

# Women as Imams

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The word 'imam' as used in the Qurân means a source of guidance (e.g. Qurân 2:124). The meaning is not limited only to prayer. Thus, the leader should guide the people along the path of Islam. In other words, the role of the leader is to follow the teachings of Islam and to act as a role model.

(M.F. Osman, "The Contract for the Appointment of the Head of an Islamic State", State, Politics, and Islam, ed. Mumtaz Ahmed, 1986, p. 56).

Leading prayer is not a necessary criterion for leadership, although it may be symbolically desirable. The leader himself or herself need not actually lead prayer. The leader can delegate this function to another. Prophet Muhammad, on two occasions, assigned Ibn Umm Maktum to lead prayer in Medina. On more than one occasion Muadh would pray isha with the Prophet and when he was finished he would return to his people and, with the Prophet's permission, he would lead them in prayer. Thus, the assumption that the leader must actually lead the prayer is not necessarily valid.

(As-Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunna*, American Trust Publications, 1989, vol. 2, p. 57).

Several ahâdîth set forth the criteria for leading prayer: an ability to read the Qurân, knowledge of the Qurân, knowledge of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, and being accepted by the congregation. The following hadith, related by Ahmad and Muslim and reported by Ibn Masud, states that the Prophet said: "The imam of a people should be the one who is the most versed in the Qurân. If they are equal in their recital, then the one who is most knowledgeable of the sunnah. If they are equal in the sunnah, then it is the one who migrated first. If they are equal in that, then it is the eldest. And one should not lead prayer in another's house without permission." (As-Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunna*, American Trust Publications, 1989, vol. 2, p. 56).

As-Sayyid Sabiq, a renowned Islamic scholar from al-Azhar, states that the following people are prohibited from leading prayer: someone with a legitimate excuse not to pray and an incapacitated person. He further states that the following people are discouraged from leading prayer: an evildoer and someone who changes the religion. Thus, maleness was not mentioned as a criterion. Moreover As-Sayyid Sabiq states that it is preferable for a woman to lead other women in prayer and he states that Aishah used to lead the women in prayer. (As-Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunna*, American Trust Publications, 1989, vol. 2, p. 58).

According to Ibn Rushd, Imam al-Shafii believed that a woman could lead other women in prayer; however, both al-Tabari and Abu Thawr believed that a woman could lead both men and women in prayer. (Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.33 (citing Ibn Rushd, *Bidaya al-Mujtahid wa Nihaya al-Muqtasid*, Dar al-Fikr, vol. 1, p. 105)).

Umm Waraqa bint Abdallah, an Ansari woman who was well versed in the Qurân, was instructed by Prophet Muhammad to lead ahl dariha (ahl dariha means the people of her home where 'dar' means home and can refer to one's residence, neighborhood, or village), which consisted of both men and women, in prayer. The "people of Umm Waraqa's home" were so numerous that Prophet Muhammad appointed a muezzin for her. Umm Waraqa was one of the few to hand down the Qurân before it was written. Umm Waraqa wished to be known as a martyr so she asked Prophet Muhammad to allow her to participate in the Battle of Badr (624

A.D./ 2 A.H.) so that she could take care of the wounded; from that time on Prophet Muhammad referred to her as "the female martyr." (Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam*, Markus Wiener Publishing, 1981, p. 111 (citing Ibn Sad, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 8, p. 335).

In 699 A.D. (77 A.H.) a woman named Ghazala led her male warriors in prayer in Kufa after having controlled the city for a day. Not only did she lead Muslim men in prayer, she recited the two longest chapters in the Qurân during that prayer. Thus, although the practice of women leading prayer is not commonly accepted, one cannot simply conclude that it is prohibited without first conducting honest and unbiased research.

Note: Some traditional imams do not accept Ghazala as a legitimate precedent because she belonged to the Kharijite sect, a group of puritans, known for their piety, who revolted against Ali and Muawiya; however, this does not necessarily invalidate her actions). (al-Tabari, *History of Messengers and Kings*, 51:80; Ali Masudi, *Gardens of Gold*, Dar al-Andalus, Beirut, 1965, 3:139).

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