WOMEN, RELIGION, and SOCIAL CHANGE

Edited by
Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad
and
Ellison Banks Findly

State University of New York Press
1985

CHAPTER TWO

Women, Religion and Social Change in Early Islam

JANE I. SMITH

Although women often play vital and significant roles in times of profound religious change, change accompanied by some form of social upheaval, normally these roles are substantially diminished when the upheaval has ceased and social change is gradual rather than dramatic. This hypothesis has been advanced as an attempt to identify a common pattern in the relationship of women and social change across a wide variety of religio-cultural contexts. My task in this article is to try to test the hypothesis against the events at the time of the establishment of Islam in the sixth century C.E. in Arabia.

At first glance it might seem that the case is so obvious as to present little challenge. An overview of the very early history of Islam provides a general picture of increasing segregation, seclusion and degradation of women. While several of the wives of the Prophet and other women played strong roles in the period of Islam's naissance, women soon came to be considered—and in most cases therefore to be—passive and submissive and consequently more and more iso-

lated. That there were individual exceptions of women playing significant roles in society after the death of the Prophet does not negate the overall truth of this circumstance. Or so it would seem.

It is not true that women in general were insignificant members of society in the days of pre-Islamic Arabia, suddenly became active participants in religious revolution in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, and then again lost status as their rights and privileges began to disappear. While the Qur'ān apparently did improve the legal circumstances for women in many aspects of family relations over those of the period immediately before the revelations to the Prophet, women in pre-Islamic Arabia were not completely without power and authority. These women are known in many cases to have been proud and strong-willed participants in battle as well as holders of significant religious status as seers and soothsayers, judge-arbiters, and (although rarely) even prophetesses.

It also seems to be the case that for most of his life Muhammad himself respected and trusted women, was strongly influenced by a number of forceful females, and attempted to provide for equal participation of women in the religious life of the new community. Is one to conclude, then, that the status of women was high and the opportunity for them to play significant social roles readily available before the advent of Islam as well as in its immediate formative period, and that it was only after the death of Muḥammad and the beginnings of solidification of the new community that women ceased to be taken seriously as active participants in society? I think not, although the evidence initially might seem to point that way.

Let us look first at some of what is known about women in pre-Islamic Arabia. While significant research has been done by Nabia Abbott, Robertson Smith, Ilse Lichtenstadter and others, far too often the results of their work are ignored in the effort to highlight the advantages (or, in some cases, the disadvantages) for women of the Islamic system as compared to its pagan background. Much contemporary Muslim apologetic, for example, thrives on the fact that the Prophet through revelation banned female infanticide and that unlimited polygyny was replaced by the Islamic limitation of four wives to a husband.

Apart from fairly simplistic attempts to categorize the general situation for women in pre-Islamic Arabia as poor in order to stress the virtue of the Islamic improvements, it is not easy to generalize about women before the time of the Prophet. Are we talking about the many centuries from the time of the Sabaen Kingdoms of South Arabia or about that period immediately before the Prophet which Mus-

lims call the *jāhilīya* or time of ignorance? Are the records adequate to provide anything like a clear picture of any period? Even if we could know all the facts, would our distance from them in terms of time, geography and cultural orientation not color our responses so as to make the attempt to understand the early Arabian situation in context next to futile?

While recognizing such problems—only several among many—we can nonetheless assume that we do know some things and try to make generalizations about what the facts may mean. That women in ancient Arabia were not always subservient to men is clear from the chronicles of pre-Islamic Arab queens. Nabia Abbott in her detailed study[1] indicates that there are records of some twenty-four such queens over sixteen centuries. Some of the queens are known also to have been priestesses of the local gods. After about the fourth century C.E. we have little record of female rulers as such, though we do know that poets recognized and paid tribute to many strong women of their day.[2]

Despite these very notable exceptions, it is also true that females overall figure relatively little in the available records about life in pre-Islamic Arabia. A number of possible reasons may be adduced for this: (1) women in general were never in positions of social prominence; (2) an earlier prominence, at least in the case of certain individuals, gave way to a loss of public prestige during the period of ignorance; (3) the records are simply so inaccurate, or incomplete, that we have a skewed picture; (4) compilations of reports by second- and third-century Muslim recorders were subject to the anti-female prejudices of those recorders and thus misrepresent the actual situation.

It does appear in general that women's power and prestige were lower in the days immediately preceding the time of the Prophet than they were earlier. Scholars for a while accepted Robertson Smith's work[3] as proving that in many ancient Arabian tribes matriarchy and polyandry were the rule. This thesis, however, has come to be disregarded as improbable for any significant numbers. It is the case that in pre-Islamic Arabia several types of marriage existed, from matrilineal and matrilocal to patrilineal and patrilocal. In the jāhilīya period the latter clearly came to predominate, with the result that women seem to have been increasingly regarded as the property of males who had the right to unlimited polygamy. (At the time of the Prophet acquiring wives by capture was still widespread. The woman who was captured automatically became a member of the captor's tribe.)

Despite the patriarchal orientation of most marriages, a woman's blood kinship with her own tribe was retained and, if necessary, she

could seek protection with her own people if ill-treated by her husband. The woman, then, was not without resources, but in fact the alternatives always left her under the charge of a male—either her husband or her nearest male kinsman. Both men and women could repudiate a marriage, although it is hard to know from available records how often women experienced this right.

Attempts to assess the degree of freedom and influence enjoyed by women in the jāhilīya have, of course, varied. Without question, as is almost universally the case, their primary sphere was the home and their primary roles were those of wife and mother.[4] In that context they were highly valued, the occasional practice of burying alive a female child notwithstanding. Women were important in the social life of the tribe because feuds and even battles arose over them, and families eagerly negotiated for the freedom of captured women. None of this is to credit women with having played significant decision-making or leadership roles outside the family context, although they sometimes served as mediators. Perhaps more interesting for the modern observer is the fact that women did take an active role in warfare. They were not armsbearers, however, but served by taking care of the wounded on the battlefield and by joining together in coteries to urge the warriors on to victory.

Few observers have gone so far as did Reynold Nicholson when he affirmed that the position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia was high and their influence great.[5] Stressing that poets sang of women and warriors fought for them, he eloquently argued that this was proof of their nobility and high rank in society. Unfortunately for Nicholson, perhaps, a contemporary feminist would turn his argument upside down and point out that what he is illustrating is precisely the passive role that permitted women to be considered objects for possession rather than full participants in the social structure of the tribe.

In fact, however, passivity does not at all seem to characterize the lives of women in pre-Islamic Arabia. In one sense women were protected and apparently seen, to some degree, as a kind of property. On the other hand they were of necessity strong and resilient, prepared to lead the hard life of a primarily desert land whose dangers included the constant threat of war and plunder in which they might be the booty. This helps explain their evident courage and even enthusiasm for a good fight. It seems that they did take some part in the events of public life and did exercise a kind of influence that was more or less lost in the later developments of Islamic society.

One way in which individual women were able to exercise influence was as participants in leadership roles in the religious life. Even

up to the time of the Prophet there are recorded instances of a woman as soothsayer, as priestess, and as prophetess. (There is, however, only one known prophetess and even the priestesses were quite rare.)[6] The term *rabbat al-bait* literally means mistress of the temple in this context. Abbott observes that before the advent of Islam, *rabba* and *rabb* were applied to female and male human beings, respectively, who played the roles of priestesses and priests. After Islam the term *rabb* was generally limited to the deity. *Rabba* was not.[7] It is beyond the scope of this essay to pursue the implications of this, but future scholars may wish to examine the relationship of the emergence of a monotheistic cult, in which the deity is apparently understood as masculine, to the general conviction that it is impossible for women to play roles of religious leadership equal to men.

It does seem to be the case that women did not have an active part in the political life of Mecca on the eve of Islam. Under the leadership of Quṣayy, head of the Quraish tribe at the time of the Prophet, government decisions were made by a Council of Elders on which no woman sat. A woman would on occasion give her opinion in public, but attempts to exert influence generally were limited to private persuasion of the men in her family and clan. This, it is obvious, is a timeless strategy which women employ in the face of otherwise limiting male power structures.

In comparing women in pre-Islamic Arabia to those after the advent of Islam two observations can be made. One is that the position of a woman and her place in society were not determined by codified law. This meant that the role a woman was able to play depended to a great extent on her own personality. Is it possible that the very codification of Islamic law was in itself part of the cause of the segregation of women and the apparent lessening of their opportunities to participate in public life? Second, despite the obvious fact that to some extent women were simply understood by males to be their property— valued, perhaps even esteemed, but still property—they enjoyed one clear advantage over their sisters to come: they did not suffer the devastating restriction of seclusion.

From this general background on women in pre-Islamic Arabia, let us turn to the situation that prevailed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the founding of the new religion of Islam. Several episodes recorded during and after the life of the Prophet point to certain women having potential, and in some cases real, power. These seem to reflect the authority accorded women by virtue of their participation in, or association with, religious or cultic practices that were holdovers from earlier days.

A number of accounts record that at the time that Mecca surrendered to the Muslims, the keys of the Ka'ba were in the hands of a woman named Hubba, daughter of Hulayl, the last priest-king of Mecca.[8] It seems that little can be made of this, however, as Hubba's role was clearly secondary to that of not only her father but also her husband and the men of her tribe. More interesting is the case of a group of women who have come to be known as the harlots of Hadramaut. This part of South Arabia had been strongly opposed to the increasing influence of Muhammad. When the Prophet died a group of women apparently were so overjoyed that they gathered together for singing, dancing and open celebration. A.F.L. Beeston[9] speculates that they were perhaps priestesses of the old pagan religion of South Arabia who hoped that Muhammad's death signalled the end of Islam and therefore the resurgence of their own power and influence.

Regardless of what is really to be made of the incident, three points are of interest for our consideration. First, in that part of Arabia there evidently were women who, along with male priests, played an active religious role before the coming of Islam. Second, these women felt secure enough in that function to make a public demonstration of their joy at the death of the founder of Islam. Third, and closely related to the above, the new caliph Abū Bakr feared these women to the point that he sanctioned severe punishment for them. It seems clear, then, that these women did have the capacity to exert influence on the course of events, a capacity enjoyed by virtue of their pre-Islamic status and not one occasioned by the religio-social revolution of the Prophet.

The power of the spoken word, particularly in poetic form, was formidable in early Arabia and helps explain the force of the verbalized revelations of the Qur'ān. At the time of the Prophet a select group of persons was recognized as possessing the gift of poetry, including some of the women in tribes bitterly opposed to Muḥammad. One 'Asmā' bint Marwān, for example, was considered so dangerous that the Prophet was anxious to get rid of her once and for all. While apparently he did not give orders for her death, the records cite his enormous relief when one of his followers, sensing Muhammad's alarm, had her executed.[10] After the final victory Muhammad extended amnesty to most of those who had fought against Islam. The only ones it appears he could not forgive, very likely out of concern for their continuing influence, were those (especially women) who had ridiculed him in songs and poems. This constitutes interesting

testimony of the power of their position, as well as of the recited word.

Just as women had participated in battle before the time of Muhammad, usually cheerleading rather than bearing weapons, so they continued to be very much in evidence fighting both for and against the Prophet. In some cases their participation took the form of nursing, particularly in the setting up of field hospitals in mosques to care for the wounded. Often their roles were most notable when they were seeking revenge, and we have reports of women physically attacking enemy warriors with swords and clubs. One popular story of the early Islamic period, for instance, describes Sumayya, wife of 'Ammār b. Yāsir. Both Sumayya and 'Ammār were early converts to Islam. When 'Ammār was tortured and killed by the Quraish, Sumayya went out to attack in retaliation and was herself killed, becoming the first woman martyr in Islam.[11]

One of the most interesting and well-known personages at the time of the Prophet was the redoubtable Hind, a woman to swell the heart of any firm-minded feminist. Her husband Abū Sufyān was the leader of the Quraish army, and it is clear that Hind was a figure of consequence in her own right—intelligent, proud, and seemingly fearless. Her rage against the Muslims was fueled by the fact that she had lost her father, uncle and brother at the Battle of Badr. At the subsequent battle of Uhud, Hind seized the opportunity for retaliation. She and some fifteen other women led the charge, singing and dancing and playing the tambourine onto the battlefield with the men following. When her father's murderer, Hamza, was himself killed in the fight Hind reportedly took long-awaited revenge by ripping out and biting his liver, cutting off his ears and nose and performing other grisly acts. There is little doubt that such reports are greatly exaggerated, but there is even less doubt that she was a women of strong will and courage. When Abū Sufyān himself later converted to Islam she became even more outraged, publicly striking her husband and calling for his death. "Kill this old fool, for he has changed his religion," she is reported to have cried. When she realized that her attempts were in vain she turned on her idols, smashing them and lamenting that she had trusted in them.[12] Hind herself later converted to Islam and fought for the new religion as she once fought against it.

As one of the leading women of Mecca, Hind was part of a group of women giving formal allegiance to Islam after the conquest of the city. Having women take the oath of allegiance to Islam had been part of Muhammad's overall plan from shortly after the emigration to Me-

dina when he had his friend, the future caliph 'Umar, administer it in his name. After this it was not uncommon for women to come to the Prophet in groups to vow their allegiance. There is some controversy about whether Muḥammad actually clasped the hands of the women as he did those of the men,[13] but the details are considerably less important than the fact that he clearly regarded women as creatures with sufficient independence from their husbands and families to make their own commitment. An astute politician, he also doubtless realized that a community with the active support of its women would be greatly strengthened. (Muḥammad's bond with the women is recorded in S. 60:12.) The fact that many women were included among the earliest converts to Islam does seem to indicate that women were influential in the ultimate conversion of both Mecca and Medina.

The first person to take the message of the Prophet seriously, and in that sense the first convert, was his first and at that time only wife, Khadīja, then about fifty-five years old. Her economic and social position as an independent merchant is of interest not only as an indication that such an occupation was open to women at the time of the Prophet, but also because it may have influenced others to listen to her husband's preaching. While much of the evidence is unreliable, it appears that together with some of Muḥammad's female relatives there were women converts from both high social rank (those who were members of the Quraish tribe) and the lower ranges of society. Clearly some women converted because of pressure from their husbands or families, but the records certainly make plain that for many it was a decision over which they had personal control.

Various tales are related of strong women who defied their families and would not give up their new faith in Islam, such as Umm Sharīk who was tortured by her husband's relatives and then left exposed to the sun with no water for three days. The story has it that finally a bucket of water came down from heaven to revive her.[14] The point is that while such narratives are certainly of doubtful authenticity and had the clear purpose of glorifying Islam rather than of praising women, they do indicate that women were significant enough in the life of the young community at least to be cited and credited with this kind of strength of character.

What we see, then, is that because women in pre-Islamic Arabian society had a measure of freedom and some participation in public affairs (though with little real opportunity for leadership), they were prepared for the most part to be equally active in either helping to oppose or to establish the new faith. The question then becomes, how did women fare once the battles were won and Islam was a recognized religio-political community?

There seems little question that for most of his active life Muḥammad recognized women as having the right to full participation in his new Islamic society, and in fact that he probably was more progressive on that score than many of his co-religionists. Despite the Prophet's apparent insistence on equal responsibilities in the religious sphere, however, events toward the end of his lifetime did lead to a situation in which the freedom and participation of women that characterized the earlier days were very seriously curtailed. Much of the change hinged directly on the issue of sexuality and the perceived need to "protect" the woman in ways which became greatly inhibiting. Some would see it as a direct result of Muḥammad's having overextended himself in the accumulation of wives to the point where intrigues in his harem were rife and the situation was close to unmanageable.[15]

In the meantime revelations came to the Prophet from God which were seen as eternal and universal, and yet also as directed toward the solution of particular problems facing Muḥammad and his community. When his favorite wife 'Ā'isha was accused of misconduct after having stayed behind on a trip to search for a lost necklace, it was finally divine revelation which assured Muḥammad of her innocence.[16] This is not the place to describe in detail legal stipulations for women which the Prophet incorporated into the governing structure of the new community on the basis of Qur'anic revelation. Equally important as what was revealed and then codified is the fact that the process did take place. Whether the regulations on marriage, divorce and protection are equitable between men and women is probably of less consequence for women than the fact that once they were recognized as divine, and thus immutable, the possibility of alternative structures or modes of action was foreclosed.

Aside from this, it seems to me that two very significant and interrelated factors in early Islam not only contributed to but were determinative of the rather rapid decline of women from the (limited) position they held before the time of the Prophet. One is exclusion and the other seclusion. By exclusion I mean the fact that despite the obvious intention of the Prophet that women be part of the religious life of Islam, they increasingly were deprived of the opportunity to share in the communal aspect of that life. In particular, from the beginning they were excluded from participation in Islam's most significant leadership roles. By seclusion I mean that process—beginning most specifically with the Prophet's relegation of his wives to a place apart

from normal social intercourse with men—that led to the functional withdrawal of women from the normal rounds of what came to be essentially male society.

For the purposes of this discussion I would say that the really interesting point is not that these things did happen, but that they could happen despite the significant role played by women before and during the Islamic revolution and despite the fact that they seem clearly not to have been the intent of the Prophet, at least in his earlier days. Thus I would argue that while in one sense the establishment of the new religion resulted in a diminished role for women, this could not have come about had the prevailing attitude of males not permitted and even encouraged such a diminished role. The two realities which I have called exclusion and seclusion seem both to have resulted from and given encouragement to the already present—and probably always existing—assumption by the males in the community that women in general are somehow ontologically unsuited for full social participation. First the matter of exclusion.

That the Qur'ān makes explicit the full religious responsibility of women is very clear. They are enjoined to participate in the expressed obligations and are assured, equally with men, a just judgment and eternal condition commensurate with the degree of their piety. Yet in practical effect, the question of whether women's responsibilities, particularly that of the daily communal prayer, could be carried out in full company with men is less clear. There are various narratives which insist that Muḥammad did allow women to pray in his company, and even encouraged it, while other reports suggest that in fact this permission was granted only if the husband was in full agreement. The fact is that the inevitable sifting and coloring process of the transmission of narrative reports makes it very difficult to know what was in the mind of the Prophet. In any case it does appear that even the Prophet suggested rules for women somewhat different than those for men. One finds, for instance, testimony from ʿĀ'isha that Muḥammad indicated that the only time women should assemble was for a funeral or at the mosque and that women at morning prayer should be so wrapped up as to be unrecognizable.[17]

There are several instances of traditions from Umm Salāma, another of the Prophet's wives, which indicate that the Prophet felt a woman is better off praying in her own home, although chains of transmission for that are weak. One famous narrative, repeated in a variety of forms, attributes to the Prophet the suggestion that the most appropriate place for a woman to pray is her own hut, followed, in descending order of preference, by her enclosure, her compound,

her clan's mosques, and finally (and least desirable) the mosque of Muḥammad.[18] This apparently was said in response to the case of a single woman and might be explained as pertaining only to her circumstances. It has, of course, been used through the centuries to admonish women to stay at home.

Muḥammad did order women not to pray during menstruation, a decree for which there is ample documentation and which apparently also precluded their attendance at the mosque during those times. Again this has become one of the classical supports for the unsuitability of women to act as imams or leaders of the prayer; an argument, in fact, made to me by a Philippine Muslim not long ago. A commonly circulated tradition, sometimes attributed to the Prophet, holds that prayer can only be interrupted by a dog, an ass, or a woman, an association over which ʿĀ'isha was understandably furious.[19]

The question of whether women should attend the mosque engaged the attention of the early Muslim doctors. It is obvious that many (one may presume most) of these authorities did not wish to have them present, but were constrained by such traditions as that which says that women cannot be prevented from attendance, although they must not be perfumed. There are also narratives attributed to the Prophet which say women should not raise their heads before the imam raises his (nothing similar is stipulated for men), and that women should exit from the mosque before men. ʿĀ'isha herself is supposed to have said that if Muḥammad had seen what she saw of the women he would not have allowed them to go to the mosque, a statement made after the death of the Prophet under the strict rule of the second Caliph ʿUmar, who forbade women to attend public worship.[20] There is some slight evidence that from the beginning women were separated from men at worship, but that does not seem to have become an explicit requirement until later.

Circumstances for women became considerably more constrained under the rule of ʿUmar, only a few years after the death of the Prophet. ʿUmar tried to limit women to prayer at home, but even his own wife and son opposed him. He achieved virtually the same effect by appointing separate imams for men and for women. He also forbade Muḥammad's wives to go on the pilgrimage, a decree which he later (and seemingly without explanation) reversed. The reversal, however, did not signal a change of any significance in the obvious and accelerating trend toward the exclusion of women from the worship life—as from the other aspects of public life—of the young Muslim community.

Some would argue that if we can indeed identify an increasing ex-

clusion of women, it is precisely because of the specific fact of seclusion, beginning most obviously with the Qur'anic injunction that the wives of the Prophet be secluded behind a curtain. "And when you ask anything of the Prophet's wives," says S. 33:53, "ask it of them from behind a curtain; this will be more pure for your hearts and for their hearts." It is idle to suggest that this injunction, or others in the Qur'ān indicating ways in which to protect the female believers from insult, represented a direct attempt to subjugate and isolate women. The intent obviously was to offer women, and in particular the honored group of Muḥammad's wives who were to be leading examples to others in the community, protection and a means of preserving family honor. (It is true that the huts of Muḥammad's wives were all in the courtyard of the great mosque of Medina in full view of a constant stream of visitors.) One of the immediate causes for concern over protecting the honor of the Prophet's wives seems to have been the famous incident of 'Ā'isha and the lost necklace.

The particular institution of the *ḥijāb* or seclusion behind a curtain, sanctioned by its inclusion as divine revelation, does seem to have signalled a significant move toward a reduction in opportunities for women. Such freedoms as they had soon became virtually nonexistent, and regulations originally intended for the wives of the Prophet were quickly extended to apply to all of the women of the community. "Thus was laid the foundation stone," writes Nabia Abbott, "of what was to prove in time one of the most stubborn and retrogressive institutions in Islam—the segregation of the women behind curtains and veil."[21]

While the devastating effects of the institution of the hijāb can hardly be overestimated, it is nonetheless worth asking whether it really created conditions markedly different from those women had experienced earlier. The evidence, as we have seen, is mixed, and yet it seems that the fact of seclusion could not have been perceived by the Prophet's wives to be shocking in the way it appears shocking to a twentieth-century observer. We have no record that any of the wives took issue with the decree, not even Umm Salāma and 'Ā'isha, who were not known for reticence. Does not this apparent acceptance suggest that women in fact really did not expect to participate in the life of the community? The same could be asked of the later acquiescence by the mothers of the faithful to 'Umar's decision that they not be allowed to make the pilgrimage. In other words, one is led to believe that even in the tumultuous days of the establishment of the new religion, women never had any expectation that as a group they would have significant parts to play outside of the home and family.

Again it seems important to return to the question of women in leadership roles. Here exclusion, I would argue, was not a consequence of seclusion but a result of the prevailing mentality that understood women to be inherently unfit for such roles. The wives of the Prophet were perceived as female role models, but clearly were not considered to be leaders in the public life of the community. (An interesting possible exception is 'Ā'isha, to whom we shall return shortly.) The general inability to function in this capacity seems to have characterized women from the jāhilīya right through the founding of the new religion. It was noted earlier that before the time of the Prophet some women were leaders in religious, though not political, spheres. Even this possibility was more or less lost under the governance of the Prophet. An essential inequality on this score seems to be built into the basic presuppositions of Islam. The distinguished German orientalist Ignaz Goldziher says that the Qur'anic insistence on equal religious responsibility for women and men proves that women were not prevented from achieving the same importance as men in inner religious life. He does note, however, that there were what he calls "some theological limitations of entirely theoretical nature," one of which he identifies as the inability of women to reach the grade of prophet. He implies that this is theoretical because in any case there can be no more prophets after Muḥammad.[22] It must surely be argued, however, that the fact that women by definition cannot play this, the ultimate leadership role, is not theoretical at all, but has obvious implications for the understanding of women's capacity to serve as leaders.

We have already noted the problems understood to be inherent in a woman's becoming an imam. Later Muslim legislation decreed that this is an impossibility, but the issue is somewhat less clear for the time of Muḥammad. Some sources, for example, say that Umm Waraqa did function as an imam to her household at the request of the Prophet.[23] If she served both men and women in this capacity, as seems to have been the case, she is the only woman recorded as having done so. There are other instances of women leading prayers for other women; most often mentioned is 'Ā'isha. These references, not surprisingly, are to the period after women were secluded from the common worship life.

On the whole it seems apparent that at no time during or immediately after the time of the Prophet did women have strong positions of leadership in the religious sphere. A possible exception lies in the fact that a few women in the early community served as collectors and transmitters of traditions. The most important source of informa-

tion about the habits and opinions of the Prophet came from the widows of Muḥammad, particularly ʿĀ'isha, who were privy to a great deal of personal material. They were, therefore, the original authorities for much of what was attributed to the Prophet as well as the mediums through which the information was transmitted. In this sense they were influential in helping determine the standard of behavior for the young community. It is clear that ʿĀ'isha memorized a great many of the sayings of Muḥammad, as did Umm Waraqa who even made her own collection. In such isolated cases, women in the early community to a limited extent did assist in the redaction of the Qur'ān. I think it can be argued, however, that even in these instances when women were clearly influential in the formulation of the emerging legal structures of Islam, it was strictly because of their privileged positions as the ones nearest to the Prophet rather than because of recognition of their inherent abilities to exercise direction and authority.

If there were occasional possibilities for female leadership in the area of religion during and after the time of the Prophet, the same does not seem to have been true with respect to public affairs. Nothing in the Qur'ān even suggests a woman's eligibility for public service. There is no record that any woman served as a counselor to the Prophet, other than Khadīja in the earliest days, or as a deputy representing the interests of Islam. Again ʿĀ'isha, the spirited favorite of the Prophet, seems to have been an exception. She did in fact take an active part in political affairs after Muḥammad's death, violating the principle of seclusion when she fought in the Battle of the Camel and later when she tried to influence the course of community leadership. By virtue of her position as the wife closest to Muḥammed she was always highly respected and her opinion was sought on a number of matters. When the Caliph ʿUmar appointed a council of six to determine his successor, at his request they were to meet either in a place close to ʿĀ'isha's house or in the house itself. Perhaps unfortunately for the future course of women in Islam, however, even ʿĀ'isha was not able to maintain a leadership role. Militarily she was defeated in the Battle of the Camel, and politically she never could attain any degree of real power. Despite ʿUmar's desire for her proximity, she herself was not elected a member of his six-man council, nor could she even participate in the selection of its members.

With the rapid expansion of Islam, persons from a variety of cultures came to be included in the community. The addition of large numbers of captive slave women under the Umayyads resulted in the creation of a kind of two-class system of free Arab women and slaves.

Reputed to have loose morals, the slave women came to be very popular. In a parallel movement, free Arab Muslim women were increasingly "protected" by seclusion from the areas of social intercourse and a general receding of their influence. Many have defended the Islamic system by insisting that social conditions more than religious or political factors led to the gradual but steady enforcement of veiling and seclusion. "In order to observe historical justice," says Goldziher, "it must be admitted that degradation of women in Islam is the result of social influences for which the principles of Islam are unjustly made responsible, but which were in fact the outcome of the social relations of the peoples converted to Islam."[24] It can scarcely be denied, however, that the groundwork for this development had been solidly and effectively laid by the injunctions of the Qur'ān, no matter how one might wish to justify the social significance of these injunctions.

As was true before and during the time of the Prophet, individual women in the first century of Islam still were able to exert influence in a variety of ways. One can point, for example, to such persons as Muḥammad's great-granddaughter Sukāyna, a renowned figure in the social circles of the Hijāz, who had sufficient aplomb to choose and reject her husbands at her own will.[25] It is also the case that a select group of women were recognized in the community for their piety and religious learning, such as the Prophet's great-great-great-granddaughter Sayyida Nafīsa and others of the women scholars who studied and taught the Islamic sciences.

It is clear, however, whether we are discussing the time before, during or after the Prophet, instances of strong women playing leadership roles in any capacity were far from the norm. It may be lighthearted to say that the exception proves the rule, but I have tried to make the case that whether one is talking about the queens of early Arabia, individuals such as Hind or ʿĀ'isha, or the small class of women who were influential in the religious realm, they in one sense are significant precisely because they are exceptional. For whatever reasons—and they would surely include some of the issues discussed here—the prevailing and dominant understanding of women simply hardened so that fewer such exceptions were possible.

It would seem to me, then, that on the basis of these rather general observations about the circumstances of women at the time of the founding of Islam, several tentative conclusions might be offered:

1. Before, during and after the time of the Prophet it was highly exceptional for a woman to play a significant leadership role—and then primarily in the religious rather than the political realm. Therefore

there is no convincing evidence that the social revolution engendered by the founding of Islam afforded women opportunities for leadership hitherto unavailable to them.

2. The establishment of Islam as a religio-cultural system significantly diminished the number of opportunities for women to participate openly in society. Two factors directly affecting their increased exclusion from normal social intercourse seem to have been (1) the codification of law based on divine revelation and (2) the imposition of seclusion, also based on divine revelation.

3. The fact that exclusion and seclusion came to prevail quickly and in increasing measure seems to have resulted from: (1) the prevailing male attitude about the inherent unsuitability of women for roles of full public participation and leadership; and (2) an apparent willingness on the part of women to accept the restrictions imposed on them and to acquiesce in the limitations then understood to be part of divine ordination.

It is obvious that these conclusions are preliminary and that considerably more investigation needs to be done before a clearer picture of the situation of and for women at the time of the Prophet can emerge. However, one last observation might be made about the scope of the project beyond the mere uncovering of data. The suggestion was made earlier that further reflection is needed on the issue of how a dominant conception of the deity as masculine may have led to a lessening of opportunity for women to play leadership roles in the religious structure. I think that the study of women and religion has now progressed to the point where we recognize the need to give greater attention to the possible connection between monotheism as a theological orientation and the understanding of inherent female potential. The ramifications of such a consideration, it is clear, might be significant for the study not only of Islam but of all the great monotheistic traditions as well. I suspect that when attention is given to this issue we will be able to shed more light on the question of women's participation in religious revolution.

NOTES

1. Nabia Abbott, "Pre-Islamic Arab Queens," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58 (1941):1–22.
2. See especially Reynold Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1962).

3. W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1885 and reprints).
4. Ilse Lichtenstadter, *Women in the Aiyam al-ʿArab* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1935), chap. 4.
5. Nicholson, *Literary History*, p. 87.
6. Nabia Abbott, "Women and the State on the Eve of Islam," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58 (1941):260–61.
7. Ibid., 261–62. There have been some exceptions to this; *rabba* has occasionally been used in popular Islam to refer to a female religious functionary.
8. See, e.g., Ibn Saʿd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabir* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1905–1940), 1:39ff.
9. A.F.L. Beeston, "The So-Called Harlots of Ḥaḍramaut," *Oriens* 5 (1952): 16–22.
10. Ibn Hishām, *Sīrah, Das Leben Muhammeds*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1859) p. 134.
11. Faiz S. Abu Jabar, "The Status of Women in Early Arabic History," *Islam and the Modern Age* 4 (1973):69.
12. Abbott, "Women and the State on the Eve of Islam," 275 from Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. A. von Kremer (Calcutta, 1856),pp. 308ff.
13. Gertrude H. Stern, "Muḥammad's Bond with the Women," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1940–42):196.
14. Gertrude H. Stern, "The First Women Converts in Early Islam," *Islamic Culture* 13 (1939):297–98.
15. See, e.g., Nabia Abbott, *Aishah, the Beloved of Muhammad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 41–61.
16. Qur'ān, S. 24:11–15.
17. See Stern, "The First Women Converts," *Islamic Culture* 13 (1939): 300–303 for a summary of narrative materials on the general subject of women and prayer.
18. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (n.p.: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Maymanīyah, 1895), 6:301.
19. Ibid., 42.
20. Ibid., 69.
21. Nabia Abbott, "Women and the State in Early Islam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1942):110.
11. Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 2:274.
23. Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabāqāt*, 8:335; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 6:504.
24. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2:271.
25. See, e.g., J. C. Vadet, "Une personalité féminine du Ḥiǧāz au 1er/VIIe siècle: Sukayna, petite fille de ʿAlī," *Arabica* 4 (1957):261–87.