The masjid is for men: Competing voices in the debate about Australian Muslim women's access to mosques

Muslims in Australia, as in other English-speaking and European nations, live as a religious minority where community infrastructure is still being built, intensifying the role of the local mosque as the centre of Muslim religious and community life. Despite evidence that the spatial *sunnah* of the Prophet gave women full access to the *masjid*, many Australian mosques practice segregation and varying levels of exclusion, which disenfranchises the female half of the community. Segregation and exclusion are defended through use of the fear of sexual *fitnah* trope that arose from patriarchal interpretations of, and interpolations into, Islamic source texts. Nevertheless, fundamentalist and contextualist voices have defended the right of women to fully access mosques. Contextualists in particular base this on the need to provide fresh *fiqh* interpretations appropriate to the exigencies of modern life, pointing out that many other traditional rulings from the *fiqh* of mosques have been abandoned or modified in the Australian context.

Keywords: masjid, Muslim women, Australian mosques, Muslim minorities, sexual fitnah, fundamentalism, traditionalism, contextualism, segregation

Introduction

The issue of women's limited access to *masajid* 'mosques' (sing. *masjid*) has generated controversy in many places around the world, including in Australia. A commonly cited reason for excluding women from accessing mosques (either partially or fully) is a fear of sexual *fitnah*. That is, female intrusion into male space is seen as potentially sexually enticing. However, there is much evidence to demonstrate that historically, the Prophet granted women full access to his mosque and other holy Islamic spaces. Thus, an inconsistency exists between what Muslim architect and academic Akel Ismail Kahera (2002, 44) calls the Prophet's 'spatial *sunnah*' and the attitudes many Muslims hold towards women's access to mosques.

In late 2008, Jamila Hussain's (2008) paper on gender discrimination in Australian mosques was picked up and reported in the local media. In response, the Mufti of Australia, Sheikh Fehmi Naji el-Imam, promised to address the question of segregation limiting women from fully accessing Australia's mosques. Immediately there was a

strong response from conservative members of the Muslim community who articulated a fear of women's sexualised intrusion into the main prayer space. Sydney personality Keysar Trad wrote in the online Australian magazine *Crikey* on November 24, 2008: 'if women did not have [their own] private space, one could imagine the circle of male worshippers may multiply (and new converts joining en masse) to allow those who like to pack their person tightly against women in crowded places to attend in an attempt to create a different type of "worship".'

This paper analyses the arguments of competing voices debating women's mosque access, and challenges segregation in the *masjid*, arguing that women's exclusion is the result of patriarchal interpolations that have obscured the egalitarian nature of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung and the Prophetic *sunnah*.

Competing voices

Abdullah Saeed (2007) has described a number of different trends in how Muslims interpret and understand their religion, particular in the context of responding to modernity. These are: legalist traditionalists; theological puritans; militant extremists; political Islamists; secular liberals; cultural nominalists; classical modernists; and progressive *ijtihadi*s. In more detail: legalist traditionalists are "primarily concerned with maintenance of the law as conceptualized in the classical schools" (397). They reject the need to reform or reinterpret Islamic law, and instead call for the application of pre-modern interpretations as developed in the classical (Sunni) Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali and (Shi'i) Ja'fari schools. Theological puritans emphasise a strict monotheistic theology. They reject what they consider to be un-Islamic innovation, including Shi'ism and Sufism, as well as adherence to traditional schools of jurisprudence. Militant

extremists focus on and react to what they perceive as the subjugation of Muslims at the hands of Western neo-colonialists, most specifically the United States of America. They emphasise militaristic jihad and permit the use of terror, because of the power and resource differential between themselves and the states and coalitions they fight. Political Islamists hold that the establishment of an Islamic state with full implementation of their conception of shari'ah law, will counter the decline of Muslim societies that has occurred, particularly since colonisation of much of the Muslim world. Most political Islamists hope to achieve this through proselytising and societal change. They are contrasted by secular liberals who eschew the politicisation of religion and call for the separation of mosque and state. Cultural nominalists are those Muslims whose link with Islam is purely through cultural heritage and not through the meaningful practice of Islam as a religion. Classical modernists seek reform of Islamic law, through a revival of the use of *ijtihad* which is the application of mental exertion in independent systematic reasoning to derive an answer to a unique question of religious law. They attempt to harmonise rationality and religious faith. This group has spawned the birth of progressive *ijtihadi*s, who call for a major overhaul of the methodologies of interpreting Islam and Islamic law. They focus particularly on the arena of human rights, justice and pluralism.

There is a missing group in Saeed's classification: those whose contact with and expression of Islam comes through Islamic mysticism known as Sufism. This group includes those raised in Muslim families as well as Western converts who may or may not incorporate other aspects of Islamic practice into their experience. There are traditional Sufi groups that adhere to Islamic sacred law, but interpret religion through the lens of developing Islamic spirituality, particularly through specific rituals and practices

(prayer, fasting, meditation, music, dance etc.). Alternatively there are new Sufi groups that have modified or even entirely abandoned most recognisable Islamic practices, although retaining the name Sufi. Groups such as the Sufi Order International have 'repackaged' Sufism for Westerners.

I have also reduced Saeed's taxonomy to four over-arching orientations. These are: secularist, fundamentalist, traditionalist and contextualist. In more detail: secularists are Muslims who argue for the separation of religion and state, and the privatisation of religion. They see no role for religious institutions in the structures of society, particularly as they pertain to governance and legislation. We can include within this group 'cultural' Muslims whose affiliation with Islam is primarily through cultural connection to Muslim ancestors, families and friends rather than active religious belief and practice. They are Muslims not because they are religious, but because they have an ancestral connection to Muslim-majority cultures and nationalities.

Traditionalists are Muslims who feel that the traditional, pre-modern interpretations of theology and jurisprudence should be the foundation upon which the state and society rests. Because it is impossible to fully avoid the modern experience, they are perhaps better described as neo-traditionalists. They look to the past with a sense of melancholy, and wish to re-establish the link that has been ruptured by modernity, between themselves and their societies, and the Prophet and the generations of pre-modern Islamic scholars who developed the normative, orthodox interpretations of Islam and its sacred law.

Fundamentalists, and I use the term with some caution, are Muslims who, like the traditionalists, are at odds with the modern world, but feel that the present pitiable state of

Muslims is caused partly by the stagnation of the traditional pre-modern Islamic institutions, the incorporation of inauthentic innovations (both historical and modern) into the interpretations of Islam, and the consequent inability of Muslims to withstand the onslaught of Westernisation. Although they are fully rooted in the modern world, their solution is to seek a return to the fundamentals of Islam: the original teachings of the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims. That they differ in what these fundamentals are, is not of interest here, except to note that fundamentalists share a number of characteristics including a deep distrust and fear of the modern project.

Lastly, a group I call contextualists, are those Muslims who are negotiating the path between faithfulness to religious belief, and the reality of living in modern societies. This last group includes the modernists that arose out of al-Azhar under the leadership of Muhammad 'Abduh, and progressive Muslims whose interpretations of Islam are influenced by the modern, post-Enlightenment milieu, having absorbed (and thus are reading into their interpretation of Islam) philosophies and concepts of individual autonomy, human rights, egalitarianism, separation of religion and state, feminism and so on. It is in this group I place my own approach to understanding religion, and thus this paper approaches the topic of women's access to mosques from a contextualist orientation.

It should be noted, these are not hard and fast boundaries, and the different orientations may borrow emphases and methods of other orientations. For example, both contextualists and fundamentalists may call for a return to the original precedents set by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, however their methodology for understanding the *sunnah* may be different. Contextualists may borrow the scholarly

interpretative techniques of the traditionalists, but reject *taqlid*, that is, replicating the

decisions of pre-modern scholars without regard to the differing conditions of time and

place. In Muslim majority societies, these trends are causing a deep struggle as to who

may speak for Islam and for Muslims. These trends are also at work in European and

English-speaking countries such as Australia, although on a much smaller scale, and with

different dynamics due to the nature of Muslims as a minority group of recent immigrants

and their children, within a Christian-majority nation.

That different Muslims take different approaches to the interpretation of their

religion is a point noted by Kahera (2002), in regard to mosques in the American

community. He writes:

> The right of communal gathering is a critical aspect of religious practice; it has been a debate
> among Muslim jurists in the past, and it remains a contested issue today. In the medieval
> Muslim world, the public domain of a town, country, village or city admitted the
> development of a legal discourse that was cognizant of the use of public space with regard to
> age, sex, and gender but gave preference to men. This will come as a surprise: many
> contemporary Muslim jurists share the same medieval views. Therefore, they have not
> thought about the public domain with respect to the American community, or in an analytical
> manner with respect to time, place, and the conditions of life in urban America. It is for this
> reason that controversy prevails between a distorted, medieval view that women should pray
> at home and a judicious view that women should have equal access to the public domain
> (124).

Definition of terms

For the purposes of this paper, I give specific meanings to the terms 'segregation',

'integration' and 'mixed prayers'. This is important because in the debate about women's

access, advocates of different positions have at times misunderstood their opponents

because of ambiguous terminology.

'Segregation' refers to the separation of male and female space in mosques. Men

have access to the main space for prayer, whereas women are confined to praying behind

barriers that obstruct their view of the imam, and/or prevent the male worshippers from

seeing them. These can be permanent barriers such as walls or balconies, or can be temporary such as opaque curtains, removable screens and the like. 'Integration' refers to the inclusion of women in the main prayer space of the mosques. Women still pray in their own rows separate from the men, however they are not excluded from the main prayer space, nor is their view of the imam obstructed, or the men obstructed from viewing them. 'Mixed prayers' refers to men and women physically praying together in the same rows, shoulder to shoulder, with no separation or segregation at all.

The distinction between integration and mixed prayers is important, because a common fear of conservative Muslims is the misperception that the call for ending segregation is also one to institute mixed prayer. However, arguing against the segregation of women does not automatically confer a position on whether there should be integration or mixed prayers. There have been a small number of people in Western countries calling for establishing mixed prayers, including the possibility of female imamate, however dealing with this call is outside the scope of the present paper.

Scholarly diversity on women's access to mosques

In Islamic sacred law, there is no scholarly consensus on either excluding women from the mosque entirely, or on segregating men and women (as defined above). Different Muslim scholars have taken different positions that appear to be largely influenced by cultural considerations, and at times, a reactionary stance to the fear of the innovation of Westernisation. An exclusionary position is taken by scholars at the traditionalist Sunnipath organisation, which offers online education in aspects of religious belief and practice. An example is the *fatwa* 'legal answer to a question of religious law' (pl. *fatawa*) given by Lebanese convert Shaykh Gibril Haddad.

> The majority of the Ulema if not their Consensus agree—and Allah knows best—that if women go to mosques—for obligatory prayers or otherwise—then there should be (1) a separate entrance for them and (2) space for prayer and facilities they can use in isolation from mixing with and view by the men. And Allah knows best. … The curtain is not against the Sunna but on the contrary is a way to prevent fitna, which prevention is fard and a pre-requisite of obligatory and recommended practices. There is a basic principle that 'the prevention of evil take (sic) precedence over the obtainment of good.' Such prevention, in other words, applies before everything.
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> In view of this, the Prophet said that the best place for a woman's Salat is in the privacy of her house, and in another narration: in the privacy of her room. If something approaching the function and purposes of this private space can be reduplicated in the mosque, it should be welcome as something close to Wajib, not fought.
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> So the curtain should be accepted, allowing men and women to pray on alternate sides if space does not allow front rows for men and back rows for women, which is a better arrangement. Together with this there should be separate facilities and, if possible, separate entrances.

Haddad acknowledges there was no segregation in the Prophet's mosque, however he argues the desirability of preventing social intercourse between men and women is a good *bid'ah* 'innovation'.

An example of a pro-integration *fatwa* is that given by Muzammil Siddiqi (2007), an American imam and chairman of the Fiqh Council of North America:

> Muslims should not deliberately and for no reason bifurcate their congregation in their Masajid. If there is a concern that the lines of men and women will mix inside the Masajid, then there is no harm in putting a lower barrier, only to demarcate the separate area for women. But women should not be put in a totally separate room in the Masajid unless there is a shortage of space and no other proper arrangement can be done for them.

Siddiqi, whom we might tentatively call a contextualist, based on the content of his other *fatawa* and his early education at the modernist Aligarh Muslim University, criticises the practice of putting women in separate rooms from the imam and male worshippers on the basis that it breaks the continuity of the *jama'ah* 'congregation'. Indeed, in some traditional interpretations sacred law, discontinuity in the congregation invalidates the congregational validity of the worshipper's prayer for the one who is unable to see the imam or the rows in front of him or her. Another pro-integration example is the *fatwa* of Abu Bara'a Ghassan Abdul Fattah al-Baraqawi (n.d.). In response to the question of

whether it is a *bid'ah* to have a partition separating men and women in the mosque, al-

Baraqawi replied:

> It is neither a must nor a Sunnah to erect a partition between the rows of men and women in the Masjid because the women used to pray in (Jamaa'ah) congregation in the Masjid at the time of the Prophet (SAAW), and he did not erect a wall or anything else between them, nor was this the practice of the companions.

He quotes the position taken in a *fatwa* given by fundamentalist (in this case Wahhabi-

Salafi) scholars who saw the construction of barriers in mosques segregating men and

women as an un-Islamic word *bid'ah*.

As can be seen from this sample of modern *fatawa,* there is no scholarly

unanimity on the question of women's access to mosques. These *fatawa* are reflective of

the different orientations (traditionalist, fundamentalist and contextualist) taken by

different Muslim scholars. I have not addressed any secularist arguments here, as by

definition they do not enter into the debate with a religious interpretation.

Historical evidence on the issue of women's access

There is much evidence that the female companions around the Prophet Muhammad had

full access to the Ka'bah in Makkah and the Prophet's mosque in Madinah. The most

obvious example of this is the occasion of revelation given for the Qur'anic *ayah* 15:24 in

al-Wahidi's *Asbab al-nuzul* (2008). Ibn 'Abbas related:

> A beautiful woman used to pray behind the Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, but she used to stand in prayer behind all the women present. Some people used to proceed to the first row so as not to see her. Others, on the other hand, used to pray in the last row on purpose, such that, upon bowing, they caught a glimpse behind them [trying to see that woman]. And so, this verse was revealed: 'And verily We know the eager among you and verily We know the laggards'.

Here is an incident where it can be argued *fitnah* due to a woman's presence actually

occurred, and yet the Divine Legislator's response was not to instruct the Prophet to erect

a barrier or exclude the female Companions from the mosque, but to inform the impious

men that God is aware of their actions and motivations. Another important incident demonstrating women's full access to the masjid was when a woman publicly contradicted the Caliph 'Umar during a sermon in which he attempted to limit the amount of *mahr* 'bridal payment' that could be offered to women by prospective husbands. Ibn Kathir (2003) tells the story that whilst standing on the pulpit of the Prophet's mosque, 'Umar instructed that men adhere to a maximum limit on the *mahr*. When he descended, an unnamed woman of the Quraysh argued with him that no maximum limit could be placed, by quoting a Qur'anic verse (4:20). 'Umar then re-ascended the pulpit and recanted his instruction. It is worth pointing out the potential implications of this event. Apart from demonstrating that even in the caliphate of 'Umar, women still had access to the *masjid*, this event shows women's presence prevented a potential limitation on their rights being imposed by a male authority figure. Had women not been able to access the mosque, and publicly contradict even the caliph, their ability to challenge rulings and interpretations injurious to their favour would be severely impeded. We also have some evidence that women from the succeeding generations also had access to the mosque. Sulami's (1999) biography of female Sufis includes a number of stories demonstrating women's agency. Sulami included women in his biography noted for their important roles as preachers, Qur'an reciters, and scholars, not just of other women but of men as well. But the clearest evidence of women's access to the *masjid*, is in his biography of Maymuna, the sister of Ibrahim al-Khawwas. She is reported as having said: 'I lost respect for my husband Hamid after I saw him entering the mosque and sitting down without performing the prayer of respect for the mosque' (216). It seems this event caused her to divorce her husband, after which she went to live with her half-brother

Ibrahim al-Khawwas. Germane to the present paper, she would have been unable to

personally note her husband's disrespect for the mosque and the *sunnah*, had she been

excluded or segregated away from the men. The question then must be asked: Why has

segregation and exclusion been implemented in many different Muslim cultures both

medieval and modern?

The interpolation of patriarchy

Both Nevin Reda (2004) and Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001) discuss this question in the

context of misogynistic and patriarchal views being cemented through hadith generation

in the centuries following the Prophet's passing. A similar approach to understanding

hadith reflecting the socio-religious views of later Muslims (although not dealing

specifically with women and mosques) appears in Fazlur Rahman's (2000) research as

well. These follow on from Orientalist scholar G.H.A. Juynboll (1996) who used the

issue of anti-women hadith to develop a methodology for identifying the post-prophetic

originators of hadith. Juynboll used Joseph Schacht's 'common-link' theory to question

anti-women hadith, a technique of hadith criticism that has the following steps:

1) All hadith with similar texts are gathered together.
2) Their *isnad* 'chains of transmission' are traced and compared to discover the 'common link' (that personality before which there was limited or singular transmission, and after whom there was a plethora of transmitting authorities.
3) Examination of other hadith of the 'common link' to discover his/her areas of concern: whether the common link narrated many hadith that had similar 'tone' (for example, an anti-women bias).

When Juynboll applied this to some anti-women hadith (including the ones about women

being deficient in intelligence and the majority of the inhabitants of hell) he found a

common link at the third generation. Before this, the various hadith in question passed

through *ahad* 'singular narrator' chains only. Given the personalities included in these

ahad chains, who themselves were known to have many students, Juynboll argued it was extremely unlikely that these well-known authorities would only pass that particular tradition to one of their students only. The implication being, that the common link *entered* the tradition into the body of literature through a respected *ahad* chain. Thus, the anti-women hadith are reflective of third century attitudes to women, and are not authentic statements of the Prophet. As Khaled (2001, 246–7) writes:

> I believe that as to the overwhelming majority of the traditions dealing with the role of women in society, the role of the Prophet in the authorial enterprise is minimal. If one adopts the faith-based conviction that the Prophet was not sent by God to affirm and legitimate conservative and oppressive power structures, traditions that affirm the hegemony of patriarchy would have to pass the strictest level of scrutiny. However, applying this level of scrutiny to these traditions would reveal that there were too many patriarchal vested interests circulating, advocating, and embellishing these types of reports. Consequently, one would have to conclude that the voice of the Prophet in the authorial enterprise behind these traditions is hopelessly drowned and muted.

Abou El Fadl notes a tension in the source texts reflective of the interpolation of a patriarchal paradigm on hadith materials at a time when the memory of women's involvement in the Prophet's mosque was still too strong to be eliminated entirely. This explains the contradiction inherent in the hadith canon with some traditions having the Prophet recommend that women pray in the most secluded parts of their homes, with others having him affirm the right of women to pray in the mosque. Abou El Fadl notes:

> These reports [the ones asserting it is better for women to pray secluded in their homes] coexist with other traditions that assert that the mosque of the Prophet was full of rows of women lining up for prayers. … The prayers of the men who prayed behind the women were considered valid. These traditions also note that after completing his prayers the Prophet would delay a bit, presumably, to give the last rows an opportunity to leave the mosque. Furthermore, there are reports that some women would stay for long periods and even sleep in the mosque. Importantly, a large number of reports state that the Prophet wanted all women to join the community in *'Id* prayers, and that he urged even menstruating women to listen to the sermon and join in the celebrations. When some women complained that they might not have a garb to wear, the Prophet advised those women who have two garbs to lend one to a woman without. Interestingly, the early jurist Malik b. Anas (d.179/796) held that it is preferable for a woman to perform *i'tikaf* [retreat] prayers in the mosque and not in her home (242).

Reda (2004) on the other hand, side-steps the question of hadith authenticity. Whether or not the Prophet ever literally spoke the words of the hadith texts is not as relevant as the weight these hadith have played in the interpretation of women's access. That is, it doesn't matter so much that the Prophet may never have spoken this or that phrase recorded in the traditions, Muslims legislate on the basis he did, and therefore the effect is the same as if he had spoken the very words. She looks at two periods important in setting precedents for women's access and traces the introduction of segregation. The first period is that of the Prophet and his immediate successor Abu Bakr. In this period, women had full access to the mosque, which is confirmed in her analysis of Qur'anic *ayat*, such as 'Who is more unjust than one who prevents [believers] from celebrating God's name in his mosques' (2:114); 'The male believers and the female believers are each others' allies. They … establish prayers' (9:71); 'O Mary! Humble yourself before your Lord, prostrate yourself, and bow down *ma'a al-raki'in* "with those who bow down",' (3:43); and 'whenever Zakariya entered the *mihrab* "mosque sanctuary" to (see) her [Mary], he found with her food' (3:37). Reda writes: 'In the material as well as the textual sources dating to Islam's "ideal" period, there appears to be no indication of gender apartheid; rather, evidence points to the conclusion that women had full access to the mosque' (86).

The second period beginning with the reign of 'Umar until the canonisation of hadith texts is when segregation was introduced. It is in this period that three trends can be ascertained in the hadith sources: 'The first trend,' Reda argues 'attempted to institute gender apartheid and legitimize the practice through select prophetic traditions. The second trend strongly opposed gender segregation on the grounds that it was not the

Prophet's practice. The third trend was an attempt to keep women from mosques altogether' (Reda 2004, 94). Interestingly, Kahera (2002) references the medieval jurist Ibn Hazm locating the exclusion of women from mosques in the rulings of Abu Hanifa and Malik.

Reda's three trends are found existing in Muslim discourse today. Given the lack of consensus on the issue of exclusion or seclusion, as a contextualist I argue that a locally relevant *fiqh* of mosques should be based not only on the Prophet's original spatial *sunnah*, but also on the unique needs of Muslims living as minorities in English-speaking and European countries in the twenty-first century.

Do Australian Muslims follow the *fiqh* of mosques?

In answer to those traditionalists who argue Muslims should simply implement the decisions of pre-modern scholars in either excluding women from mosques, or observing strictly segregated space because of the need to implement *taqlid* of pre-modern traditional Islam, it is worth pointing out that other rulings in the traditional *fiqh* of the mosque have been abandoned due to the unique exigencies of modern Australian life. For example, pre-modern jurists gave rulings on the number of adult male individuals needed to constitute a valid *jama'a* for Friday prayers, based on the number of Muslim homes within a locale, i.e. for Malikis it was between thirty and fifty permanent male residents. Yet as Kahera (2002, 127–8) notes that in the American context, another English-speaking, Christian-majority country:

> The congregational rule, which limits the number of male worshippers, does not apply, since the basis and the conditions on which it was originally instituted were governed by a particular type of habitat. That type of habitat, that is, contiguous dwellings whose occupants are adherents of the faith and are all male heads of households, does not exist in urban or rural America.

Nor does it exist in Australia. Other instances of the abandoned *fiqh* of mosques, are in the rulings of where *masajid* may be established; the importance of men's attendance at *masjid* for the daily obligatory prayers; what facilities may be built above and below the areas designated as the space of the *masjid* and the necessity of praying the Friday congregational prayers in the *jam'i masjid*, the largest central mosque of the locality in which a Muslim man lives. Unlike in pre-modern societies, the vast majority of mosques in Western countries like Australia are built by atomised groupings of Muslims, without regard for the classical rulings of mosque establishment. Similar to the situation in Australia and other English-speaking countries, Lotfi (2001, 240) notes:

> Mosques in the USA are not government supported; they are owned by associations or by individuals and are often set up in leased space. Given the high property rates in most urban centers, where the majority of Muslims can be found, most communities cannot afford to build mosques from the ground up, and the overwhelming majority of mosques in the USA are storefront mosques. Most of the early mosques were established in converted commercial or residential buildings. In a few cases mosques have been established in former churches, movie theaters or fire stations, a practise that has endured to this day. The storefront mosque is a non-pedigreed anonymous structure belonging to the informal sector.

In Australia, Muslim men fortunate to get an hour off work to attend Friday prayers, are happy to get to the closest mosque or *musalla* 'non-permanent place of prayer', whether it is small or large; most men do not attend the mosque for the five daily obligatory prayers; places are designated as *masajid* even if they are not irreversibly dedicated to the worship of God and/or they have proscribed facilities built above or below the prayer hall; and the rulings of the *jam'i masjid* simply aren't applied. The obvious reason for this is that the context of the twenty-first century Australian environment is very different from the context in which pre-modern jurists were giving their rulings. It is inconsistent to abandon one set of *fiqh* rulings due to the differences of time and place in modern life, but enforce pre-modern rulings without consideration of those very differences, simply because they have to do with women. Thus, I argue that

whilst we should not completely abandon the scholarly heritage of our Muslim ancestors, there is clearly a strong need for contextual *fiqh* interpretations that take into account the needs of Australian Muslim women today.

The need for contextual fiqh

Reda (2004) argues it is through returning to interpretation of Qur'anic *ayat* that the rehabilitation of women's full access to the mosque might occur. Along these lines, we might take the advice of Kahera (2002) who points out that the only Qur'anic stipulations for access to the mosque are: a) believers are to perform regular prayers, and b) anyone who enters the mosque space should be ritually clean and dressed appropriately. Neither of these stipulations involves asserting male primacy.

In 2004, I conducted a small-scale qualitative study of Muslim female converts and mosque access (Author 2004). Even though I sought out self-identified religious Muslims, women who had converted to Islam and considered themselves to be religious, observing the various rituals required by the religion, none of the converts were regular attendees of any mosque at the time of my survey. For most, there had come a point in their lives where they felt unwelcome at the mosque; their personal understanding of Islam differed from that held by other Muslims at the mosque; or it became difficult to attend, and consequently they stopped going to the mosque. This was partly due to cultural differences, with Australian mosques being ethnicised, and partly due to sexism encountered by the women, the majority of whom came from ancestral cultures in which gender segregation is not practiced. Through the course of the interviews I conducted with female converts, it became clear that they desire much more from mosques than what is presently offered, and that the lack of fulfilment of these 'wants' negatively

affects their experiences of adopting and maintaining Islam as their faith of choice. I

suggest this shifts their 'wants' into the realm of 'needs'.

Despite the prevalence of segregation and varying levels of exclusion, it is

possible for women to at least partially access many of Australia's mosques, and just over

ten percent of Muslim women surveyed in 2007 and 2008 indicated they attend the

mosque weekly for Friday prayers.[1] This was in comparison to thirty percent of Muslim

men who went to Friday prayers weekly. A further nine percent of women attended

Friday prayers at least monthly, in comparison with another five percent of men. Thus, a

significant proportion of women attend the mosque, despite gender segregation and the

disproportionate facilities and resources accorded to them. However, that convert women

disenchanted with the lack of access to mosques have responded by walking away,

ironically confirms the perception that full access to mosques is not an important issue

among Muslim women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the different orientations existing among religious Muslims (traditionalist,

fundamentalist and contextualist) tussle over who is the authoritative voice of Islam and

Muslims. The danger is that with marginalisation of the Muslim community in places

where Muslims live as minorities, through reaction to global crisis events involving

Muslims, dog-whistle politics and a rise in xenophobia and Islamophobia, the mosque is

one of the few spaces that theoretically might be safe (physically and mentally) for

Muslim women to congregate and confirm their Islamic identities. Significant

percentages of Australian Muslim women enter the public space on a regular basis

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1. Details of the survey have been removed to preserve anonymity for peer review.

through employment, education, consumer activities and so on, so much that true segregation and privatisation of women (in the sense of their secluding themselves in their houses, and only emerging for urgent needs) is very rare. It is ludicrous to suggest that Muslim women should enter into non-religious, non-Islamic Australian public life in every way, but be excluded from the religious space that is the mosque. It is my contention that re-asserting women's full and integrated access to the mosque upholds the spatial *sunnah* of the Prophet and is an important need for Muslim women, particularly those living as minorities in English-speaking and European countries where Muslim community infrastructure is still being built and there are precious few avenues for Muslims to learn their religion, nurture their faith, network with other Muslims and develop community wellbeing.

Notes
Data from 600 questionnaires returned from Muslim men and women living in New South Wales and Victoria as part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project *Muslim Voices: Hopes and Aspirations of Australian Muslims* headed by Professor Gary D. Bouma and Associate Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, and with funding and support from the Australian Multicultural Foundation, the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). A second related project gathering data in Sydney using the same questionnaire was funded by DIAC.

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