

Women and Islam

*An Historical and Theological
Enquiry*



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A Tradition of Misogyny (1)

According to al-Bukhari, it is supposed to have been Abu Bakra who heard the Prophet say: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity."¹ Since this Hadith is included in the *Sahih* – those thousands of authentic Hadith accepted by the meticulous al-Bukhari – it is *a priori* considered true and therefore unassailable without proof to the contrary, since we are here in scientific terrain. So nothing bans me, as a Muslim woman, from making a double investigation – historical and methodological – of this Hadith and its author, and especially of the conditions in which it was first put to use. Who uttered this Hadith, where, when, why, and to whom?

Abu Bakra was a Companion who had known the Prophet during his lifetime and who spent enough time in his company to be able to report the Hadith that he is supposed to have spoken. According to him, the Prophet pronounced this Hadith when he learned that the Persians had named a woman to rule them: "When Kisra died, the Prophet, intrigued by the news, asked: 'And who has replaced him in command?' The answer was: 'They have entrusted power to his daughter.'"² It was at that moment, according to Abu Bakra, that the Prophet is supposed to have made the observation about women.

In AD 628, at the time of those interminable wars between the Romans and the Persians, Heraclius, the Roman emperor, had invaded the Persian realm, occupied Ctesiphon, which was situated very near the Sassanid capital, and Khusraw Pavis, the

Persian king, had been assassinated. Perhaps it was this event that Abu Bakra alluded to. Actually, after the death of the son of Khusraw, there was a period of instability between AD 629 and 632, and various claimants to the throne of the Sassanid empire emerged, including two women.³ Could this be the incident that led the Prophet to pronounce the Hadith against women? Al-Bukhari does not go that far; he just reports the words of Abu Bakra – that is, the content of the Hadith itself – and the reference to a woman having taken power among the Persians. To find out more about Abu Bakra, we must turn to the huge work of Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani.

In the 17 volumes of the *Fath al-bari*, al-'Asqalani does a line-by-line commentary on al-Bukhari. For each Hadith of the *Sahih*, al-'Asqalani gives us the historical clarification: the political events that served as background, a description of the battles, the identity of the conflicting parties, the identity of the transmitters and their opinions, and finally the debates concerning their reliability – everything needed to satisfy the curiosity of the researcher.

On what occasion did Abu Bakra recall these words of the Prophet, and why did he feel the need to recount them? Abu Bakra must have had a fabulous memory, because he recalled them a quarter of a century after the death of the Prophet, at the time that the caliph 'Ali retook Basra after having defeated 'A'isha at the Battle of the Camel.⁴

Before occupying Basra, 'A'isha went on pilgrimage to Mecca, where she learned the news of the assassination of 'Uthman at Medina and the naming of 'Ali as the fourth caliph. It was while she was in Mecca that she decided to take command of the army that was challenging the choice of 'Ali. Days and days of indecision then followed. Should she go to Kufa or Basra? She needed to have an important city with enough malcontents to aid her cause and let her set up her headquarters. After numerous contacts, negotiations, and discussions, she chose Basra. Abu Bakra was one of the notables of that city and, like all of them, in a difficult position. Should he take up arms against 'Ali, the cousin of the Prophet and the caliph, challenged maybe but legitimate, or should he take up arms against 'A'isha, the "lover of the

Beloved of God" and the "wife of the Prophet on earth and in paradise"?⁵ If one realizes, moreover, that he had become a notable in that Iraqi city, which was not his native city, one can better understand the extent of his unease.

It can be said that Islam brought him good fortune. Before being converted, Abu Bakra had the hard, humiliating life of a slave in the city of Ta'if, where only the aristocracy had the right to high office. In year 8 of the Hejira (AD 630) the Prophet decided that it was time for him to undertake the conquest of Ta'if. He had just conquered Mecca, making a triumphal entry into that city, and now felt himself strong enough to subdue the inhabitants of Ta'if, who were still resisting Islam. But they put up a strong defense. The Prophet camped outside the city and besieged the citadel for 18 days. In vain. The chief tribe that controlled the city, the Banu Tamim, and their allies were entrenched in the fort and used bows and arrows against the attackers, causing casualties among Muhammad's army. Twelve of his men were killed, causing him distress, as he had hoped to win without losses. Each soldier was a Companion; he knew their families; this was not an anonymous army. He decided to lift the siege and depart. But before doing so, he sent messengers to proclaim around the fort and the besieged city that all slaves who left the citadel and joined his ranks would be freed.⁶ A dozen slaves answered his call, and Abu Bakra was one of them. The Prophet declared them free men, despite the protests of their masters, and after their conversion to Islam they became the brothers and equals of all.⁷ In this way, Abu Bakra found both Islam and freedom.

And then we see him a few years later, a notable in an Iraqi city, the incarnation of Muhammad's dream – that all the poor, the humiliated of the world, could accede to power and wealth. The rapid rise of this one Companion summarizes very well what Islam meant for a man like Abu Bakra, who would never have been able to imagine leaving his native city as a free man and especially changing his social status so quickly: "You, the Arabs, were in an unspeakable state of degradation, powerlessness, and profligacy. The Islam of Allah and Muhammad saved you and led you to where you are now."⁸ In fact, since his conversion Abu Bakra had scaled the social ladder at a dizzying pace: "Abu Bakra

was very pious and remained so throughout his life. His children were among the notables of Basra as a result of their fortune and their erudition."⁹

When the task of establishing for posterity the biographies of the Companions was begun, some experts were put in an awkward position because the paternity of Abu Bakra was not at all certain. Imam Ibn Hanbal, who did research on the genealogies of the Companions, admitted to "having passed rapidly over the case of Abu Bakra without going into details, because he was advised not to delve too deeply."¹⁰ Abu Bakra is one of those persons so numerous at the end of the pre-Islamic era whose paternity is difficult to trace. Not having an illustrious genealogy meant scarcely existing socially in tribal and aristocratic Arabia. It is true that in Muslim society the status of natural children is not at all high, but the reasons for looking down on them are entirely different. In the pre-Islamic period, being able to trace one's paternal line to the most distant ancestor was the mark and privilege of the aristocrat. Slaves and all other classes could not trace theirs with the required assurance because of constant uprooting and moving about. In Islam the natural child is looked down on because its mother has failed to obey Muslim law, which permits the sex act for free women only within the framework of marriage. This was not the case in the period of the *jahiliyya*, the time of ignorance according to Muslim terminology, the time when people did not have criteria for distinguishing the permitted from the forbidden, the licit from the illicit. It was this that Islam brought to them, and in terms of paternity this was an innovation.

One of the revolutionary practices (revolutionary in the sense of a break with the past) that Islam institutionalized was the *'idda*, the waiting period that required a Muslim woman, separated from her husband for one reason or another (divorce or death), to not remarry before the passing of several menstrual cycles. The objective of the *'idda* is to ascertain, in case the woman is pregnant, the natural father of the child in order to link the child to him. In the pre-Islamic period the linking of the child to the father was either unimportant (for the tribes still practicing matriarchy) or inadequate (for women prisoners of war living with their captors

or for slaves passing from one master to another) or impossible, and apparently not very important, in cases of temporary marriage, *mut'a*.¹¹ In the latter case, which continues to the present day to stir debate between Sunnis (who condemn it) and Shi'ites (who tolerate it), a man and a woman can decide to live together as husband and wife for a few days, a few weeks, or a few months. All that is necessary is that the date of breakup be fixed at the beginning and that the marriage in fact end at the date agreed upon by the two partners. This kind of marriage, practiced by nomads or traders who went on long journeys, was forbidden by the Sunnis, who regarded it as in flagrant contradiction with the principles of the Muslim family and particularly the rule of paternity that linked a child to its natural father.

Abu Bakra's case, then, was not an isolated one. On the contrary, it was the fate of that whole population of "uprooted" people who suffered from the doubts hanging over their paternity, and whose lives reflected their resulting subordinate status. Many of the biographies of the Companions begin with one or two sentences by the authors about the difficulty they have had in tracing the paternity of their subjects. Abu Bakra, then, was a man to whom Islam had given not only fortune and prestige, but, still more important, an identity: "I am your brother in religion," he loved to repeat to those around him.¹² With such a background, it is easy to imagine that he was the enemy of any civil war that could undermine the establishing of Muslim society.

So why was he led to dig into his memory and make the prodigious effort of recalling the words that the Prophet was supposed to have uttered 25 years before? The first detail to be noted – and it is far from being negligible – is that Abu Bakra recalled his Hadith after the Battle of the Camel. At that time, 'A'isha's situation was scarcely enviable. She was politically wiped out: 13,000 of her supporters had fallen on the field of battle.¹³ 'Ali had retaken the city of Basra, and all those who had not chosen to join 'Ali's clan had to justify their action. This can explain why a man like Abu Bakra needed to recall opportune traditions, his record being far from satisfactory, as he had refused to take part in the civil war. Not only did he refrain from taking part, but, like many of the Companions who had opted for

nonparticipation, he had made his position known officially. 'A'isha, who often used to accompany the Prophet on military expeditions, knew the procedure for the negotiations that took place before the military occupation of a city and had conducted matters correctly. Before besieging the city, she had sent messengers with letters to all the notables of the city, explaining to them the reasons that had impelled her to rebel against 'Ali, her intentions, and the objectives that she wanted to attain, and finally inviting them to support her.¹⁴ It was a true campaign of information and persuasion, a preliminary military tactic in which the Prophet excelled. And 'A'isha was going to use the mosque as the meeting place for a public discussion to inform the population before occupying the city. Abu Bakra was thus contacted from the beginning in his capacity as a notable of the city.¹⁵

'A'isha did not take this course of action only because of faithfulness to Muhammad's methods. There was a more important reason. This was the first time since the death of the Prophet that the Muslims found themselves on opposite sides in a conflict. This was the situation that Muhammad had described as the worst possible for Islam: *fitna*, civil war, which turned the weapons of the Muslims inward instead of directing them, as Allah wished, outward, in order to conquer and dominate the world. So 'A'isha had to explain her uprising against 'Ali. She reproached him for not having brought the murderers of 'Uthman, the assassinated third caliph, to justice. Some of those who had besieged 'Uthman and whose identity was known were in 'Ali's army as military leaders. Many Muslims must have thought like 'A'isha, because a large part of the city of Basra welcomed her, giving her men and weapons. After driving out the governor who represented 'Ali, 'A'isha set up her headquarters in Basra, and with her two allies, Talha and al-Zubair, members of the Quraysh tribe like herself, she continued her campaign of information, negotiation, and persuasion through individual interviews and speeches in the mosques, pressing the crowds to support her against the "unjust" caliph. It was year 36 of the Hejira (AD 656), and public opinion was divided: should one obey an "unjust" caliph (who did not punish

the killers of 'Uthman), or should one rebel against him and support 'A'isha, even if that rebellion led to civil disorder?

For those who held the first opinion, the gravest danger that the Muslim nation could face was not that of being ruled by an unjust leader, but rather of falling into civil war. Let us not forget that the word *Islam* means *submission*. If the leader was challenged, the fundamental principle of Islam as order was in danger. The others thought that the lack of justice in the Muslim chief of state was more serious than civil war. A Muslim must not turn his back when he sees his leader commit injustices and reprehensible acts (*al-munkar*): "The Prophet said: 'If people see *al-munkar* and they do not try to remedy it, they incur divine punishment.'"¹⁶ Another version of this Hadith is: "Let him who sees a situation in which *al-munkar* is being perpetrated endeavor to change it."¹⁶ This was the argument of the group who assassinated Anwar Sadat of Egypt, and is representative of the very prolific literature of the Muslim extremists of today.¹⁷

At Basra in year 36 the dilemma that confronted a Muslim – whether to obey an unjust caliph or to take up arms against him – was not just being posed in the circles of the ruling elite. The mosques were veritable plenary assemblies where the leaders came to discuss with the people they governed the decisions to be taken in the conflict between 'A'isha and 'Ali, and it must be pointed out (after reading the minutes of those meetings) that the people spoke up and demanded to be informed about what was going on. The ordinary people did not even know what the quarrel was about; for those citizens the important problem was the absence of democracy. It seemed mad to them to get involved without knowing the motives that were driving the leaders and the conflicts that divided them. They gave as the reason for their refusal to get involved on either side the lack of democracy in the selection of the caliph. In one of the debates that took place at the Basra mosque when 'A'isha's partners were invited by the people to explain their motives, a young man who did not belong to the elite made a speech that illuminated a whole area that was not very clear in the dynamics of Islam at the beginning and is often "forgotten" today – the nondemocratic dimension of Islam, which was noted and felt as such by the ordinary people. This

young man took the floor in the Basra mosque, an act that would cost him his life, and addressing the allies and representatives of 'A'isha who were pushing him toward subversion, said to them:

It is true that you Muhajirun [the original migrants from Mecca] were the first to respond to the Prophet's call. You had the privilege of becoming Muslims before all the others. But everyone had that privilege later and everyone converted to Islam. Then, after the death of the Prophet, you selected a man from among you without consulting us [the common people, who were not part of the elite]. After his death, you got together and you named another [caliph], still without asking our advice You chose 'Uthman, you swore your allegiance to him, still without consulting us. You became displeased with his behavior, and you decided to declare war without consulting us. You decided, still without consulting us, to select 'Ali and swear allegiance to him. So what are you blaming him for now? Why have you decided to fight him? Has he committed an illegal act? Has he done something reprehensible? Explain to us what is going on. We must be convinced if we are to decide to take part in this war. So what is going on? Why are you fighting?¹⁸

Thus the decision not to participate in this civil war was not an exceptional one, limited to a few members of the elite. The mosques were full of people who found it absurd to follow leaders who wanted to lead the community into tearing each other to pieces. Abu Bakra was not in any way an exception.

When he was contacted by 'A'isha, Abu Bakra made known his response to her: he was against *fitna*. He is supposed to have said to her (according to the way he told it *after the battle*):

It is true that you are our *umm* [mother, alluding to her title of "Mother of Believers," which the Prophet bestowed on his wives during his last years]; it is true that as such you have rights over us. But I heard the Prophet say: "Those

who entrust power [*mulk*] to a woman will never know prosperity."¹⁹

Although, as we have just seen, many of the Companions and inhabitants of Basra chose neutrality in the conflict, only Abu Bakra justified it by the fact that one of the parties was a woman.

According to al-Tabari's account, Basra, after 'A'isha's defeat, lived through many days of understandable anxiety. Was 'Ali going to take revenge on those who had not supported him, one of whom was Abu Bakra? "In the end 'Ali proclaimed a general amnesty All those who threw down their arms, he announced on the day of the battle, and those who returned to their homes would be spared."²⁰ "'Ali spent some days on the battlefield; he buried the dead of both sides and said a common funeral prayer for them before returning to the city."²¹

Nevertheless, everything was not quite so simple, if we take the example of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, another Muslim pacifist who had refused to get involved in a civil war that he regarded as senseless. Abu Musa al-Ash'ari lost both position and fortune. However, it is true that the situations of Abu Musa and Abu Bakra are not comparable, except for their refusal to get involved. Abu Bakra's support was solicited by 'A'isha, the losing party, while that of Abu Musa was sought by 'Ali, the victor. Abu Musa was none other than a governor in 'Ali's service, his representative, and the symbol of the Muslim state as the head of the Iraqi town of Kufa. 'Ali, before proceeding to Basra, then occupied by 'A'isha, sent emissaries to Abu Musa demanding that he mobilize the people and urgently send him troops and weapons. Not only did Abu Musa personally choose not to obey his caliph, but he also thought himself obligated to "consult with" the population he governed. He decided to involve the people, whom he called together in the mosque for information and discussion, and to enlighten them about the position of the Prophet on the subject of civil war. Abu Musa recited to them the Hadith condemning *fitna*, and ordered them to disobey the caliph and not answer his call to enlist. For him, the duty of a Muslim in the case of *fitna* was absolute opposition to any participation. He recited many Hadith at the Kufa mosque, all of them against *fitna* –

against civil war plain and simple. It was not a question of the sex of the leader!²² Al-Bukhari assembled all Hadith on the subject of civil war in a chapter entitled "*Al-Fitna*"; among them was Abu Bakra's Hadith – the only one to give as a reason for neutrality the gender of one of the opponents.²³

What is surprising to the modern reader who leafs through the chronicles of that famous Battle of the Camel is the respect that the people, whatever their position toward the war, showed to 'A'isha. Very rare were the occasions on which she was insulted – and even then it was never by one of the political leaders, but by some of the ordinary people.²⁴ The historians recall that only the Shi'ite chroniclers (the pro-'Ali ones) find fault with 'A'isha. Why, then, did Abu Bakra distinguish himself by a completely unprecedented misogynistic attitude?

Abu Musa al-Ash'ari was dismissed from his post and banished from Kufa by 'Ali. He was replaced by a governor who was less of a pacifist, and above all more tractable.²⁵ If this happened to Abu Musa, the situation of other "pacifists" who were less highly placed was very delicate indeed. It would seem providential to also remember having heard a Hadith that intimated an order not to participate in a war if a woman was at the head of the army.

Abu Bakra also remembered other Hadith just as providential at critical moments. After the assassination of 'Ali, Mu'awiya the Umayyad could only legitimately claim the caliphate if Hasan, the son of 'Ali and thus his successor, declared in writing that he renounced his rights. And this he did under pressure and bargaining that were more or less acknowledged.²⁶ It was at this moment that Abu Bakra recalled a Hadith that could not have been more pertinent, under political circumstances that had unforeseen repercussions. He is supposed to have heard the Prophet say that "Hasan [the son of 'Ali] will be the man of reconciliation."²⁷ Hasan would have been a very small baby when the Prophet, his grandfather (through his daughter Fatima), would have said that! Abu Bakra had a truly astonishing memory for politically opportune Hadith which curiously – and most effectively – fitted into the stream of history.

Once the historical context of a Hadith was clarified, it was time to go on to its critical evaluation by applying to it one of the

methodological rules that the *fuqaha* (religious scholars) had defined as principles of the process of verification.²⁸

The first of these rules was to consider "this religion as a science," in the tradition of Imam Malik Ibn Anas (born in year 93 of the Hejira, the eighth century AD), who was considered, with Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa, one of "the three most famous imams in Islam because of their contribution to the elaboration of the knowledge that enables the believer to distinguish the permitted from the forbidden."²⁹ Malik Ibn Anas never ceased saying:

This religion is a science, so pay attention to those from whom you learn it. I had the good fortune to be born [in Medina] at a time when 70 persons [Companions] who could recite Hadith were still alive. They used to go to the mosque and start speaking: The Prophet said so and so. I did not collect any of the Hadith that they recounted, not because these people were not trustworthy, but because I saw that they were dealing in matters for which they were not qualified.³⁰

According to him, it was not enough just to have lived at the time of the Prophet in order to become a source of Hadith. It was also necessary to have a certain background that qualified you to speak: "Ignorant persons must be disregarded." How could they be considered sources of knowledge when they did not have the necessary intellectual capacity? But ignorance and intellectual capacity were not the only criteria for evaluating the narrators of Hadith. The most important criteria were moral.

According to Malik, some persons could not under any circumstances transmit a Hadith:

Knowledge [*al-'ilm*] cannot be received from a *safih* [mentally deficient person] nor from someone who is in the grip of passion and who might incite *bid'a* [innovation] nor from a liar who recounts anything at all to people And finally one should not receive knowledge from a shaykh, even a respected and very pious one, if he has not mastered the learning that he is supposed to transmit.³¹

Malik directs suspicion at the transmitters, emphasizes the necessity for Muslims to be on their guard, and even advises us to take the daily behavior of sources into consideration as a criterion for their reliability:

There are some people whom I rejected as narrators of Hadith, not because they lied in their role as men of science by recounting false Hadith that the Prophet did not say, but just simply because I saw them lying in their relations with people, in their daily relationships that had nothing to do with religion.³²

If we apply this rule to Abu Bakra, he would have to be immediately eliminated, since one of the biographies of him tells us that he was convicted of and flogged for false testimony by the caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab.³³ This happened during a very serious case that 'Umar punished by execution – a case involving *zina* (fornication), an illicit sex act. In order to end the sexual licentiousness and promiscuity that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia and in an effort to control paternity, Islam condemned all sexual relations outside marriage or ownership as *zina*, encouraging women and men to marry and labeling celibacy as the open door to temptations of all kinds. It gave men the right to have several wives and to divorce them easily and replace them by others, provided that it was all within the framework of Muslim marriage.

'Umar, the second caliph of a new community still under the influence of pre-Islamic customs, had to act rapidly and severely to see that a key idea of Islam, the patriarchal family, became rooted in the minds of believers. Capital punishment for *zina* would only be applied if four witnesses testified to having seen the adultery with their own eyes and at the same time. These were conditions so difficult to prove that it made this punishment more a deterrent than a realistic threat. It was necessary, moreover, to avoid having enmities and slanders lead to the condemnation of innocent persons. If there were only three witnesses who saw the accused *in flagrante delicto*, their testimony was not valid. In addition, any witness who slandered someone by accusing him of the crime of

zina would incur the punishment for *qadhf* (slander) – he would be flogged for false testimony.³⁴

Now this was what happened in the case of Abu Bakra. He was one of the four witnesses who came before 'Umar to officially make the accusation of *zina* against a well-known person, a Companion and a prominent political man, al-Mughira Ibn Shu'ba. The four witnesses testified before 'Umar that they had seen al-Mughira Ibn Shu'ba in the act of fornication. 'Umar began his investigation, and one of the four witnesses then admitted that he was not really sure of having seen everything. The doubt on the part of one of the witnesses made the others subject to punishment by flogging for slander (*qadhf*), and Abu Bakra was flogged.

If one follows the principles of Malik for *fiqh*, Abu Bakra must be rejected as a source of Hadith by every good, well-informed Malikite Muslim.

To close this investigation, let us take a brief look at the attitude of the *fuyah* of the first centuries toward that misogynistic Hadith that is presented to us today as sacred, unassailable truth. Even though it was collected as *sahih* (authentic) by al-Bukhari and others, that Hadith was hotly contested and debated by many. The *fuyah* did not agree on the weight to give that Hadith on women and politics. Assuredly there were some who used it as an argument for excluding women from decision making. But there were others who found that argument unfounded and unconvincing. Al-Tabari was one of those religious authorities who took a position against it, not finding it a sufficient basis for depriving women of their power of decision making and for justifying their exclusion from politics.³⁵

After having tried to set straight the historical record – the line of transmitters and witnesses who gave their account of a troubled historical epoch – I can only advise redoubled vigilance when, taking the sacred as an argument, someone hurls at the believer as basic truth a political axiom so terrible and with such grave historical consequences as the one we have been investigating. Nevertheless, we will see that this "misogynistic" Hadith, although it is exemplary, is not a unique case.



4

A Tradition of Misogyny (2)

Throughout my childhood I had a very ambivalent relationship with the Koran. It was taught to us in a Koranic school in a particularly ferocious manner. But to my childish mind only the highly fanciful Islam of my illiterate grandmother, Lalla Yasmina, opened the door for me to a poetic religion.

She suffered from what we now call insomnia, but in that time such ideas, which revealed too much preoccupation with oneself, did not exist. At least, not in our house. She took advantage of her insomnia to say the dawn prayer, and thus transformed her sleep problem into an ethic and an art of using the first hours of the day. A little later she would wake us up with the tempting odors of *mahrash* (a pancake made with semolina, eaten by peasants) and mint tea. While we – my brother, sister, cousins, and I – ate our breakfast, she dreamily told us a tale of a fabulous journey: the pilgrimage to Mecca. She chanted to us odds and ends of information about a classic era which she pieced together in her own way, and in which kept recurring the two words that ever since have inspired in me the desire to fly far away – *al-Madina al-munawwara*, Medina the radiant, Medina the city of light, which was the destination of her journey. When we interrupted to remind her that the destination of the journey was Mecca, she reassured us with the sly confidence of illiterate Moroccans: “Don’t worry. I am just going to make a little stop, for the most important thing is the tomb of The Beloved [the Prophet]. I hope

A Tradition of Misogyny (2)

that in your school they haven’t moved it, because he was buried in Medina. At least that is what I learned on my own.” There was a war going on between her and the men of learning – a war that I could not understand at the time. She chanted to us the various stages of the *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) while she made her bread. The journey that she recounted was not the same as the one they taught us so forcefully at the Koranic school. Sometimes she would forget ‘Arafa (one stage of the ritual journey of the *hajj*); sometimes it was the stage of Mina that disappeared from her story because she was in such a hurry to get to her ideal destination – Medina, the eternal city of light, where a gentle and welcoming Prophet would receive us. “No mint tea there, children. You must expect something else. I have forgotten what it is, but I know it is something different,” she concluded in her realistic but adventurous way. Her Islam was an occasion to journey to strange countries, to spread one’s wings, and to discover love and enlightenment there.

After these early-morning epics, it was hard for me to settle into the cramped and harsh world of school. While with Lalla Yasmina we could freely play with words, at the Koranic school the least fault in pronunciation was marked down and punishment followed: “The Koran must be read as it descended from Heaven.” Wednesday was the day for recitation. Every mistake in pronunciation was punished, depending on its nature or seriousness, with a certain number of whacks administered by the *muhadriya*, the oldest students. They were rarely the most brilliant, and we could “buy them off” with cherries or peaches or pomegranates, depending on what was in season. Lalla Faqiha (the teacher) was so obsessed with pronunciation that she barely explained to us what the words meant. For Lalla Faqiha, to read and write an incomprehensible text was a way of celebrating the Koran as a mystery. On Monday we wrote on our *luhat* (tablets) the verses to be learned. Sitting cross-legged, we intoned them until Wednesday. We were allowed to rock back and forth when we became carried away by the rhythm: “*Al-qur’an naqham*” (the Koran is music), she told us, while holding her long stick over our heads. “If you don’t feel the harmony of it, you should go serve the Christians and Jews.” To my misfortune, I only really retained

the verses in which the words fluttered around like threads of Chinese silk:

Wa al-tur
Wa kitabin mastur
Fi riqqin manshur
Wa al-bait al-ma'mur

By the Mount,
And a Scripture inscribed,
On fine parchment unrolled,
And the House frequented.

Verses like these (from sura 52), of which I only remember the rhythm, allowed me to escape the stern eye of Lalla Faqiha for hours at a time as I rocked back and forth. I left school far behind and hastened to Medina, the city of light where one drank wondrous concoctions.

This dual attitude that I had toward the sacred text was going to remain with me. Depending on how it is used, the sacred text can be a threshold for escape or an insurmountable barrier. It can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it. However, for me, the older I grew, the fainter the music became. In secondary school the history of religion course was studded with traditions. Many of them from appropriate pages of al-Bukhari, which the teacher recited to us, made me feel extremely ill at ease: "The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*."¹

I was very shocked by such a Hadith. I hardly ever repeated it, in the hope that by dint of silence it would be erased from my memory. I, who found myself intelligent, creative, good, passionate, enthusiastic, as only a 16-year-old can, used to say to myself: "Why would the Prophet have said a Hadith like that, which does me harm? Especially since this kind of saying doesn't correspond at all with what they tell us elsewhere about the life of Muhammad." How could Muhammad, "The Beloved," so hurt a

young girl who, in the bloom of youth, had transformed him into a pillar of her romantic dreams? Muhammad was not just a chief of state. He was also the lover of 'A'isha: "'Amr Ibn al-'As [a Companion] asked the Prophet: 'Who is the person you love most in the world?' 'A'isha,' he responded."² Surprised to hear that it was not a man who held first place in his leader's heart, 'Amr Ibn al-'As, a Companion whose military zeal was known to all, was taken aback. How was it that it was not military men who took precedence? And returning to the charge, he asked, "And among men, who is the one you love the most?" And the Prophet avowed that the man he loved most was Abu Bakr, the father of 'A'isha, his beloved.³ Abu Bakr was a man known for his sensitivity, which bordered on sentimentality. He could not read the Koran without weeping!

In an Arabia where power predominated, where the saber was king, this prophet, who publicly stated that he preferred women to men, was preaching a very unusual message. Apparently Abu Hurayra, that Companion who put woman in the same category as the ass and the dog as disturbances for the believer, did not at all understand his *risala* (message), since he made woman an element that interrupted worship by "interposing herself between him and the *qibla*." To understand the danger of such a Hadith, we must describe what the *qibla* is.

The *qibla* is an orientation, the orientation toward the place of the Ka'ba, the age-old sanctuary taken over by Islam in year 8 of the Hejira (AD 630), when Muhammad reconquered his native city. The *qibla* gives to Muslim prayer – in addition to its spiritual objective (meditation) and its pragmatic objective (discipline) – its cosmic dimension. It puts the Muslims into their orbit, makes it possible for them to situate themselves in the world and to connect themselves to the universe, including Heaven. The Ka'ba did not always represent the sacred orientation for Muslims. For some months, encouraged by their Prophet, they turned toward a foreign holy place, Jerusalem. During Muhammad's childhood, the Ka'ba was the center of idolatrous cults. But from the time that he was visited by Gabriel and received the first revelations, it was naturally toward the Ka'ba that he turned with his wife Khadija to offer for the first time his strange prayer. When Mecca

proved hostile, scorning his message and persisting in its idolatry, Muhammad dreamed of seeking the divine elsewhere, and he turned toward Jerusalem:

When the Prophet arrived in Medina, for a period of 16 months he said his prayers turned toward Jerusalem. Then, one day a man who had previously said his prayers with the Prophet among a group of Ansaris said: "I testify that I saw the Prophet say his prayers with his face turned toward the Ka'ba, so change your direction."⁴

Why this about-face? Behind this change in direction lies the genius of Islam as the most clever expression of Arab nationalism, one that was going to challenge world dynamics forever. When you think of it, Islam as a monotheistic initiative in seventh-century Arabia was almost condemned, given the georeligious structure of the region, to being nothing more than a subvariant of Judaism or Christianity, with, of course, a sprinkling of the ingredients of local idolatrous cults. What direction could Muhammad, who wanted to create something new, something specifically Arab, choose? He did not have many options, did he? The Ka'ba was the direction of the idolators. In AD 622 they had just chased him out of Mecca. Turn towards Jerusalem? That would be doing obeisance to the Jews and Christians. But at first glance the hostility of the Meccans made the Jews and Christians, "people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*), seem to him to be more logical allies, more ideologically harmonious. While Christianity had the magnanimous face, understanding but distant, of the legendary Negus of Ethiopia, who sheltered the first persecuted Meccans, the Jews, on the other hand, very numerous and influential in Medina, were dead set against him.⁵

The Jewish community used all its influence to undercut the Prophet by accusing him of being an impostor, by hindering him from claiming the Judeo-Christian heritage as the basis of his mission. There is an extensive literature, scattered in the Arab sources, about this struggle over knowledge between the Jews of Medina and Muhammad, who was convinced at the beginning that he would obtain their support against their common enemy,

polytheism. He only renounced Jerusalem in favor of the Ka'ba when he had despaired of the Jews:

When the Prophet came to Medina, where the dominant cults were those of the Christians and Jews, whose faith was directed toward Jerusalem, God ordered him also to turn in that direction for prayer, in order to avoid provoking them and to make them favorable to him Nevertheless, deep within himself, he wanted the direction of prayer to be toward the Ka'ba, the sanctuary which had also been the *qibla* of Abraham and Ishmael. He prayed every day to God to grant this wish.⁶

The orientalists all make a close study of this question, generally seeing it in terms of the international context in which Muhammad began his mission, and especially the opposing forces that faced each other in the struggle over religion and knowledge. We can see in the attitude of those who accused Muhammad of being a false prophet – an epileptic according to some, an hysteric according to others – the reflection of the Jews of Medina toward an Arab who had the audacity to appropriate for himself Judeo-Christian knowledge.⁷

If Muhammad seemed a more substantial threat to the Jews than to the Christians, it is partly a result of geographical proximity and thus to a conflict of interests. In Medina, power was shared between the two polytheistic tribes (the Aws and the Khazraj) who invited Muhammad to come to Medina and the Jewish community. One of the bases of the power of that community was the control of Judeo-Christian knowledge. So Muhammad, who was laying the groundwork for an Arab nationalist ideology, could only assert himself in one of two ways – either with the support of the Jewish community or by combatting it if it discredited and denigrated him. The remainder, especially the expulsion of the Jews and sometimes their physical liquidation, was the result of the implacable logic imposed by the war for knowledge, the only total war, as is shown today in the conflict between the West, which dominates the production of technological knowledge, and the Third World countries, who only consume it.

What the Prophet did was to "nationalize," to "Arabicize" the Judeo-Christian heritage, as if in our day there should emerge an Arab prophet who would claim Einstein, Marx, and Freud not only as ancestors of modern Arab Muslims, but as the heritage that only a Muslim society is capable of making bear fruit, the only one able to develop their scientific message.

The Jews saw the Prophet as an impostor who stole their prophets and "indigenized" them to his own advantage. It was in their interest to get rid of the Prophet for two reasons. Not only was he sapping the source of their prestige – access to the sacred, to Heaven, to the book revealed by God, to the prophets – but he was also using their own prophets, their own legends, their own knowledge, to constitute himself as a force that would dominate the world. The Prophet was naïve enough to believe that the Jewish community would see in him only an ally. It was only during the critical years – 5 to 8 of the Hejira, those years of military insecurity and economic crisis – that he decided to declare total war on them. What might Islam have become if the Jews had given their support to Muhammad? It is possible that it would never have seen the light of day, that it might have become a somewhat deviant Judaism, a rather specialized sect in the vast Mediterranean area which has already seen so many.

Nevertheless, we should remember that if the Prophet succeeded in his mission, it was because the Arab terrain was ripe for an ideological bouleversement. Arabia was experiencing a very serious ideological crisis which reflected a deep economic and social crisis, and which explained the foothold held by the Christians and Jews in the area. The Arabs admired them as communities that had obtained what they lacked: a sense of identity, a feeling of belonging to a superior civilization, the feeling of being a chosen people with whom God carried on a dialogue. This is the reason that in the Koran there is so much emphasis on the fact that the book revealed by God is Arab. The Arab world was in such a state of crisis that its people did not believe themselves worthy of having a prophet of their own lineage nor a God who would speak Arabic to them. Al-Tabari's commentary on verse 3 of sura 41, which states that the Koran is "a Lecture in Arabic for people who have knowledge," expresses

very well Islam's role as a response to a nationalist crisis, a crisis of self-confidence.⁸ The old tribal solidarities, which had functioned well up until now, were threatened by new economic ties, by commercial alliances. The breakdown in the economic and social structures was seen by many, just like today, as an intellectual malaise, a religious crisis, a quest for a God who would make it possible for the Arab tribes, who were in a state of complete disintegration, to make themselves a force in the world.

This was the situation that made Muhammad change his decision about the *qibla* – to turn away from Jerusalem and instead to pray in the direction of Mecca. Jerusalem had to be abandoned as a symbol; it represented a greater danger than Mecca. And this choice of the Ka'ba as the direction that organizes the sacred and structures space made Islam what it has become: both a religion that is embedded in the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition and a separate religion which poses itself as a rival power and contends for universal domination, while nevertheless distancing itself from the elitist Jewish message. Islam addresses itself to all. For Muhammad's mosque, unlike in other religions, is not a building, a construction, but a perspective. The mosque is everywhere: "The whole earth became my mosque."⁹ All a believer has to do to pray is to face the direction of Mecca (for North Africans it is east, the direction of the rising sun; for Indonesians and Chinese it is the opposite), and place in front of himself an object that symbolically represents the sacred shrine. The *qibla* makes the universe turn, with an Arab city as its center. Excluding women from the *qibla*, then, is excluding them from everything – from the sacred dimension of life, as from the nationalist dimension, which defines space as the field of Arab and Muslim ethnocentrism.

In Islamic space one can pray anywhere – in the street, in a passageway, in a garden, or on the battlefield. The Prophet, for example, used to plant his saber in front of himself and thus create his *qibla*. He could even, when traveling or on a military expedition, go through the motions of prayer.¹⁰ However, once a person has set up a symbolic *qibla*, he must avoid letting anything get in the way of him and that *qibla*, so as not to be distracted. Since the whole earth is a mosque, aligning woman with dogs and

asses, as does the Hadith of Abu Hurayra, and labeling her a disturbance, amounts to saying that there is a fundamental contradiction between her essence and that of the divine. By lumping her in with two familiar animals the author of the Hadith inevitably makes her a being who belongs to the animal kingdom. It is enough for a woman to appear in the field of vision for contact with the *qibla* – that is, the divine – to be disturbed. Like the dog and the ass, she destroys the symbolic relation with the divine by her presence. One has to interrupt one's prayer and begin again.

Arab civilization being a civilization of the written word, the only point of view we have on this question is that of Abu Hurayra. According to Ibn Marzuq, when someone invoked in front of 'A'isha the Hadith that said that the three causes of interruption of prayer were dogs, asses, and women, she answered them: "You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, lying on the bed between him and the *qibla*. And in order not to disturb him, I didn't move."¹¹ The believers used to come to 'A'isha for verification of what they had heard, confident of her judgement, not only because of her closeness to the Prophet, but because of her own abilities:

I have seen groups of the most eminent companions of the Prophet ask her questions concerning the *fara'id* [the daily duties of the Muslim, the rituals, etc.], and Ibn 'Ata said: "'A'isha was, among all the people, the one who had the most knowledge of *fiqh*, the one who was the most educated and, compared to those who surrounded her, the one whose judgement was the best."¹²

Despite her words of caution, the influence of Abu Hurayra has nevertheless infiltrated the most prestigious religious texts, among them the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari, who apparently did not always feel obliged to insert the corrections provided by 'A'isha. The subject of many of these Hadith is the "polluting" essence of femaleness.

To understand the importance for Islam of that aspect of femaleness, evoking disturbance and sullyng, we would do well

to look at the personality of Abu Hurayra, who, as it were, gave it legal force. Without wanting to play the role of psychoanalytical detective, I can say that the fate of Abu Hurayra and his ambivalence toward women are wrapped up in the story of his name. Abu Hurayra, meaning literally "Father of the Little Female Cat," had previously been called "Servant of the Sun" ('Abd al-Shams).¹³ The Prophet decided to change that name, which had a very strong sense of idolatry about it. "Servant of the Sun" was originally from Yemen, that part of Arabia where not only the sun, a female star in Arabic, was worshipped, but where women also ruled in public and private life. Yemen was the land of the Queen of Sheba, Balqis, that queen who fascinated King Solomon, who ruled over a happy kingdom, and who put her mark on Arab memory, since she appears in the Koran:

22. . . .[the hoopoe] said: I have found (a thing) that thou apprehendest not, and I come unto thee from Sheba with sure tidings.

23. Lo! I found a woman ruling over them, and she hath been given (abundance) of all things, and hers is a mighty throne.

24. I found her and her people worshipping the sun instead of Allah¹⁴

Abu Hurayra came from the Yemeni tribe of the Daws.¹⁵ At the age of 30 the man named Servant of the Sun was converted to Islam. The Prophet gave him the name 'Abd Allah (Servant of Allah) and nicknamed him Abu Hurayra (Father of the Little Female Cat) because he used to walk around with a little female cat that he adored.¹⁶ But Abu Hurayra was not happy with this nickname, for he did not like the trace of femininity in it: "Abu Hurayra said: 'Don't call me Abu Hurayra. The Prophet nicknamed me Abu Hurr [Father of the Male Cat], and the male is better than the female.'¹⁷ He had another reason to feel sensitive about this subject of femininity – he did not have a very masculine job. In a Medina that was in a state of full-blown economic development, where the Medinese, especially the Jews, made an art of agriculture, and the immigrant Meccans continued their

commercial activities and managed to combine them with military expeditions, Abu Hurayra preferred, according to his own comments, to be in the company of the Prophet. He served him and sometimes "helped out in the women's apartments."¹⁸ This fact might clear up the mystery about his hatred of women, and also of female cats, the two seeming to be strangely linked in his mind.

He had such a fixation about female cats and women that he recalled that the Prophet had pronounced a Hadith concerning the two creatures – and in which the female cat comes off much better than the woman. But 'A'isha contradicted him, a Companion recounted:

We were with 'A'isha, and Abu Hurayra was with us. 'A'isha said to him:

"Father of the Little Cat, is it you who said that you heard the Prophet declare that a woman went to hell because she starved a little female cat and didn't give it anything to drink?"

"I did hear the Prophet say that," responded Father of the Little Cat.

"A believer is too valuable in the eyes of God," retorted 'A'isha, "for Him to torture that person because of a cat . . . Father of the Little Cat, the next time you undertake to repeat the words of the Prophet, watch out what you recount."¹⁹

It is not surprising that Abu Hurayra attacked 'A'isha in return for that. She might be "The Mother of the Believers" and "The Lover of the Lover of God," but she contradicted him too often. One day he lost patience and defended himself against an attack by 'A'isha. When she said to him, "Abu Hurayra, you relate Hadith that you never heard," he replied sharply, "O Mother, all I did was collect Hadith, while you were too busy with kohl and your mirror."²⁰

One of the constant themes of conflict in Islam from the very beginning is what to do about menstrual periods and the sex act. Are periods the source of sullyng? 'A'isha and the other wives

of the Prophet never lost any opportunity to insist that the Prophet did not have the phobic attitude of pre-Islamic Arabia on that subject. Did the Prophet purify himself after making love during the holy month of Ramadan? "I heard Abu Hurayra recount that he whom the dawn finds sullied [*janaban*, referring to sullyng by the sex act] may not fast."²¹ Upon hearing this new law decreed by Abu Hurayra, the Companions hastened to the wives of the Prophet to reassure themselves about it: "They posed the question to Umm Salama and 'A'isha . . . They responded: 'The Prophet used to spend the night *janaban* without making any ritual of purification, and in the morning he fasted.'²² The Companions, greatly perplexed, returned to Abu Hurayra:

"Ah, so. They said that?" he responded.

"Yes, they said that," repeated the Companions, feeling more and more troubled, because Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. Abu Hurayra then confessed, under pressure, that he had not heard it directly from the Prophet, but from someone else. He reconsidered what he had said, and later it was learned that just before his death he completely retracted his words.²³

Abu Hurayra was not the only one to report Hadith about the purification ritual, and this was a real bone of contention between 'A'isha and the Companions. "Ibn 'Umar ordered women who were doing the purification ritual to undo their braids [before touching their hair with wet hands]." 'A'isha is supposed to have responded when someone reported to her the teaching that he was propounding: "That's strange . . . Why, when he was about it, didn't he order them to shave their heads? When I used to wash myself with the Prophet, we purified ourselves with the same bucket of water. I passed my wet hand over my braids three times, and I never undid them!"²⁴ 'A'isha insisted on these corrections because she was conscious of the implications of what was being said. Pre-Islamic Arabia regarded sexuality, and the menstruating woman in particular, as a source of pollution, as a pole of negative forces. This theory about pollution expressed a vision of femaleness that was conveyed through a whole system of

superstitions and beliefs that Muhammad wanted to condemn. He saw it as, on the one hand, the essence of the *jahiliyya* (the era of ignorance) and, on the other hand, the essence of the beliefs of the Jewish community of Medina.

The *fuqaha* who took part in the debate on the subject of pollution, recorded at length in the religious literature, came down on the side of 'A'isha. Their argument was that her version of the Hadith seemed to agree more with the attitude of the Prophet, who tried by all means to "struggle against superstition in all its forms."²⁵

This was not a matter that interested only the imams. The caliphs were also greatly concerned about it: "Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan asked Umm Habiba, the wife of the Prophet, if the Prophet – may God pray for him – had ever prayed in the garments in which he had made love. She said yes, he had, because he saw nothing bad in it."²⁶ Imam al-Nasa'i explains to us why he laid such stress on the subject of menstruation in his chapter on the purification ritual. The Prophet, he said, wanted to react against the phobic behavior of the Jewish population of Medina, who declared a woman who was having her period unclean: "He ordered them [the male believers who had asked him questions on this subject] to eat with their wives, drink with them, share their bed, and do everything with them that they wanted except copulate."²⁷

The books of *fiqh* devote whole chapters to the purification rituals that every Muslim must carry out five times a day before praying. It is undeniable that Islam has an attitude bordering on anxiety about bodily cleanliness, which induces in many people an almost neurotic strictness. Our religious education begins with attention focused on the body, its secretions, its fluids, its orifices, which the child must learn to constantly observe and control. The sex act imposes a more elaborate ritual for the grown man and woman, and after menstruating the woman must wash her entire body according to a precise ritual. Islam stresses the fact that sex and menstruation are really extraordinary (in the literal meaning of the word) events, but they do not make the woman a negative pole that "annihilates" in some way the presence of the divine and upsets its order. But apparently the Prophet's message,

15 centuries later, has still not been absorbed into customs throughout the Muslim world, if I judge by the occasions when I was refused admittance at the doors of mosques in Penang, Malaysia, in Baghdad, and in Kairwan.

According to the meticulous al-Nasa'i, Maymuna, one of the wives of the Prophet (he had nine at the time that concerns us here, the last years of his life in Medina), said: "It happened that the Prophet recited the Koran with his head on the knee of one of us while she was having her period. It also happened that one of us brought his prayer rug to the mosque and laid it down while she was having her period."²⁸ Already at the time that Imam al-Nasa'i was writing (he was born in year 214 or 215 of the Hejira, the ninth century AD), the scholars suspected that there was a message there that was disturbing the misogyny ingrained in the peoples of the Arab Mediterranean area, before and after the Prophet, and they made great efforts not to betray that very disturbing aspect of the Prophet's message. These *fuqaha*, who saw in misogyny the danger of betrayal of the Prophet, doubled their precautions and did a thorough investigation of the sex life of the Prophet by listening to the reports of his wives, the only credible sources on this subject. They accumulated details about his life at home as well as in the mosque. Ibn Sa'd devoted a chapter of his book to the layout of the Prophet's house. This chapter, as we shall soon see, is extremely important for the clarification of a key dimension of Islam: the total revolution it represented *vis-à-vis* the Judeo-Christian tradition and the pre-Islamic period with regard to women. However, very quickly the misogynistic trend reasserted itself among the *fuqaha* and gained the upper hand. We will see the resurgence in many Hadith of that superstitious fear of femaleness that the Prophet wanted to eradicate.

One can read among al-Bukhari's "authentic" Hadith the following one: "Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse."²⁹ Al-Bukhari did not include other versions of this Hadith, although the rule was to give one or more contradictory versions in order to show readers conflicting points of view, and thus to permit them to be sufficiently well informed to decide for themselves about practices that were the subject of dispute.

However, there is no trace in al-Bukhari of 'A'isha's refutation of this Hadith:

They told 'A'isha that Abu Hurayra was asserting that the Messenger of God said: "Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse." 'A'isha responded: "Abu Hurayra learned his lessons very badly. He came into our house when the Prophet was in the middle of a sentence. He only heard the end of it. What the Prophet said was: 'May Allah refute the Jews; they say three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse.'"³⁰

Not only did al-Bukhari not include this correction, but he treated the Hadith as if there was no question about it. He cited it three times, each time with a different transmission chain. This procedure generally strengthens a Hadith and gives the impression of consensus concerning it. No mention was made of the dispute between 'A'isha and Abu Hurayra on this subject. Worse yet, al-Bukhari followed this misogynistic Hadith with another along the same lines which reflected the same vision of femaleness as a pole of destruction and ill luck: "The Prophet said: 'I do not leave after me any cause of trouble more fatal to man than women.'"³¹ The source of this Hadith is 'Abdallah Ibn 'Umar (the son of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph), who was known for his rare asceticism and for nights interrupted by prayers and purifications.³² 'Abdallah was a source very highly valued by Bukhari. He was the author of another famous Hadith, in which he throws women into hell: "'Abdallah Ibn 'Umar said: 'The Prophet said: "I took a look at paradise, and I noted that the majority of the people there were poor people. I took a look at hell, and I noted that there women were the majority."'"³³

What conclusion must one draw from this? That even the authentic Hadith must be vigilantly examined with a magnifying glass? That is our right, Malik Ibn Anas tells us. Al-Bukhari, like all the *fuqaha*, began his work of collecting by asking for Allah's help and acknowledging that only He is infallible. It is our tradition to question everything and everybody, especially the *fuqaha* and imams. And it is more than ever necessary for us to

disinter our true tradition from the centuries of oblivion that have managed to obscure it. But we must also guard against falling into generalizations and saying that all the imams were and are misogynistic. That is not true today and was not true yesterday. The example of this is Imam Zarkashi, who, luckily for us, recorded in writing all of 'A'isha's objections.

Imam Zarkashi was of Turkish origin, but born in Egypt in the middle of the fourteenth century (actually in year 745 of the Hejira). Like all the scholars of his time, he traveled throughout the Muslim world in search of knowledge. He specialized in religious knowledge and left behind no less than 30 compendiums. Many of these are lost to modern researchers, and we know only their titles. Among those that have come down to us is a book devoted to 'A'isha's contribution to Islam, her contribution as a source of religious knowledge. The book begins as follows:

'A'isha is the Mother of the Believers She is the lover of the Messenger of God She lived with him for eight years and five months; she was 18 years old at the time of the death of the Prophet She lived to be 65 years old We are indebted to her for 1,210 Hadith.³⁴

And he explains:

This book is devoted to her particular contribution in this field, especially the points on which she disagreed with others, the points to which she supplied added information, the points on which she was in complete disagreement with the religious scholars of her time I have entitled this book *Collection of 'A'isha's Corrections to the Statements of the Companions* (*Al-'irada fi ma istadrakathu 'A'isha 'ala al-sahaba*).³⁵

This book remained in manuscript form until 1939. Al-Afghani discovered it while doing research for his biography of 'A'isha in the Al-Dahiriya Library of Damascus. Why did Imam Zarkashi, one of the greatest scholars of the Shafi'i school of his

time, undertake his work on 'A'isha? A work that, by all accounts, he must have considered extremely important, since he dedicated his book to the Judge of Judges (*qadi al-qudat*) – the equivalent of the Minister of Justice today, the supreme authority in religious matters in a Muslim city. Because, he says, “the Prophet recognized 'A'isha's importance to such an extent that he said: 'Draw a part of your religion from little *al-humayra*.'”³⁶ One of the Prophet's favorite pet names for 'A'isha was *al-humayra*, referring to her very white skin made radiant by a light sunburn, something rather rare in the Hijaz, the northern part of Arabia.³⁷

'A'isha disputed many of Abu Hurayra's Hadith and declared to whoever wanted to hear it: “He is not a good listener, and when he is asked a question, he gives wrong answers.”³⁸ 'A'isha could take the liberty of criticizing him because she had an excellent memory: “I never saw anyone who had so much knowledge about religion, poetry, and medicine as 'A'isha.”³⁹ Abu Hurayra knew how to rile her. “But who has heard about that from Abu al-Qasim [the Prophet's surname]?” she exclaimed when someone recounted to her another of Abu Hurayra's traditions, this time describing what the Prophet did after making love.⁴⁰

It is not wasted effort to us to tarry over the personality of Abu Hurayra, the author of Hadith that saturate the daily life of every modern Muslim woman. He has been the source of an enormous amount of commentary in the religious literature. But he was and still is the object of controversy, and there is far from being unanimity on him as a reliable source. The most recent book about him, jointly published by a Lebanese and an Iraqi firm, is a tribute written by one of his admirers who devotes not less than 500 pages to defending him. 'Abd al-Mun'im Salih al-'Ali gave his book a rather eloquent title: *In Defense of Abu Hurayra*.⁴¹ It was obviously a success since a new edition was published in 1983. The author begins by asserting that “the Zionists and their allies and supporters have found another weapon against Islam; it is to introduce doubt about the narrators of traditions . . . and especially about those who were the source of many Hadith.”⁴² This gives an idea of the intensity of the controversy surrounding

Abu Hurayra. What is certain is that Abu Hurayra, long before Zionism, was attacked by Companions of his own generation. He had a very dubious reputation from the beginning, and al-Bukhari was aware of it, since he reports that “people said that Abu Hurayra recounts too many Hadith.”⁴³ Abd al-Mun'im, to his credit, cites all the incidents in which he was strongly challenged, including by those other than 'A'isha. He assures us that 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the second orthodox caliph, did not say that “the worst liar among the *muhaddithun* [narrators of Hadith] is Abu Hurayra.”⁴⁴ He disputes the claim that 'Umar threatened to exile him, to send him back to his native Yemen, if he continued to recount Hadith.⁴⁵

'Umar, who enjoyed an unparalleled influence on the Prophet and the Muslim community of yesterday (and still does today) because of his prestige as a man of politics, his boldness in military matters, his strong personality, and his horror of lying, avoided recounting Hadith. He was terrified at the idea of not being accurate. For that reason, 'Umar was one of those Companions who preferred to rely on their own judgment rather than trust their memory, which they considered dangerously fallible.⁴⁶ He was very irritated by the facile manner in which Abu Hurayra reeled off Hadith: “'Umar al-Khattab,” we can read in al-'Asqalani's biography of him, “is supposed to have remarked as follows about Abu Hurayra: ‘We have many things to say, but we are afraid to say them, and that man there has no restraint.’”⁴⁷

For the pious Companion the fallibility of memory was an occasion for meditating on the fragility of existence in the face of the flowing river of time, which steals not only youth, but especially memory. 'Umar Ibn Hasin, another Companion who was conscious of the treacherousness of memory, said:

If I wanted to, I could recite traditions about the Prophet for two days without stopping. What keeps me from doing it is that I have seen some of the Companions of the Messenger of God who heard exactly what I myself heard, who saw what I saw, and those men recounted Hadith. Those traditions are not exactly what we heard. And I am afraid of hallucinating, as they hallucinate.⁴⁸

The Arabic word is *yushbah*, literally “to hallucinate,” that is, to see a reality that does not exist but that has the appearance of reality.

Abu Hurayra, on the contrary, for the three years that he spent in the company of the Prophet, would accomplish the *tour de force* of recalling 5,300 Hadith.⁴⁹ Al-Bukhari listed 800 experts who cited him as their source.⁵⁰ Here is how Abu Hurayra explains his excellent memory: “I said to the Prophet: ‘I listen attentively, I take in many of your ideas, but I forget many.’”⁵¹ Then the Prophet is supposed to have told him to spread out his cloak while he was speaking to him, and afterwards to pick it up at the end of the session. “And this is the reason that I no longer forgot anything.”⁵² Telling the story of the cloak was not the best way to be convincing in a religion like Islam, which has a horror of mysteries of all sorts, where Muhammad resisted the pressure of his contemporaries to perform miracles and magical acts, and where the *fuqaha* became well versed from very early on in an exaggerated pragmatism.

Abu Hurayra also gave another explanation that was a bit more realistic than the first. The other Companions, he said, put their energy into business matters and spent their time in the bazaars drawing up contracts and increasing their fortunes, while he had nothing else to do but follow the Prophet everywhere.⁵³ ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab, who was well known for his physical vigor and who awoke the city every day to say the dawn prayer, disliked lazy people who loafed around without any definite occupation. He summoned Abu Hurayra on one occasion to offer him a job. To his great surprise, Abu Hurayra declined the offer. ‘Umar, who did not consider such things a joking matter, said to him:

“You refuse to work? Better people than you have begged for work.”

“Who are those people who are better than me?” inquired Abu Hurayra.

“Joseph, the son of Jacob, for example,” said ‘Umar to put an end to a conversation that was getting out of hand.

“He,” said Abu Hurayra flippantly, “was a prophet, the son

of a prophet, and I am Abu Hurayra, son of Umayma [his mother].”⁵⁴

With this anecdote we come back to our point of departure, the relationship of “Father of the Little Female Cat” to femaleness, and to the very mysterious and dangerous link between the sacred and women. All the monotheistic religions are shot through by the conflict between the divine and the feminine, but none more so than Islam, which has opted for the occultation of the feminine, at least symbolically, by trying to veil it, to hide it, to mask it. Islam as sexual practice unfolds with a very special theatricality since it is acted out in a scene where the *hijab* (veil) occupies a central position. This almost phobic attitude toward women is all the more surprising since we have seen that the Prophet has encouraged his adherents to renounce it as representative of the *jahiliyya* and its superstitions. This leads me to ask: Is it possible that Islam’s message had only a limited and superficial effect on deeply superstitious seventh-century Arabs who failed to integrate its novel approaches to the world and to women? Is it possible that the *hijab*, the attempt to veil women, that is claimed today to be basic to Muslim identity, is nothing but the expression of the persistence of the pre-Islamic mentality, the *jahiliyya* mentality that Islam was supposed to annihilate?

What does the *hijab* really represent in the early Muslim context? What does the word signify? What are its logic and justification? When was it inaugurated, for whom, and why?