejecting male expectations of women's social appearance or travelling alone unaccompanied by a male guardian. The devotional acts of pious weeping and tawāf also provided for women an arena in which they could affirm their spiritual equality with men, and even surpass them in religious excellence and closeness to God. Aside from illustrating the social function and impact of women's pious expression, these accounts will also serve to frustrate popular legal conceptions of medieval Muslim women's conduct and behavior. My reasons for grouping pious weeping and ṭawāf in the same chapter are as follows: First, there is much overlap between women's pious weeping and circumambulation of the Kaʿba. One finds many instances in which women are engaged in both ritual activities simultaneously in one account. Second, the ritual acts of weeping and tawāf occur most often in the public realm, unlike the practices of excessive devotion and nighttime prayer which take place primarily in the privacy of

one's home. As a consequence, the ritual acts of weeping and ṭawāf have a greater social and religious impact on non-familial men.

Pious Weeping

In the religious culture of medieval Islam, pious men and women engaged in the ritual practice of weeping as a way of gaining spiritual intimacy with God. Early Muslim ascetics often wept out of uncertainty over one's state in the next life and fear of divine punishment. Christopher Melchert writes that one Syrian ascetic, Saʿīd b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 168/784), "continually wept at prayer, explaining that hell was always then represented to him."[59] Despite prophetic example directing Muslims to balance their fear of God with hope of His love and mercy, many ascetics inclined towards extreme fearfulness as a way to eschew complacency in ritual worship.[60] Medieval Sunni scholars generally lauded pious weeping as a sign of one's privileged connection to God and religious expiation; however, they criticized weeping for worldly motives like mourning over the loss of a loved one since it seemed to suggest disproval of divine decree. Moreover, mourning rituals often occurred in public and while such weeping was not ostensibly pious, the Prophet's recommendation that pious weeping occur in private so that one may maintain a pure intention may have had a negative impact on

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[59] Christopher Melchert, "Exaggerated Fear in the Early Islamic Renunciant Tradition," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, no. 3 (2011): 289.
[60] Melchert, 296.

this form of weeping.[61] In spite of possible legal proscription, however, many women were active participants in public wailing at funeral ceremonies.[62]

Aside from their engagement in public mourning rituals, women were also deeply involved in the ascetic practice of weeping out of fear of the next life. Al-Ḥiṣnī includes many tales of women who wept ardently, ascending to great spiritual heights. One woman was found at the Kaʿba, beseeching God and wailing. She continued in this state, weeping fiercely until it is said she passed away.[63] In many ways, the devotional practice of pious weeping operated as a form of social power that enabled women to depart from established gender norms and obtain religious recognition. In this vein, Laury Silvers opines that women's pious weeping "offered them a certain amount of religious and social authority that challenged scholarly efforts to direct orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and women's role in public religious practice, and also challenged social expectations such as marriage."[64] For instance, some women's renunciant practices of excessive fasting and weeping damaged their physical appearance to the point that it harmed their chances at marriage. However, their ruined bodies were also viewed positively as proof of their religious sincerity and nearness to God.[65] Similarly, al-Ḥiṣnī furnishes an account of a woman who slept little, fasted in intense heat, and wept so much that the "trails of tears on her face blackened." When people informed her of her

[61] Linda G. Jones, "He Cried and Made Others Cry," in E. Gertsman (ed.), *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 103-119.
[62] Silvers, 33.
[63] al-Hisnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 74.
[64] Silvers, 33.
[65] Silvers, 34.

poor physical appearance, she quipped, "I only look for true well-being and satisfaction in the next life."[66] For this woman, her state in the next life was more important than her physical condition in this life. In another story, a nameless woman who is granted the appellation, "obedient devotee," is censured for her incessant weeping but continues, nonetheless, to weep out of fear of the Last day:

> She wept for forty years and was chastised for her excessive crying. Even so, she exclaimed, "I will persist in my weeping until I know of my fate in the next life according to God." Ibn al-Husayn said, "We came across the obedient devotee in a cemetery in Basra whereupon we decided to seek some religious advice from her. But we were unable to discern most of her speech due to her excessive weeping. Whenever we saw her like this, we would leave her. She remained in this state in the cemetery for fifty-four years, reminding herself of the hereafter." And God knows best.[67]

This account raises several interesting elements that complicate the dominant narrative of women's place and role in medieval Islamic society. An unknown critic, seemingly the authoritative voice of the law, reproaches this pious devotee for her inordinate amount of crying. It is possible that her crying was viewed simply as harming her physical appearance like in the abovementioned account, or perhaps it was also seen as violating the prophetic ideal of moderation in ritual worship. As mentioned

[66] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 57.
[67] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 70.

previously, the *sunna*, or prophetic model, provided the main religious template that defined and inspired the pious expression of devotees. Pious practices, in part, arose out of a "personalized relationship with Islamic ritual law" in which there was ample room to creatively expand on the prophetic model of piety.[68] It is for this reason that medieval Muslim ascetics participated in perpetual year-round fasting despite the Prophet's insistence on moderation.[69] However, this does not mean that the Islamic legal tradition readily accepted extreme forms of pious practice. On the contrary, not only did the Prophet preach against excessiveness in ritual devotion, there was also the possibility that "overexerting oneself in supererogatory activities could make a person miss the obligatory duties of worship," a serious cause for concern.[70] This may very well have been the reason for reproach against this pious woman; however, she appears unconcerned with legal standards of ritual practice and chooses instead to persist in weeping.

The narrative continues that Ibn al-Husayn and his companions seek her out for religious instruction, but due to her incessant weeping, they fail to interpret her speech and are forced to leave her. That this woman receives male visitors who desire her religious counsel suggests that she was widely known for her spiritual knowledge. However, it may also be that what generates her spiritual authority is her practice of excessive weeping, especially since there is no mention of her religious credentials in this account. It follows, then, that these male visitors sought her out with the primary

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[68] Reid, 212.
[69] Reid, 70.
[70] Reid, 212.

aim of learning from her pious behavior. This idea of spending time with pious figures, and attempting to imbibe their *adab* (mannerisms) is a timeworn practice in Islamic religious history. For aspiring students, a religious teacher was not merely a carrier of religious knowledge, but also a "model of bodily norms," which students endeavored to emulate.[71] In the above account, one finds that this practice was not limited to male figures alone, nor was there strict gender segregation as commonly understood in many modern conceptions of Islam.

Another interesting aspect worthy of comment is the claim that this woman wept for forty years. Aside from what we would reflexively deem as hyperbole used to stir readers to greater acts of piety, one cannot ignore the significance of this number according to the Islamic tradition. Historically, Muslims viewed the number forty as closely associated with important mystical and supernatural occurrences,[72] which suggests that there may have been a possible connection between the number forty and this woman's incessant weeping. It is also narrated that this woman resided by herself in a cemetery for over fifty-years. Here one notes the apparent discrepancy between legal norms and social practice. As will also be seen in the accounts of female devotees in the following section, this pious woman seems to live alone without the accompaniment of a *maḥrām* or male legal guardian to protect and oversee her affairs. This should have certainly warranted the criticism of religious authorities. Furthermore, given the legal norms against women attending funeral ceremonies, her residence in a cemetery should

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[71] Reid, 10.
[72] See Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

have also been objectionable. However, such legal norms do not seem to impede her engagement in ritual activities: she is evidently free to worship by herself in a cemetery. Thus, based on al-Ḥiṣnī's fifteenth-century accounts, one could argue that there was a social value placed on pious weeping through which women obtained spiritual authority and social autonomy.

Women in Ṭawāf

The subject of women's travel and pilgrimage in Islam has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest. Scholars have focused especially on the role of the ḥajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) in bolstering women's pious image. Marina Tolmacheva, for example, has written how the ḥajj in particular satisfied "the individual need for pious expression by medieval women."[73] Tolmacheva also suggests that women's pious observance of the ḥajj could translate into material capital for women in the form of marriage. She writes that while marriage was prohibited during the ḥajj proper, "pilgrimage occasioned matrimony not only for personal inclination but also pious reasons," thus indicating that piety may have been an important criterion for choosing a good Muslim wife.[74]

Although historical evidence attests to women's travel in and outside of the ḥajj ritual, legal rules governing women's social mobility sometimes made it difficult, at least in theory, for women to travel long distances by themselves. Tolmacheva notes

[73] Marina Tolmacheva, "Female Piety and Patronage in the Medieval Ḥajj," in Gavin R.G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 169.
[74] Tolmacheva, 173.

that concerns for women's safety and privacy often precluded women from travel. In her analysis of exegetical traditions dealing with the ḥajj, Aisha Geissinger writes that by the mid-ninth century of Islamic history, ḥadīths restricting or categorically forbidding women's travel without a maḥrām rose to prominence in legal discourse.[75] However, in spite of the legal restrictions placed on women's movements, women continued to travel without the accompaniment of a male relative. This is clearly the case in al-Ḥiṣnī's accounts of itinerant women who visit the tombs of saints or the sacred house of God unescorted by a male guardian. Like the women in the previous section whose pious weeping offered them a degree of social mobility, women's circumambulation of the Kaʿba seems to allow for relative freedom of movement outside of the home.

One main theme found in al-Ḥiṣnī's work involves pious women travelling long distances, sometimes at night, to perform ṭawāf, circumambulation of the Kaʿba. Unlike the ḥajj, which is an obligatory practice incumbent on all Muslims, ṭawāf constitutes a supererogatory ritual act. Thus, while exceptions were sometimes made to relax the rules of women's travel in order to fulfill the ḥajj duty, travel to perform ṭawāf—a form of voluntary worship—might have theoretically represented more of a legal obstacle. Still, al-Ḥiṣnī cites several accounts of pious female devotees circumambulating the Kaʿba and reaching states of spiritual ecstasy. In one such account, a woman who seems

[75] Aisha Geissinger, "Portrayal of the Ḥajj as a Context for Women's Exegesis: Textual Evidence in al-Bukhari's al-Sahih," in Sebastian Guenther (ed.), *Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 171-175.

to travel by herself at night to visit the Kaʿba is eventually so overcome by her supplication to God that she drops to the ground in total submission:

> Ibrāhīm b. Muslim said, "A devout woman stood in the middle of the night. She clung to the curtains of the Kaʿba and then wept and cried, 'O you generous companion and excellent succor [i.e. God], I came to you from *a long and distant journey*, turning myself wholly towards your divine favors that encompasses your creation. So bestow upon me a favor from among your favors that I am not in need of favors from anyone else. O locus of fear, O locus mercy!' Then she screamed so greatly that she fell on her face [in prostration]." And God knows best.[76]

Though this woman is not described as performing ṭawāf, she is seen clinging to the curtains of the Kaʿba, a narrative trope that occurs in many of these accounts. She petitions God to satiate her such that she need not rely on anyone else for material needs. Not only is this woman able to visit the Kaʿba unaccompanied by a male guardian, her sincere supplications seem to whet the curiosity of a non-maḥrām man, who seeks to learn from her engagement with God. What is perhaps more striking than this, however, is the fact that her presence alone in the middle of the night does not elicit opprobrium from anyone. Neither her narrator, Ibrāhīm b. Muslim nor her biographer, al-Ḥiṣnī, find her behavior problematic or even odd; rather the entire scene

[76] al-Hisnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 99, (emphasis added).

appears normative to them. Her gender, far from posing any constraints, is insignificant to her apparent piety.

In another account, we find that a woman's devotional piety in the form of ṭawāf and earnest supplication enables her to transcend not only issues of gender, but also social class:

> Mālik b. Dīnār said, "While I was circumambulating the Kaʿba, I observed a young slave girl worshiping and saying, 'O Lord there are so many types of human desires—their pleasures may be gone yet their consequences remain. O Lord there is neither punishment nor rectification for these sins except by fire.' By God, I remained like that until the rising of dawn." Mālik said, "I put my hand on my head and cried. Then I started saying, 'May the mother of Mālik lose him![77] This slave girl made him nothing tonight and rendered him useless'"—And God knows best.[78]

Here, again, a male Sufi saint witnesses a devout woman, this time a young slave girl, worshiping by herself at the Kaʿba. It is quite possible, though the text does not explicitly mention this, that her worshipping entailed circumambulation. Her protracted supplication reflects currents of penitence and fear for the next life for having

[77] Mālik is attributing a curse to himself (*thakalat Mālik umuhu*) out of shame for his low spiritual condition in comparison to the slave girl.
[78] al-Hisnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 99.

indulged in some sort of bodily appetite,[79] possibly of a sexual nature. If the latter is true, then her expression of repentance may have been due to her engagement in some sort of physical intimacy with another slave, since such contact would have been impermissible according to the law. However, if her display of guilt stems from her engagement in physical intimacy with her master, then her lamentation is somewhat curious. As a slave, she would have been obligated under the law to meet the sexual demands of her master.[80] In spite of such legal obligation, however, it may be possible that as a strict ascetic, she took a negative view towards any sort of sexual relationship, legal or not.

Mālik hears her lamentation and in a sudden burst of self-abasement and humility, he curses himself. He then exclaims that this slave girl has reduced him to an inferior position as if to say: how is it that a person beneath me in social class—a mere slave girl—has surpassed me in piety? This would seem to suggest that due to this slave girl's devotional practice, she is able to supersede a free man—at least in the spiritual realm. There is also a strong undertone that Mālik, too, regrets giving himself away to physical desires. Though sexual intimacy, if that is indeed what is being referred to here, would be legally permissible for Mālik within the context of marriage and concubinage, it may be possible that he eschewed intercourse in favor of a celibate

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[79] This could refer to any number of bodily appetites that would have been considered impious for strict ascetics, such as sleeping too much, eating meat, or satisfying a sexual desire. What is alluded to in this passage is most likely sexual intercourse.
[80] See Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qurʾan, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

lifestyle, a common trend among medieval Muslim male ascetics.[81] Or it may be that Mālik had committed *zina* (premarital or extramarital sex) and was thus feeling ashamed. Whatever the case may be, Mālik is left in a state of debasement in front of the pious example of a slave girl.

Elsewhere in al-Ḥiṣnī's work, a slave woman, also found clutching the curtains of the Kaʾba, teaches a male observer about the subtle relationship between God and His servant:

> Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī said, "I was performing ṭawāf when I heard a mournful voice. It was slave woman clinging to the drapes of the Kaʿba and saying, "You know O my darling who my lover is, and you know that my body and tears reveal my secrets. O my darling I concealed my love for you until my chest was constricted."
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> Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī said, "What I heard grieved me until I wailed and wept." She said, "My God, my Master and my Lord, by your love of me, forgive me." He [Dhū al-Nūn] said, "This overwhelmed me so I said, "O slave woman, isn't it sufficient to say by my love of you, rather than by your love of me?" She responded, "Keep out of it, O Dhā al-Nūn, don't you know that for God Most High is a people He loves and who love Him.[82] So His love for them preceded their love for Him?" I said, "How did you know I was Dhū al-Nūn?" She said,

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[81] Reid, 35-47.
[82] Here she is directly quoting a verse from the Qurʾān.

> "O you naive person, the hearts dwell in the square of secrets so I knew you."[83] Then she said, "Look behind you." So I looked behind me and when I turned around, I was uncertain whether the sky or the earth had swallowed her."[84] And God knows best.[85]

Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, a famous Egyptian Sufi saint from the ninth century appears here observing the pious worship of a female slave at the house of God. The romantic language of this slave woman's supplication is reminiscent of the stylistic features of classical Arabic love poems in which one could easily confuse a prayer to God as a message to one's lover. Dhū al-Nūn, absorbed by her ornate rhetoric, perceives a theological error in her supplication to God: he believes she should ask God to forgive her based on *her* love for him, not vice versa. The slave woman, seemingly irritated that Dhū al-Nūn has interrupted her devotion, explains to him that it is not she, but rather he who has an incorrect understanding of the proper formula for prayer. She quotes a verse from the Qurʾān in which God says, "Allah will bring forth a people He will love and who will love Him,"[86] meaning that God's love is greater than His servants' love for Him. It is noteworthy that this female slave is able to quote the Qurʿān from memory and moreover, correct Dhu al-Nun, a renowned male saint patently above her in social status. The startled Dhū al-Nūn would certainly not forget

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[83] I.e., a pure heart has knowledge of things.
[84] She had disappeared.
[85] al-Hisnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 101.
[86] Qurʿān, (5:54). I have used Sahih International's translation here for clarity.

this teaching moment from this fellow spiritual journeyer, all the more given her godly knowledge (she knows who he is without him informing her) and her miraculous disappearance at the end. One wonders about the identity of this slave woman: Is she a saint who possesses miraculous abilities? Is she a supernatural being like an angel or a *jinn* (a being made of fire according to the Islamic perspective)? Or is she simply a devout slave woman penned with magical powers by her male biographers? Regardless, her spiritual lesson and theatrical disappearance at the end has the effect of rendering her story unforgettable to Dhū al-Nūn and quite possibly all those who hear this story after him.

These medieval accounts of Muslim women as agents of pious practice and religious authority fly in the face of law-centric narratives about female passivity and dependence. Through their performance of devotional acts, such as pious weeping and tawāf, medieval Muslim women were able to attain spiritual status amongst their peers and in turn, acquire a degree of religious autonomy. Women not only taught men important spiritual lessons but also, eschewed legal requirements regarding their movement outside of the home and androcentric perspectives concerning their appropriate physical appearance. Thus, one can conclude that it was piety and not gender that constituted the marker of religious influence and authority in medieval Islamic society.

Chapter Four: Women's Interaction with Jinn

In the last chapter, I explored two distinct areas of women's pious expression: pious weeping and tawāf. These modes of devotional practice invested women with the religious agency and authority to express their piety in bold and creative ways and circumvent certain legal norms guarding gender propriety. In this chapter, I will examine a solitary account involving a female devotee whose unusual miraculous abilities signify her elevated spiritual rank and allow her to critically challenge her social class, race, and gender. What appears to be a saint's abilities to interact with supernatural beings and perform an exorcism also constitutes a powerful subversion of societal norms and constraints. Above all, this narrative reveals the breadth and scope of female piety, which took on many forms and expressions and importantly, did not always conform to inherited models of piety like the *sunna* or prophetic example.

Islamic hagiographic literature abounds in stories of pious Sufis whose spiritual superiority enables them to perform extraordinary acts and miracles. One such mystical act is their ability to engage with supernatural beings or *jinn*. According to the Islamic narrative, jinn are incorporeal beings made of fire who, like human beings, are accountable to God in their actions and behavior. Jinn live in a metaphysical world that overlaps with the material human realm but are importantly, invisible to humans and forbidden from interacting with them. Despite this prohibition, there are instances in which jinn may defy the law of God and occupy the body of a human being necessitating the performance of an exorcism by a saint or spiritual leader. The subject

of Sufi thaumaturgy including the miraculous ability to interact with *jinn* and perform exorcisms has been discussed at great length in ethnographic literature on modern Sufi networks.[87] Scholars have found that the ability to communicate with and command supernatural beings represents a powerful tool of authority for modern Sufi masters.[88] However, little research exists on medieval Muslims' engagement with the supernatural and how this might relate to the construction of religious authority in the pre-modern past. Based on al-Ḥiṣnī's account, I contend that the ability to interact with otherworldly beings bore witness to one's piety and virtue and aided in the obtainment of religious recognition and influence in medieval Islamic society. In the following report, a man questions a black female slave about her religious sincerity. The pious female slave responds not merely in words but also through a demonstration of her spiritual eminence and authority:

> Muḥammad b. Sa'd al-Taymī said: I saw a black slave in one of the cities of the Levant. In her hand were palm leaves, which she was splitting. While dividing the leaves, she said to herself, "O God you possess knowledge that overwhelms my heart, so have mercy on my lowliness and desolation today. I asked her, "O black slave, what is the sign [of one who is a true lover of God]? Suddenly, a man yelled nearby. She looked first to the man and then to me and said, "O you idle person, the sign of one who is sincere in his love of God is to pose this

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[87] See, for example, Katherine Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
[88] See, also, Arthur Saniotis, "Tales of Mystery: Spirit Familiar in Sufis' Religious Imagination," *Ethos* 32, no. 3 (2004): 397-411.

question to this mad man (*majnūn*).” Then the mad man stood up and a female jinn, who had taken hold of him, spoke thus on his tongue, “I swear by the sincerity of your love of God [O female slave], I will not return to this man ever again!” And God knows best.[89]

Here a black female slave is found shredding palm leaves but her menial labor does not seem to hinder her from engaging in ritual worship. She performs her work perfunctorily and focuses instead on supplication and remembrance of God. She attributes all knowledge and wisdom to God and then entreats Him to bestow mercy on her “lowliness” and “desolation.” This may be a literal reference to her lower social status as a slave or an allusion to her spiritual humility before God. In any case, her religious supplications are so sincere that they attract the attention of a male devotee, al-Taymī, who decides to solicit spiritual advice from her. Though he is a non-maḥrām man and a stranger to her, there is no indication of impropriety in this mixed gender interaction. He asks her about the characteristic of someone who is true in his or her devotion to God. The female slave reveals that the mark of true spiritual conviction lies in one’s saintly ability to communicate with the *majnūn* or the possessed. She then turns to a seemingly mad man who, as we are told, has been possessed by a female jinn. Speaking through the body of the man, the female jinn attests to the religious sincerity of the female slave and further emphasizing her piety, promises to abandon the man and never possess him again.

[89] al-Hisnī, *al-Mu’mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 95.

There are several observations we can make about this account. At first blush, the nearby vagrant man appears insane, but the female slave possesses the spiritual intuition to determine the true source of his apparent madness: jinn possession. Her love of God is so pure and true that the jinn immediately vows to depart from its human host. In his study of madness in medieval Islam, Michael Dols writes in this vein, arguing that the clinically insane in many ways occupied the role of the "wise fool" in Islamic society. Although socially deviant, the insane were often valued for the unique spiritual insight they imparted to others. Sometimes, the cause of insanity was attributed to jinn-possession. In such cases, Sufi mystics known for their miraculous abilities of spiritual healing and exorcism were called upon to expel an unwanted supernatural being.[90] Similarly, in the abovementioned story, the female jinn, perhaps acting as the wise fool, affirms the female slave's sincerity of faith and vows to exit the body of the man. In effect, the female slave is able to perform a successful exorcism, an act that works to buttress her religious standing and authority. She answers al-Taymī's question, not in the form of a direct response, but through the display of her own spiritual powers, which confirms her elevated religious status.

Another interesting element is that the female jinn is reported as occupying a male body, which seems to disturb commonly assumed notions about pre-modern Islamic gender relations. Here several questions come to mind: Why is it a female and not male jinn that occupies a male body? Is a female jinn considered more powerful

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[90] Michael Dols, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* Ed., Diana E. Immish. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 223-243.

than a man? What can this tell us about the construction of gender in this time period? Perhaps the gender bending in this account can be used as a basis for rethinking and reimagining the meanings attributed to gender, specifically notions of male dominance and female passivity in medieval Islamic history.

Finally, we find that factors such as class, race, and gender do not seem to interfere in this woman's ability to participate in pious life and gain religious recognition. Her social duties as a slave are performed in tandem with her devotional practices, not unlike the pious women we encountered in chapter two who were known for their excessive devotion and nighttime prayer. That she garners attention from a foreign and presumably free man and teaches him a spiritual lesson through her own mystical talents signifies that what matters more than her gender or social status, is her spiritual excellence and devotional piety. The same goes for her race. Though her male narrator explicitly describes her as being black, her racial status appears unimportant and irrelevant to her ability to ascend in devotional piety and gain religious authority. In fact, not only is this black female slave pious and devout, she is apparently spiritually superior to al-Taymī, whom she addresses as an "idle" man, devoid of religious understanding. Essentially, this woman is able to transcend any and all social constraints inherent in her class, race, and gender, even surpassing someone who would normatively – according to medieval social norms and Islamic law – be in authority over her.

Conclusion

Throughout medieval Islamic history, piety functioned as a source of social and religious capital. It granted one not only fame and prestige but also religious influence and authority in society. Unlike other areas of Islamic praxis that might have been closed off to women, such as law-making and political governance, women participated freely in the realm of pious expression. As we have seen in al-Ḥiṣnī's fifteenth-century biographical collection of pious female devotees, women were revered by their male biographers for their extraordinary acts of supererogatory worship. Their engagement with God manifested in diverse and disparate ways, but the pursuit of God's pleasure and a deep concern for the next life remained their uniform and primary goal. In Chapter Two, I argued that female devotees were upheld as exemplars for their long hours of ritual devotion, especially their observance of the nighttime prayer. Some women performed devotional practices in harmony with their social obligations as wives and mothers, finding no apparent conflict between their duties to God and their duties to their families. Other women, however, preferred a life of solitary worship and seclusion from society. In accounts of these latter women, no mention is made of their family or social ties, suggesting that they were free from the charge of domestic and household duties and could devote themselves entirely to worship. In Chapter Three, I argued that women received special attention for their devotional acts of pious weeping and tawāf. These pious acts in particular granted women a degree of socio-religious influence amongst men and allowed them to bypass certain gender constraints enshrined

in legal discourses. For instance, we discovered that some women were seemingly able to travel alone or remain outside of the house at night without the accompaniment of a male guardian, which is considered a requirement for women according to some Muslim male jurists. Finally, in Chapter Four, I examined a solitary and peculiar account concerning a female devotee whose pious ability to interact with a supernatural being and performance of an exorcism highlights the creative breadth of female pious expression. In this account, issues of class, race, and gender also surface and raise critical questions with regards to Muslim women's agency and status in medieval Islamic society.

I have also examined al-Ḥiṣnī's possible motivations behind compiling this work on saintly women, and his choice to comment on specific biographical accounts. Noticeably, al-Ḥiṣnī remains predominantly silent throughout this work, enabling the narrative accounts to speak for themselves. This may be due to the possibility that he views most of these accounts as straightforward and not in need of explanation. However, in the rare instances when al-Ḥiṣnī does choose to comment on specific accounts, his reasons for doing so are more difficult to discern. One possible reason for his commentary, as we saw in chapter two on women's excessive devotion, is that he wishes to stress to his readers the importance of the next life over this life, which is in fact the dominant theme that obtains in most of these accounts. This much is also true in the last section of his work, in which he asserts that pious female devotees should seek satisfaction in the next world as opposed to this temporal one, avoiding those spiritual diseases, which negatively impact one's relationship with the Divine. Beyond this, it is

quite clear that al-Ḥiṣnī wishes for aspiring female devotees to learn from and emulate the lives and practices of pious women featured in this work as he explicitly states in his preface. Moreover, he discloses that since he had previously composed a biographical work exclusively on virtuous men, one on pious women was now required, especially for those female devotees aspiring to reach a higher spiritual status.

My primary goal throughout this work has been to paint a general portrait of medieval Muslim women's pious practices, thereby highlighting their social functions and roles beyond the narrow purview of the law. In doing so, I have offered a glimpse into how religious authority was constructed in medieval Islamic society and in particular, how Muslim women acquired religious fame, autonomy, and influence amongst men. Contemporary literature on medieval Muslim women has tended to emphasize the limitations and restrictions placed on women's social and religious lives as outlined in Islamic legal discourses, but I have found that in al-Ḥiṣnī's biographical work, gender-based norms and constraints do not seem to inhibit women from participating and excelling in pious life. Whether women choose to subvert or conform to their gender roles – both cases are clearly evident in al-Ḥiṣnī's work – their gender has no bearing on their ability to go above and beyond the obligatory requirements of ritual worship. Through the bodily performance of ritual acts, women achieve spiritual equality, if not superiority, over their male counterparts. Thus, by de-emphasizing the voice of the law as the sole determiner of women's rights and agency and exploring other textual discourses like Sufi biographical works, this essay demonstrates, above all,

that there is much more to learn about Muslim women's place and power in medieval Islamic society.

Beyond Islam as Law: Piety and the Quest for Women's Religious Authority

What might the relevance and implications of such historical research be for the status of Muslim women today? As I stated previously in the Introduction, Muslim female scholars with an activist bent for gender reform, especially in the realm of Islamic personal status laws in Muslim-majority countries, have attempted to formulate new and egalitarian legal positions that might act as a remedial force to the gender inequality and misogyny prevalent in contemporary Islamic law and society.[91] A necessary component of this reform is the quest for Muslim women's religious authority and leadership in the U.S. context and overseas. While most Muslim female scholars and reformers have set their sights on reinterpreting the textual sources of Islamic law, like the Qurʾān, in an effort to tackle obstacles to women's religious authority, few scholars have utilized other moral and ethical discourses to reexamine the place and role of contemporary Muslim women. Sa'diyya Shaikh is perhaps one of the few to draw on Sufi perspectives on women and gender to argue for women's full autonomy and agency in the law. Shaikh reappraises the underlying metaphysical foundations of the law through a feminist reading of Sufi narratives on the nature of the human being and

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[91] See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Legal Tradition and the Challenge of Gender Equality," in Z. Mir-Hosseini et al. (ed.), *Men in Charge?: Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015).

the God-human relationship. She concludes that "it is not the gendered body but the human being's inner state that is the site of moral and spiritual worth."[92] Elsewhere she writes:

> Sufism presupposes that every human being can pursue and achieve the same ultimate goals and that gender does not constitute an impediment or an advantage to these existential ends. These assumptions potentially pose a direct challenge to the very basis of patriarchy, in which the male body is the signifier of social and ontological superiority.[93]

Shaikh is correct in her assertion that gender, at least in theory, does not pose a stumbling block to one's spiritual achievements. This is made clear in al-Ḥiṣnī's accounts of pious women. However, her lack of emphasis on the role of the body and consequent prioritization of the human being's inner state limits our understanding of the spiritual practices and imperatives found in Sufi discourses. It is evident from al-Ḥiṣnī's work that it is not merely the inner state that is the locus of one's moral and religious status but also, the outward expression of one's inner state through bodily performances. One should be reminded that medieval female devotees gained religious authority primarily through a strict spiritual training and disciplining of the body. Thus,

[92] Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Islamic Law, Sufism, and Gender: Rethinking the Terms of the Debate," in Z. Mir- Hosseini et al. (ed.), *Men in Charge?: Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), 109.
[93] Shaikh, 115.

it is neither the privileging of the inward or outward but rather the synchronization of both states that constitutes proper Sufi conduct and practice.

Although Shaikh notes that "early Sufi women adopted diverse approaches to piety"[94] and that in some cases, they were able to subvert traditional gender norms, she does not make the connection that it was the bodily practice of piety and not a theory or assumption about spiritual equality that enabled women to transcend their gender and obtain social and religious status. If the male body did indeed connote "social and ontological superiority," then it was women's bodily performance of ritual acts that disrupted that assumption. But it seems Muslim female scholars and activists have yet to grasp this idea regnant in medieval Islamic society; namely, that it was primarily through the bodily cultivation and enactment of piety that one gained agency and authority. This historical fact is perhaps relevant to the pursuit of women's religious authority today since this process of acquiring agency still holds currency amongst Muslims in many parts of the contemporary world.[95] As Saba Mahmood has demonstrated in her groundbreaking study on the women's mosque movement in Egypt, female mosque adherents have been able to acquire religious authority and even affect both Islamist and secular-liberal politics – all by following a specific disciplinary program of the body by which piety is created and expressed. For these Egyptian women, Mahmood writes, "politics involves not simply rational argumentation and

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[94] Shaikh, 108.
[95] One might recall in Chapter One I mention Aria Nakissa's work on contemporary Muslim jurists in Egypt. The ability to interpret religious texts and issue legal opinions was achieved only after following a strict purification process in which scholars modeled their actions and behavior on the life of the Prophet.

evaluation of moral principles, but issues forth from intersubjective levels of being and acting"[96] or in other words, a "process of moral cultivation."[97] In this conception, then, piety represents a mobilizing social and political force without which these female mosque adherents could not have obtained agency and impacted political governance.

This notion of piety as a social force, still valorized by modern Muslims, may offer new ground upon which Muslim female scholars and reformers can make cogent claims to women's religious legitimacy and authority. I say this, of course, not with the intention of assuming a normative position on how Muslim women should proceed in their struggle for religious authority but, more so with the aim of illuminating alternative historical strategies of developing religious authority and triggering political and legal change. In seeking to develop and expand women's religious authority through the use of piety, Muslim women must ask themselves a number of questions: Do Muslim female activists and reformers espouse and reflect traditional pious norms and if not, does this effect their ability to garner religious authority in their local Muslim communities? Are traditional constructions of piety premised on androcentric assumptions about the body and thus inaccessible and restrictive to women or, as the accounts in al-Ḥiṣnī's work seem to indicate, are they more egalitarian in nature? Is there space to break from traditional models of piety and reconstruct new forms of pious acts and behavior and if so, how would contemporary Muslims respond to such reconfigurations of piety?

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[96] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 152.
[97] Mahmood, 151.

To the extent that Muslim female scholars and activists focus on the law in their efforts to garner religious authority and influence, they will overlook the role of piety as a fundamental building block of social and religious power in Islamic societies. For the pious female worshippers in al-Ḥiṣnī's fifteenth-century text, piety functioned as a source of socio-religious capital by which they were able to defy certain gender-based norms and surpass their male counterparts in spiritual excellence. It is my contention that such models for obtaining religious fame and power are still relevant to Muslims; perhaps one need only heed the advice for success of the poor woman (*miskīna*) mentioned in the first account: "[Attend] the circles of remembrance and [hold steadfast] to the Truth."[98]

[98] al-Ḥiṣnī, *al-Mu'mināt wa-siyar al-sālikāt*, 71.

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