

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا

18:1 Praise be to God, Who has sent down the book to His servant, and has allowed therein no crookedness

## **WOMEN LEADING CONGREGATIONAL PRAYERS**

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### **Introduction**

Recently, on the occasion of a the participation of a woman in the sermon of the United Muslim Association mosque in Etobicoke, members of the Muslim community issued statements to the effect that women leading men in prayers was prohibited in Islam. Some depicted our prophet by statements such as “The Islamic practice of the Prophet to this day is that no woman has led the prayer” and “The Prophet did not permit women to give any Khutba or lead men in prayer.”

The above statements are not in keeping with the Qur’an and the reliable prophetic tradition. It is our responsibility as Muslims to provide this information, using the methods that God has shown us in the Qur’an such as enjoining good and forbidding harm, mutual consultation and dialogue. This information, which some Muslims may be unaware of, is to help them make an informed decision on what they choose to do or think. We sent out a letter referred to as our “Eid Mubarak” letter, in fulfillment of this responsibility.

From our study of the Qur’an, Hadith and other texts, we see no reason to prohibit women from giving Friday and Eid sermons or leading congregational prayers. On the contrary there is evidence in support of it. We wish to take this opportunity to outline the evidence on which we base our position, in addition to some of the most commonly used arguments against women leading congregational prayers and our response.

## Evidence for Women Leading Congregational Prayers:

1-The Prophet (pbuh) commanded Umm Waraqah, a woman who had collected the Qur'an, to lead the people of her area in prayer. She had her own *mu'adhdhin* (person who performs the call to prayers)<sup>1</sup>.

2-The above prophetic tradition (*hadith*) is the reason why several medieval Muslim scholars supported female leadership. These include Tabari (d.310/923), author of the famous *tafsir: Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an* and *Tarikh al-Rusul wal Muluk*, Muzani, Abu Thawr and Abu Sulayman Dawud ibn Khalaf al-Isfahani (d.270/884), founder of the Zahirite school<sup>2</sup>.

3- God affirmed the suitability of women in major leadership roles as seen in the example of the queen of Sheba in Surat al-Naml 27:23-44. In the category of non-prophets, she is the Qur'anic role model for a positive leader. Her method of leadership included transparency, public consultation, and putting the welfare of her people first. Pharaoh, a man, is the Qur'anic role model for negative leadership. Compare his words in verse 79:24 "I'm the big boss" "أَنَا رَبُّكُمْ الْأَعْلَى". Thus gender is no guarantee for a successful leader, but women can be successful leaders as well.

Men should not forbid what God has affirmed.

وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَا تَصِفُ أَلْسِنَتُكُمُ الْكَذِبَ هَذَا حَلَالٌ وَهَذَا حَرَامٌ لَتَقْتَرُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ إِنَّ  
الَّذِينَ يَقْتَرُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ لَا يُلْحِقُونَ

16:116 But say not - for any false thing that your tongues may put forth, "This is lawful, and this is forbidden," so as to ascribe false things to God. For those who ascribe false things to God, will never prosper.

4- God addresses gender discrimination from the moment a baby girl is born in the following verses:

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُمْ بِالْأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ. يَتَوَارَىٰ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِن سُوءِ مَا  
بُشِّرَ بِهِ أَيُمْسِكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ فِي التُّرَابِ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ.

16:58 When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, suppressing his anger.

16:59 He hides himself from the people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it in abasement, or bury it in the dust? Bad is what they judge!

Preventing female Muslims from major leadership positions, such as giving sermons or leading congregational prayers is gender discrimination and a way of abasing female Muslims.

<sup>1</sup> See Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahman Al-Banna, *Al-Fath al-Rabbani li Tartib Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybani ma'a Sharhihi Bulugh al-Amani* (Bayrut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.) vol.5, 3:1375; Muhammad ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (Bayrut: Dar Sadir, 1958) vol.8, p.457.

<sup>2</sup> Banna, *op.cit.*

5-God has commanded justice as can be seen in Surat al-Ma'ida 5:8 and elsewhere (See also 7:33; 16:90).

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاَنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

5:8 O you who believe! Stand up firmly for God, as witnesses to fairness, and let not the hatred of others make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to God consciousness: and be conscious of God, for God knows well what you do.

6.Men need to hear what women have to say in enjoining good and forbidding harm. Friday and Eid sermons are an excellent opportunity for them to do so.

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ أُولَٰئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

9:71 The male believers and the female believers are each others allies, they enjoin good and forbid harm, they establish prayers, practise charity, and obey God and His Messenger. On them will God have mercy, for God is Exalted in power, Wise.

### Objections:

**1-The first objection we were presented with stated that Umm Waraqah sought permission from the prophet, thus any other woman would need to do the same.**

#### **Response:**

The entries in the Tabaqat of Ibn Sa'd on Umm Waraqah and Al-Fath al-Rabbani state that the prophet "commanded" her to lead the people of her area in prayer and that Umm Waraqah "sought permission" to go into battle: "she said to him (i.e. the prophet): Do you give me permission to go out with you to give medicine to the wounded and nurse the sick, it may be that God will grant me martyrdom."

When the prophet commanded war, people did not usually individually seek permission to accompany him into battle, but followed his command. Individual permission was sought when wishing to be relieved from their duty and stay behind. Umm Waraqah's unusual request is explained in the text, which states that the prophet had ordered her to lead the people of her *dar* (area) in prayer. The text explicitly states:

كان النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قد أمرها

This means: “the prophet (pbuh) had ordered her” and not “then the prophet ordered her” or “she sought permission” as some Muslims are mistranslating it. Thus Umm Waraqah wished to be relieved from this duty in order to accompany the prophet into battle. The text clearly distinguishes between “seeking permission” and “commanding.” Umm Waraqah “sought permission” when wishing to go to battle, but the prophet “commanded” her to lead prayers.

The need for a second mosque in Medina can perhaps be explained by the remoteness between the homes of some of the inhabitants of Medina, the *Ansar*, and the prophet’s home, which also served as mosque for the community. The distance motivated some of them to attempt to move their homes to the vicinity of the prophet’s mosque, but the prophet dissuaded them from it<sup>3</sup>. The text states that Umm Waraqah was from the *Ansar*. The prophet’s choice of Umm Waraqah is also explained in the text by the fact that she had collected the Qur’an.

It is hard to imagine that anybody living in Medina at that time, whether man or woman, would presume to set up their own mosque, complete with *mu’adhdhin*, without either the prophet’s express command or permission. Today, all who lead congregational prayers or perform the *adhan* (call to prayers) do so without the prophet’s express permission, since the prophet has long passed away. His express permission is neither possible nor required, whether for men or women.

In light of the above, when the need for a second mosque arose, the prophet chose a woman to act as the *imam*. His statement indicates his position when it comes to women leading men in prayer. We should not be stating that he did not allow it and thereby present a false and misogynistic image of the prophet. It is only fair that those wishing to present opinions contrary to the prophet, should not ascribe them to the prophet, but should attribute their opinions to themselves.

**2-Some argue that the prophet denied Umm Waraqah permission to go to the battle of Badr, commanding her to stay at home and that she would be granted martyrdom anyway.**

### **Response:**

It was not uncommon for women to go to war, nursing the sick and wounded and even participating in defense activities. Nusaybah, Umm ‘Ammarah, was one such heroine, known for defending the prophet at a critical moment during the battle of Uhud<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Amad al-Din Abu al-Fida’ Isma‘il ibn Kathir al-Qurashi al-Dimashqi, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim* (al-Qahira: Dar Ihya’ al-Kutub al- ‘Arabiyya, n.d.) vol.3, pp.565-6.

<sup>4</sup> Izz al-Din ibn al-Athir, *Asad al-Ghabah fi Ma’rifatal-Sahabah* eds. ‘Ali Muhammad Mu’awwid, et.al. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), Vol. 7, pp. 269-270.

If indeed the prophet refused Umm Waraqah permission to accompany him into battle, then this serves to accentuate the importance the prophet placed on the service she was performing to the community in leading prayers.

It is not unusual that Umm Waraqah used her home as a mosque for congregational prayers. The prophet, similarly, did not build a separate building to function as his mosque, but used the courtyard of his home. There does not appear to be a separate architectural form for a mosque in the earliest architecture in Medina. It is also not unusual that she had a *mu'adhdhin* to perform the call for prayers, instead of performing it herself. The prophet similarly had a *mu'adhdhin* whose name was Bilal.

**3-Another objection commonly presented is that the term *dar* (translated as area above) refers to her individual home, which housed at the most three people: herself and her two servants.**

**Response:**

The Arabic term *dar* can be used to describe areas ranging from an individual home, to the whole territory of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*). Often it was used to denote the housing or area where a particular clan lived. Homes in the prophet's day were not as large as contemporary homes, and usually consisted of small rooms surrounding a courtyard. Clans and tribes lived clustered together. We do not know how many persons lived in Umm Waraqah's individual home or clustered next to her. However, since people generally lived closely clustered together with their individual clans and tribe and since Umm Waraqah was from the *Ansar* it is safe to assume she had at least a clan to live among, if not a whole tribe.

The biographies in the *Tabaqat* literature generally consisted of short entries containing some of the most memorable actions associated with the person, and did not list the person's entire family and neighbours. From her *kunya* name, we can assume Umm Waraqah had a son called Waraqah, however he is not mentioned in her biography. The only reason why her two servants are mentioned (a man and a woman) is because they murdered her. 'Umar had them crucified for their deed, and they thus became the first persons crucified in Medina. Thus we cannot assume that Umm Waraqah's immediate household consisted of only three persons, or that she was isolated from family and neighbours.

In the context of the Umm Waraqah tradition, it is not sound to assume that *dar* meant her individual home, since this would be at odds with the need for a *mu'adhdhin*. She would not have needed the *mu'adhdhin* to call together three persons to prayer. Thus, in this context it is sound to conclude that *dar* is a larger geographical area, which needed the services of a *mu'adhdhin*. The text specifically says "there was a *mu'adhdhin* for her," which means that the *mu'adhdhin* was to call people to come and pray with her.

**5- The basis on which some medieval and contemporary Muslim scholars prohibited female leadership in major matters such as acting as *Imam*<sup>5</sup>, leading congregational prayers, giving Eid and Friday sermons, and acting as judge, is a tradition ascribed to the prophet. This *hadith* was transmitted on the testimony of Abu Bakrah and states that a people will not prosper who give the ordering of their affairs to a woman.<sup>6</sup>**

**Response:**

Both the reliability of Abu Bakrah and the contents of the *hadith* are unacceptable on the basis of the Qur'an. Abu Bakrah was known to have accused a Muslim man and woman of adultery without the necessary testimonies and was whipped eighty lashes during the reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab.<sup>7</sup> He was also known never to have repented.<sup>8</sup> Compare the following Qur'anic verse:

وَالَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ الْمُحْصَنَاتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَأْتُوا بِأَرْبَعَةِ شُهَدَاءَ فَاجْلِدُوهُمْ ثَمَانِينَ جَلْدَةً وَلَا تَقْبَلُوا لَهُمْ شَهَادَةً أَبَدًا وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

24:4 And those who slander chaste women and do not produce four witnesses: flog them eighty lashes and reject their evidence ever after: these are the transgressors.

Compare also the contents of the *hadith* with the Qur'anic verses on the Queen of Sheba 27:23-44. She led her people to Islam: thus her people prospered. It is up to us Muslims to choose whether we wish to follow the guidance of the Qur'an or whether we wish to put it aside and follow Abu Bakrah and the traditions of some of our ancestors.

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَنَا أَوْ لَوْ كَانَ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ

2:170 When it is said to them: "Follow what God has revealed:" They say: "No! We shall follow the ways of our ancestors;" even if their ancestors were not rational and not guided?

**6-Some argue that Bukhari's judgment on the reliability of prophetic traditions is infallible.**

**Response:**

<sup>5</sup> See Abd al-Rahman al-Jaziri, al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Gharawi and al-Shaykh Yasir Mazih, *Kitab al-Fiqh 'ala al-Madhahib al-Arba'a wa Madhhab Ahl al-Bayt* (Bayrut: Dar al-Thaqalayn, 1998) vol.5 pp.616-618.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (al-Qahira: Dar al-Rayyan, 1988) vol.13 , *Kitab al-Fitan* 92:7099, p.58.

<sup>7</sup> <sup>1</sup> 'Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, *Usd al-Ghaba fi Ma'rifat al-Sahaba*, (al-Qahira: al-Maktabah al-Ta'awuniya, 1964) p.39 and Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, *Tafsir Surat al-Nur* (Bayrut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1983) p.73.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

Undoubtedly medieval Muslim scholars, including Bukhari, developed brilliant criteria and methods for rating and identifying the reliability of traditions. It remains a monument to the outstanding scholarship and superb critical thinking demonstrated by medieval Muslims. Bukhari’s criteria are among the most stringent when it comes to the inner coherence of the individual chains of transmissions and the tradents occurring in them. Whereas Bukhari only admitted tradents on whose veracity and reliability there was full agreement, Abu Dawood, for example, was satisfied with transmitters as long as they were not universally condemned. However it would be incorrect to assume that there are no mistakes among the thousands of *hadith* collected by Bukhari. We Muslims need to differentiate between the divine and the human and not attribute divine perfection to human beings. Bukhari was a human being and is therefore not perfect and can make mistakes. Whereas medieval Muslims had no problems scrutinizing even Bukhari’s collection and identified mistakes, some contemporary Muslims are less willing to use their thinking skills today.

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَتَّخِذُ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَنْدَادًا يُحِبُّونَهُمْ كَحُبِّ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَشَدُّ حُبًّا لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ  
بَرَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا إِذْ يَرَوْنَ الْعَذَابَ أَنَّ الْقُوَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعَذَابِ

2:165 There are people who take equals and venerate them as the veneration of God, but the ones who believe venerate God more. If only the unjust could see, then they would see the torment, that to God belongs all power, and that God will strongly enforce the torment.

**7- Another objection commonly presented is the *hadith* “Verily! The woman is not an Imam over men.”<sup>9</sup>**

**Response:**

This *hadith* has been addressed by scholars before and refuted. The chain of transmission contains ‘Abdullah ibn Muhammad al-Tamimi, who is considered unreliable and a forger of *hadith*.<sup>10</sup> This is why Muslims do not generally accept it. Thus, what is found in the reliable Prophetic tradition confirms women’s leadership of men in congregational prayers. Moreover, there is no reliable *hadith* that prohibits women from leading men in prayers.

**8-Some argued that the opinion of Tabari was an isolated case and should be ignored.**

**Response:**

Tabari’s position that women could be Imams over men was by no means a solitary one. Although he started as a Shafi’i, Tabari’s views developed into a distinct school of law (*madhhab*), with followers who included many leading scholars of the age.

<sup>9</sup> Banna, al-Fath al-Rabbani , vol.5, 3:1375, p.234.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

Abu Isma'il ibn Yahya al-Muzani (d.264) and Abu Thawr Ibrahim ibn Khalid ibn Abi al-Yaman al-Kalbi (d.240) similarly started out within the Shafi'i school and then developed their own school of law with adherents in various parts of the Islamic world. The Zahirite school was also a respected school of law with many adherents. Therefore historically, there were at least four schools within Sunnism that permitted women to lead men in prayers. In addition, the Kharijites also permitted women to lead. Thus, in medieval Islam, many men supported the leadership of women. It is difficult to determine the opinions of women on the issue, since they have not been recorded. Whether the majority of the Muslim population supported women's leadership or not is difficult to determine.

Interestingly, in an era conspicuous for its misogyny, the leadership of women was discussed within Islam and supported by many leading scholars of the age. Today, in an age and a country recognized for the promotion of human rights, the leadership of women is met with great resistance by some members of the Muslim community

**9-Another objection was that the four surviving schools of Sunni jurisprudence prohibit women leading men in prayers. Therefore we have a “consensus of a majority.”**

**Response:**

It is important to note, that Muslims, who relied on consensus to derive law, distinguished between “consensus” and “majority”. None considered consensus to mean majority, but understood it as the agreement of every individual within a group. The Shafi'ite Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, for example, understood it to mean the agreement of all qualified scholars at any moment of time<sup>11</sup>, Malik used the consensus of the people of Medina, the renown Zahirite Ibn Hazm and the Hanbalite Ibn Taymiyya limited it to either the consensus the rightly guided caliphs or to the first generation of Muslims<sup>12</sup>, Shafi'i understood it to mean the consensus of the entire Muslim nation<sup>13</sup>, whereas the Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbar excluded groups that denied the authoritative nature of consensus<sup>14</sup>. Whichever way one chooses to define it, the legal requirements of consensus in the case of the prohibition of females from leading congregational prayers are not met, even if one should exclude the Kharijites, since there are still four leading scholars and their following to contend with. A “consensus of a majority” is an interesting notion in light of the great pains of Muslim scholars to distinguish between “consensus” and “majority,” but it does not pose a valid legal argument.

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<sup>11</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Mustasfa min 'ilm al-usul* (Bayrut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> See also Sirajul Haqq, “Ibn Taimiyya's conception of analogy and consensus” *Islamic Culture*, 17 (1943), pp.77-87.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, *al-risala* ed. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (Cairo, 1309 A.H.). Shafi'i also discusses Malik's views.

<sup>14</sup> al-Qadi Abi al-Hassan 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Asadabadi, *Al-Mughni fi abwab al-tawhid wal-'adl*, ed. Amin al-Khuli, vol. XVII (Cairo, al-Mu'assasa al-Misriya al-'amma, 1963)

**10- Some translate the meaning of *qawwamun* in verse 4:34 to mean authority:  
4:34 Men are providers for women.....الرَّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ**

**Response:**

The Arabic meaning of *qawwamun* in verse 4:34 is “providers.” Extending the meaning to “authority” is a mistranslation and a misinterpretation. Scholars of the Arabic language such as Ibn Manzur, author of *Lisan al-‘Arab*, explains it as *ma’in* which means providing sustenance and financial provisions<sup>15</sup>. Thus the verse outlines the financial rights of women over men, but does not prohibit women from leading congregational prayers in any way.

**11-Some see CCMW “falling into the western feminist trap of considering equality as identity.”**

**Response:**

It is unfortunate that Muslim women, arguing for women’s rights, are written off as “western” and “feminist” as if Islam were equivalent to the oppression of women carried out in some parts of the Muslim world today. We have every respect and appreciation for western feminists and what they have accomplished for women. However, our arguments are based on the Qur’an and to a lesser extent on the prophetic tradition, and not on western feminist writings. It is our fundamentally Islamic beliefs that move us. It is about time some of us Muslims realized that Islam gives women rights as well and inspires women’s activism, not just western feminism.

The Qur’an provides us with the example of one such woman activist, who argued with the prophet himself in an effort to see justice done. The Qur’an also provides us with the example of the prophet, who did not put her down, but listened to her and discussed the issue with her. God heard her and responded to her. Her effort led to the alleviation of an injustice that had been committed against her and other women (58: 1-6).

**12-Some object to our presentation on the assumption that we have no formal training in Islamic or Arabic studies.**

**Response:**

This is a misapprehension: some of us do have formal training in Islamic and Arabic Studies, as do many Muslim women. However from our study of Islam we hold

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<sup>15</sup> Abu al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Makram ibn Manzur al-Ifriqi al-Misri, *Lisan al-,Arab* (Bayrut: Dar Sadir, 1990) vol. 12, p.503.

this to be irrelevant. Muslims are required to look at the substance of what is said, not the credentials of the speaker.

الَّذِينَ يَسْتَمْعُونَ الْقَوْلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحْسَنَهُ أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ هَدَاهُمُ اللَّهُ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمْ أُولُوا النَّالِبَابِ

39:18 The ones who listen to what is said and follow the best of it: those are the ones whom God has guided, and those are the ones with minds.

**13-Some hold that dealing with issues of Islamic law, such as permission and prohibition (*halal* and *haram*), is the privilege of a male scholarly elite, considered authoritative experts in the field. Non-experts are required to follow what the experts say, uncritically.**

**Response:**

The delegating of religious authority to a scholarly elite over the non-scholarly, especially in issues of Islamic law such as permission and prohibition, goes against the very grain of Islamic monotheism. Islamic monotheism, as expounded in the Qur'an, is distinctive in its attribution of religious authority to God and God alone. Consider the following verses:

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

3:64 Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we do not take up, from among ourselves, religious authorities (*arbab*) other than God."  
" If then they turn back, say: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims.

The above verse defines, in very broad terms, what it is to be a Muslim. It precludes the taking up of religious authorities (*arbab*), other than God. The term *arbab* can also be translated as lords, masters, chiefs, dignitaries, leaders, owners, Rabbis, scholars or elite. The *arbab* are not images or secondary deities, but are human beings "from among ourselves". The singular is *rabb* and is the cognate of the Hebrew *rabb*. The addressees are the People of the Book, so in order to properly understand *arbab* it would be helpful to keep the role and function of the Hebrew *rabb*/Rabbi in mind. A Rabbi is a Jew qualified to expound and apply the *halakhah* and other Jewish Law. They are highly educated experts, many of who have devoted their lives to the pursuit of knowledge and the service of their community. However in Islam, religious authority especially the authority to produce religious law, belongs only to God and should not be given to humans, no matter how learned they are.

The above meaning is further expounded in the following verse:

اتَّخَذُوا أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهْبَانَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا  
إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ سُبْحَانَهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

9:31 They take their scribes and their monks to be their religious authorities (*arbab*) other than God and (they take as their religious authority) Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but one god, there is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him: (Far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him).

Ibn Kathir recounts an incident associated with the above verse. ‘Adi ibn Hatim al-Ta’i, who was a Christian in the pre-Islamic period, entered upon the prophet as he was reciting the verse and said to him: “They did not worship them.” The prophet responded saying: “No, they prohibited what was lawful, and they made lawful what was prohibited, and they followed them. That is their worship of them.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, it is the responsibility of all Muslims to educate themselves as best they can in religious matters, rather than lie back and leave religious knowledge only for an elite. Although the seeking of knowledge and people with knowledge are highly regarded in the Qur’an, when it comes to the authority to religiously prohibit or permit, the Qur’an indicates egalitarianism between Muslims, where all Muslims have the right and the responsibility to question the rulings of others.

**14-Some argue the following: “Abu Hurayrah said: the Prophet ﷺ said: "the best rows of men are the front rows and the worst [rows of men] are the back rows, and the best rows of women are the back rows and the worst [rows of women] are the front rows". This explicitly states that if women are in the front they are in the worst position to pray. So how can she be making Khutba facing the worshipers and then praying ahead of even the first front row?”**

**Response:**

Abu Hurayrah’s *hadith* needs to be evaluated with the rest of the evidence, both *hadith* and Qur’an, in order to ascertain whether gender segregation was instituted in the prophet’s lifetime. This has been done with the conclusion that there was no gender segregation in congregational prayers in the prophet’s lifetime, but that it was introduced later.<sup>17</sup> The word for “rows” used in the above *hadith* is “*saff*” in Arabic. The word “*saff*” does not appear in the Qur’an in connection with prayers, but with battle rows (See for example 61: 4). Nothing in the text of the above *hadith* connects the above

<sup>16</sup> ‘Amad al-Din Abu al-Fida’ Isma’il ibn Kathir al-Qurashi al-Dimashqi, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim* (al-Qahira: Dar Ihya’ al-Kutub al- ‘Arabiyya, n.d.) vol.2, p.348-9.

<sup>17</sup> Nevin Reda “Women in the Mosque: Historical Perspectives on Segregation” *AJISS* Vol.21 No.2 (2004) pp.77-97.

arrangement with prayers. It is possible that a tradition, which originally arose in the context of battle, was later applied to prayer.

**15-Some argue that a woman praying in front of men is *fitnah*, i.e. temptation into sin, basing it on a *hadith* in which the prophet supposedly referred to women as constituting man's greatest *fitnah* in life.**

**Response:**

It has been convincingly argued that this hadith is unreliable<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, of the numerous occurrences in the Qur'an of *fitnah* or its derivatives, none apply to women. Among the conveyers of *fitnah* mentioned in the Qur'an are wealth and children (64:15), the two angels Harut and Marut (2:102), number of angels (74:31), visions (17:60), persons persecuting Muslims (85:10), a camel (54:27), and even God (29:2). *Fitnah* is portrayed similar to a testing of the faith, which all must undergo (29:2).

The prophet recognized that attraction may occur between men and women and offered the following solutions. If a man should feel attracted to a woman, the prophet advised him to have relations with his wife stating that that will do away with what came over him<sup>19</sup>. If young people should be unmarried, the prophet recommended they marry<sup>20</sup>. If they were unable to marry, then the prophet counseled them to fast<sup>21</sup>. Either way, the prophet's solution was not to introduce gender segregation.

The solutions the prophet offered, all lead only to good. Thus, the "*fitnah*" or "attractiveness" of women is not harmful, but leads to marriage, marital relations or fasting. However, the same cannot be said for the development of a male-male attraction. For a man, who prefers other men, to marry a woman, is not a good solution, since it is unfair to the woman and can potentially cause her harm.

Gender segregation and the promulgation of negative images of women can effect the development of sexual orientation in individuals and vice versa. There is evidence in our history, that these negative images are sometimes accompanied by a male-male attraction<sup>22</sup>. We would not wish to encourage or assist the development of a similar situation today.

**Disclaimer:**

These are the views of the author.

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<sup>18</sup> G.H.A. Juynboll, "Some isnad-analytical methods illustrated on the basis of several woman-demeaning sayings from *hadith* literature" *Al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Árabes*, No. 10 (1989) pp. 343-384.

<sup>19</sup> Abu l-Husayn Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushyri, *Sahih Muslim biSharh al-Nawawi* (al-Qahirah: Mu'assasat Qurtuba, 1991) Vol.9, 16-Kitab al-Nikah, No.10, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> 'Asqalani, *op.cit.* Vol. 9, 67-Kitab al-Nikah, No.5060, p.8.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.14.

<sup>22</sup> J.W.Wright Jr, and Everett K. Rowson, *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997).