Summary

This ethnographic study documents and explores the religious lives of women from the Ithna Ashari Shia Muslim community, and draws primarily upon the stories, experiences and understandings of women in the South Indian city of Hyderabad. The aim is to enlarge our understanding of Shia Islam by examining the influence of gender upon religious activity. This gendered approach is crucial given that most research and writing on Shia Islam reflects male expressions and beliefs. The book asks four main questions: How do pious Shia women nurture and sustain their devotional lives? How are female religious beliefs and experiences similar to and different from those of men? Do gender-based religious roles and expectations exist, and if they do, what do they tell us about Shia faith? And, how do answers to these questions challenge two popular scholarly dichotomies: the gendered divide between public and private spaces, and the division of religious activity into “normative” and “popular” forms?

Chapter One gives a background to the study by documenting stories, ideas and sacred personalities which undergird Shia faith. It uses sources from faith-inspired history, devotional literature, sermon texts and interviews to provide a women-centered narrative. Two historical moments pivotal to Shia faith—the succession to the Prophet, and the events associated with the massacre of Imam Husayn and his male followers at Karbala—give context to a number of key ideas which inform the religious imagination of devout women: the guidance and blessing of the Prophet’s family (the Ahl-e-Bayt), and the sinlessness of its holiest fourteen members (the masumeen); the tie between salvation and one’s love for the family of the Prophet; the imperative to resist injustice; and the harsh reality of life’s grief and suffering coupled with the certainty that, through God’s grace, all will be overcome at the end of time.

These pivotal moments in remembered history also introduce us to powerful female figures, three of which the Chapter examines in detail: Fatima and Zaynab, the daughter and grand-daughter of the Prophet; and Hind, the wife of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. The first two women are an inescapable part of religious gatherings, devotional activities, prayers and oral recitations. Fatima is the beloved and loyal supporter of the Prophet and “the Mistress of the Day of Judgment”. Zaynab is “the partner of Husayn” who completes Husayn’s resistance to tyranny by proclaiming the truth of the martyrdom, ferociously protecting her family, and seeing that the dead are properly mourned and buried. In addition to these major figures, courageous Hind plays a minor but important role in the aftermath of Karbala by mourning the death of the members of the Prophet’s family, and demanding that her husband release the captives. An analysis of the popular stories surrounding these three women illuminate their importance as feminine examples of faith—a perspective which male historians and theologians have tended to ignore when they portray women as the passive backdrop to a male-centered cycle of events. Thus, traditional accounts of Karbala depict the incident as one in which believers become martyrs for their faith, placing women on the periphery by definition. Yet, the feminine perspective frames Karbala as the story of tragedy and bravery with women and men standing together as central actors, a view which helps to nurture and sustain the devotional lives of women.

Chapter Two provides a glimpse of Yadgar Husayni, an all-women gathering place cum shrine (ashurkhanah). This unique female institution is an important site for religious expression and provides a venue for many of the religious rituals examined in this book. Unlike other prominent ashurkhanas to which women and men are visitors, Yadgar Husayni is founded and operated by women, and provides a powerful reflection of female beliefs and priorities. To begin to explore this site’s meaning for women, the Chapter reviews Hyderabad history, analyzing how Shias see their place in Indian society as a minority within a minority, and how this informs their identity. The Chapter then traces how and why women established Yadgar Husayni in the 1940s, and describes how it has changed over time. Thick ethnographic description helps to chronicle the three main functions of the shrine: to provide women and girls space to perform rituals, to assist the economically deprived in the community, and to provide religious education.

Yadgar Husayni enshrines a powerful visual image of female beliefs and priorities: a theology which upholds the primacy of God, ties to a broad Muslim identity, and the special place of the Ahl-e-Bayt; and ritual priorities which affirm the abiding presence of the family of the Prophet, the gathering of believers, and the performance of prayer and supplication. Although Yadgar Husayni is a “women-only” space, male and female symbols co-mingle, with male religious heroes being at the shrine’s heart. This symbolism mirrors a dominant Shia world-view in which the feminine gaze remains focused on the males at the center of female lives. In other words, the centrality of males is
part of how many devout women frame their faith. At the same time, models of faithful remembrance, courage and perseverance come from strong female examples. This mutuality among males and females is further reflected in the choices women have made about involving men in establishing and maintaining Yadgar Husayni. Women have been strategic in making use of male skills and opportunities while still preserving independence in decision-making. This choice has ensured a level of transparency and an acceptance of this women’s shrine by the whole community—men as well as women.

Chapter Three describes the two most popular communal events among Shias: the mournful majlis and the joyous jeshn. It presents their historical development, how they fit within the cycle of Shia devotional life, and their component parts. The function of the gatherings are similar: they convey stories about the family of the Prophet, bring sacred connection with the Ahl-e-Bayt, and confer blessing on the faithful. A detailed description of a Hyderabad majlis and jeshn offers a launching point from which to analyze women’s creation of meaning through narrative, performance, sacred objects and setting. The Chapter analyzes the commonalities and differences between the two types of gatherings, and what their design and comparative popularity tell us about women’s religious lives. Their appeal among women is attributed to several factors: the presence of active female roles for participation; the use of ritual elements associated with social customs like weddings and funerals, which create a sense of familiarity; and opportunities to connect with one’s emotions (especially grief and loss), enjoy a social event with other women, and experience and renew cosmic relationships.

Chapter Four looks at the role of preacher or orator (zakira), the woman who has the primary task of relating and interpreting religious stories to the majlis or jeshn audience. This is the most visible and respected position in the area of ritual practice, and provides a window into female religious leadership. The zakira (or her male counterpart the zakir) is the “rememberer”, the respected story-teller who is responsible for keeping alive the founding stories of the faith. During remembrance gatherings, she is also the main actor in transporting the audience back in time to experience the sorrows and celebrations of the beloved family of the Prophet. Right from the time of Zaynab, the main function of a zakira has been to relay the story of what took place, to testify to the courage and bravery of those who were martyred, to express one’s grief and pain at the loss, and to inspire empathy, loyalty and sorrow in one’s listeners. In the modern period the zakira took on the additional goal of educating listeners on religious themes beyond the Karbala story, although the most popular focus continues to be the sufferings of the Ahl-e-Bayt.

The Chapter draws upon the opinions of local Shia women to discuss the choices women make to be a zakira, the demands of leadership, and the qualities which make a zakira effective. It describes the ways a leader gains competence and confidence through formal and informal education, and asks what this role means for women—including the somewhat controversial issue of payment. Finally, in an effort to better understand issues of power and change, the Chapter assesses the impact and limits of female religious leadership in the community and concludes that while female religious leaders may gain the respect of men, the impact of their religious ideas has a shorter reach.

Chapter Five investigates one of the most important symbols for the Shia community: the alam, an emblematic crest which scholars have generally described as a battle standard. This popular icon occupies a central place in religious spaces like Yadgar Husayni and events such as the majlis and jeshn, and is an important link in remembering and honoring the family of the Prophet. The Chapter assesses the historical and contemporary uses of the alam, drawing upon ethnographic description to convey ways in which women use it to make meaning. The Chapter presents theological ideas which explain the icon’s sacredness, including concepts of blessing (barakat) and purity which shape many women’s understanding of the alam’s place in religious performance. It also discusses the contested meanings of this popular icon.

An important finding is that although its image as a battle standard may help the devout recall the army of Husayn who rallied under this banner, the alam has come to symbolize the Ahl-e-Bayt themselves. For example, women sometimes will parade these symbols before a grieving assembly to enact the death and funeral procession of the martyrs. The power of these icons lies not in their association with battle, but in their ties with sacred souls central to Shia faith. Like the tombs of the Prophet’s family which devout Shias long to visit, the alam provides a holy and grace-filled point of connection. In fact, many believers see these ties as imbuing the alam with special power and blessing.
Chapter Six documents and compares two final devotional activities which women use to invite holy intervention into their lives. *Amal* is a litany of prayer said in times of need or crisis, which takes the form of a repeated powerful phrase or Quranic verse. *Dastarkhan* is an exclusive female gathering which commemorates the fulfillment of a vow by remembering, revering and seeking the help of specific member of the Prophet’s family. *Amal* and *dastarkhan* are both devotional activities which women use to connect the tragic and joyous events of their lives with the power-filled world of the holy. The Chapter begins with an overview of the concept of intercession, then analyzes the content and purpose of these intercessory rites, including their component parts and the roles of leaders and participants. A comparison of the two rituals reveals differences in form as well as similarities in purpose, with ideas of blessing, intercession, and the calling on relationships with sacred beings uniting these rituals. Both *amal* and *dastarkhan* represent a tangible course of action which can help a person deal with overwhelming difficulties. In addition to increasing one’s sense of control, they also provide spaces for women to engage in supportive social interactions during times of crisis.

The Conclusion reviews the book’s primary findings by summarizing critical resources which inform and enliven women’s religious lives: personalities from religious history, sacred space, ritual performance, female leadership, and iconic symbols. It compares the transmission of religious knowledge through organized religious instruction and informally through example, ritual, oral narrative and commentary, noting that women shape formal instruction in ways which acknowledge male authority in this realm. However, in a society where the religious establishment is equated with the world of male scholars, women retain ownership, flexibility and power over religious expression by using example or experience to pass on knowledge—as they do in a significant portion of religious ritual. By relying on non-institutionalized systems of knowing, women are less influenced by externally determined definitions and structures, and have relatively greater freedom to shape and give meaning to devout expression.

Affirming that gender-based religious roles and expectations do exist, the study notes that it is generally only men who conduct mourning or celebratory processions in the streets, and perform the rhythmic self-flagellation (*matam*) involving swords, knives and blades. Women alone mark the fulfillment of a vow with a *dastarkhan*, and play key leadership roles during most home-based supplication rites, even when men participate in them. When men and women join to honor the Prophet’s family at remembrance gatherings, all participants assume that men will lead the proceedings. This mirrors a historical model of community leadership demonstrated by the Prophet and the Imams. In the absence of men, women assume the role of leaders; a position once again supported by the community’s historical memory of events in the aftermath of Karbala.

The presence of women and the sound of their weeping is part of the experience of Karbala both in the imagined past and the re-experienced present. Without the female witness to tell the tale and grieve the loss, the martyr would disappear. This is why the female voice surfaces repeatedly even during male recounting of martyrdom stories, and why the female audience is an important part of most male ritual activity. A gendered analysis suggests that devout women, more than men, may tend to frame their religious lives within a network of relationship—an observation echoed in studies of other religious traditions. Through ritual, women build up lifelong, intensely personal relationships with the powerful and sympathetic *Ahl-e-Bayt*, whose lives are as familiar to them as their own friends and relations.

Finally, the Conclusion critically examines gender formulations in scholarly research, contesting the way academics have framed religious practice and the interactions between men and women. This study adds to a growing body of research which challenges the equation of public/private with female/male, inside/outside, powerless/powerful, passive/active and inferior/superior. It suggests a more complicated and nuanced reality; namely, that societies actively create female, male and mixed-gender spaces which are shifting and contested; and that female and male spaces exist in both domestic and public spheres. This conception better explains the creation and use of space by women and men in Muslim societies, including the one studied in the present volume. The Conclusion also decries the scholarly habit of defining practices as “normative” or “popular”. A gender analysis of this division reveals women as among those most often associated with devalued “popular” beliefs and behaviors, while “orthodox” most predictably encompasses the activities of men. This fact is explained in large part by the fact that male religious authorities have had the power to define “normative” and marginal behaviors. The book argues that scholars have tended to misunderstand and undervalue female ritual activities at least as much as they once did for Shia beliefs and practices in comparison to normative Sunni behavior. Correcting mistaken information and assumptions requires sympathetic, respectful presentations in which a community is allowed to describe religiosity on its own terms. Using this methodology, the present study demonstrates that women find powerful meaning in religious rituals.
which they shape and perform; that such activities are grounded in a strong, coherent understanding of what it means to be a faithful Shia; and that such rituals address a range of important spiritual, psychological and emotional needs. These findings counter simplistic assumptions that female religious behavior is the result of limited education, a lack of sophistication, and a less developed nature. Women's expressions of devotion are not a flawed approximation of male-defined norms and behaviors, but a vigorous, authentic affirmation of Shia faith with an emphasis on loyalty, connection and saving grace.