

RECONNECTING WITH OUR SCHOLARS UPON THE PLAIN OF *TAQWA*

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وَإِذَا أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى الْإِنْسَانِ أَعْرَضَ وَنَأَى بِجَانِبِهِ
وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ كَانَ يَئُوسًا ﴿٨٣﴾

*When We bestow Our favors unto man
he turns away and becomes remote.
But when evil befalls he gives himself up to despair.
Qur'an 17:83*

Among the many thousands of spiritual disciples of Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), a large number of them were women, but he would only speak to them from behind a screen. That was in colonial India. In post-Ottoman Turkey, the Naqshbandi sheikh Hajji Baba (d. 1991) also took measures to be formal and conservative with his many women murids. He believed that without doing so, “even a sheikh could be expelled from the Divine Presence.”ⁱ More contemporary to us, the Shadhili sheikh Nuh Keller will not meet with women in his zawiya in Jordan unless they don the face-veil (*niqab*) and other people are present nearby in the same setting. Sheikh Husain Abdul Sattar of Chicago for many years refused to take female disciples at all, and now does so but with the permission of her *mahram*ⁱⁱ. These kinds of measures are seen as commendable by certain Muslims of a traditional mindset. But for a number of Muslims in America, setting up such restrictions between male scholars of religion and female students of knowledge is seen as an act of placing barriers between women and their chance at religious advancement.



In order to understand why some American Muslims would see the examples mentioned above in a negative light, I will first discuss some intellectual developments that affect the practice of Islam in America today. I will then argue that these developments constitute a shift away from the centrally important concept of *taqwa*, or Godfearingness. The final portion, and primary goal, of this essay, is to highlight this intellectual shift away from *taqwa* toward a liberal Islam as a means of explaining the current spiritual crisis facing the American Muslim community regarding its religious scholars.

The Effect of Liberalism³ on American Islam

Definitions of liberalism are debated, but it is generally acknowledged that some time in the 17th century there began to develop in Europe a system of thought that placed the individual at the center of human existence. The God-centered morality of Christianity and the Greek value of self-realization were replaced by an individualism that emphasized rights rather than duties and placed a central emphasis on freedom. As time progressed, freedom or the autonomy of the individual became the central goal of liberal society. And as liberalism developed and spread across the Western world, it became the dominant paradigm (in a sense, the basic *'aqida*) of industrialized Western society, such that the "supreme end of every individual" no longer was salvation, pleasing God, or self-improvement.⁴ Instead, it became freedom itself. The highest aim of human beings was now "to assert themselves in the world as the individuals they are."⁵ Due to its pervasive influence, a critical study of liberalism would require a volumes-long assessment of modern civilization and its forms of thinking. For the purposes of this essay, three

disparate seeming aspects of liberalism and its offshoots (e.g. feminism) will be outlined here. The reason for outlining these three in particular should be clear *inshaAllah* by the end of the essay.

i. Liberalism's Belief in Progress

One of the unique aspects of the liberal tradition is that it upholds a meliorist view of man and society. That is, it affirms "the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements."⁶ The belief in progress and reform are an intrinsic part of the liberal worldview and inform therefore how the modern individual looks upon existing institutions, including that of religion (religion is viewed by secular liberals as a social institution, not as divinely revealed truth). What this means is that for the modern person, even long-established beliefs and practices are open to debate, since all such things are possible to improve.

ii. Woman as Victim

Another core tenet of the liberal tradition is that it affirms egalitarianism, in that "it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings."⁷ The early thinkers of classical liberalism had elite, propertied men in mind when calling for the equality of all. As Western political thought developed, more parties began calling for their own inclusion within this "all," eventually leading to a movement for women's rights to be established according to a liberal framework. However, because of the fact that liberalism emphasizes an intrinsic *right* to freedom, and because there continue to exist social institutions

(like marriage and family) that are predicated on duties to others that must be fulfilled regardless of one's conflicting inclinations, the feminist movement is caught in a predicament of forever positioning women as victims. To take the feminist call for freedom to its logical end, the entire structure of not just family but also men and women's civic and social roles would have to be "radically altered" to achieve fully equal rights among adult members of a society. This is in fact the goal of many liberal and feminist thinkers today—a complete re-envisioning and restructuring of gender roles.⁸ As long as institutions like religion and marriage remain on earth, which honor and maintain the traditional roles of men and women, this goal cannot be fully achieved, and so the view of woman-as-victim remains.

iii. Islam vs. islams

As the liberal concept of equality gained ground in the intellectual, social and political realms of Western society, the concept of authority and authoritative figures suffered a major blow. With this, so did the idea of a unified, singularly authoritative religious tradition, with an agreed-upon set of values, practices and beliefs, since some authority would be needed to decide what in fact was agreed upon. Within the academic study of Islam, the idea began to circulate of the existence of multiple, coequal "islams"—all legitimate and equally compelling subjects of study.⁹ Any institutional or methodological claim to a true, capital-I "Islam" was seen as contrary to egalitarianism, and therefore circumspect. The Sunni conception of scholarly consensus (*ijma'*), the authoritativeness of the four legal schools, or the exclusive validity of the Sunni schools of theology, began to be labeled by some Western academic scholars as constituting "Arab Islam."

The assumption of course is that there was something inherently unfair in the idea of a single, authoritative form of Islam. What formerly was considered to be authentic Islam was now ascribed to a single group ("Arabs") among many, and every other individual Muslim's interpretation of how to practice Islam was now seen as deserving of its rightful place in the liberal academic study of Islam.

American Islam and Its Scholars

As more and more Muslims in the post-colonial era began moving to Western nations, they naturally began to adapt to and be influenced by the liberal societies they now called home. They loved Allah and His Messenger (Allah bless him and grant him peace) but could not help but accept and internalize some of the liberal perspectives around them. Liberalism's belief in progress, and its exasperation at the continued status of women as victims, were things colonized Muslims had already had to struggle with, since their colonizers had used these ideas to badger Muslim self-confidence during colonial rule (Did they believe in Islamic reform or not? Did they want advancement for women or not?). These questions followed Muslims to their new Western abodes, but to some degree they were not initially as painful to face as they had been during colonial days. Even in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and beyond, it was easy to find fellow Westerners who answered these questions with confidence in non-liberal ways, particularly in America where Christianity still had a strong presence. The fact that these Muslims now had some status as Westerners also helped, as the newly naturalized Muslim American could say, "Since I am now a citizen of your nation, do I not have the right to freedom of religion, to determine the answers to these questions as I

please?” American converts to Islam had an even greater advantage in this regard and could confidently proffer non-liberal, Islamically-grounded answers to the questions in a way their immigrant coreligionists could not.

But following the events of September 11, 2001, Muslims felt great pressure to present themselves as “more American than apple pie,” and the propagation of a liberal face of Islam suddenly became a matter of urgency. Virtually overnight, the freedom of Muslims to just be themselves turned into a second-class kind of freedom. Yes, you could practice your religion, but only as far as you can demonstrate how your religion matches up with the liberal ideals of America. Otherwise, you were not “moderate” enough to be trusted.

So began a liberalization of traditional Islam in America, with the tacit support of a beleaguered Muslim American public. Fatwas unconditionally permitting things like usurious loans, the keeping of dogs as household pets, and the marking of the Islamic calendar via astronomical calculation began to circulate.^{10,11} It was now more important in the eyes of some American Muslim thinkers to eat organic than to eat halal. Many times, these “fatwas” were issued by academic scholars of Islam or by committees comprised of such scholars as well as scientists, thus furthering the liberalization process by not recognizing the need for qualified religious scholars (*‘ulama*) trained in the high skill of fatwa derivation. Numerous, sometimes complex, arguments derived from classical Islamic legal discourse were presented as justification, despite the fact that never in Islamic history had these rulings been applied in such ways by scholars of any of the four Sunni legal schools.

The place where the liberalization of Islam became most palpable, however, was in the arena of the participation of women in the American Muslim public sphere, and in particular in circles of religious learning and Muslim activism. Women’s access to classes and teachers was emphasized like never before, but with the stated intent of “empowerment,” not toward inculcating submission and humility before God. The presence of female scholars and spokesmen became a priority as a means of redressing an assumed normalcy of discrimination, rather than teaching due to qualification. A certain reticence toward commenting on proper decorum and dress developed—to the point that women without *hijab* were sometimes appointed emcees of national religious meetings—as a statement endorsing the full inclusion of women. A blatant call for the development of an “American Islam” was put out, with encouragement especially of new cultural forms that honored a newly emerging American Muslim identity. In “third spaces” that were not quite social and not quite religious, women and men began interacting freely to enjoy spiritually uplifting song and performance. In some cases, it was the women who would perform, or play musical instruments, with prominent male scholars and preachers of the American Muslim community present to show their endorsement.

The Place of Taqwa

The prominent vocabulary of this liberalization phase has consisted of words like identity, culture, tradition, lineage. Knowledge has been emphasized as well, but as a means of preserving the four concepts just mentioned. Rarely in American Muslim circles is knowledge emphasized as a means of fully and properly submitting to Allah. Rarely, if ever, is it

emphasized as a means of developing *taqwa*, a core teaching of the Qur'an:

"Have taqwa of Allah and He will teach you." (2:282)

"You who believe, if you have taqwa of Allah, Allah will make a Discrimination¹² for you." (8:29)

"Had the people of the cities believed and had taqwa, We would have opened up baraka on them from the heaven and the earth." (7:96)

"Whoever has taqwa of Allah, He will make a way out for him, and provide him from where he does not reckon." (65: 2-3)

"Whoever relies on Allah, He is enough for him. The command of Allah reaches the mark." (65:3)

"Whoever has taqwa of Allah, Allah will make his affair easy for him. That is the command of Allah which He has sent down to you." (65: 4-5)¹³

There are more verses and Prophetic traditions like this, highlighting the importance of *taqwa* in the life of a Muslim. *Taqwa* can be defined as "Godfearingness" or "awe and dread for Allah's might and power, and fear of overstepping His limits."¹⁴ It is in the actualization of the Muslim's submission to God at the level of the conscience, such that he can come to a place where he finally realizes his true purpose on earth: to demonstrate his slavehood (*'ubudiyya*) to Allah.

"I have not created jinn or men except to worship me (ya 'budun)." (Qur'an 51:56)

This purpose is as common to the Muslim who lives in Egypt or Pakistan as the one who lives in America; the earth belongs in totality to the One who created it. The submission (*islam*) required of the Muslim is manifest at all levels—through his body when he prays or fasts; through his intellect when he believes in the Truth revealed to Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace); and through his method of acquiring knowledge of what God commands, by seeking it at the feet of those who submitted to the pious scholars who came before. The fruit of all of this submission is that the submitted human being's consciousness becomes in tune with the command of Allah in a way that he can no longer even consider doing what is displeasing to Him.

Allah the Almighty has said: Whosoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have imposed upon him, and my servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. (Bukhari)¹⁵

How exactly can we know what the religious duties mentioned in this hadith are, what the command of Allah is in any given matter, so that we can thereby aim for this high rank of friendship with Allah? *That* is the real purpose of seeking knowledge in Islam. And when that is the real purpose, then selecting carefully who one takes one's *deen* from—knowing who is qualified to speak on the authority of God, both in terms of training and in terms of personal piety—becomes critical.¹⁶ With this purpose, even the desire to be in the company of scholars begins to revolve around one's need to develop *taqwa*.

Visiting the lords of *taqwa*. Go to them—it heals and it is the key of the doors of guidance and good.¹⁷

But when seeking knowledge becomes about “representation”—who can best present an amicable face of an American Muslim identity—then the criteria of religious qualification, training, and, above all, *taqwa*, start to fade away into the artificially bright light of liberal public relations.

The Current Problem

Liberal American Islam is apparently here to stay. American Muslims are proud of the progress they have made beyond the Old World methods of practicing Islam. The compromised nature of women's status is no longer a question. It is a fact, needing not even to be spoken, and to help overcome the historical victimization of women, access to religious learning (and all other aspects of public life) has been increased and promoted with obvious results. No longer do we feel the need to justify a different way of

practicing Islam from those who came before. We are American, after all, and have the right to assert our American Islam in the world as the unique community that we are.

The above is the view of prominent liberalizing factions among the Muslims in America. But Allah Most High has now sent us a challenging test: how will you deal with situations where those you consider to be scholars of religion fail to have *taqwa*? Will your solution continue to lie within a liberal paradigm, or will you turn back to Allah? The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) told us, “The believer is the mirror of his fellow believer.” A mirror is now being held up to the lack of *taqwa* inherent in “American Islam”: what will we as a community of believers in this country reflect back?

I do not confess to have the answer. I am not a religious scholar, a member of the *'ulama*. I am, rather, an academic scholar of Islam, trained to analyze Islam through the lens of history and the liberal critical tradition that forms the foundation of the modern Western academy. But as someone who has tried to save her soul from the liberalizing tendencies of the Academy by keeping the company of religious scholars, and by seeking knowledge and advice from them, I offer below a few reflections and recommendations that I hope will prove useful to the Muslims in America who are struggling through the current test Allah has put before us.

I was fortunate in that I grew up in a conservative, traditionally minded community within America. My exposure to religious scholars came at a young age through Qur'an classes and Sunday school lessons on the basics of *fiqh*, *tajweed* and *seerah*. The real exposure to seeking knowledge however came in 1998 when I was able to attend an Islamic study program in

Fez, Morocco, in which we Western Muslim students were taught by both local Moroccan scholars as well as scholars who themselves resided in the West. It was a life-changing experience for which I will forever be grateful, as it helped me appreciate Islam, Islamic scholarship, and Muslim saints and scholars in a way I never had before. As a female student, had I not been given access to this opportunity, I don't know if I ever would have embarked so confidently and with such enthusiasm on the journey to study Islam.

When I began graduate study of Islam in America, I was cognizant of the fact that studying Islam in the university was not the same as studying Islam at the feet of scholars. My professors at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan were not the same as the pious, dignified, *sunnah*-following 'ulama of the Qarawiyyin in Fez. My professors knew a lot about theory and history and legal methodology, but they were not even Muslim,¹⁸ let alone able to say anything of worth about what I as a Muslim should believe or how I should practice. So to get answers on questions regarding women in Islam—the focus of much of my research—I made it a point to seek out religious scholars both at home and abroad in the Muslim world. And to my surprise, some of the most well-known and conservative or traditional male scholars offered me the same access that had been granted to me by that Western-Muslim organized program in Fez.

There was a difference, however, in how that access was granted in comparison to some of the scholars I met in America, and therefore a subtle difference in what was ultimately conveyed. When I met to discuss my work with Mufti Taqi Usmani in Karachi, he made sure when we were

done to introduce me to his wife as he and my husband went off to pray in the masjid. In Damascus, the Hanafi scholar Sheikh Hassan al-Hindi gave me a lot of time, may Allah preserve him. Like Mufti Taqi, he too had me meet his wife and family, and took numerous other precautions to assure the appropriateness of our meetings, despite the fact that he is blind. The great Syrian hadith scholar Dr. Nuruddin 'Itr introduced me to his top female student, presumably as a means for me to benefit not just from the single meeting with him but from potential long-term contact with women scholars of the *deen*. In Abu Dhabi, the Yemeni scholar Habib 'Ali al-Jifri made sure to have an excellent, academically-informed translator present during our meeting, in case I would have any trouble conveying my own ideas or grasping his. He too made sure to connect me with a female member of his family—his sister, a woman of religious accomplishment—which I interpret to be an act of propriety as well as a mode of encouragement to me as a female student in my pursuit of sacred knowledge.

Such precautions and markers of propriety served to grant me access, while making clear that the intellectual exchange was purely for the sake of Allah, upon the grounds of *taqwa*, not for the appeasement of some liberal ideal of equal opportunity. On the other hand, though meeting with Muslim scholars in America was generally within the bounds of propriety (*alhamdulillah*), there were times when I faced awkward circumstances. On one occasion, I was given an appointment to meet with a scholar at the institution where he teaches. I waited for my appointment as he finished a class with two men, but then they left, and I ended up in a meeting with this scholar alone on a large premises with no one else around. The same thing happened at

another institution, with a well-known religious scholar of a different educational lineage. I showed up to the meeting assuming the bustle of students and classes, or at least the presence of staff. But I again found myself alone with a male scholar, and though technically someone could have easily walked in,¹⁹ as a woman and as a student of knowledge who knows better, both these meetings made me highly uncomfortable. On another occasion, I was given permission to meet a renowned scholar at his residence. Having learned my lesson from previous experiences, I took a companion with me. Had I not done so, I found that for a good part of that meeting too I would have been alone with him.

Aside from what happened at these meetings, other cues have been given to me by American Muslim scholars regarding the need to relax the traditional boundaries between men and women. As a young woman at an Islamic study program, I wore the face-veil for a couple of days, imitating what I saw to be the good practice of one of the British students there. But one of the main teachers of the program discouraged me from wearing it, citing no valid religious justification for his discouragement. On another occasion, a well-known Muslim scholar deliberately initiated a handshake with a random non-Muslim woman passing out pamphlets on the street. Since the woman was barely paying attention to our presence, the only reason I could discern for why he had done that was to demonstrate to me (the only other person around) that this is what the face of American Islam should look like.

I relay these stories with some shame and quite a bit of hesitation, because though I do not ascribe any sinister motive to any of the people mentioned, and in fact respect all of them for the

good work they have done and continue to do, I do believe there was something wrong done at each of these occasions. Having gone through these experiences myself, I can relate to the claim that women in such situations cannot be judged harshly, because the power differential in place (he being a respected scholar, I being a mere student) compromises the woman's ability to speak out.

But by using this as a reason to demonize male scholars and deem women as perpetual victims who cannot be held accountable is taking a page out of the liberal, feminist rule book. Instead, we must remind ourselves that, despite the social structures in place that try each of the genders in different ways, we will all have to answer to Allah for our own contribution to any given life situation. I know that the women scholars with whom I have studied and spent time, whether from the Levant, Pakistan or elsewhere, have *taqwa* so engrained into their practice of Islam that they would have left the former situations as soon as they saw something to be off. They would have left, or not have allowed themselves to be caught in such a situation in the first place. And in the latter types of situations, they would have spoken out. When I told one of my teachers about the handshaking incident, she looked at me incredulously and exclaimed, "Why didn't you *say* something?"

I could have said something. In both types of incidents, I could have taken a stand. I could have said, "I'm sorry but I didn't realize there would be no one else here. Can we reschedule this meeting?" I could have said, "I have to say, that was wrong to shake that woman's hand, and it made me uncomfortable seeing it." It is my own weakness of resolve and *taqwa* that I did not do these things. Both actions would have been

difficult for me to do, but not nearly impossible. To call out the handshaking incident would have been especially hard though, because the liberal concept of “live and let live” does not match up well with the Islamic obligation of enjoining the good and forbidding the wrong. It would also have been hard because within American Muslim circles, so much rhetoric had already gone into questioning the laws of Islam on this matter that even an observant Muslim woman like me who knows it is wrong to touch unrelated men would be confused as to whether it would be right for me to say anything at all.

Though I am a human being accountable before Allah, and I was as obliged to do the right thing as the men mentioned in the incidents above, as a Muslim woman it would have been much easier for me to stand up for the truth had there already existed a robust culture of *taqwa* within Muslim communities in America. Wasn't it this same culture of *taqwa* that allowed the knowledgeable woman to question the noble Companion ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with them) when she saw he was advocating something not in line with the teachings of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace)?²⁰ Why do we read feminism and individual rights into such situations, when we know that the Companions, both men and women, have their high rank because of their single-eyed focus on gaining the pleasure of Allah, even to the detriment of their own selves?

Having such a culture of *taqwa* engrained into the practice of Islam in America would help the male scholars do right just as it would help women. There are, in fact, many ‘*ulama* in America who do take measures of *taqwa* when teaching and interacting with their female students. As a graduate student, when I was going through a text of Islamic legal rulings (*fiqh*) with a local

scholar, we would always meet in the masjid right in the center of the men's prayer hall after Maghrib salah, sometimes with my husband present. A friend of mine relates how careful her teacher was when training her in the science of Qur'anic recitation (*tajwid*). Not only did he teach from behind a curtain, he also avoided communicating with his female students on the phone (preferring written communication outside of class) in order to prevent the growth of familiarity and casualness in the student-teacher relationship. What is unfortunate, however, is that these measures do not match up with the current religious atmosphere in America. The ‘*ulama* are labeled as unaccommodating or extremist if they ask for such protective measures to be taken. We have to realize though that if such *taqwa*-centered practices are normalized, and are instituted from a place of wanting to please Allah, then everyone in the community will feel more confident to act according to the laws of God and to stand up for these laws when they are being violated.

The point is, our community and interpersonal affairs must be handled through *taqwa*, not through the lens of liberal thought that supposedly empowers the ever-victimized woman to live according to a more progressive paradigm. What does a liberal American Islam have to say about the former above-mentioned incidents of seclusion, except “it's all fine as long as women are being empowered, everyone's consenting, and nothing bad happens”? Why not pay more attention to the Lord of men and women, who laid down the rules of *taqwa* to help ward away evil before it comes?

“Do not even approach *zina* (sexual unlawfulness), for it is an

indecent thing and an evil way.”
(Quran 17:32)

The possibility of *zina* is always present and is the reason why the scholars of the Muslim world whom I met took the precautions they did. No human being, in the East or West, is safe from the devising of Satan or the inclinations of his lower self (*nafs*). But in a place like America, we do not have the unwritten rules of a Shariah-infused culture to help guide our everyday interactions, as is the case still in many Muslims lands. The fact that we do not have cultural understandings and social structures that encourage *taqwa* should make us as American Muslims eager to be more cautious, not less. The unfortunate reality however is that the sense of superiority and self-sufficiency that is unique to America results in an exceptionalism that is useful for the liberalization project. Through it, Muslim Americans are emboldened to rewrite the rules of decorum in even “Islamic” and “traditional” spaces in a manner unprecedented.

Now that some breaches of conduct have happened, instead of deriving solutions to the problem from the Shariah, some Muslims are continuing to apply the same liberal standard of ethics that got us to the ugly place where we now stand. There is a call to action, particularly on social media, with every man and woman speaking his individual mind. But *taqwa* there is almost non-existent, with little regard for the Divine commands related to backbiting, slander, rules of evidence, etc.

As for more formal action, meetings are being organized, conferences held, and policies drawn up, that aim to prevent sexual violations between male scholars and their female students and co-workers. But the language being employed

indicates not a concern to make *tawba* from the community’s collective turning away from the Rule of God, nor even reminders to individual believers that we must all one day face Allah. The language of these more formal initiatives is deeply liberal, assuming: that hierarchical relationships are intrinsically problematic; a tendency in men to abuse power; the victim status of women regardless of their actions and intentions; and a program of reform that further promotes a fractured, distrustful, and ultimately incoherent view of Islamic social and communal relationships.

A Call Toward Reorientation

How fortunate we would be as a community if we called each other to “enjoin the good and forbid the evil” according to a comprehensive plan to abide by the command of Allah, one that calls for a reassessment of: the changes that have come about in American Muslim religious spaces; the changing dynamic of family and marriage among American Muslims; the particular pressures that high-profile scholars and their families face; the unique religious challenges to proper decorum posed by the now widespread use of social media; and the need to increase access to the religious education of all members of the American Muslim community while still upholding the dictates of the Sacred Law.

Centering the discourse on *taqwa* rather than on the liberally defined rights of “socially disempowered” individuals does not mean that women will be excluded from circles of learning. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) himself set aside a day just for women at their request, “admonishing them and enjoining them” (Bukhari). The Prophet’s wife ‘Aisha (Allah be pleased with her) is cited as having

personally taught the 2,210 hadith she related from him (Allah bless him and grant him peace) to 17 women and 156 men, “with a throng besides those”²¹ that hadith scholars were unable to list. The teaching of women must continue. As a community, however, we should purify our intention to make such opportunities open to women out of a desire to help them succeed on their path to Allah, not out of conscious or subconscious imitation of the liberal model of representation and empowerment.

Similarly, we should for sure hold those in positions of power and influence to greater accountability, as can be seen in the examples of the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and grant him peace) and his blessed Companions, who only placed those most fearful of Allah in positions of influence. What I argue is that our impetus for holding influential men accountable should be the same desire to please Allah and preserve the *deen* that the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) and his Companions had. We should not be holding them accountable due to the inherent distrust of men that results from liberalism, which only encourages individualism and fails to connect human beings to each other in any kind of wholesome manner.

Along with robust discussion on how *taqwa* can be increased and compliance to the Shariah improved on a community-wide level, the men who are religious scholars and teaching in our communities should call themselves to account and check their own intentions before Allah.²² Even though his contemporaries taught women, the Shafi‘i scholar ‘Abd al-Wakil al-Durubi (d. 1993) refused to do so, saying, “Were she Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, and I Hasan al-Basri, I wouldn’t teach her the ABC’s.”²³ As a community, we should respect such positions, and laud the types

of measures taken by the scholars mentioned at the very start of this essay, instead of lambasting them for being unfair and accusing them of being unconcerned for the advancement of women, even as we construct opportunities for learning that are in line with what is pleasing to Allah.

Our goal as a community when trying to return to a condition of *taqwa*, particularly in our religious institutions and gatherings, must be to do so with the wisdom and balance of what the Shariah calls for. We can only do this with confidence as Muslims in America, however, when we believe in the truth and efficacy of the sacred laws of God. A good friend of mine demonstrated this confidence at her workplace, where she is part of the administration of a public school. It was the height of the Me Too movement (the same time as when our own Muslim American *fitna* began). She approached the male principal of the school and stated, “Michael²⁴, you need to not meet with teachers in private behind closed doors anymore, unless the room has windows.” She went on to explain to both the principal and other staff that this was for the protection of both him and the female teachers of the school. Michael readily agreed, and so did the rest of the administration. When done with wisdom and confidence, even non-Muslims can appreciate the social benefit that results from putting the Shariah in place.

When I advocate a return to a *taqwa*-centered approach to Islamic practice in America, I am not endorsing any particular practice or regimen. “*Al-taqwa ha-huna*,” “Godfearingness lies right here,” said the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace), pointing to his chest three times, indicating that real consciousness of God lies in one’s heart, at the core of one’s being. Wearing the face-veil, for instance, may be appropriate and called for in Muslim lands, but numerous

'*ulama* of high standing have discouraged the practice in America because they see the possibility of greater harm being done than good. This is a Shariah-based calculation though, not something based on whim or liberal calls to freedom of expression, and so such an *ijtihad*²⁵ within the practice of American Muslims may very well come from a place of *taqwa*.

At the same time, we must remember how fortunate we are as Muslims, as a people of God whose religion has been divinely preserved till the end of time, that the main teachings of our religion are clear and agreed upon, with no room or need for legal deliberation (*ijtihad*). This broad consensus on the teachings of Islam had struck me even as a young woman: the piety and practice I saw among the religious scholars of Fez was the same as what I experienced when I later married into a religious family from Pakistan. If the practices that mark pious comportment in the Muslim world seem foreign to some of us, this is only because we have allowed American exceptionalism to color the way we view our own practice of Islam. It is up to us to reject such an exceptionalist view of Islam in America. As American Muslims, we have access to the same beliefs and practices that have always beautified the lived practice of Islam, and many Godfearing families here in America continue to abide by the rules of decorum that a state of *taqwa* entails.

Finally, if we as American Muslims are to take any lesson from liberalism, let it be the emphasis on you as an individual in its ultimate sense. Those who believe know that each of us will stand alone as individuals before Allah on the Last Day, and so carry themselves accordingly. The Shadhili Sheikh al-Kurdi (d. 1972) had told his disciples in Jordan, "If you see me step

outside the masjid with my right foot first,²⁶ cease to follow me." His example is used by Sheikh Nuh Keller to convey the same idea to his own disciples: do not succumb to following a "sheikh" if you find that he does not follow the Shariah and the *sunnah* of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace). These words indicate not just the humility before Allah of these men, but the fact that the onus is on us as individuals. It is up to us, once we profess belief in Him, to obey the command of Allah, whether we are women or men. On the private level, each one of us is responsible to uphold the laws of God as best as we are able.

As for the public sphere, what measures are required to bring the American Muslim community back to a *taqwa*-based equilibrium with respect to Islamic practice is not for me or any one person to decide. It will take consultation and honest discussion between the religious scholars and the men and women of our community, as has already begun to some extent. What I wish to emphasize, however, is that this discussion must include the '*ulama* in their roles as teachers who guide us on how to truly submit to Allah, and not simply use them as tokens of legitimization of the liberalization process. If we wish to take a God-centered approach to the problem, we cannot take the liberal stance of excluding and deeming suspicious the scholars who hold fast to the authoritative positions and perspectives of Islam. It had been the responsibility of the '*ulama* to guide the community toward *taqwa* in open and in secret. When they failed to do this, and the community went along with the liberalization of Islamic practice in America, Allah removed His protective cover from over this community, and the sins of a few became the spiritual crisis of many. It is now up to the Muslim Americans who

have been active or complaisant supporters of this liberalization to make *tawba*,²⁷ whether they are scholars or lay women and men, for we all bear responsibility before Allah in this regard. Turning back to Him with sincerity will, *inshaAllah*, be the key to us gaining His Help, as well as our ultimate salvation.

That is His right over us, to turn back to Allah and to adopt *taqwa* at both the private and the public level. As the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and grant him peace) told us, it is also the only real means of success and protection for the Muslims of America:

Be mindful of Allah, and Allah
will protect you. Be mindful of

ⁱ As quoted in Keller, Nuh Ha Mim, *Sea Without Shore: A Manual of the Sufi Path*. Amman: Sunna Books, 2011, p. 102.

ⁱⁱ i.e. close male relative

³ To critique liberalism is not the same as taking a politically right-wing stance, as some in America who are unfamiliar with the broader history of classical liberalism may assume. This paper is essentially arguing for an Islamic counter-perspective.

⁴ Gray, John, *Liberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 9-11.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. xii.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Okin, Susan Moller, *Women in Western Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 278-281.

⁹ By the time the eminent anthropologist Talal Asad critically engages with the concept of “islams” in his 1987 paper, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” it had already been around at least for some decades, if not from the turn of the century in the works of Orientalists like Snouck Hurgronje (d. 1936). Reprinted: Asad, Talal, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2009), p. 1-30.

¹⁰ Despite the difference of opinion regarding the ritual impurity (*najasa*) of dogs, Maliki scholars hold it to be

Allah, and you will find him in front of you. If you ask, ask Allah. If you seek help, seek help of Allah. Know that if the Nation were to gather together to benefit you with anything, it would benefit you only with something that Allah had already prescribed for you, and that if they gather together to harm you with anything, they would harm you only with something Allah had already prescribed for you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried.²⁸

either disliked or impermissible to keep a dog at home without reasonable need.

¹¹ In the late Shafi'i school, al-Ramli (d. 1004/1596) held that a person with knowledge of astronomy could follow calculations instead of sighting the moon, and those who trust him can do so as well, but it is not on the basis of his opinion, nor on the conditions specified by the Shafi'i school, that the calculation position had been adopted in North America. In fact, Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Shah, executive director of the Fiqh Council of North America, states explicitly in a 2018 article that the calculations position on moonsighting was adopted in North America with the intent of carving out a new legal position and methodology that would “make Islam germane” to modern realities, showing no awareness or need of the Shafi'i position in his defense of the calculations position. This confirms my assertion that the North American position was adopted from a stance of liberalization that honors progressive innovation and the interpretive right of American Islam (as per the specific aspects of liberalism that I outline at the start of my essay), and not according to the legal methodology of the Sunni Islamic tradition: “The Muslims in the West are living different realities than their brethren in the Muslim majority contexts. Their hermeneutical instincts are expected to be at variance with their fellow Muslims in the Muslim world because of the circumstantial disparity. The Muslim jurists of the West also have leverage over their

counterparts in the Muslim world. They can dare to think out of the box and withstand the popular pressure. I am confident that they will rise above the tide of criticism, stand their grounds and continue their principled stand. The employment of astronomical calculations is a new phenomenon and a new debate. Gradually it will become a norm like the calculated prayer schedules with more education, awareness and passage of time.” Zulfiqar Ali Shah, An Analysis of Moon Sighting Arguments, June 22, 2018, <http://fiqh-council.org/an-analysis-of-moon-sighting-arguments/> Last accessed: December 11, 2019. See also: Hamza Yusuf, “Caesarean Moon Births,” 2006; Sohail Hanif, “Why Can’t We Unite? A Brief Overview of Moon-Sighting Wars (And How to Avoid Them),” <https://seekersguidance.org/articles/social-issues/moon-sighting-wars/> Last accessed: December 5, 2019; and Waleed S. Ahmed, “Crescent Chronicles: A Brief History of Moonsighting in America,” <https://muslimmatters.org/2014/07/26/crescent-chronicles-a-brief-history-of-moonsighting-in-north-america/> Last accessed: December 11, 2019.

¹² a Discrimination through which you can discern Right from Wrong.

¹³ The translations of these Quranic verses have been taken from ad-Darqawi, Mawlay al-Arabi, *The Darqawi Way: The Letters of Shaykh Mawlay al-‘Arabi ad-Darqawi*, trans. Aisha Bewley. Cambridge: Diwan Press, 1979, p. 139 and 311.

¹⁴ Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 417.

¹⁵ al-Nawawi, Yahya b. Sharaf al-Din, *An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith*, trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies. Beirut: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1976, p. 118.

¹⁶ The relationship between worship, *taqwa* and seeking sacred knowledge is beautifully summed up in a letter by the Naqshbandi sheikh Khwaja Nasir al-Din ‘Ubaydullah Ahrar (d. 1490 CE) to his disciple Mawlana Muhammad Qadi: “The true essence of worship is humble veneration, supplication, and contrition. These qualities arise in the heart through the contemplation of God’s glorious majesty. The achievement of such bliss depends on love. Love becomes manifest through obedience to the Prophet and Master of all ages. We therefore need to know how to obey. Thus it becomes necessary to pay attention to those scholars who are the heirs to true religious knowledge. As for those who abuse their learning, making it a means to worldly gain or an instrument of fame and fortune, they must be avoided. One should not mix with dervishes who indulge in music and dancing and who do not hesitate to buy and sell all

kinds of things. One’s ears must be deaf to heretical doctrines. One must study to acquire true wisdom, in conformity with the practice of the Prophet. May you be blessed with peace.” From Safi, Mawlana ‘Ali b. Husain, *Rashahat-i ‘Ayn al-Hayat*, as cited in, Shushud, Hasan Lutfi, *Masters of Wisdom of Central Asia*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2014, p. 119.

¹⁷ Poetic verse of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Taza, as quoted in ad-Darqawi, *The Darqawi Way*, p. 118

¹⁸ Save one! May Allah bless him with the *khayr*.

¹⁹ Islamic sacred law prohibits *khalwa* or unlawful seclusion between an unrelated man and woman. Technically in the Shariah, a situation where two people are meeting in a public place, where others are expected to easily walk in and out, does not constitute *khalwa*.

²⁰ See the commentary for Qur’an verse 4:20, for example in al-Qurtubi, Muhammad b. Ahmad, *al-Jami` li ahkam al-Qur’an*. Cairo: Dar al-Shu`b, n.d. vol. 3, p. 1669.

²¹ Quoted from Imam Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi’s *Siyar A’lam al-Nubala* in Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, p. 101.

²² Sheikh ‘Abdullah ibn Ahmad al-Zubaydi asked Imam al-Haddad about the following hadith: “There is a valley in Hell against which Hell itself cries out seventy times a day for protection; it has been prepared by God the Exalted for those scholars of this community who are hypocrites.” Imam al-Haddad responded by saying that the ‘*ulama* being referred to here were either a) actual hypocrites with no faith in their hearts or b) people of faith who became “so overcome by their love for social eminence and high status that they ostentatiously display their devotion and knowledge to achieve them.” al-Haddad, Imam, *The Sublime Treasures: Answers to Sufi Questions*, trans. Mostafa al-Badawi, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008, p. 38.

²³ Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, p. 101.

²⁴ Name has been changed.

²⁵ i.e., a legal position based on reasoning and contemporary circumstance

²⁶ The practice of the Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) was to enter the mosque with his right foot and to exit with his left. It is not required for Muslims to do the same, but it is highly commendable to imitate the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) in all of his states and actions to the best of one’s ability.

²⁷ i.e., turn to Allah in sincere repentance

²⁸ Hadith related in al-Tirmidhi. Translation adapted from al-Nawawi’s *Forty Hadith*, trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies.