

Medieval Islamic Preaching as a Resource for the Study of Gender and Islam

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Abstract

This chapter explores constructions of gender identities and gender distinctions reflected in medieval Islamic preaching and ancillary prosopographic literature on male and female preachers. The goal of this research was to ascertain what the study of Islamic preaching and homiletic sources adds to our knowledge regarding the status of women, the sanctification of patriarchy, female piety, ideals of masculinity and femininity, and gender relations. Two kinds of investigations were conducted: (1), the search for and analysis of prosopographic data concerning female preachers and (2), a brief thematic, rhetorical, and gender analysis of two hortatory sermons on women, possibly addressed to all female or mixed audiences. The chapter ends by suggesting areas of future research on gender and medieval Islamic preaching.

1. Introduction

One of the goals of the research project, “Interdisciplinary and Comparative Studies in Religious, (Trans)cultural, and Gendered Identities in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia and the Mediterranean” (Ref. no. FF12015-63659-C2-2-P, MINECO/FEDER, UE) was to study the role of Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious agents in articulating and transmitting notions of religious identity and alterity in medieval and early modern Mediterranean societies as they relate to gender. Toward this end, I focused part of my research on analyzing gender related themes in Islamic preaching and oratory. Scholars of medieval Christian sermons have conducted extensive research on women preachers, their sermons, and female authority; *ad status* sermons of male preachers addressed to religious and laywomen; gender distinctions in the reception of preaching; and sermons on marriage and marriage symbolism, among other topics.² Studies on gender and Islamic preach-

1. This chapter summarizes partial findings of my research undertaken within the frameworks of the Spanish government funded research project, “Interdisciplinary and Comparative Studies in Religious, (Trans)cultural, and Gendered Identities in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia and the Mediterranean” (Ref. no. FF12015-63659-C2-2-P, MINECO/FEDER, UE) and the Ramón y Cajal Postdoctoral Program.
2. A pioneering study on women preachers and female authority was the coordinated volume by Kienzle, Beverly Mayne and Walker, Pamela (Eds.) (1998), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles. Numerous studies on gender and medieval Christian preaching have since followed, among them several of the contributions in Muessig, Carolyn (Ed.) (2002), *Prea-*

ing and oratory³ in the premodern period are scarce in comparison, apart from brief mentions of the religio-political orations delivered by female soothsayers and certain women from the Prophet Muḥammad's household under extraordinary circumstances.⁴

This chapter seeks to outline what my research on Islamic preaching and ancillary sources contributes to our knowledge regarding gender issues in pre-modern Islamic societies, such as the status of women, the sanctification of patriarchy,⁵ expressions of female piety, ideals of masculinity and femininity, and genders relations. I conducted two kinds of investigations: (1), the search for and analysis of prosopographic data concerning female preachers preserved in biographical dictionaries, hagiographic literature, and juridical sources, and (2), a brief thematic, rhetorical, and gender analysis of two hortatory sermons on women, possibly addressed to all female or mixed audiences. I will include a brief explanation of the sources I analyzed and their methodological limitations. Despite the paucity and the gaps in the sources, preliminary results illuminate how hortatory preaching provided a vehicle for ascetic and Sufi women to exercise spiritual authority over men as well as women. The majority of studies on gender and Islam in the premodern period analyze the Qur'ān, Hadith, exegesis, prosopographic, and juridical sources. By contrast, the present study sheds light on the creative strategies male preachers deployed to transmit notions of ideal Muslim femininity and female piety by reinterpreting and adapting these sources to suit their targeted audiences of ascetic Sufi women or women from the general public. I will conclude with some suggestions for future lines of research.

cher, *Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, Leiden/Boston/Cologne; O'Mara, Veronica M. (2000), «Preaching to Nuns in Late Medieval England» in George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (Eds.), *Medieval Monastic Education*, New York, pp. 93–119; Waters, Claire M. (2003), *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia; and Pryds, Darleen (2012), «Franciscan Lay Women and the Charism to Preach» in Timothy J. Johnson (Ed.), *Franciscans and Preaching. Every Miracle from the Beginning of the World Came about through Words*, Leiden/Boston, pp. 41–57.

3. Islamic oratory (khaṭāba) encompasses the canonical ritual orations for prescriptive religious occasions and civil occasions (Friday and festival sermons, nuptial orations, rain rogation sermons, etc.), para-liturgical religious sermons, and jihad orations. There are also other genres of non-canonical hortatory preaching (maw'iza/wa'z) and storytelling (qaṣaṣ). On the various genres of Islamic oratory and preaching, see Berkey, Jonathan (2001), *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East*, Seattle/London; Qutbuddin, Tahera (2006), «Khuṭba: The Evolution of Early Arabic Oration» in Beatrice Greundler and Michael Cooperson (Eds.), *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms: Festschrift for Wolfgang Heinrichs*, Leiden, pp. 176–273; and Jones, Linda G. (2012), *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World*, New York.
4. Qutbuddin, «Khuṭba», pp. 193–194, 200–201, 245–250.
5. On this notion see Mir-Hosseini, Ziba (2007), «Islam and Gender Justice» in Vincent Cornell and Omid Safi (Eds.), *Voices of Islam*, vol. 5, *Voices of Diversity and Change*, Westport, Greenwood, pp. 85–113.

2. Sources for the study of gender and Islamic oratory

A number of challenges arise upon exploring gender related themes using Islamic oratorical sources. In the first place, one must consider the social limitations on female preaching in Muslim societies, which finds parallels in Christianity and Judaism. Muslim women were prohibited from leading the canonical rituals, including the sermon, in the mosques to avoid the spectacle of women exercising authority over and exposing themselves to strange men. Yet just as there is evidence that Christian women preached “despite repeated prohibitions,” as the contributors to the collective volume, *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, edited by Beverly M. Kienzle and Pamela Walker have demonstrated,⁶ so too are there indications that some Muslim women preached under restricted circumstances. Admittedly, the information gathered thus far about Muslim women preachers, their sermons, reflections of gender distinctions or gendered religious rhetoric amounts to glimpses scattered across a broad range of sources. These sources include biographical dictionaries of religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*) and other notables; hagiographic compendia of Muslim ascetics, mystics, and saints; compendia of juridical opinions and casuistry; literary anthologies that preserve the orations and sermons of famous orators; and discreet collections of oratory. I will complete this section with highlights of the data I have gathered from these sources, together with an explanation of their limitations.

Biographical dictionaries (*tabaqāt* or *tarājim*) of the religious, political, and intellectual notables of a given geographical region, legal school, or other group affiliation have long been recognized by scholars of Islamic history as one of the most useful sources of information about the social, intellectual, political, and cultural history of the Muslim world.⁷ Although the protagonists of biographical notices are overwhelmingly masculine, biographical dictionaries can also be mined for tidbits of information concerning women and gender. I underscore the scantiness of the data because typically the number of biographical notices dedicated to men in any given compendium far exceeds those dedicated to women. Moreover, as María Jesús Viguera and Ruth Roded have pointed out, the content of the notices featuring women tend toward extreme brevity and stereotyped information in comparison with the biographies of men.⁸ The following are three examples: First, the Iraqi hortatory preacher and historian Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) described Fāṭima bint

6. Kienzle, Beverly Mayne and Walker, Pamela (Eds.) (1998), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles.

7. On Islamic biographical dictionaries, see al-Qadi, Wadad (1995), «Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structures and Cultural Significance» in George N. Atiyeh (Ed.), *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, Albany, pp. 93–122; and Roded, Ruth (1994), *Women in the Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: From Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who*, Boulder.

8. Viguera, María Jesús (2016), «Dieciséis mujeres andalusíes biografiadas por el cordobés Ibn Baskuwāl (494/1101-578/1183)», in *Revista al-Mulk* 14, pp. 9–18; Roded, Ruth (1994), *Women in the Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: From Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner.

al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥasan al-Faḍlawiyya al-Rāzī as “a pious devout hortatory preacher (*wā‘iza muta‘abbida*) who “owned a lodge (*rābiṭa*) where the ascetic women would gather (*tajma‘u al-zāhidāt*),” presumably to listen to her sermons.⁹ A later Syrian historian al-Dhahabī (d. 753/1352) included her in his *Major History of Islam*, adding that the lodge was in Baghdad and that she was “a famous preacher (*wā‘iza mashhūra*).”¹⁰ The second and most intriguing notice I have found is the Valencian historian Ibn al-‘Abbār’s (d. 658/1260) description of an Andalusī woman identified simply as Rashīda “al-Wā‘iza (the hortatory preacher):” Rashīda “travelled throughout al-Andalus preaching and exhorting the women; she had a good reputation and excelled in piety and goodness.”¹¹ Finally, Muḥammad al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), an Egyptian historian and hadith transmitter wrote a biographical notice about Bayram ibnat Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Surūr, in which he mentioned that while on a journey to Jerusalem in the company of her father, she took lessons from the eminent religious scholars (*al-shuyūkh*) there and she “preached exhortations to the women (*wa‘āzat al-nisā*).”¹²

Despite their brevity, the notices provided by Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn al-‘Abbār, and al-Sakhāwī are of historical importance as proof that women practiced the genre of non-liturgical religious and moral preaching known as *wa‘z* (pious exhortation). *Wa‘z* typically speaks of one’s duties to God, eschatology, and ascetic themes such as condemnation of the mundane world, patience in adversity, and complete reliance upon God. The biographers coincide in affirming that the three preachers Fāṭima, Rashīda, and Bayram restricted their homiletic sessions to all female audiences. Yet each case differed: Ascetic women converged at Fāṭima’s private lodge to listen to the sermons of this “famous hortatory preacher.” This scenario probably reflects Fāṭima’s fame as a preacher as well as her status as an ascetic recluse, which may be inferred from Ibn Jawzī’s description of her as a *muta‘abbida*, i.e., a person who devotes herself exclusively to worshipping God. On the other hand, Rashīda and Bayram exemplify contrasting cases of female itinerant preachers. Whereas Bayram travelled “in the company of her father,” Rashīda “wandered throughout al-Andalus,” which implies that she enjoyed the freedom of movement to travel about un-chaperoned.

Two other brief biographical notices merit comment: Palestinian Mamluk historian Khalīl al-Ṣafadī wrote an obituary for “the Baghdadi female belletrist (al-Kā-

9. Ibn al-Jawzī, Abū l-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (1938), *al-Muntaẓam fī ta’rīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, 6 vols., Haydarabadh, p. 2110; Online version:

[<http://www.alwaraq.net/Core/SearchServlet/searchone?docid=43&searchtext=2YjYp9i52L-jYqQ=&option=1&offset=1&WordForm=1&exactpage=2110&totalpages=1&AllOffset=1>]

10. Al-Dhahabī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ‘Uthmān (2003), *Ta’rīkh al-Islām wa-wafāyāt al-mashhūr wa-l-a‘lām* (Ed.) s. n., Beirut, p. 3624; Online version:

[<http://www.alwaraq.net/Core/SearchServlet/searchone?docid=141&searchtext=2YjYp9i52L-jYqQ=&option=1&offset=1&WordForm=1&exactpage=3624&totalpages=4&AllOffset=1>]

11. Cited in Ávila, María L. (1989), «Las mujeres ‘sabias’ en al-Andalus» in *La mujer en al-Andalus*, ed. María Jesús Viguera, Madrid, pp. 139-84, 170.

12. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi*, vol. 2, 15.

tiba l-Baghdādiyya”) Ṣafīyat bint ‘Abd al-Rahmān, eulogizing her as a “virtuous hortatory preacher and belletrist (*wā’iza adība fādila*).”¹³ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sam‘ānī (d. 1166), an Arabophone historian from Merv, described ‘Ā’isha bint al-Ḥasan al-Warkānī as a “scholarly woman (*imra’a ‘ālīma*) and a hortatory preacher (*wā’izā*) of beautiful irreproachable conduct (*ḥasanat al-sīrat*).¹⁴ Though few in number,¹⁵ it is interesting to note that the five cases considered here pertain to women from different places: ‘Ā’isha al-Warkānī came from Warkān, a town in Isfahan; Fāṭima and Ṣafīyat resided and preached in Baghdad, while Bayram preached in Jerusalem and, as mentioned, Rashīda preached throughout Muslim Iberia. The broad geographic expanse suggests that women engaged in hortatory preaching throughout the Muslim world.

The positive commentaries of the male biographers about the extreme piety, devotion, virtuousness, irreproachable moral conduct, and erudition of these women preachers could be interpreted as gender neutral. After all, in many parts of the Islamic world hortatory preaching and especially homiletic storytelling provoked divided opinions between the ‘*ulamā*’ (religious and legal scholars) who sanctioned these activities as licit under certain circumstances, and those who condemned these “popular preachers” as charlatans or agents of religious “innovation” (*bid’a*). As a result of this polemic, biographers and chroniclers often made a point of highlighting the religious erudition, moral probity, and piety of male and female hortatory preachers.¹⁶ Thus, the comments recognizing the profound devotion, erudition, and morality of the female preachers could be read as an indicator of gender parity. Yet these positive qualifiers of the women’s character and conduct, together with the explicit mention that they preached before all female audiences, could also serve the narrative function of assuaging the prejudices of certain male elites—the probable intended audience of the biographical dictionaries—who might doubt or disparage a woman’s capacity for scholarship or for assuming leadership roles as teachers or preachers.

A prime example of this disparaging attitude toward women appears in the writings of a fourteenth-century Egyptian Maliki jurist, Ibn al-Ḥājj, the author of a com-

13. Al-Ṣafādī, Khalīl b. Aybak, *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi-l-wafāyāt*, in Hellmut Ritter; Sven Dederich et al. (Eds.) (1931-1997), Leipzig, Istanbul, Damascus, Weisbaden, 29 vols., *Dār al-Naṣr/Frantz Staynart*, vol. 2 pp. 22-51. Online version at <http://www.alwaraq.net/Core/SearchServlet/searchone?docid=280&searchtext=2Y-jYp9i52LjYqQ=&option=1&offset=3&WordForm=1&exactpage=2251&totalpages=5&AllOffset=1>

14. Al-Sam‘ānī, ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad, *Kitāb al-Ansāb* in David Samuel Margoliouth (Ed.) (1912), Leiden-London, Brill, p. 1421; Online version: [<http://www.alwaraq.net/Core/SearchServlet/searchone?docid=61&searchtext=2YjYp9i52LjY-qQ=&option=1&offset=1&WordForm=1&exactpage=1421&totalpages=1&AllOffset=1>]

15. Altogether Roded has located twenty notices of female preachers. Roded, *Women in the Islamic Biographical Dictionaries*, pp. 104-106.

16. Roded, *Women in the Islamic Biographical Dictionaries*, pp. 105-106; Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, pp. 218-231. Iraqi hortatory preacher Ibn al-Jawzī composed a famous apologetic treatise on hortatory preaching and storytelling that exposed some of the abuses of disreputable preachers. See Swartz, Merlin L. (1986), *Ibn al-Jawzī’s “Kitāb al-Quṣṣās wa’l-mudkhakkirīn,”* Beirut.

pendium of Islamic jurisprudence, *Introduction to the Noble Law according to the Four Schools of Law*.¹⁷ Legal compendia, prescriptive treatises, and collections of juridical casuistry and opinions (*fatāwā*) contain goldmines of information about the legal and social history of Muslim societies. An instance of the latter is Ibn al-Ḥājj's denunciation of what he considered to be unlawful "innovations (*bida'*)" in certain preaching practices. He railed against the female leaders (*shaykhāt*) who organized preaching assemblies (*majālis al-wa'z*) for women in the cemeteries during Ramadan and the celebration of the Prophet Muḥammad's birthday (*Mawlid al-Nabī*). Ibn al-Ḥājj delegitimized the authority of these women by insinuating that they had insufficient authentic religious knowledge to merit the title of "*shaykha*," the feminine form of *shaykh*, a term of respect for pious learned men with a profound knowledge of the religious sciences (the Qur'ān, scriptural exegesis, Hadith, legal, or mystical texts). Ibn al-Ḥājj appeared to disdain the very notion that a woman could be considered a "*shaykha*" when he urged that women be forbidden from attending the assembly (*majlis*) of "someone whom they claimed to be a female *shaykha* (*man yaz'amna annahā shaykha*)."¹⁸ He further undermined their authority by accusing them of "meddling" in Qur'ānic exegesis ("*tadakhkhala naṣṣahā fī l-tafsīr li-Kitāb Allāh*") and "*spinning tales* about the prophets (*wa-taḥkī al-anbiyā'*),"¹⁹ rather than narrate from the canonically recognized sources.¹⁹

Moreover, later in the same passage Ibn al-Ḥājj revealed that some women preachers delivered sermons before mixed audiences, for he denounced as "that heinous cause of moral corruption (*hādhihi l-mafāsida*)" the "mixing of men, women, and children, all mingled together before the male or the female hortatory preacher (*'alā l-wā'iz aw al-wā'iza*)."²⁰ Yet mixed audiences in hortatory preaching sessions sometimes provoked the censure of the jurists even when the preacher was male. For instance, 'Abd Allāh al-'Abdūsī (d. 850/1446), the *qāḍī* of Fez, was asked to render a juridical opinion (*fatwā*) concerning the probity of a group of Sufis who gathered together on the Prophet Muḥammad's birthday to pronounce hortatory sermons (*mawā'iz*) and litanies (*adhkār*). One of the arguments adduced to defend the activity was that "women do not participate in these assemblies, which does not give rise to any excess."²¹

Hagiographic texts also furnish details about female preachers. Hagiographic literature is an excellent source of data on the lives and activities of Muslim ascetics,

17. Ibn al-Ḥājj al-'Abdarī, Muḥammad (1981), *Madkhal al-shar' al-sharīf 'alā l-madhāhib al-arbi'a*, ed. s. n., 4 vols., Cairo.

18. Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-shar' al-sharīf*, vol. 2, p. 12.

19. On Ibn al-Ḥājj's attitudes toward women and female authority, see Lutfi, Huda (1991), «Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in the Muslim Prescriptive Treatises», in Nikkie Keddie and Beth Baron (Eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History*, New Haven, pp. 99-121.

20. Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-shar' al-sharīf*, vol. 2, p. 16.

21. Lagardère, Vincent (1995), *Histoire et Société en Occident Musulman au Moyen Âge: Analyse du Mi'yār d'al-Wanṣarīsī*, Madrid, p. 475.

Sufi mystics, and saints, as well as the communities that venerate them.²² As with the biographical dictionaries, hagiographic compendia are composed by men and tend to contain far fewer notices dedicated to women than to their masculine counterparts. Apart from including biographies of preachers, the authors/compiler of these texts might provide information about preaching, noting, for example, that someone converted to the ascetic or Sufi path after listening to a powerful sermon; commenting on the content of the saint's sermons, or describing the impact of their preaching.²³

An important hagiographic source containing information on female preaching are the exempla preserved in the anthology of Sufi hortatory sermons, *The Splendorous Garden of Homiletic Exhortations and Edifying Tales*, compiled by the Egyptian ascetic Sufi preacher, Shu'ayb al-Ḥurayfīsh (d. 801/1398).²⁴ The work contains 56 sermons, 17 of which treat the prodigious deeds and virtues of male ascetics, Sufis, and saints while two sermons focus specifically on "devout women (*al-sālihāt*)."²⁵ Whereas Ibn al-Hājj condemned the spectacle of women preachers speaking before mixed gender audiences, all the examples of female preaching al-Ḥurayfīsh describes in his sermons on pious women take place as private audiences before one or more male listeners within the context of a specific type of religious activity, the Sufi *siyāḥa*, or spiritual wandering. These sojourns were undertaken primarily to retreat from society and test one's reliance upon God, to visit holy ascetics, Sufi master, or saints, benefit from their superior mystical gnosis, or obtain their blessings and prayers. A *topos* of al-Ḥurayfīsh's narratives of the Sufi *siyāḥa* is a dialogue that ensues between the Sufi male or female protagonist and the male narrator who seeks out a Sufi devotee or saint whom he has heard about, or whom he encounters unexpectedly during the course of a journey elsewhere. These dialogues typically follow a certain pattern: an initial greeting, an interrogation that reveals the Sufi protagonist's spiritual gnosis and proximity to God, and the reaction of the narrator who requests the saint to preach to him, provide him with spiritual guidance, and/or ask for divine intercession on his behalf. Al-Ḥurayfīsh depicts scenes of private extemporized hortatory preaching in which a pious Sufi woman preaches exhortations to her male interlocutor, either at her own initiative or at the latter's behest. Invariably, in these exchanges the person who preaches exhortations possesses greater spiritual authority than his or her interlocutor. Thus the act of homiletic exhortation is an indicator of female authority and demonstrates that women could excel spiritually just like men and exercise spiritual authority over them.²⁵ This idea is consistent with al-Ḥurayfīsh's affirmations that God "equated (*qarana*) men and women in their

22. On this genre see Mojaddedi, Jawid A. (2001), *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism. The Ṭabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmī*, New York, Routledge.

23. On audience responses to Islamic preaching, see Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, pp. 232-256.

24. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, Shu'ayb b. Sa'd (1992), *al-Rawḍ al-fā'iḳ fī l-mawā'iz wa-l-raqā'iq*, (Ed.) Khālīd 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Akk, Damascus.

25. For further analysis of Sufi women exerting spiritual authority over men, see Roded, *Women in the Islamic Biographical Dictionaries*, pp. 100-104; and Salamah-Qudsi, Arin Shawkat (2018), *Sufism and Early Islamic Piety: Personal and Communal Dynamics*, Cambridge/New York, pp. 53-82.

capacity to attain mystical states (*aḥwāl*), excel in asceticism (*zuhd*),” and engage in spiritual activities such as spiritual wanderings (*as-siyāḥāt*) “just like the men.”²⁶ Al-Ḥurayfīsh’s focus on the spiritual authority of devout women suggests that the sermon was addressed to female Sufis or perhaps a mixed gender audience of Sufis and ascetics, rather than the general public.

Finally, an anonymous hortatory sermon (*maw‘īza*) on the subject of spousal relations provides insights into the gendered messages targeting either an all female or a mixed audience of the general public, which contrasts with the quasi proto-feminist discourse articulated in al-Ḥurayfīsh’s sermons on/to devout women. Manuscript no. 1248 of the Bibliothèque National de France is titled, “*Huqūq ikhwat al-Islām* (the reciprocal inalienable rights between Muslims),” and is dated 1516.²⁷ Of special relevance here is the homily titled, “the inalienable rights of the two spouses (*huqūq al-zawjāyn*).”²⁸ This sermon is one of two anonymous hortatory sermons²⁹ I have located that explicitly speak of women, gender, and spousal relations. The analysis of these sermons suggests that the preacher of the hortatory sermon has greater leeway to develop a variety of gender-related themes than the preacher of the canonical nuptial oration, which has certain restrictions due to its juridical and ritual functions, making the content more predictable.³⁰ In the remainder of this essay, I will briefly comment on selected passages from al-Ḥurayfīsh’s sermons on pious women and the anonymous sermon on “the inalienable rights of the two spouses.”

3. Images of women and gender in Islamic hortatory sermons

Although Shu‘ayb al-Ḥurayfīsh performed the pilgrimage to Mecca and spent time there studying Sufism with eminent shaykhs, he was associated with a variety of “popular” Sufism, first introduced to Egypt by Andalusī and North African Sufis in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which attracted men and women from all strata of society. The Sufis invited the general populace to observe and participate in their rituals and to attend the lectures and sermons held in mosques and spiritual lodges (*zāwīyas*). By all accounts, al-Ḥurayfīsh was a charismatic preacher however, his preaching style elicited disapproval among some of the religio-juridical elites.³¹

26. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā‘iq*, p. 182.

27. The cataloguer Georges Vajda disagrees with De Slane’s attribution of the text to the Egyptian Shafī‘i jurist and Sufi ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (c. 1492-1564). The date of the text (1516) makes it improbable that Sha‘rānī could have composed it at such a young age. See Vajda, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes*, pp. 122-123.

28. BnF, ar. 1248, ff. 300v-306v.

29. The other is Paris, BnF, ar. 1316, no. 3, “Mawā‘iz.” For the catalogue description, see Vajda, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes*, pp. 176-177. One of the sermons is titled, “bāb al-mar’a taḥūnu zawja-hā” (on the woman who deceives her husband).

30. For an analysis of the nuptial oration, see Jones, *The Power of Oratory*, pp. 123-130; and Qutbuddin, «Khuṭba», pp. 196-197.

31. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority*, p. 18. On Shu‘ayb al-Ḥurayfīsh, see Al-‘Asqalānī, Ibn Hajar (1975), *Inba‘ al-ghumr bi-abnā’ al-‘umr*, 9 vols., Haydarabad, vol. 4, p. 63 and Al-Sakhāwī,

The first sermon al-Ḥurayfīsh gave on women was titled, “That which expels harshness from the heart by remembering the (pious) women.”³² After the extended doxology he recited two Qur’ānic verses³³ that spoke of gender equality with regard to men’s and women’s religious beliefs and practices. As noted previously, al-Ḥurayfīsh recited these verses to support his assertion that “God equated (*qarana*) men and women” in their capacity to excel in mystical and ascetic piety and that women and men alike engaged in spiritual practices, including journeys to visit Sufi masters and ascetic retreats.³⁴ To illustrate this spiritual gender parity al-Ḥurayfīsh narrated several exempla, including one featuring a dialogue between the famous Egyptian ascetic Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī and an anonymous devout ascetic woman (*‘ābida*). Dhū l-Nūn had heard about the woman’s many “good deeds and spiritual striving,” so he sought her out and “found her fasting during the day, staying awake at night in prayer, not breaking her fast to worship or perform good deeds.” He also mentioned that she lived alone “in a ruined Christian monastery,” which served as a pretext to assert his male prerogative to interrogate her about her religious and moral integrity.³⁵

The woman’s response echoed the familiar Sufi *topos* used by men and women to justify the life-choice of voluntary celibacy and ascetic retirement: that her heart was so filled with the love of God that she had no room for anyone else and that she was constantly in the divine presence. At this point, the gender dynamic definitively changed as Dhū l-Nūn abandoned his masculine authoritative role of interrogator and supplicated her to guide him on the mystical path by preaching to him. He said, “You have surely guided me onto the mystical path (*al-ṭarīq*), so lead me by the path of words (*fa-slakī bī masālak al-qawl*). For verily and by God, I am drowning in my sins.” She replied with a brief sermon exhorting him “to make the fear of God (*taqwā*) your source of greatness, the Hereafter your only quest (*marādaka*), piety and ascetic retirement your natural disposition (*sajiyataka*), to fling the mundane world from your heart, follow the path of the ones who fear (God), and abandon the path of sinners (*ṭarīq al-mudhnibīn*).” Al-Ḥurayfīsh recorded Dhū l-Nūn’s reaction: “Her words impacted me in my heart and were the cause of my reconciliation with my Lord.”³⁶ Al-Ḥurayfīsh portrays the woman’s sermon as the catalyst for Dhū l-Nūn’s spiritual conversion. In sum, this homiletic anecdote illuminates how spiritually elevated ascetic Sufi women could influence and assert their authority over men through personalized sermons.

Al-Ḥurayfīsh’s second sermon, “On the memory of the righteous, penitent, forbearing women,” reveals the masculine anxieties surrounding the chastity of

al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’, vol. 5, p. 20. Al-Sakhāwī was scandalized that al-Ḥurayfīsh adopted the “vile speech” and “wore the distinctive outer robe of the Ḥurayfīsh.”

32. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq*, pp. 182-189.

33. Qur’ān 48: 25 and 33:35.

34. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq*, p. 182.

35. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq*, p. 188.

36. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā’iq*, pp. 188-189.

female ascetics and mystics living on the margins of society beyond the control of patriarchal authority. Al-Ḥurayfīsh based this sermon on verse 34 from the Qur'ān's chapter on women and explained that if a woman is obedient to her husband, if she guards her private parts (*idhā ḥafāẓat farjahā*), and if she preserves herself only for her husband out of a desire to gain God's pleasure and seek His rewards, then she shall be granted paradise."³⁷ In contrast to the previous sermon on women, which defended the gender parity of female and male Sufis and ascetics, here al-Ḥurayfīsh defined female piety in more overtly sexualized terms of obedience to spousal authority and strict sexual morality. Yet all the subsequent exempla he related feature unmarried ascetic and Sufi women, suggesting that they were the target audience. The narrative elements of the male gaze, the greeting, and the interrogation display a pronounced masculine anxiety about the virtue and chastity of Sufi women that is only hinted at in the first sermon.

Signs of this greater male anxiety emerge in the exemplum about a man named 'Uthmān al-Jurjānī,³⁸ who was traveling from Kufa toward Basra when he saw "a woman (*imra'a*) walking alone on the road. She was wearing a woolen cloak (*jubbāt ṣūf*) and a veil covering the lower part of her face made out of coarse hair (*khamār min sha'r*), all the while repeating, 'O my God, O my Lord.'"³⁹ Male anxiety about encountering a woman alone and unaccompanied on a public road is mitigated by the detailed description of her clothing: the cloak and face veil signal her modesty and chastity, while the mention of the woolen fabric (*ṣūf*) reveals her condition as a Sufi. In the ensuing dialogue, al-Jurjānī initiated the greeting but the woman seized the initiative as interrogator, asserting her authority over him by asking him who he was, where he was going, and what he was planning to do in Basra. His response that he had a "personal need to attend to" prompted her to interrogate him about his relationship with God: "O 'Uthmān, don't you know the Fulfiller of Needs (Ṣāḥib al-ḥājja) who takes care of them for you?" Admitting that he was not on such intimate terms with God due to his "many sins," he asked her to pray for him and she did, but she also admonished him with a sermon, saying, "If only you had been as righteous in your dealings with the Most Sublime and you had relied exclusively upon Him to satisfy your need....O 'Uthmān,...had you loved Your Lord, he would have made you richer than all mankind." The gist of the sermon was to rely solely upon God to satisfy all his needs.⁴⁰ Here al-Jurjānī did not ask her to preach; she claimed the prerogative to do so. Despite the more explicitly gendered concerns expressed in this sermon about the chastity of ascetic Sufi women, both sermons demonstrate and legitimize the capacity and propriety of such women to exercise and exert spiritual authority over men.

37. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā'iḳ*, pp. 358-367.

38. I have not been able to identify this person, although he most likely was a prominent ascetic or Sufi, since all the other narrators of exempla in this sermon fit that profile.

39. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā'iḳ*, p. 359.

40. Al-Ḥurayfīsh, *al-Rawḍ al-fā'iḳ*, pp. 359-360.

Turning now to the anonymous hortatory sermon on “the inalienable rights of the husband over the wife” in BnF, ar. 1248, the anonymity of the text means that we can only conjecture about the identity of the author, the intended audience, and the context in which it was written or delivered. According to Georges Vajda, all the sermons are written in Arabic although many have Persian glosses. Hence, the author might have been from Iran or Iraq. The texts are identified as *mawāʿiz*, suggesting that the author was a hortatory preacher. The title of the manuscript, “*Huqūq ikhwat al-Islām* (the reciprocal inalienable rights between Muslims),” alludes to an ethical system defining the proper conditions for harmonious licit coexistence (*muʿāshira*) among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. The focus on “inalienable rights” could mean that the preacher was also a jurist. Because the sermon treats the rights of people from all social conditions, the most likely scenario and public of this homily would have been in a mosque before a mixed gender audience.

The homilist began the sermon by listing various relations between equals: “the friend with the friend (*al-ṣadīq maʿā al-ṣadīq*), the loved one with the loved one (*al-ḥabīb maʿā al-ḥabīb*), the boon companion with the boon companion (*al-khalīl maʿā al-khalīl*).” He then mentioned various pairs of people with a differentiated unequal status: the master with the disciple, the prince and the subject, the rich man and the poor man, one of the spouses over the other (*wāḥid al-jawzayn maʿā al-ākhar*)..., the Muslim with the infidel, and so forth.⁴¹ Thus the relations between spouses are but one type of human relation discussed in a homily that is intended to have something for everyone.

The homily on spousal relations purports to discuss the rights and claims that each spouse may make over the other. Yet in fact, the preacher sanctifies the figure of the obedient wife and privileges the husband’s perspective by focusing overwhelmingly on the duties and responsibilities the wife owes him. He began by declaring that “marriage/sexual relations is a kind of possession or bondage (*nawʿa raqqin*) and that the wife who is possessed owes her husband absolute obedience (*wa-min raqīqatihi fa-ʿalayhā ṭāʿatu l-zawj muṭliqan*) in everything that he asks of her as long as it is not contrary to God’s will.”⁴² This is a central message of the homily, which he develops by treating the following related subthemes:

- a. The wife’s salvation depends upon her obedience to and satisfaction of her husband. Moreover, the wife who pleased her husband will enter the highest ranks of paradise alongside those who showed exemplary patience—Job’s wife, Mary, female martyrs and saints.⁴³
- b. The wife’s obedience to her husband is an obligatory act of worship, equal to if not more meritorious in the eyes of God than other devotional acts. Con-

41. BnF, ar. 1248, ff. 300v–306v.

42. Ms. 1248, f. 300v.

43. Ms. 1248, f. 301r

- versely, the wife who performs voluntary devotions without her husband's permission will be denied their heavenly recompense.⁴⁴
- c. The wife's duty to her husband supersedes the allegiance to her family, including her male relatives. To demonstrate this, the preacher narrated an anecdote about a woman whose husband had to travel. He made his wife promise not to descend from the upper floor of the house while he was away. She obeyed her husband even when she received word that her father had died. After the burial, the Prophet sent a message to the woman informing her that God had forgiven all the sins of the father "due to the obedience of his daughter."⁴⁵
 - d. The ideal man is the husband who has absolute authority over his wife. Unusually, the preacher relied heavily upon female authorities to support this point. He related several hadiths transmitted by women, most of which unequivocally sanctify patriarchy although one advocates greater mutual respect between spouses. For instance, he quoted this saying of 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, the Prophet's favorite wife: "If the Prophet knew what the women were doing he would not have allowed them to go out at all." In fact, the preacher altered the saying to make it more restrictive, since in the established versions 'Ā'isha stated that the Prophet would have banned women from going to the mosque. The preacher also quoted the advice Asmā' bint Kharījah, gave to her daughter on how to create a marriage based on mutual respect, "Be his earth and he will be your sky. Be his plain and he will be your pillar," and yet, "Do not nag him so he will not despise you....Do not let him smell (anything on you) except perfume....Do not let him see anything except beauty."⁴⁶
 - e. The final theme problematizes the ideal of the hypermasculine authoritative husband by upholding Muḥammad as the perfect man *because* he was most compassionate, gentle, kind, patient, forgiving, and affectionate of husbands. The preacher cited several hadiths to this effect, including the following, "The best of you are the men who treat their wives the best. And I am the best of you in the treatment of my wives."⁴⁷ By ending with such exempla, the preacher seems to have intended to temper the image of the hypermasculine hegemonic husband presented earlier. Such a sermon addressed to a general audience sanctified the husband's "inalienable right" to expect obedience from his wife while protecting her right to not be brutalized by urging men to emulate Muḥammad in being kind, compassionate, and affectionate husbands.

44. Ms. 1248, f. 301v.

45. Ms. 1248, f. 303r.

46. Ms. 1248, f. 305v. She was one of the first generation of Muslim women.

47. Ms. 1248, f. 306v.

4. Conclusions

The research undertaken on representations of gender in medieval Islamic preaching adds to our knowledge concerning the status of Muslim women and the nature and limitations of female authority. The data suggests that female hortatory preaching was practiced in many countries of the Muslim world. Male bias of the sources reflects a preference that women confine their preaching to all female audiences; women preachers who addressed mixed gender audiences risked arousing the suspicions of some men. That exceptions to this social norm are encountered in Sufi sources corroborates the scholarly thesis of the relatively greater gender equality found in Sufi circles. Yet a comparison of the sermons on women by al-Ḥurayfīsh and the anonymous hortatory preacher demonstrates that male anxieties about female sexual virtue persist in sermons about and/or addressed to devout ascetic and ordinary women alike, and reveals that male preachers drew upon different rhetorical and gender strategies to neutralize this anxiety. While al-Ḥurayfīsh's women preachers undoubtedly exhibit greater gender equality, agency, and authority than the anonymous hortatory preacher's obedient wives, a reading against the grain of the latter illuminates the capacity of the obedient wife to intervene in the salvation of her male relatives and to shape ideal masculine identity. Regarding future lines of research, the search for data needs to be expanded to locate additional specimens of thematic and hortatory sermons that could shed further light on discourses targeting female audiences and gendered religious rhetoric. Finally, further investigations of prosopographic and hagiographic literature could yield additional data about female preachers and preaching.