

D.A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of `A'isha bint Abi Bakr*

(New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)

In the book *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, D.A. Spellberg has produced a fine piece of academic writing. She has examined the writings of Muslim scholars regarding `A'isha, the third wife of the Prophet Muhammad, in order to analyze the attitudes of Islam to women. She argues that these scholars reinterpreted the legacy of `A'isha to create a paradigm for Islamic women and to explore questions about women in Islamic society.

Spellberg begins by introducing the legacy of `A'isha. She gives a very brief biography, but her focus is not on the life of this early Islamic woman, but rather upon her importance in the formation of Islam. `A'isha had a special position among Islamic women due to her role as Muhammad's wife, first Caliph Abu Bakr's daughter, a major source of opposition to Ali the fourth Caliph, and as the transmitter of much of the tradition of hadith. Yet, Spellberg notes, there are no biographies or commentaries on `A'isha written until one hundred and fifty years after her death. When Islamic scholars did begin to write about `A'isha, their ideological backgrounds colored their interpretations. In particular, many questioned the validity of hadith with `A'isha as a source: while Sunni Muslims accepted her, Shia Muslims rejected her and her father as intrinsically biased and enemies of Ali. Instead, they looked to Ali as a source of hadith and his wife, Fatima, as a role model for Muslim women. In this work, Spellberg concentrates upon the varied Sunni interpretations of `A'isha, as a better insight into the thinking of many Muslims, while using Shia texts only to provide a counterpoint.

Spellberg discusses some of the first accounts of `A'isha that come in the biographical dictionaries of the third century AH onwards, and how political and religious concerns shaped these accounts. She looks first upon the work of Ibn Sa'd, whose biographical dictionary of hadith transmitters set `A'isha apart, not only from other Islamic women but from the other wives of the Prophet. As the

community of Muslims at the time argued ideological battles over Sunnism and Shi'ism, over the precedence of Abu Bakr or `Ali, the elevation of Abu Bakr's daughter in these biographical dictionaries said as much about the situation as it did about `A'isha. Ibn Sa'd described how `A'isha tended to the Prophet, aided him in ritual ablutions and was with him on his deathbed, how she was a virgin on her marriage and childless on her widowhood, and importantly, how the Angel Gabriel was involved in her life and her marriage. However with a century, al-Tabari's account of `A'isha's life was rather less glowing. In this account, she is no longer the most beloved, but also recognized as a potential source of conflict within the Islamic world; the work does not mention her father and does not clearly exonerate her for her possible adultery. However, neither work denies the importance of her as a transmitter of hadith. Spellberg argues this reflects the acceptance of this role for women in general in the period. Denied formal education and a role as an interpreter of hadith, women could contribute to the religious culture in this one area. While the Prophet had denied any difference between Muslim men and women, the men of Medieval Islam clearly did differentiate, and used `A'isha and her legacy as a means to set women apart.

The issue of `A'isha's possible adultery is a fierce point of contention in the Muslim world, and Spellberg considers this next. Once again, interpretation divides between Sunni and Shia Muslims: the former see her exoneration proof of her special status, the latter do not accept her innocence and use Sunni acceptance of it as proof of the moral superiority of their own vision of Islam. The accusation affected not only `A'isha, but Spellberg contends, but also all Muslim women. How Muslim men viewed the accusation further brings insight into male issues of sexual control of women and personal and tribal honor as well as insight into religious-political debate. Spellberg examines accounts of the accusation and Sunni

and Shia interpretations: the means by which Shia justified their continued rejection of her innocence in the face of Qu'ranic absolution and used the allegation to slander the entire Sunni community; the refutation of Shia claims by the Sunni. Indeed, such passionate defenses of `A'isha's honor became a centerpiece of medieval Islamic writing. These interpretations have continued through the centuries and continue to be a source of contention in the Muslim world.

`A'isha was not merely a wife of Muhammad, but also a political player in the early Islamic *umma* and her example has informed Islamic opinion in subsequent centuries regarding gender and politics. `A'isha married politically, involved herself in the accession of her father and vigorously opposed Ali's accession as fourth caliph. Spellberg discusses how `A'isha's actions have had an effect on the role of women in Islamic political life, arguing that criticism of `A'isha reflects not only discomfort with female participation in what has been a traditionally male-dominated society but also ambivalence towards her role in the first Islamic civil war. Naturally, the Shia vigorously decry `A'isha's actions, but even the Sunni attitude is negative, albeit less so, and placing much of the blame on her male conspirators and having her later regret her actions. They thus emphasize the obedience and passive place of women in Islamic society. Spellberg further argues that writers equated the moral trial – *fitna* – associated with the sexuality of women to the *fitna* surrounding the civil war. Women are causes of strife, just as `A'isha was a cause of strife, and should be prevented from political roles in society. As Islamic political theory progressed through the centuries, so to did interpretations of `A'isha's legacy emphasized not her exalted place in Islamic history, but rather the inherent dangers in her feminine nature to strengthen existing arguments in favor of male dominance.

Finally, Spellberg considers `A'isha as an exemplar for Islamic women. While Shia reject `A'isha as such a role model in favor of Fatima, the Sunni look to `A'isha as well as Fatima and Khadija to provide paradigms for all women, each with a somewhat different slant. Spellberg

describes both early and later sources that have Khadija as a resolute mother of the Islamic people; Fatima as the beloved daughter, mistress of the women of the world and mother of martyrs, in addition to sources on `A'isha herself. She also considers comparisons between `A'isha and Maryam, mother of Jesus. These interpretations fluctuate in time with the needs of the Islamic community for the different forms of female excellence.

Spellberg has written a very detailed text, albeit one which tends to complexity and some repetition in places. Her arguments are thorough and compelling, bringing to light the relationship between conceptions of `A'isha and attitudes towards women in the evolving Islamic world. As such, she provides an interesting insight into a particular aspect of Islamic culture. In particular, she shows the pivotal role of `A'isha in the conceptions of Islamic community and in differentiating between the Sunni and Shia traditions. Spellberg has clearly written the text with academics in mind: it is most appropriate for scholars of Islamic history and culture, including graduate and senior undergraduate students.

Spellberg uses a wide variety of sources, both written and visual. While she refers to the Qu'ran and the hadith, she uses the biographical dictionaries of the third century AH onwards to illuminate much of her argument. These primary sources are extremely important in themselves to reflect attitudes to `A'isha and are in themselves central to her argument. Her analysis of the Ottoman imagery of `A'isha and Fatima is very interesting and she has a strong grasp of later sources and secondary works that together cement her argument.

D.A. Spellberg has written an interesting work that focuses not upon the biography of `A'isha, wife of the Prophet, but upon her continuing legacy in the Islamic world. Her examination of the writings surrounding `A'isha and the events of her life, set within the context of the times in which they were written, provide an notable perspective not only on attitudes to women within the Muslim world, but also upon the differences and tensions within Muslim society as a whole.