Preface

I first encountered the religion of Islam through interactions with Muslims in the South Indian city of Hyderabad. I had moved there from Montreal, Canada, in 1985 with my six-month old son and Indian husband. My husband’s work at the Henry Martyn Institute, an institution with a focus on Christian-Muslim relations and inter-religious dialogue, brought me into contact with Muslims in a city known for its vibrant Muslim culture and heritage. I was fortunate to leave North America before the age of rampant stereotypes about Islam, for it allowed me to begin my relationship with a people and their religious beliefs without the baggage of preconceived ideas. Initially, what I learned about people’s faith came from local encounters in a vibrant, bustling metropolis where the melodious call to prayer echoed across the city as part of a rich weave of sounds. I gradually got to know fruit sellers and shop owners, neighbors, and teachers, housewives and domestic workers. My interest in and connections to people further expanded as I accompanied my husband on his research to local religious sites, and as we met with Muslims from across the socio-economic spectrum to talk about life, belief and community in our multi-religious city. During our visits I and my young children spent a good deal of time in female company as was the local custom, especially in conservative circles. Being a visible white “foreigner”, however, I generally had greater latitude than most Indian women, and often was invited into the formal “parlor” or meeting place of men, as well as the bedrooms, kitchens and living areas where women and children tended to congregate.

My interest in the Muslim community thus began as part of a “new life” for me which blossomed into twenty years in India. Part of my identity included being the wife of a respected Christian scholar of Islam with a passion for interfaith dialogue, the mother of (eventually) three delightful children, a part of the nearly five million people who identified Hyderabad as home (of which only the smallest fraction were “foreigners”), and a researcher whose curiosity and interest in gender and psychology eventually led me to academic study, teaching and writing about Muslim women’s lives. As social networks deepened and my interest in Muslim communities grew, I increasingly drew upon published writings to further my interest in Islam’s foundations, precepts, history and practices. Although this information was at times useful, I sometimes found formal presentations of Islam to be limited and unsatisfying. For example, I was fascinated by the vibrant local observances surrounding Shab-e-Barat, the “Night of Quittance” (D’Souza 2004b). On this occasion, the faithful remember those who have died and affirm that life and death are in God’s hands. Muslim neighborhoods are lit up and active long into the night, and many adherents are engaged in rituals of personal and communal piety. In stunning contrast, scholarly sources barely mention this popular event. Even specialist encyclopedias confine it to the margins of Muslim experience. As Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper (1987) concluded in their study of Turkish celebrations held to honor Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, implying that these central religious behaviors are “peripheral” to people’s lives is extremely misleading.

As my research continued, I eventually grew frustrated by the pejorative ways in which women’s spiritual lives were overlooked, dismissed, glossed over, or devalued in the writings of many male religious leaders and Islamic Studies scholars. This was particularly true when women’s rituals or activities fell outside the established “five pillars” of Islamic practice: daily prayer, fasting during Ramzan, pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime, regular tithing for those whose economic situation allows it, and affirming one’s faith through a straight forward formulaic recitation. Although I saw women doing all these things, I saw them faithfully doing much more: being generous to the poor, praying for their needs and for the intercession of powerful spiritual figures, engaging in simple or elaborate rituals with deep layers of meaning. The unsatisfying gap between what women named or practiced as important to their religious lives, and what male scholars and religious leaders defined as central motivated me to conduct research which could accurately and respectfully portray female devotional lives. I chose an empirical process rather than a historical study in order to provide women with a chance to define and describe for themselves what their religious perceptions and experiences are. Grounding my research in the context of the study of religions led me to discover that my frustration about the scholarly portrayal of Muslim women was not unique but part of a larger dysfunction within the academy, and that such experiences were coalescing into a gender-related paradigm shift in Religious Studies.
This book is thus the product of my thinking, explorations and discoveries in the area of gender and Islam. It came to fruition through the cooperation, encouragement and support of many, many people. My first and most grateful thanks goes to the Muslim community in Hyderabad for their warmth, hospitality, and gracious openness. There are far too many helpful individuals—friends, acquaintances, and even strangers—to thank every one personally. I would, however, like to offer my very special gratitude to the Shia community for welcoming an ever-inquiring “outsider” in their midst. In particular, I offer my deep appreciation to Dr. Zakia Sultana for her generous gift of time and her unwavering patience in answering my questions. Miriam Banu, Riyaz Fatimah, Meehoor Ali Abbas, Siraj Bahdur Ali, Ameena Naqvi, Tahira Naqvi, Rabap Patel, Tasneem Husayn, Sabih, Ismat, Atiya Ahsan, Sayyida Jafari, Maryam Naqvi, Sakina Hasan and their families were among those who opened their homes to me in friendship, and shared their thoughts about faith and community. I am very grateful for their trust, kindness and hospitality. I would like to thank Syed Ghulam Husayn Raza Agha who graciously listened to my questions and expressed his own views about women, religious practices and the Shia community in Hyderabad. I am indebted to Professor Sadiq Naqvi for his friendship, his delight in knowledge and his introduction to Zakia Sultana. The Shia community as a whole went to great lengths to help me understand their beliefs and practices. I have tried my best to honor their patience and their trust. Any shortcomings in my presentation spring from my own limitations and mistakes.

I am particularly grateful to Professors Anton Wessels and Nelly Van Doorn-Harder for their guidance, advice and encouragement in the preparation of this work. Anton’s challenges to my writing and my assumptions have made the book stronger than it otherwise would have been. Nelly’s willingness to assume a guiding role at a late stage in the development of my work was impressive, and her thoughtful feedback and practical problem-solving were real gifts. Anton and his partners Toke and Wilhelmina have been generous with their hospitality, and provided me a welcoming home whenever I was in the Netherlands—I treasure the memories of our time together.

I owe a special thanks to Dr. Andreas D’Souza for his encouragement in my pursuit of studies, his sharing of books which we both needed, and his proof-reading of early drafts of this work. I am also deeply indebted to the staff and faculty at the Henry Martyn Institute for their cheerful assistance on matters large and small, and their willingness to support me in my research and writing.

I have greatly benefited from the challenge and support of the international academic community over the years. As part of my dissertation examining committee, Professors Kari Vogt and Johan ter Haar read my initial manuscript and gave me deeply appreciated feedback. Rev. Dr. Toby Howarth and Professors Jorgen Nielsen, Willy Jansen and Stella van de Wetering also read my work and offered valuable advice. My personal thanks also goes to Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor Joyce Flueckiger, Dr. Yoginder Sikand, Professor Mary Hegland, and Dr. Omar Khalidi for their comments and encouragement at key points in the life of this work. Among the institutions which deserve special thanks for their support are the Vrieje Universitat and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I am particularly grateful to a number of partners of the Henry Martyn Institute—the United Church of Canada, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the Church of Sweden, the Church of Scotland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—for their funding of travel and sabbatical costs at several points in the writing of this work. Church of Our Saviour in Milton, Massachusetts was generous in providing me housing at a critical time in my writing. I wish all these institutions and individuals success in their concerted efforts to promote inter-religious understanding, and to build a world in which we respect equally people of all faiths.

Finally, my thanks go to the family and friends whom I hold closest in my heart. To my children for their patience over the years in having a mother who gets swallowed up by research and writing, and for their support and delight in having me complete this work. To Art, for the happiness and laughter he has brought into my life. To the late Dr. Mildred Christian, my father Dr. Robert Diener, and my uncle Dr. Preston W. Smith, Jr. for their presence and encouragement. To Lalita Iyer, Lakshmi Raman, and Jeanne Dooley for offering the right words at the right time, especially when things have been difficult. To Rizwane Anees for her trust, friendship and home in the Old City, and to Carolyn Pogue and Jasmin Nordien for their whoops of laughter and unwavering, affectionate devotion. Lastly, I acknowledge with much gratefulness the girl who has accompanied me throughout my journey and whose joy, creativity and abiding belief in me are precious gifts in my life.
Some Notes on Transliteration

This book springs from the South Indian Shia Muslim experience and thus contains a good bit of Urdu vocabulary, as well as some Arabic and Persian words. In choosing a transliteration system to present those words which cannot be translated into English, I have been guided by two main desires: to reflect the local Urdu-speaking context, and to ensure the readability of the text by non-specialists.

When it comes to the local context, I have used Urdu transliterations as much as possible, even when the word has Arabic or Persian origins. To give just a few examples, when translating “blessing”, I use the Urdu barakat rather than the Arabic barakah; in speaking of the family of Prophet Muhammad, I use Ahl-e-Bayt rather than Ahl al-Bayt; in writing about the Muslim month of fasting, I use “Ramzan” rather than “Ramadan”; and in describing the ritual prayer I use namaz rather than salat. I believe that such choices help to capture a bit of the flavor of the language as it is spoken in Hyderabad, and thus situates the study firmly within its South Indian context.

As far as the book’s readability, I have based my transliteration on the system adopted by the American Library Association / Library of Congress, but have dropped all diacritical marks (including those indicating hamza and ayn), and occasionally have made spellings more intuitive (representing the letter chim as “ch” rather than “c”, for example). I have made these choices with two audiences in mind: the community whose lives I chronicle, and readers whose interests or research specialties lie outside the Islamic Studies field. I have found that both groups struggle at times with opaque transliteration systems which render familiar words unfamiliar or make pronunciation confusing. For instance, a “female orator” in Hyderabad Shia circles is known as a “zakira”. When the word is written locally using the Latin alphabet, it is spelled just that way. Yet, scholars who use formal transliteration systems based on Arabic most commonly write it as “dhakira”, using “dh” to indicate a particular Urdu letter of the several which give the sound of “z”. Although such formal systems are undoubtedly useful, allowing specialists to faithfully reconstruct the word’s spelling in its original language, in this case it results in a word which becomes distanced from the very people whose lives it describes, as well as leading those not familiar with transliteration “codes” to imagine the word starts with the sound of “d” (as I have been embarrassed to see happen at very public academic events).

As with any transliteration system, there are some exceptions and irregularities which require additional explanation. First, I use “Shia” to indicate both the noun “Shia” and the adjective “Shii”, as seems to be increasingly common today. Second, I do not italicize Urdu, Arabic or Persian proper names (e.g. Ali, Hyderabad, Ramzan) or words which have entered the English language (e.g. Quran, Shia, Imam). Third, in those Persian-origin words where the letter wao is silent, I have elected to drop it in the transliteration; for example dastarkhan and rawzah-khan, rather than dastarkhwan and rawzah-khan. Fourth, there are a few words for which a particular romanized spelling has become standard but which differs from the transliteration system I have adopted. The spelling of the word “hadith” (tradition) is so common among those familiar with Muslim Studies that I have not forced it to conform to the book’s transliteration system, where it would be rendered hadis. All other exceptions come from accepted local spellings (keeping in mind that India’s declining Urdu literacy has resulted in a greater use of the Roman script in Urdu communications), and involve the long form of a vowel where “ee” replaces “i”, and “oo” replaces “û”. These are: shalwar kameez, durood, masumeen, and mumineen, which I would otherwise render as shalwar kamiz, durud, masumin, and muminin. My choice has been to respect the popularly recognized form. Finally, I have used the English convention of making plurals by adding “s” to the singular form of the Urdu word, rather than using the “broken” plural form of the original language—a practice which local speakers tend to adopt when using Urdu words in English. I therefore write ashurkhana, zarihs and jeshns, for example, instead of ashurkhane, zarins or jeshnhas. A few exceptions are ulama (the plural of alim) since it has already entered popular usage in English, majalis (plural of majlis) since it seems awkward to follow English rules and add an “es”, and the above examples of masumeen (pl. of masum) and mumineen (pl. of mumin).

I trust that the Glossary at the end of the book will help to make new vocabulary more comprehensible to the non-Urdu-speaking audience.
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This study examines the gendered expressions of Shia Muslim faith. My main interest is to understand how Ithna Ashari Shia women construct and experience their religious lives. I have chosen a feminine emphasis because I have found that most Shia studies implicitly or explicitly reflect male expressions and beliefs. Moreover, there has been only limited analysis of how gender impacts Shia piety. My intent, then, is to try to document and explore women’s religious lives, and to critically analyze and apply the findings to increase our understanding of Shia faith and practice.

There are several ways this investigation of gender and religion could proceed. One would be to look at how women figure in Shia Islam. That is, what has been said or implied about women in core teachings of the faith, key Shia concepts, and the religion’s central stories. One challenge with this approach is that women generally have not been among those who frame what is “core”, “key” or “central”. With few exceptions, it has been men who have held most of the power to name what is normative. This is visible today in the almost complete male dominance of the formal, hierarchical structures of religious knowledge within the Shia community, and male preeminence in the academic study of Shia Islam within the fields of Religious Studies and Islamic Studies. My choice, then, is to look at Shia women’s religious expressions in order to deduct what is “central”, “key” or “core” from female points of view. I then use these findings to expand and clarify our current notions about Shia Islam.

The main sources of information in this inquiry are the explanations and experiences of Shia women who live in one of the largest Shia communities in India, in the southern city of Hyderabad. It is thus primarily an empirical or ethnographic study which focuses on ritual. I also make use of textual material—historical accounts, hagiographic sources, popular poetry, sermons and religious studies texts—to analyze how gender impacts our understanding of Shia faith and practice.

Here in the Introduction I provide an orientation to the theoretical framework of my study, looking at the impact of gender on the study of religion, and giving an overview of the studies of ritual and of Shia Islam. I then describe my research methodology, focusing on fieldwork choices, my presence as a researcher, and a description of participants. I conclude with an summary of the focus, limitations and challenges of the work as a whole, and an orientation to the organization of the book’s seven chapters.

**Gender and the Study of Religion**

My initial encounters with Islam came through personal contact with Muslims, particularly women. It was only at a second stage that I began to make use of published writings to supplement what I observed and was told. Because I valued and respected what women expressed about their faith, I was confused by significant gaps which I found in the textual material. For example, a friend with whom I spent time would occasionally recite the words of a Quranic ayat (verse) over a glass of water before giving it to her sick child to drink. She hardly thought about this action: it was just one of the things she did. In response to my queries, she tried to help me understand the world behind her behavior, struggling to articulate what she believed when she gently murmured those memorized words. From our conversations I learned something of the power of sacred words which go beyond their revelatory meaning. I also learned about belief in a God who listens to one’s heart-felt cry and acts in compassion—if it is God’s will. Yet, when I turned to academic resources to help deepen my understanding of this important aspect of my friend’s faith, I found the material extremely limited. In the relatively small literature addressing people’s religious expressions, Muslim scholars and Islamic studies authors tended to focus their attention on explaining fundamental beliefs and practices—what they identified as the “pillars” of Islam. When they did address “less foundational” ritual behavior, most tended to classify it as “folk” or “popular” religion, separating it from what they identified as “normative” Islamic practice. Authors would condescendingly dismiss such actions as works of “magic”, or their tone would be pejorative and the experiences devalued.
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Part of my confusion and impatience in dealing with such gaps between women’s practices and published treatises was linked to the way women explained their faith-filled actions as part of a well-connected whole. My friend who calls God’s presence into the intimacy of her relationship with her sick child, also performs daily prayers, observes the annual month of fasting, and hopes to one day perform the pilgrimage to Makkah—these latter actions being part of what scholars define as the established requirements of Muslim faith. She and her sisters frequently join their father in voluntarily teaching Arabic to neighborhood children, and most nights she gives away whatever is left from her family’s evening meal to people who come to her door to beg for food. My friend explains all these actions—and many more—as integral to being a Muslim. In contrast, I found most scholarly texts much less holistic. The absence of nuance, as well as a tendency to separate “normative” from “popular” practices set up boundaries which seemed to obscure rather than clarify how people see and understand the world, their lives, and their relationships with the cosmos.4

Central to this dichotomy between textual representations and practical spirituality is the question of how we define, and therefore approach, religion. My own experience of Muslim women’s religious lives is that their faith embodies many forms and expressions—some of which “established religion” name as primary, some of which it does not. I therefore see religion as a fairly open-ended construct defining a set of symbols, beliefs and activities which people use to help give structure and meaning to their lives. To look at religion in this way, as personal and experiential (whether individually or collectively) and consequently somewhat plural, contrasts with dominant scholarly views which tend to see religion as a cumulative tradition, the expressions and beliefs of which are defined and bounded by institutional structures and hierarchies. Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed to this contrast in his seminal work The Meaning and End of Religion (1991, 131) when he noted, “The participant is concerned with God; the observer has been concerned with ‘religion’”.5 My interest is thus focused on Islam as faith-inspired people name and practice it.

To understand religious faith through the beliefs and actions of adherents is especially important when one works with people who, as a group, have been marginal to the process of defining the normative boundaries of religion—whether in academic or religious settings. Such groups includes women, rural- or village-dwellers, the economically disadvantaged, and communities existing outside the geographic mainstream (for example, Muslims from countries other than the Middle East). When we stop to consider, it is not surprising that tensions arise in seeking to reconcile our definitions of religion established by elite males with beliefs or practices of others, including women. In fact, as my scope of research widened to consider female religious practices outside the Muslim community, I realized that the gap between how women express their faith and how religions are portrayed cuts right across the Religious Studies field. Awareness of this gap has led to a shift in the subject and method of research, catalyzing what a number of scholars have called a paradigm shift in the study of religion (Gross 1994, King 1995, Kinsley 2002).

The lynchpin in this shift in scholarly thinking is the concept of gender. Gender is an organizational category—like class, race, caste and ethnicity—which helps us understand, analyze and explain the structure and functioning of a society. As a primary source of individual and social identity, it is an important factor in governing interactions and relationships among people. While “sex” refers to biological differences between men and women, gender refers to the meanings which societies and cultures assign to these differences. In other words, gender is how a society perceives, evaluates and expects males and females to behave.6 Unlike sex, it is a humanly constructed category and therefore varies across cultures. What is less variable is how societies have used gender to create hierarchical ideologies which establish and justify sexual inequality in thought, language and social institutions.7

Awareness that gender may be an important variable in the study of world religions started gaining momentum in the early 1970s, when female scholars began calling attention to ways in which male thought and actions were being privileged over female. This early literature included Rita M. Gross’s work on women in Australian aboriginal religion, which in 1975 became the first doctoral dissertation on women’s studies in religion to be accepted by a major American graduate institution. A handful of published works helped to document Muslim women’s separate religious experiences, most notably Lois Beck’s and Nikki Keddie’s edited volume Women in the Muslim World (1978), and articles such as Fatima Mernissi’s “Women, saints and sanctuaries” (1977), Robert A. Fernea’s and Elizabeth W. Fernea’s “Variation in religious observance among Islamic women” (1972), and Nancy Tapper’s critique of anthropological studies of the Muslim Middle East in “Mysteries of the harem?” (1979). These and other works suggested that there was a pervasive gender bias grounded on a number
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of unexamined assumptions, the most basic being that explanations and theories drawn from men’s religious practice and thinking encompassed those of women. In short, a male-dominated religious studies establishment had collapsed and equated the male norm with the human norm. A second assumption was that women usually had little to do with the shaping of religion, a belief which was sustained by tending to define the study of religion as the study of classical texts and scriptures, media where women were usually absent as authors and subjects (but not necessarily as objects). An androcentric bias was reflected further in scholarly habits of using generic masculine language, and in patterns of research which generally assumed males to be religious subjects—those who named what was real and true—while females were presented only in relation to or through the perceptions of such men.

The most significant fallout of this pervasive gender bias was that women’s lives, beliefs and perspectives tended to be under-reported and ignored. Still worse was the propensity to misrepresent and devalue female actions and beliefs as scholars implicitly measured them against an assumed human (actually male) norm. The fact that almost all recognized, traditional texts have been male narratives has meant that a community’s “central” stories, and written reflections on them, spring largely from male definitions and priorities. Female views and voices have either been absent or expressed through male imaginations and interpretations. We see this reflected by the fact that, up until the 1970s, field research on contemporary religious practices was primarily a product of male scholars interacting with male subjects. A researcher’s first-hand access to women often was limited because of cultural practices governing the interactions between males and females. Moreover, the [male] religious elites who have been the common points of contact for such research have their own perceptions and biases about women and their activities. In the Muslim case, for example, we find religious leaders generally asserting that God has created females with a weaker and more emotional nature than that of the stronger and more rational males. This and other theologically-justified reasons usually lead them to conclude that men are inherently superior to women—including in their knowledge about and practice of religion.

The impact of these tendencies toward androcentrism, feminist scholars began to argue, was a misrepresentation of religion. An example which helps illustrate this is the well-documented case of Australian aboriginal traditions. When Rita Gross conducted her research in this area in the early 1970s, existing scholarship reported that aboriginal men were the keepers of religion—its main shapers and sacred practitioners—while women were profane, having little if any religious role to play. Analyzing the community’s myths and the nature of men’s rituals, Gross (1987, 1994) felt that “something seemed not quite to add up”, and argued that conventional scholarly hypotheses were somehow inadequate. A decade later, the sustained research of Diane Bell (1993) provided an astounding corrective to formerly accepted “knowledge” about Australian aboriginal traditions. By listening to women and operating from within their spaces, she provided evidence of their vivid religious lives, the impact of their rituals on the wider community, and the support women lend to men’s religious practices. Bell’s work did not simply bring insights about “women’s religion” as an appendix to existing generalizations about aboriginal society and religion. The strength of her research is that it illuminated the limitations of previous conceptualizations, and revolutionized the way in which we see and understand aboriginal religion as a whole.

Starting in the 1980s, then, awareness of the importance of gender began to demonstrably expand our knowledge of people’s religious beliefs and practices. Books began to appear such as Caroline Bynum’s, Stevan Harrell’s, and Paula Richman’s edited Gender and Religion (1986), Pat Holden’s collection Women’s Religious Experience (1983), and Mary Belenky’s, Blythe Clinchy’s, Nancy Goldberger’s, and Jill Tarule’s Women’s Ways of Knowing (1986). The Encyclopedia of Religion included a section on “Domestic observances” (1986), and an array of ethnographic studies began to document Muslim women’s lives (Friedl 1989, Eickelman 1984, Betteridge 1989, Caspi 1985, Frazzetti 1984, Azari 1983, Tapper 1983). Accumulated research began to reveal that female religiosity at times differs from that of men, and that it also contributes to shaping religious communities. As scholars documented, reclaimed and validated women’s ideas, experiences, needs and interests, it became clearer that men’s views about women and their religious lives (noteworthy in what they reveal about male perceptions) differed from women’s own thinking and acting. These and other ideas have continued to be explored with greater breadth and nuance through gender sensitive research published in the 1990s and into our present decade. Contributions are numerous and varied and have included Lila Abu-Lughod’s study of Bedouin culture in Writing Women’s Worlds (1993), Nancy Auer Falk’s and Rita Gross’s edited collection Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives, Marjo Buitelaar’s Fasting and Feasting in
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*Morocco* (1993), Saba Mahmood’s ground-breaking *Politics of Piety* (2005), Salma Ahmad Nageeb’s *New Spaces and Old Frontiers* (2004), and Lara Deeb’s *An Enchanted Modern* (2006) to name only a very few. Perhaps one of the most impressive contributions has been the six-volume *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* (2003-2007) edited by Suad Joseph which explores religious practices, family life, issues of space and mobility alongside economics, law, sexuality and education. The result of all this research has been a growing awareness of the importance of taking female inclinations, motivations and beliefs into account in portraying the religious life of a community of believers.

The Study of Ritual

My primary concern in this study is to learn how devout women perform and understand a set of collective religious activities in which they are engaged. My purpose is not to advance a particular theory of ritual behavior, but to try to grasp how women themselves see their actions. Still, academic discussions about the nature and function of ritual have helped to further my thinking about women’s activities. Although the extensive theoretical debates over what ritual is or what it does are beyond the scope of this study, I would like to summarize a few ideas from the fields of ritual and performance studies in order to clarify my own perspectives and assumptions.

At its essence, religious ritual is more about “doing something” than saying something—even when spoken words are involved. It is quite literally the embodiment of a belief. James C. Livingston (1989, 98) describes religious ritual as “an agreed-upon and formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions carried out in a sacred context.” Livingston’s emphasis on “sacred context” is important, for it reminds us not only of the role of place, space and time, but also the intention and perception of the believer who performs a rite. However, the words “agreed-upon” and “formalized” give preeminence to religious behaviors which are recognized by established, authoritative powers. The definition ignores rituals which are developing, emerging or practiced by marginalized groups—actions which the religious “center” might not acknowledge or recognize. For the purposes of this study, then, I see religious ritual as a pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions with a more or less fixed, recognizable and repeatable sequence or course carried out in a sacred context.

The idea that rituals are “more or less fixed” communicates something about rituals and change. Ronald Grimes (1993) notes that rituals are constantly recreated by the act of doing them. In other words, since every group of performers (including the “audience”) and every situation in which a ritual is performed is different, every spoken word and gesture becomes a unique act. Thus, every enactment of a ritual is a new creation, with participants actively re-interpreting symbols as they communicate them. This point of view does not deny the role of tradition; indeed, for many theorists it is a cornerstone of ritual. It does, however, reinterpret tradition (which might best be categorized by the description, “this is the way it has always been done”) as a source of authority and power, rather than a static and fixed entity. Tradition is an actively created way in which societies remember, and is constructed, maintained and enforced by ritual. Catherine Bell (1997, 73) summarizes this emphasis on ritual performance as a dynamic, ongoing process:

> Cultural [and thus religious] life has come to be seen as this dynamic generation and modification of symbolic systems, as something constantly being created by the community. From this perspective, change becomes a dynamic process integral to how people live and reproduce culture [or religion], not something that happens to a passive and static social entity… ritual does not mold people; people fashion rituals that mold their world.

In other words, individuals create meaning by creatively engaging with the expression of their tradition. While Bell is correct to stress people’s role in fashioning ritual, she overstates the point that ritual does not fashion people. In her study of the female piety movement in Cairo, Saba Mahmood (2005, 2001) found devout Sunni women using conscious actions to inculcate pious behaviors like female modesty. As she remarks, “…what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them” (2005, 157). Religious ritual, then, is a malleable tool which can assist in the process of self-creation.
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There are many other functions of ritual. Religious rites initiate people into the meanings, norms, values, customs and sanctions of a given culture or pattern of belief. They also help to name and shape those meanings, norms, customs and values. Rituals draw communities together, mediate between the past and the present, form identities, and teach ethical norms for human behavior. They give opportunities to express or channel emotions, transform individual psyches, express complex realities, and access power. They also offer means of communicating between individuals, among groups, and between people and a higher reality. Not every religious ritual will do all of these things, but many do at least some of them. How a ritual functions depends upon the desires and actions of the practitioners, the symbolism and associations connected with the rite, and the circumstances under which the ritual is performed. It is clear, then, that we must grasp the particular context of a given ritualized behavior in order to begin to understand its meaning and function for an individual or group. This assumption underscores the choices I have made in researching, recording and presenting Shia women’s religious lives.

Shia Islam in Western Discourse

It was only in the latter part of the twentieth century that Western research on Islam began to acknowledge Shia religiosity as legitimate forms of Muslim religious expression. Up until that point, Western academics tended to give their primary attention to Sunni forms of piety. This reflected the fact that, for historical reasons, Western societies had more extended contact with Sunnis and were therefore less aware of Shia faith. A lack of information was only part of the story, however. Western orientalists also had made fantastic charges against Shia faith and practice based on Sunni polemical arguments and Christian theological assumptions. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1981a) notes, the study of comparative religion rarely gave attention to Shia Islam, but when it did, scholars usually relegated it to a “secondary and peripheral status of a religio-political ‘sect’, a heterodoxy or even a heresy.” Despite the work of a few sensitive scholars (Louis Massignon and Henri Corbin among them), much of Shia belief and practice remained “a closed book”. It is only within the last several decades that Western scholarship has given attention to Shia Islam as a legitimate religious expression in its own right. This interest in the subject has been stimulated by events in Iran, including the overthrow of the Shah and the emergence of a (Shia) Islamic state, and the United States invasion and occupation of Iraq which has highlighted sectarian divisions between Shias and Sunnis.

One Western-oriented work which marked a significant turning point in the factual and sympathetic presentation of Shia belief was Shi’ite Islam (1975) written by the highly respected Shia authority Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, and edited, supplemented and translated by Seyyed Husayn Nasr. This introductory volume “dealing with Shi’ism and written from the Shi’ite point of view” was the first modern English work to be written by a Shia religious authority rather than orientalist researchers. It set out to present a “fair and objective study” of a branch of religion which is a living reality in doctrine and history. It was well received and soon followed by exemplary works like Mahmud Ayoub’s (1978) Redemptive Suffering in Islam and S. H. M. Jafri’s (1979) The Origins and Early Development of Shi’a Islam. Following the Iranian revolution and discussions about the role played by religion in the uprising, a number of authors published works on the political aspects of Shia faith (Cole and Keddie 1986; Kramer 1987; Arjomand 1988; Sachedinia 1988). These early works have been augmented by books addressing an ever-widening range of topics including: religious beliefs and practices (Momen 1985; Shams al-Din 1985; Nasr, Darbashis and Nasr 1988; Amir-Moezzi 1994, Bar-Asher 1999, Aghaie 2004; Deeb 2006, 2005), religious culture and political history (Rizvi 1986; Cole 1989; Nakash 1994; Modarressi 1993, Newman 2000, Brunner and Ende 2001; Hyde 2006; Dake 2007), and religious leadership and theology (Mir-Hosseini 1999; Walbridge 2001; Howarth 2005).

While the literature on Shia Islam continues to expand, it still remains relatively understudied when compared with that which focuses on Sunni Muslims, particularly in the area of lived expressions of faith.

Shia Women’s Ritual Lives

In order to better understand the rituals and beliefs which are the focus of this study, one needs a sense of the wider context of Shia religious expressions. To meet this need I offer here a brief orienting overview. Most Shia women perform a multitude of devotional activities, large and small. Some follow cyclical patterns (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly), others are organized at crisis times (including illness, death, trouble in the family, etc.), and still others on special occasions including major events in the life cycle (for example, birth, marriage, the first cutting of the hair, building a house, etc.). Hyderabad women observe most of their religious rituals in three main settings: at homes (a woman’s own, as well as those of family and friends), at shrines dedicated to holy members of the Prophet’s family, and at community gathering places cum shrines (ashurkhanahs).
PARTNERS OF ZAYNAB

Women’s activities include a range of behaviors from religious acts like prayer or fasting to preparatory and supportive work such as cooking, cleaning the house, inviting guests and other mundane tasks. I summarize below the most prominent religious rituals, although for the sake of brevity (and given that they are outside the scope of the present work) I do not elaborate upon women’s involvement in life cycle events.15

Two of the most common religious activities are ritualized daily prayer (namaz) and fasting during the month of Ramzan—activities which are common to Sunni as well as Shia Muslims. Other practices which are familiar to Sunnis are tithing or giving of alms, offering specialized prayers (of which a wide variety exist), rituals which sanctify significant events in the life cycle (marriage, death, etc.), and practices particular to special annual days (major and minor festivals in the Muslim calendar16).

Of central importance for a vast majority of Shia women are gatherings which honor members of the family of the Prophet, commemorating key events in their lives, especially their births and deaths. The most widely observed in India and worldwide is the majlis (lit. “sitting”; pl. majalis), known as rawdah in Iran or qiraya in southern Iraq.17 This is a gathering to remember and mourn the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (the grandson of the Prophet), and his family and followers. Somewhat less popular but also widely prevalent is the jeshn (lit. “jubilee” or “rejoicing”), a gathering very similar to the majlis but which marks birth anniversaries and other happy occasions in Shia history. Men as well as women organize and attend these gatherings, following an annual cycle of tragic and joyous remembrance days which are well-known in most Shia households. Individual families organize a majlis or jeshn (most often at home) to commemorate days of special meaning on an annual, weekly or—during the main annual mourning period—daily basis. These ritualized events are also sponsored to coincide with major life-cycle ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals, or on occasions which hold personal meaning for a family (for example, a person’s death anniversary). Women participate in majlis and jeshn organized by men (in which women usually occupy a physically marginalized position), and also organize, lead and take part in exclusively female gatherings. In fact in Hyderabad, women-organized remembrance gatherings out-number those organized by men.18

Women, and perhaps to a lesser extent men, also engage in a variety of rituals which seek out divine intervention in solving personal problems.19 Among the most popular is the making of a vow (mannat, nazr), which occurs in many forms; reciting a litany of prayers amal; lit. “practice”), or the entire Quran; making a sacrifice or offering (sarka); preparing, sanctifying and consuming food in the name of members of the Prophet’s family (niyaz; lit. “petition”); and relating miracle stories about one or more of the holy, revered persons who are so intimately related to Prophet Muhammad.

Another popular devotional act for women is pilgrimage (ziyarat) to local, national and global sites associated with members of the Prophet’s family (Takim 2005). Like most Muslims, the majority of Shia women hope to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah (hajj) at least once in their lifetime, but many long at least as greatly for the opportunity to visit other sacred sites. Such places of pilgrimage include the tombs of the Prophet’s family, or significant places in their lives; sites associated with their miraculous appearance (like Mawla Ali in Hyderabad, where Shias believe the son-in-law of the Prophet visited and healed a sick man); and places (particularly ashurkhana) imbued with their presence, power and blessing. Both men and women participate in ziyarat, although women generally are the more frequent pilgrims, especially at local sites—which some visit on a regular daily, weekly or monthly basis.

Looking at Shia devotional practices through a gender lens, we notice women-only rituals, men-only rituals, and those in which both genders participate—separately or together. The religious events in Hyderabad which are generally practiced solely by men are praying at the mosque,20 mourning processions in the streets,21 and types of rhythmic flagellation of the body (matam) involving swords, knives and blades. Although, as we have already noted, women are often primary participants in many of the rituals which men also practice, there are a few which are exclusively practiced by females, the most notable being dastarkhan (lit. “meal cloth”; known as sofreh in Iran), a ritual meal which commemorates the fulfillment of a vow.

There exists a fairly limited body of research which gives details about Shia women’s devotional lives in the Indian sub-continent. A fascinating nineteenth century source is Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali (1917), who gave rich ethnographic detail about mourning gatherings and public processions in the North Indian state of Awadh. In the modern period, Mary Hegland (1998a, 1998b, 1995a, 1995b) describes women’s contemporary mourning
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gatherings in Peshwar, a city in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province; Ursula Sagaster (1990) makes preliminary observations about similar gatherings in Baltistan, in northeast Pakistan; and Shemeen Burney Abbas (2005) documents women’s majalis in Pakistan urban centers of Rawalpindi, Wah and Lahore. Vernon Schubel (1993) provides further detail on women’s rituals in his book on Shia religious performance in Karachi. Drawing on fieldwork he conducted in 1983, Schubel succinctly describes various popular practices including pilgrimage to shrines, the making of vows and offerings, and the recitation of special prayers and miracle stories. Turning to the Indian side of the border, we find references to women’s practices in the excellent study of Shia symbolism in the subcontinent by Syed Akbar Hyder (2006). Amy Bard (2002) focuses on women and the performance of mourning poetry in Lucknow. Toby Howarth’s (2005, 2001) research on majlis preaching in Hyderabad records and discusses the orations of several women preachers, as well as assembling useful historical and descriptive material on the majlis as it is practiced in Hyderabad.

We can glean more information about Shia women’s religious practices from studies conducted in other parts of the world, most predominately in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. With few exceptions, this body of research is based on the study of urban groups, and documents three main types of activities: lamentation gatherings like the majlis (Deeb 2006, Flarkerud 2005, Betteridge 1989, Fernea and Fernea 1972, Fernea 1965), pilgrimage to shrines (Betteridge 1993; Friedl 1991, 1989), and gatherings for the purpose of making or honoring vows (Fernea and Bezirgan 2005, Spellman 2004, Kalinock 2003, Betteridge 1989, Jamzadeh and Mills 1986, Fischer 1978, Good 1978). In addition, Azam Torab (2006, 1998, 1996) and Zahra Kamalkhani (1993, 1991) describe women’s regular religious meetings (jalaseh) in the contemporary Tehran setting. Torab’s work is particularly important, for in her monograph (1998) she chronicles a range of performances, prayers and discourses among pious followers of a popular and influential woman religious leader. The sweep of ritual activities she describes include an annual cycle of events of joy and mourning (the Persian equivalents of jeshn and majlis), intercessory rituals, votive pledges, healing rites, and various rituals associated with different life journey events—including births, deaths and weddings. In analyzing women’s religious expressions, Torab tries to assess the impact of piety on women’s personal and communal lives. As we will see, these findings are useful in helping increase our understanding of Shia devotional activities in Hyderabad.

Fieldwork Methodology

My interest in Shia women’s religiosity is informed by nearly two decades of contact with local Muslims, although I conducted most of my research during a six year period from 1994 to 2000. My extended interaction with the Shia community in Hyderabad has meant that I have observed and taken part in hundreds of ritual events in homes, shrines and gathering places—the majority being in all-women environments.

My first opportunity to observe Shia ritual took place in Hyderabad in 1985, when I witnessed the main public mourning procession on the tenth of Muharram. Over the next few years my contact with Shias was sporadic and informal, part of a process of getting to know a new city, a new language and Muslim women generally. As I decided to pursue more systematic research on Shia women, I asked the advice of a well-respected professor and Shia preacher whom I had come to know through his ties with an interfaith research center with which I was associated. When I informed him of my interest in Shia women’s activities, he directed me to a leading preacher (also a university professor) whom he felt would best answer my questions. Thus started my association with Dr. Zakia Sultana, a respected, influential and articulate leader within the Shia community. This relationship was invaluable in my work, for I was not only a relative novice in the intricacies of Shia practice and belief, but also a visible “outsider” who could benefit from patronage in building greater trust within the community. While I had established some independent friendships and acquaintances with Shias, I gained a great deal from the support, encouragement and introductions of this established and popular orator. It was through Zakia, for example, that I first gained entry to Yadgar Husayni, a unique all-women ashrurkanah (community gathering place and shrine) in the Old City. She also introduced me to a network of friends, companions and followers who helped me participate more fully in women’s devotional spaces. This circle of contacts kept expanding as women introduced me to relatives and friends, putting me in touch with an ever-increasing number of women in the Shia community.

Over the course of my research, and as my relationships deepened, I created opportunities for prolonged discussions with women who had the time and interest to answer my questions, discuss their religious experiences, and speak at length about how they learned their faith and saw religion generally. These interviews
were conducted sometimes in Urdu, sometimes in English, depending on the language facility of the person involved, and allowed me to explore ideas, beliefs and practices in greater detail with a select group of women. This greatly expanded my understanding of the rituals I witnessed. To summarize, then, my interactions with Hyderabad Shias took place at three different levels of encounter. At one level I was gathering experiences, becoming familiar with practices and events, and observing and interacting with religious people in different settings—at shrines and local pilgrimage spots, homes and courtyards, streets and community gathering sites. At another level I was building relationships in several kin and ritual circles. Here I was not just observing and participating in women’s rituals, I also was having extended conversations, asking questions, and getting to know more about what women were doing and why. At a third level, I established close rapport with a group of women who had time, interest and inclination to speak individually and in detail about their religious beliefs and practices. I describe them further in the “Participants in the Study” section below.

In conducting my research, I generally chose to rely on extensive note-taking rather than audio recording. My practice was usually to take detailed notes of conversations, observations and ideas in the presence of the people with whom I interacted. I drew upon these notes to write up events and discussions immediately or shortly after they took place. I preferred this method to audio recording, for I felt a tape-recorder might escalate women’s suspicions about my intent, especially in situations where I could not explain my presence and purpose to large numbers of people who had gathered for a faith-inspired event. When involved in personal discussions or interviews, I felt a tape recorder introduced an unwelcome degree of formality which could potentially inhibit the ease with which women spoke. It is possible that I was overly cautious in making these choices, sacrificing an extensive literal record. Yet, I feel satisfied with the level of interaction I achieved, and the quality of data which I obtained.

My preference in writing up the material I collected has been to follow a narrative style as much as possible. I believe this helps to better convey individual perceptions and voices. One consequence of having used note-taking rather than audio recording is that people’s words in the text are sometimes a best approximation rather than a verbatim record. On occasion I have chosen to change people’s names or certain non-essential details of their personal stories in order to protect their privacy. In all other details, the descriptions are accurate representations of the events I witnessed or in which I took part.

My Presence as a Researcher
In the course of my research, I repeatedly had to explain to women the reasons for my interest in their devotional lives. On the whole, people were very supportive and extremely gracious to me, although occasionally a woman expressed confusion or suspicion about my intent. I usually explained my work by describing the lack of useful books or materials to help “outsiders” like myself understand the faith and practices of Shias—particularly from women’s points of view. This explanation was helpful for women who had some exposure to systems of formal education, but proved to be incomprehensible to women for whom books held limited meaning. Once, for example, an older woman saw me writing up detailed field notes at Yadgar Husayni, and sat down next to me to ask about the person with whom I was corresponding. Even after I explained that I was writing a book to help others understand the stories and personalities which are precious to Shia believers, she remained puzzled about my aim and purpose. On another occasion in Yadgar Husayni, an elderly ritual leader demanded to know why I kept coming back to spend time writing at the shrine. Although several weeks earlier we had talked about my research and the reasons for it, on this occasion she brushed aside my words and expressed angry suspicion: What more did I need to know? I had already heard everything, so why was I still hanging around?

Part of the explanation for the suspicion I infrequently encountered is rooted in the minority position of Shias within the larger Muslim community. A tremendous amount of persecution has taken place during the roughly fourteen centuries of Shia existence. At one point in history the situation became so dire that leaders propounded a concept of assimilation (taqiyyah), encouraging Shias to conceal their identity when it came to choosing between affirming one’s religious belief and protecting one’s life or livelihood. Shias in Hyderabad have their own history of persecution, the low point being three hundred years ago in the wake of an invasion by Sunni Mughal rulers from North India. Although Shia intellectuals have tended to describe Hyderabad’s history as one of positive coexistence between Sunnis and Shias,27 the situation seems to be somewhat more complex. For example, a political leader in Hyderabad’s Old City told me that Shia families still sometimes face discrimination when trying to rent homes in Sunni localities.28 With most Shias being aware of these historic
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and practical challenges, it is not surprising to encounter people’s occasional suspicion of “outsiders” as an expression of concern for the safety of their community.

In general, women gave me the benefit of the doubt, trusting my intention and seeming to perceive me as someone who was trying to understand what they believed to be the true religious path. When women asked about my religious affiliation, I openly admitted to my Christian background, which most accepted with equanimity. A good number seemed to expect that as I learned about Shia truths, I would eventually come to embrace their beliefs. This may have been part of the reason some women chose to answer my questions and explain their spiritual lives to me.

Sometimes women made comments about my participation in different rituals, pointing out to others how I joined in reciting lamentation choruses or performing the rhythmic chest beating (matam). This was done with considerable appreciation and pride—at least when I overheard the remarks, as I was no doubt meant to. The women seemed to feel that my participation clearly demonstrated a love and respect for the venerated family of the Prophet. That I, as an outsider, chose to be part of devotional activities was further testimony to the inherent greatness of these holy personages. I did my best to conform to what I understood women expected of me. I did this out of respect for the beliefs of the community who opened itself to me, out of respect for the sanctity of certain moments, places and actions, and to ensure continued acceptance by the community. For example, when a woman invited me to a majlis which she was hosting in her home, I would arrive at the appointed time wearing the appropriate clothing (most commonly a black tunic, pants and modest shawl). Leaving my footwear at the door, I would be greeted by my hosts. If the family had a shrine or small collection of sacred icons, someone would usually take me there so that I could pay my respects, which we did silently. While waiting for the event to begin, I often took advantage of opportunities to talk with acquaintances and other participants. Once the ritual started I would sit cross-legged on the floor along with my hosts and other women participants; listen to poetry, preaching and prayers; and respond with the appropriate matam or verses of affirmation as was expected. Afterwards I usually stayed for more interaction and often food or drink. I tried to behave in appropriate ways in ritual environments, and gradually acquired performative competence in the rituals in which I took part. I did not participate in religious events for which I was not qualified (involving the recitation of Arabic, for example) or did not feel comfortable. For instance, I did not perform the ritual prayer (namaz), or partake in the collective reciting of litanies for vows. I used my own judgment on what was appropriate, and allowed women to guide and advise me. Most women were both helpful and discreet in passing along instructions which they felt were crucial, especially surrounding issues of purity and the handling of sacred objects.

I feel it was inevitable that my presence as an observer influenced to at least some degree certain rituals—if only by inspiring participants to perform well before the outsider in their midst. Although I did not attempt to draw attention to myself, I could be easily noticed in smaller gatherings, the sole white-skinned “foreigner” in a crowd. Yet I did not get a sense that the passion and dedication with which women engage in devotional rituals—whether mourning gatherings, fervent prayers for healing, or celebratory events—was manufactured or staged on my account. The dynamics of devotional activities (or socializing) seemed to fully occupy most of the women in a gathering; I never got a feeling that women were doing things markedly different because I was there. Especially in events where fifty, a hundred or several hundred women gathered, my presence seemed to be of little interest or importance compared with women’s own concerns and engagements.

Participants in the Study
The women I studied and with whom I interacted are a cross-section of Shias who are engaged to varying degrees in religious rituals. The majority live in Hyderabad, although I did spend some time with women who are settled abroad and occasionally return to the city to visit their extended families. My emphasis throughout this study has been on women who participate in religious activities; I do not claim to have studied a random or representative sample of Shia women. Rather, I have made use of informal networks and ritual circles to give insight into the religious behavior of a “not so unusual” group of practicing believers within the Shia community in Hyderabad.

The women about whom I write spend varying amounts of time in performing the rituals of their faith. For some, ritualized performance is regular and intense, involving a significant portion of their daily energy. For others, the deepest connections are limited to certain annual periods, mainly during the Muslim month of
Muharram. A person’s spiritual expression also changes with time and circumstance. Some women recalled earlier periods of their lives in which they had been engaged in rituals to greater or lesser degrees than they were presently. I saw other women’s religious involvement change over the course of years that I interacted with them. Sometimes these shifts occurred because of changes in life style (like getting married), sometimes because of taking on additional work at home or elsewhere, sometimes because free time became more available with the lessening of responsibilities—children growing older or retirement from a job.

The wide community of women with whom I interacted consisted of females of all ages, from young children to tottering grandmothers. Education, economic level, class and social status varied widely. The majority were part of what I would call the urban “middle class” in that their families were neither demonstratively poor (having few durable goods, limited clothing, and education and healthcare provided through “government” schools and hospitals, to name a few indicators), nor had excessive wealth (indicated by, among other things, large homes, multiple servants, ownership of high-end consumer products including new cars and electronics, membership in exclusive private schools and clubs, and regular international travel). “Middle class” families had possessions like motorcycles or scooters for transportation and household goods such as televisions and fans; many owned their own home, could spend more than a bare minimum on their children’s education, and occasionally were able to travel, including on pilgrimages. In middle class and wealthy families, only a few women were employed outside the home or sought paying jobs; most embraced their role within the joint household as full time caretakers for their families. A few women had established careers as doctors, teachers, lawyers, professors and business women. There were also women with whom I interacted who came from what we could call the “working class”: struggling to meet their strained economic circumstances by sewing piece-work, cooking and selling specialized food items, or earning income as servants in the homes of middle and upper class families. In all groups it was accepted for women to live in joint or extended families, although there was considerable variability in its form: some homes consisted of a number of siblings and their families; in others, married families lived with one or more elderly parents or grandparents. The majority of the young women with whom I spoke expected to join their husband’s household at the time of marriage, although this traditional practice is changing as increasing numbers of families choose to create independent households.

Among this wider community of religiously active women were a dozen with whom I spoke at length and developed a deeper relationship. These mostly were educated, middle-aged or older women who had respect among their peers and were comfortable talking at length about their faith and experiences. All but two had been educated outside the home, with two achieving their doctorates and one obtaining her legal degree. Half came from well-known families in the local community and shared the elevated respect and social status of these extended families. Several played leading roles in ritual events outside their own family networks. Almost all the women had been married, a few were widowed, and nearly all had children. Unlike the majority of women visiting popular shrines and religious spaces, half of this circle of informants had been or continued to be employed outside the home; most in the education field. Nearly all were connected in some way to the Shia diaspora through children, siblings or members of their extended family living abroad. For some, the family’s economic position was demonstrably strengthened by this network of support. Approximately half of these women lived in Hyderabad’s Old City: a few in small dwellings with restricted economic circumstances; most in spacious ancestral homes which served as a symbol of the family’s elevated social status before Indian independence. The other half dozen women lived in various newer parts of the city: all had relatively new homes or flats built within the last fifteen to twenty-five years—which demonstrated a degree of financial stability and cash flow in their families.

The men with whom I interacted were almost always connected to the women I knew by marriage or extended family. A few exceptions to this included male students of the Religion and Islamic Studies programs at the Henry Martyn Institute where I taught, Professor Sadiq Naqvi who was locally renowned for his scholarship in history and the local Shia community, and the religious leader Syed Ghulam Husayn Raza Agha whose views on women’s rituals and Shia politics I actively sought out.

**Focus, Limitations and Challenges**

The main intent of this study is to document and analyze some of the faith-inspired activities and beliefs of women who are part of one of the single largest Shia communities in India. I am interested in clarifying the resources and dynamics which help shape female religious expression. While my primary focus is on women, my larger concern is how gender influences Shia religious activity. In examining this wider context, I do not
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strive to document the religious lives of Shia males, for a body of literature already exists which helps make sense of men’s religiosity.\textsuperscript{30} This literature definitely can expand to give greater depth to our understanding of men’s practices and beliefs, or to explain how masculine ideals are formed and sustained, but that is not my task here. My interest is not to offer new data about men, but to document women’s religious lives in an effort to bring greater clarity about the role gender plays in shaping Shia expressions of faith.

There are four main questions I seek to answer: How do pious Shia women nurture and sustain their religious lives? How do their experiences and beliefs overlap with or remain distinct from those of men? Can we discern gender-based roles and interactions in the religious life of the community, and what do they tell us about Shia faith? And, finally, how do our findings inform our understanding of two traditional scholarly dichotomies: the gendered divide between public and private,\textsuperscript{31} and the splitting of religious practice into normative and popular expressions?\textsuperscript{32}

In this study I have chosen to focus on popular devotional activities which women collectively enact in formal or informal groups. Thus, I do not try to survey all female religious experiences, nor do I document expressions of individual personal piety (for example, private recitations of prayers). In choosing these forms of expression, I have given primary attention to devotional activities which are uniquely Shia, rather than practices which are shared with Sunni Muslims (for example, the daily prayer rite, fasting or pilgrimage to Makkah). This does not suggest that common Muslim rituals are insignificant in women’s lives, but reflects my choice to set aside rituals that are better known and documented than those which are distinctively Shia.\textsuperscript{33} I also give priority to religious events which are organized and led by women. As I have noted, women participate in a variety of devotional activities—including those held in mixed gender groups where men generally lead the event. While women are active in male-directed ritual gatherings, female-led activities are the most common ones for the majority of Hyderabad women. My choice to focus upon these events is also motivated by a desire to dispel their relative scholarly neglect.

In summary, then, this study does not try to offer an overview of the entirety of women’s devotional lives—even if such a goal were possible to achieve. Rather my attempt is to offer a glimpse of what religiosity means for a group of devout Shia women in the religious mainstream in India.

One of the challenges of this study is to avoid drifting into essentialism. I have already noted that in speaking about “Shia religion”, male scholars have tended to neglect female perspectives, assuming that ideas drawn from men are generalized for all Shias. A similar criticism could be levied at attempts to offer a generic “women’s perspective”, for no single work can encompass the variations which exist around factors such as class, ethnicity, education, age, experience and geographical community. It is thus problematic to take the findings from one group of women—no matter how significant—and present it as the perspective for all women. My intent, then, is not to offer a definition of religion for the worldwide community of Shia women, but to provide a mainstream perspective on religiosity which yields insights into what it means to be Shia for a not unimportant group of Muslims.

Organization of the Book

The bulk of this study focuses on documenting and analyzing women’s faith-inspired actions and beliefs. In looking at how pious women nurture and sustain their religious lives, I have identified five important elements: personalities from religious history, sacred space, ritual performance, female leadership, and iconic symbols. These elements offer windows into women’s creative religious expression, and I will highlight specific examples of each in the chapters which follow. Woven throughout is also a query about the ways knowledge is passed on, since this is critical to the process of how women inherit and sustain their piety. The following synopsis of the chapters provides a little more detail about the questions I ask within these broad thrust areas.

Chapter One provides a window into Shia faith and history from a feminine perspective. I want to give the reader a sense of what faithful women “know” and take for granted. I thus present some of the key religious stories, ideas and revered personalities which help shape a Shia worldview. In constructing the chapter, I have used materials—historical accounts, devotional literature, sermon texts and interviews—which present a more women-centered narrative than academic sources traditionally offer. I do this deliberately for, as I already noted, the “foundational” stories and ideas tend to proceed from male-dominated institutions. I am interested to discover more about the role female figures play in stories central to Shia religious history, and focus on three
women: Fatimah and Zaynab, the daughter and grand-daughter of the Prophet; and Hind, the wife of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. What images or themes do popular depictions of these figures bring to the fore? And what does their presence in the Shia religious imagination tell us about the resources available to women of faith?

In the second chapter I look at an important site for women’s religious expression, Yadgar Husayni, the all-women ashurkhana which is one of approximately two dozen major Shia gathering places in Hyderabad. This site is significant not only because it is a unique female institution, but also because it is a venue for many of the religious gatherings and rituals we examine in this book. I begin the chapter by providing some background on Hyderabad and the Shia community in order to situate Yadgar Husayni within a larger context. I then chart the history of the female religious organization which founded and maintains Yadgar. I ask: What are the priorities women set for the shrine, and how have they changed over time? How do women understand and frame men’s relationship with this religious institution? What symbols do they use to make a meaningful site for religious performance? I also examine areas of activity which go beyond a connection with religious rituals. I look at women’s community outreach and the theology which motivates it, and explore how women pass on knowledge through a religious school at the shrine. Finally I ask, what are the factors which have contributed to women’s success in establishing and maintaining this unique religious site?

Chapter Three focuses upon how women shape and participate in the two most popular community gatherings for Shias: the majlis and jeshn. I briefly examine the historical development of these rituals, and explore how women use narrative, performance, objects and setting to create meaning. I explore commonalities and differences between the two types of remembrance gatherings, and what they reveal about Shia faith. My main interest is to understand what gives these rituals power and popular appeal for women.

In Chapter Four I examine the role of preacher or orator (zakira), the person who has the primary task of relating and interpreting religious stories to the majlis or jeshn audience. My purpose is to gain a better understanding of what female religious leadership looks like by examining one of the most visible and respected leadership positions in the area of ritual practice. I start by looking at how this position developed historically then ask, what does this role mean for women and what does it require of them? How do they gain competence and confidence as religious leaders, and how is religious knowledge passed on? Are there certain qualities and capacities which set these women apart from other faithful Shias? What are issues they face in assuming this important religious responsibility, and what rewards do they receive? Finally, how does female religious leadership impact the community of believing women?

In the fifth chapter I explore in depth 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. I look at the historical and contemporary uses of the alam, and ask why it occupies such an important place in the spirituality of many women. I highlight theological ideas which help explain its sacredness for many believers, and analyze how concepts of blessing (barakat) and purity shape many women’s understanding of its place in religious performance. Finally, I explore some of the contested meanings surrounding the alam, and question whether women’s perceptions support the martial interpretations scholars generally attribute to this powerful religious symbol.

In Chapter Six I return to a focus on rituals, documenting and comparing two 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. It is reminiscent of Sufi practices of zikr—the meditative ritual of repeating holy words for prolonged periods of time as a way to bring one closer to God—although it has a different purpose: supplication. The second intercessory ritual is dastarkhan, the exclusive women’s gathering to commemorate the fulfillment of a vow, in which participants remember, revere and seek the help of specific member of the Prophet’s family. Both amal and dastarkhan are devotional activities which women use to connect the tragic and joyous events of their lives with the power-filled world of the holy. I begin the Chapter with a review of the concept of intercession, drawing on scriptural interpretations and popular expression. I then analyze the content and purpose of these specific acts of group prayer and entreaty, including the details of their component parts and the roles of leaders and participants. I ask: What are
the foundational concepts which underlie these rituals? What gives them meaning, power and popular appeal for women? And how do they get passed on?

In the Conclusion I begin by summarizing the main findings of the study, analyzing women’s choices and priorities in creating meaning-filled religious lives. I point to research which identifies the centrality of relationships within female worldviews (Miller and Stiver 1997, Gilligan 1982, Taylor 2002) as useful in helping us understand female religious expressions. I also look at how women’s experiences and beliefs are similar to or different from those of men and ask: What roles are women and men expected to play, and where do these roles intersect? What do gender dynamics and interactions tell us about Shia faith? Finally, I use my findings to analyze traditional formulations in scholarly research. Have researchers overstated male-female dichotomies, particularly the public-private division? Does the description of Islam as having “normative” and “popular” components actually mask the impact of gender in framing what is religious and what is marginal? If so, what alternative formulations might help us gain a more balanced understanding of religion?
Notes

1 *Ithna Ashari* (“Twelver”) Shias are those who believe in twelve *imams* (sinless spiritual successors to the Prophet). Among the several subgroups who identify themselves as Shia, this is the majority, forming roughly ninety percent of the Shia community worldwide. According to Hasnain and Husain (1988), ten to fifteen percent of the Muslim population in India is Shia, of which ninety percent are Ithna Ashari. This seems to correspond with the distribution in Hyderabad as well, although statistics are notoriously difficult to obtain. Other Shia communities in Hyderabad include the Ismailis, Khojas and Bohras; each has its own history, traditions and practices. Whenever I use the term “Shia” in this study, I am referring to Ithna Ashari persons or practices. One does find Khoja or Bohra women who participate in Ithna Ashari rituals, but I have chosen to focus on the women and religious structures of the majority community. I have tried as much as possible to be specific in noting when my description deviates from this central focus.

2 The size and vibrancy of Hyderabad’s community is second only to Lucknow in North India, which is generally acknowledged as the foremost center for Shia history and culture in India. However, one could argue that after India’s partition in 1947, with many North Indian Muslims choosing to migrate to Pakistan, Hyderabad now has a somewhat larger and more active Shia religious culture.


4 Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper (1987) reached a similar conclusion in their study in Turkey of celebrations (*mevlud*) held in honor of the Prophet’s birthday. Finding Muslims participating in a large “domain of expressions” which are both Muslim and devotional, yet are “neither definitively orthodox nor clearly *sufi*”, they argued that labeling such important religious behaviors as “peripheral” to the lives of Muslims is extremely misleading. See also my work on the popular Muslim observance of *Shab-e-Barat*, the “Night of Quittance” (D’Souza 2004b) for similar comments.

5 Since *The Meaning and End of Religion* was initially published in 1962, it is not surprising that Wilfred Cantwell Smith was not sensitive to the effects of gender on the study and practice of religion. A gendered analysis of his writing—although beyond the scope of this study—would no doubt extend and, in some areas, contest his conclusions.

6 I am paraphrasing Alice Schlegel’s definition, quoted in Ursula King (1995, 5).

7 There are many good sources for definitions and discussions of gender. Some of those which I have found helpful in the context of religious studies are found in: King (1995); Carol A. B. Warren and Jennifer Kay Hackney (2000); Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, Paula Richman (1986); Jackie Stacey (1993); and Paula M. Cooey, William R. Eakin, Jay B. McDaniel (1994).

8 David Kinsley (2002, 5) reminds us that in most cultures until very recently, it was primarily or exclusively males who were literate. Hence, it was men who “wrote texts, studied texts, commented on texts, and invoked texts in a variety of social situations”. Male dominance resulted in the main textual concerns being those of men. Such narratives also tended to privilege male practices and beliefs, with men’s religious rituals being presented as prestigious and powerful, while women’s emerge as lowly, crude and relatively ineffective.

9 Exceptions included anthropological works like Elizabeth Fernea’s *Guests of the Sheik* (1965), Bess Allen Donaldson’s rather pejorative exploration of Iranian women’s “magic and folklore” in *The Wild Rue* (1938).
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10 See, for example, Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s (1999) excellent study Islam and Gender for a thorough exploration of how Iranian clerics perpetuate ideas of gender in their interpretation of Islamic law. Haleh Afshar (1998) examines how women confront gendered assumptions in assuming public roles in post-revolutionary Iran. Maria Massi Dakake (2007, 213-236) and Azam Torab (1996, 236ff) discuss how notions of “reason” and “emotion” are used in a gendered way to devalue women; Barbara Stowasser (1994; 37, 184, n. 45) and Anne Betteridge (1980, 1993) also make mention of this. Scott Kugle (2007, 82-121 passim) examines patriarchal ideas which influence Quranic interpretation and sufi practice, particularly its emphasis on women’s “essential, inescapable corporeality”. Sachiko Murata (1992) explores in greater detail the development of metaphysical ideas about gender, drawing upon the writings of Muslim philosophers, theologians and mystics.


12 For a portion of this definition I am grateful to P. Post, H. Zondag, R. L. Grimes, A. Nugteren, and P. Petterson who in their 2003 book Disaster Ritual: Explorations of an Emerging Ritual Repertoire (Leuven, the Netherlands: Peeters Publishing) suggest rituals to be “symbolic actions with a more or less fixed, recognizable and repeatable pattern or course” (39).


14 Etan Kohlberg (1976) and Wilfred Madelung (1965, 1989) also helped to illuminate aspects of Shia theology and history during this period.

15 For details about Muslim women’s involvement in life cycle events see the third volume of Suad Joseph’s edited Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures (2006) which focuses on “Family, Body, Sexuality and Health”.

16 For more details on these, see Annemarie Schimmel (1987).

17 A colloquial form of qiraya; see Yitzhak Nakash (1994, 143).

18 As affirmed by Toby Howarth (2001: 78).

19 For a few examples in a variety of contexts see: Regula B. Qureshi (1996), Yitzhak Nakash (1994), Reinhold Loeffler (1888), and Jaffar Shureef (1832).

20 As S. H. Nasr (1981, 231) notes, Friday congregational prayers hold somewhat less importance for Shia males than they do for Sunnis; Howarth suggests some reasons for this (2001, 28-29).

21 As far as I know, at the present time in Hyderabad there is only one public procession of women; although I’ve occasionally seen women make use of procession in private majlis rituals.

22 The work of Elizabeth Fernea (1965), Erika Friedl (1991, 1989), and Hegland (all her published work from 1982 to 1992) are exceptions.

23 I suspect that the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation of Zahra Kamalkhani—“Women’s Islam: Religious practice among women in today’s Iran” (University of Bergen)—is another valuable resource providing insights on Shia
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women’s devotional practices in Iran. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain a copy, although I have read two articles (cited above) which arise from her research. I expect that the considerable detail provided by Kamalkhani complements Torab’s efforts.

24 In studying Shia women’s rituals, it is also useful to consider Sunni women’s practices, for there are important areas of commonality. For research on shrines, sanctuaries and the making of vows see Fatima Mernissi (1977), Emelie A. Olson (1994), Daisy Hill Dwyer (1978) and Nancy Tapper (1990); on various types of narrative and other performances see Lila Abu-Lughod (1993b), Monia Hejaiej (1997), Amy E. Levine (1998), Anna Bigelow (2004), Lina M. Fruzzetti (1984), Arifa Kulsoom Javed (1990) and Nancy Tapper (1983).

25 The first month in the Muslim calendar.

26 The Henry Martyn Institute (HMI), a center for Islamic Studies and inter-religious dialogue.

27 See, for example, the writings of Sadiq Naqvi (1984, 1993, 1999).

28 Interview, 23 March 1999. For a useful summary of Shia-Sunni perceptions and history in the Deccan, see Omar Khalidi (1992).

29 In Hyderabad, this is not unusual: almost all families have some relative who is either working or settled abroad. In general it seems that the higher the class and education level, the greater number of relations who are part of the international Shia community.


32 In the extensive discussion of normative versus popular Islam, we rarely find scholars directly addressing the issue of gender. In her book on Moroccan women’s fasting rituals, however, Marjo Buitelaar (1993, 6) wryly notes that assumptions that one can clearly distinguish between “orthodox” and “popular” Islam often go hand in hand with associating women with “popular” and men with “orthodox”. To corroborate her remark, Buitelaar...
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34 I follow James C. Livingston (1989) who identifies a symbol, in its simplest form, as “a meaningful sign”. I will return to develop this idea further in Chapter Four.