HEAVEN'S GATE:
How Muslim Women Open or Close Doors for Their Sisters

Ingrid Mattson

Dr. Ingrid Mattson's contribution to the Women in Islam series is entitled, *Heaven's Gate: How Muslim Women Open Doors for Their Sisters*. The goal of this lecture is to look at ways in which women contribute to or limit the empowerment of each other. Mattson begins by cautioning that as we seek the transformation of society, if we are not aware of the way in which our own individual or collective experiences have shaped us, we will recreate patterns of oppression. Dr. Mattson draws on the metaphor, "Heaven's Gate," to describe the challenge for Muslim women to be keys of goodness which open doors for other Muslim women so they can experience the fullness of their humanity. She posits 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr as a role model for this endeavor, delineates lessons to be learned from how 'A'isha related to other women, and applies these lessons to the contemporary issues of the face veil and prayer space in the mosque. Dr. Mattson concludes by stating that the risk for Muslim women today is a frequent reluctance to treat other Muslim women as individuals, and calls them to empower all Muslim women by standing up for and supporting individual rights and needs even though they may not be one's personal preference or need.

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The issues I raise might seem to some rather simple and obvious. I am not going to be presenting any astounding new research or a dramatically new perspective on women in Islam. Many might consider my approach conservative and that would be a fair interpretation, to the extent that I am not suggesting, not here, in any case, a dramatic restructuring of our institutions. Indeed, I have increasingly come to believe that societal change can be effected successfully most often by analyzing current practices and institutions and finding the dysfunctions, the weak links and the neglected issues, then strategically and methodically correcting, strengthening and building on what is already in place.

In arguing that, in many cases, a conservative approach to social change is the best option, I am not adopting an ideological stance. Sometimes radical change might be necessary. Here, I am simply recognizing that no human being, and no human community, can ever start from scratch; we can never begin with a blank slate, and then, from there, create a utopian society. Indeed on this day – November 11th – a day when we remember the millions who perished to a large extent from such arrogant fantasies, we might consider the twentieth century a time when much of humanity deceived itself into believing they could erase history; that humans, individually and collectively, could create themselves into something utterly new. Rather, God is the Creator; it is an act of usurpation of divinity to believe that we can transcend history to create a new society *ex nihilo*.

The desire to transform society for the good of humanity, for men and women, is a noble task, and we need to examine and scrutinize social, economic and political structures that lead to the repression and oppression of individuals. However, we also need to remember that each one of us who claims to be dedicated to this cause is a real human being subject to the same fears, weaknesses and desires as others. This is what I mean when I say that none of us, individually or collectively, can begin from a blank

slate. If we are not aware of the way in which our own individual or collective experiences have shaped us, we will recreate patterns of oppression; we try to find utopia, but we will create a nightmare. In short, what I am saying is that without spiritual awareness, which is based in self-knowledge, the impulse of the religious activist is little more than a desire to feel powerful through the manipulation of others.

The twentieth century was the age of revolutionaries and reformers who presented themselves as agents and instruments of radical social change. Those who ignored individual spiritual transformation as the key to eliminating oppression and inequality could only end up oppressing others. They projected and essentialized all evil onto others, and all goodness onto themselves, rather than realizing that what is essential is shared by all human beings: the temptation to feel empowered by exerting force on others. In contrast, those who became true moral leaders remained mindful of their own weaknesses and struggles with temptation. They cultivated self-awareness through openness to criticism and guidance from others, as well as through spiritual practices. They kept in mind the ways in which their own personal histories wounded or shaped them. They questioned their own desire for admiration, appreciation, love and power. They were the ones who were able to make effective social change that was deep and lasting.

I have been speaking in general terms here so let me give two examples of what I mean – one a failure, and one a success – from modern Muslim history. Moral failure is evident in the utopian Islamic movements of the twentieth century whose extreme and devastating culmination is al-Qaeda. In contrast, a successful story of courageous moral transformation can be found in the life of Malcolm X, and those of the African-American Muslim community who began with an ideology of black empowerment and moved to universal spiritual and ethical Islamic identity.

So, what does all of this have to do with women, you say? My goal is to temporarily shift our focus away from the "external" oppression of patriarchy to look at the ways in which women contribute to or limit the empowerment of each other. Unless women develop a deep spiritual awareness that allows them to question their own motives, fears and desires as they assert their rights, they can easily call for a regime of "women's rights" that strips many other women of their autonomy. If feminism becomes an ideology, then, like other ideological movements, there will be many unjust applications of power committed in its name. Some women will be judged deficient according to the construction of the "ideal woman," and even the power of the state might be used to "correct" this deficiency. Alternately, when Islam becomes Islamism, then again, coercion and force are all too often used to make some women conform to the image and comportment of the ideal woman. As women religious authorities, public policy experts, writers, activists and others use their political power, social clout and intellectual credentials to advocate for a more just and dignified place for women in society, we need to be able to recognize when our advocacy is self-interested or paternalistic. Women should be able to live in all their diversity, with all of their flaws and talents, with all of their strengths and weaknesses, in their collective and individual identities just as men do, no more, no less.

I have entitled this lecture *Heaven's Gate* for two reasons. First, I make reference to a Prophetic supplication that my beloved teacher, Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, would often make: that God will make us "keys of goodness," as individuals and as a community. What this implies is that, in our efforts to make change, we can open doors for others, or we can, often unwittingly, lock them out. We can be those gates through which others can come through and experience all the fullness of their humanity or we can be the gate keepers who close the door on others. I have also used this title because of a statement that is attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that, "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." Now, I am not claiming to give a scholarly analysis of this *hadith*, but I have been letting it spark my imagination about the way in which women relate to each other, the way in which we block or support each other, the way in which women can lift other women up, or trample them beneath their feet.

There is a woman who is often held (at least by Sunni Muslims), to be a great role model for Muslim women: 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr – one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad. I draw upon the example of 'A'isha as a gate keeper, as a woman who had intense relationships with other women, and who had multiple levels of status and authority. One significant aspect of 'A'isha's profile is that she never had any children. From a theological perspective, a Muslim would say this was God's choice. Of course God, who has power over all things, could easily have given her children,

but he chose not to do so. Yet 'A'isha, like the other wives of the Prophet Muhammad, was accorded the status of "Mother of the Believers." This status is conferred upon the wives of the Prophet by the Qur'an which states, "The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves and his wives are their mothers" (33:6). According to many reports, the men of the community would call 'A'isha and the other wives of the Prophet "mother." Just to give a few examples: Ibn Abi 'Atiq approached 'A'isha saying, *ya ummah* and 'Abdullah ibn 'Abd al-Rahman called to her, *ya ummatah* – both phrases meaning "O Mother;" another man approached her saying, *ya umm al-mu'minin* "O Mother of the Believers."[1]

Given this context, it is intriguing that there is a story that one day, a woman approached 'A'isha saying, "O Mother." 'A'isha responded, "I am not your mother. I am the mother of your men." I cannot claim to speak on behalf of 'A'isha, to claim to know what was in her mind when she responded in this way. What I would like to do is to consider what she might have meant, given the way she related to men and women. It is possible that 'A'isha's response was simply exegetical. The Qur'an calls the wives of the Prophet Muhammad the "Mothers of the Believers" following verses (Anfal 33:4-5) which speak about the unacceptability of fictional blood relationships.[2] The Prophet Muhammad, who previously was known as the "father" of Zayd, is now told in the Qur'an that it is more just to call adopted children by their birth-fathers' names; if the father is not known, then "they are your brothers in faith." Given the emphasis on clarifying relationships in this verse, it is striking that in the following verse, the Qur'an states that the wives of the Prophet Muhammad are the "mothers" of the believers. Here the word "believers" (*mu'minin*) is in the grammatical masculine plural form. This form can be inclusive of both genders (i.e., signifying all believers), or its meaning can be restricted to the masculine gender. In rejecting the appellation "mother" from another woman, perhaps 'A'isha simply wanted to take an exegetically cautious approach in not overextending the implications of the verse, given the earlier condemnation of the establishment of fictional blood relationships.

On the other hand, perhaps 'A'isha is refuting the notion that a woman has to be a "mother" to have value. While it is true that there are reports that 'A'isha asked the Prophet Muhammad to give her an agnomen (*kunya*), and he named her "Umm 'Abdullah" after her nephew 'Abdullah,

it is also the case that such names were not taken literally, and were used often simply as formal or friendly terms of address. Thus, when 'A'isha accepted the title "mother" when men of the community of believers addressed her this way, she was accepting the establishment of a taboo that would prevent them from eroticizing her in any way. Since there was no need to prevent women from eroticizing her, the title "mother" was unnecessary vis-à-vis other women. 'A'isha and the other widows of the Prophet were, therefore, able to establish themselves as influential, powerful members of the community without adopting what is commonly considered women's most important role – that of mother of children. This should be a lesson to women of later generations, about their potential to serve the community without being mothers, if it is their destiny to stay unmarried, or married, but childless.

I would like to discuss a number of the ways in which 'A'isha taught us to open doors for other women. The first is that 'A'isha never seems to have refrained from using her authority to defend the place of women in the community. 'A'isha insisted again and again, on correcting the erroneous reports from other Companions that related to the place of women in the community. In doing so, however, she brought the fullness of her experience as a woman to the conversation. For example, when she heard that one of the Companions related that a man's prayer is invalidated if a black dog or a woman walks in front of him, she gave a forceful response, refuting the claim with proof from her own experience. 'A'isha said, "I used to lay in front of God's Messenger with my legs extended in the place of his prayer; he would touch my legs when he wanted to prostrate and I would pull them up, then stretch them out again when he pulled back."[3] Now, what is interesting about this response is that 'A'isha does not refrain from bringing her personal, even intimate experience into the public space. 'A'isha teaches us that our personal experiences and intimate perspectives are not shameful, but they are important in constructing an authentic and natural way of life.

Secondly, 'A'isha was public in her corrections. Of course she corrected some people privately but she also corrected people in a public fashion when necessary. When she heard that someone was attributing to the Prophet Muhammad something she found reprehensible, she did not hold back. In doing so, she taught that it is perfectly acceptable and sometimes

necessary to challenge power publicly. It is because of the example that she set that we see her students demonstrating the same kind of strength and courage. For example, 'A'isha bint Talha, who was one of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr's students, is well known for very publicly refusing the demands of others that she cover her face in public. 'A'isha bint Talha was the most beautiful woman of her age, but she was also a great scholar of *hadith* who learned religious knowledge from her aunt and had the same kind of confidence to articulate her convictions.

'A'isha also opened doors for other women by using all the resources available to her to empower others through the creation of complimentary or alternative spaces to the dominant power. She brought into her home many young people, boys and girls, to teach them religious knowledge. Here she could give her own perspective on the Prophet's teachings to the next generation. In addition to sharing her intellectual and spiritual resources, she shared her enormous financial resources. 'A'isha, like other widows of the Prophet Muhammad, received the highest yearly allowance given in the *diwan*, the State Treasury: 100,000 dirhams. With this money, it would have been easy for 'A'isha to reproduce the power dynamic of other elites who established palatial, fortified dwellings for themselves in places like Damascus. If she had done so, there is no doubt that due to the charisma, or "blessing," of being the Prophet's widow, that she would still have received much honor. However, 'A'isha continued to live the simple, ascetic life she had lived with the Prophet Muhammad. She fasted regularly, and when she ate, she ate simple food. She dressed in simple clothes. Once, a man asked her, "O Mother of the Believers, did not God give you wealth?" 'A'isha responded, "Leave me alone. There is no need for something new if one's clothes are not worn out."[4] Instead of using wealth for her own enrichment, embellishment and comfort, 'A'isha distributed it to others in need, including many other women who needed support.

'A'isha was a woman who drew upon her privileged status to empower others, rather than to benefit herself; in this, she is an example to other women. There will always be women who, because of their special status or unique social standing, have privileged access to wealth or power centers. If we look at historical Muslim societies, we see very often that the women who became scholars had privileged access to learning because of their relationship with powerful men. Wives and daughters of scholars and women of noble households had access to the learning of scholars that was not easily accessible to other women.[5] Women who did and who do have unique opportunities because of their special status then have a choice: to either continue to reaffirm their position within elite or they could use their position to direct resources and opportunities for learning towards other women.

'A'isha, however, has as much to teach us through her faults and shortcomings, as she does through her strengths. One of the unfortunate aspects of much contemporary Islamic teaching is that it presents an incomplete, sanitized portrait of the Companions of the Prophet. Indeed, many Muslims almost seem to extend the infallibility of the Prophet to his Companions. This is neither theologically justified nor is it wise. We need role models with whom we can identity; role models who teach us that we can excel in some areas and serve the community, despite our flaws. 'A'isha was a woman with great strengths, but she also struggled, like all of us, with pettiness, jealousy and other temptations.

This is clearly demonstrated in her difficult relationship with Safiyya, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad who was a member of one of the Jewish tribes of Medina. In a moment of anger and jealousy, 'A'isha called Safiyya "Jewess," using the epithet as an insult. The Prophet encouraged Safiyya to stand up for herself saying, "Why did you not tell her, 'My father is Aaron and my uncle is Moses'?"[6] Here, the Prophet tells Safiyya to take pride in her Jewish lineage and identity. For her part, it is clear that 'A'isha was not acting according to the highest standards of behavior when she called Safiyya names. We do not know if 'A'isha's relationship with Safiyya was typically poor, or if this incident was uncharacteristic. What we do know is that, despite having a less than warm relationship with Safiyya at all times, 'A'isha did step up to defend her rights when necessary. Particularly notable is 'A'isha's insistence that Safiyya's bequest be honored after her death. Safiyya had willed a full third of her estate – the maximum possible – to her nephew who was Jewish. It seems that some anti-Jewish feeling was influencing those in charge to block the transfer of wealth. It was 'A'isha who stepped forward to say, "Fear God with respect to Safiyya's bequest," ensuring that her wishes were followed.

To have solidarity among women, therefore, we do not need to have

a utopian sisterhood, where all women are joined in a mystical bond of love and caring. What we can learn from the sometimes strained relationships that 'A'isha had with other women is that we can and should stand up for each other's rights, despite such strains. We also are reminded of the need, as I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, for even the most learned and righteous women to struggle to overcome prejudices they have inherited from their society.

Finally, we can learn from 'A'isha's legacy that, all too often, the fullness of great Muslim women's experiences is narrowed and appropriated by those wishing to present an "ideal" Muslim woman. Not only is it rare that we hear about the Companions' weaknesses, as I have already mentioned, but all too often, the words or examples of the female Companions are drawn upon selectively to support a position that the women themselves would have been unlikely to support. For example, one often hears those who wish to exclude women from the mosque citing a statement that 'A'isha was reported to have made some decades following the Prophet Muhammad's death: "If the Prophet had seen how women are behaving, he would have prohibited them from the mosque, as was the case with the Children of Israel." Although 'A'isha uses a general term "women" in her statement, any reasonable interpreter would have to agree that it is evident that 'A'isha did not mean *all* women. In the first place, 'A'isha and her fellow widows lived in the mosque, so she obviously did not mean to exclude all women. Rather than putting women down, 'A'isha was simply holding women accountable for their behavior, and not expecting anything less from them than the high standard of conduct she expected of men. The fact that 'A'isha's words have been used to justify the exclusion of women from the mosque shows how important it is for women leaders to prevent their teachings from being appropriated to exclude women who do not conform to the sanitized, narrow image that others have constructed of them. Here, religious women have to be especially careful to avoid being set up as closed doors that keep other women from accessing the knowledge and sacred spaces they need.

Another particular risk for Muslim women in our own time is our frequent reluctance to treat other women as individuals, rather than as exemplars of our collective feminine identity. Too often we seem to feel that obtaining a dignified identity for women in general is so vital that we need

to sacrifice the rights of some women for the sake of us the group. It is common in marginalized groups that there is pressure for individuals to conform for the sake of the good of the collectivity. Many are afraid that if some of their peers make statements that are too challenging, then perhaps there will be a backlash. However, we need to remember that there is no general woman; there are only individual women, each with their own idiosyncrasies, values and beliefs.

Certainly there is much value in respecting common norms of behavior and not acting counter-culturally simply to provoke a reaction. However, sometimes it is only outrageous behavior that will elicit a necessary reaction in the face of mindless complicity. Who is to judge when it is appropriate to sacrifice individuality for the sake of the common good and when it is necessary to fight for one's rights, despite protests that one is creating discord (*fitna*)? In the end, this is a judgment call that we can all make, but must not assume that any of our judgments are infallible. When it comes to women's rights, we should not be so terrified of a backlash that we disown our sisters who take a more radical path. We might think that their behavior is outrageous, ridiculous, or over-the-line, and we can make that judgment. Still, we should support their right to be wrong.

You might say that now I have adopted a typical liberal stance on rights, despite beginning my talk with a recommendation that a more conservative path of transformation should be considered. Certainly I believe that when it comes to gender relations in Muslim religious communities, that an ethical transformation based in spirituality, and drawing upon the diverse resources of classical Islam will yield positive results. However, I also believe that this kind of transformation cannot occur today except in a social and political context in which the liberal notion of individual rights is upheld. Authoritarian and patriarchal tendencies run too deep in Muslim communities for any real transformation to occur without grounding our religious choices in a liberal political (in the small and large sense) framework.

Let me give you a specific example as I conclude. Right now, Western Muslim women feel that they are under enormous pressure to prove that they are not a threat to society. On the one hand, we are under scrutiny and on the defensive simply for being Muslim. All Muslims, it seems, are constantly being asked to prove that they are not extremists. Muslims truly

feel that we are guilty until proven innocent. For example, after I gave a talk at a civic organization recently, one of the first people who stood up said, "Are you willing to denounce al-Qaeda and the extremists who are committing terrorism in the name of Islam?" What a question! I wanted to respond, "You are a man, are you willing to denounce domestic violence?" It is unfair that ordinary Muslims have to prove their innocence and it is unfortunate that those Muslim women who choose to wear a religious headscarf are, more often than not, judged to be "conservative" and, therefore, sympathetic to extremism. Muslims in the West are under this enormous pressure to project themselves as a so-called "moderate community." This leaves many of us, for example, uncomfortable with the veiling practices of any woman who covers to any degree more fully or traditionally than ourselves. If we do not wear a headscarf, we think that women who wear the headscarf are an intrinsic threat to our dignity and autonomy. Women who wear a simple headscarf with otherwise Western clothes feel embarrassed to be seen with women wearing *jilbab* with a matching *tarhah* (scarf covering the whole upper-body). Most of us are annoyed by women who cover their faces.

In 2006, Jack Straw, a senior British government official, stated that he considered the face veil (*niqab*) to be "a mark of separation," that he was uncomfortable with women who wear it and that he asks them to remove it when they visit him.[8] Many human rights advocates protested Straw's statement as an abuse of authority, paternalistic and patriarchal. At the same time, there were many women who consider themselves advocates of Muslim women's rights who applauded his statement. The most charitable explanation is that they were so excited to hear their own criticisms about the face veil given widespread attention that they did not realize the political implications – that such a statement articulated by a state authority was a misuse of power. Unfortunately, the sad reality is that there are many self-described women's advocates in Europe who explicitly support the use of state power to compel Muslim women to unveil.

As someone who has enjoyed walking the streets of London, admiring towering seven inch purple mohawks while feeling slightly disturbed by countless piercings cascading across fresh young faces, such attacks on the *niqab* strike me as evident selective discrimination. Surely I do not have to like tongue piercings, towering high-heels or face veils to support the right

of individuals to wear such things. When I worked in Afghan refugee camps, many years ago, I had to cover my face in order to move freely. I did not like it. I took it off immediately whenever I would leave the camp. I would try to convince other Muslim women that it is not necessary religiously, and that there are more drawbacks then benefits in wearing it. But if a grown woman chooses to dress this way, we all should stand up and say, "That is her right and no one has authority to compel her to conform to your preferences in dress." We cannot let our fear that we all will be looked at as "extremists" or as "unassimilated" to deny a woman's right to dress as she chooses.

My last example is of prayer space. This is something that women have to seriously consider because there are many debates over the ideal division of prayer space in mosques. There are women whose own personal preference is to pray in a secluded or separate prayer space. I have no problem with that. In fact, I normally prefer it and often even prefer to pray at home, because I can take as long as I like, without being distracted by others. I love to pray at home in my quiet little balcony. At other times, I find the presence of others gathered in the mosque just the push I need to do more. Sometimes, I need the example of others in devoted prayer to keep me focused and motivated. But of course, my preferences are simply that – my preferences – and they have little weight in Islamic law compared to the rights of other individuals. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Do not prevent the maidservants of God from the mosques of God." What we have to understand is that women are not prevented from praying in the mosque only by words. They also are prevented when they are not afforded reasonable access to the prayer space and the opportunity to join the congregation. The female companions of the Prophet Muhammad enjoyed this access during his lifetime; it cannot be anything other than disobedience to his teachings to deny such access. In order to open doors of spiritual opportunity for our sisters, it is, therefore, sometimes necessary to put aside our preferences.

In the end, I pray that God grant us the wisdom, humility and compassion to act as doors of opportunity for other women, and not to act as doors that slam in the face of the seekers of God.

NOTES

1. Ibn Sa`d, 58, 50, 61.

2. Qur'an 33:4 is often said to have prohibited adoption. This is true to the extent that "adoption" means to erase a child's lineage. Islam, however, strongly encourages Muslims to foster children and to care for them as their own children. However, children have a right to their natal identity. For more information on this topic, see: Ingrid Mattson, "Adoption and Fostering," in *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures*, v. 2, ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

3. Hadith recorded by al-Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Da`ud and others.

4. Ibn Sa 'd, v. 8, 53.

5. Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa`d to Who's Who* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), 72-78. Some of Roded's conclusions might be called into question by the research done by Mohammad Akram Nadwi in *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford and London: Interface Publications, 2007).

6. Ibn Sa'd, v. 8, 100.

7. Ibn Sa'd, v. 9, 100.

8. See Alan Cowell, "For Multicultural Britain Uncomfortable New Clothes," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2006.

MEDIATING PLACE AND SPACE:
Contributions of Muslim Women to Interreligious Dialogue

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