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## CURRICULA

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## Constructing Gender Identities and Relations in a Mudejar Hortatory Sermon Addressed to Women\*

### Costruire identità di genere e relazioni in un sermone esortativo mudéjar indirizzato alle donne\*

#### *Abstract*

This article explores the construction of Muslim gender identities and gender relations as reflected in a unique unedited manuscript of Arabic hortatory sermons. The author/scribe Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Misārīmī was an Iberian Muslim preacher living in the Christian-ruled kingdom of Aragon in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The analysis compares al-Misārīmī's sermons on «the characteristics of pious ascetic men» and «the descriptions of devout religious women», which were addressed to audiences segregated according to their gender. The comparative analysis reveals significant gender distinctions in the way al-Misārīmī's upheld the male ascetic saints as models for his male audience versus his treatment of the devout female saints when preaching before an all-female audience. The article posits that Misārīmī's paradigms shift from a discourse of gender egalitarianism to one of "gender oppositionality," which subordinates women to men and reduces female piety to a wife's obedience to her husband, not only reflects the prevailing gender ideology of a traditionally male-dominated Muslim community. It also responds to the pragmatic social concerns of Aragonese Mudejar communities in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, due to the greater vulnerability of female members of a religious minority.

*Keywords:* Muslim hortatory preaching, medieval Islamic sermons, Islam and gender, gender egalitarianism, Mudejars.

#### *Riassunto*

Questo articolo esplora la costruzione delle identità di genere musulmane e le relazioni di genere come si riflettono in un manoscritto inedito unico di sermoni in arabo. L'autore/scriba Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Misārīmī era un predicatore musulmano iberico che viveva nel regno di Aragona governato dai cristiani all'inizio del XV secolo. L'analisi confronta i sermoni di al-Misārīmī su «le caratteristiche dei pii asceti» e «le descrizioni delle religiose devote», che erano rivolte a un pubblico segregato in base al genere. L'analisi comparativa rivela distinzioni di genere significative nel modo in cui al-Misārīmī sostenne i santi ascetici come modelli per il suo pubblico maschile, rispetto all'atteggiamento mostrato verso le sante devote quando predicavano davanti a un pubblico tutto femminile. L'articolo sostiene che i paradigmi di Misārīmī passano da un discorso di egualitarismo di genere a uno di "opposizione di genere", che subordina le donne agli uomini e riduce la pietà femminile all'obbedienza di una moglie al marito, rispecchiando l'ideologia di genere prevalente di una comunità musulmana tradizionalmente dominata dagli uomini. Esso, inoltre, riflette le preoccupazioni sociali pragmatiche delle comunità mudéjar aragonesi, fra la fine del XIV e l'inizio del XV secolo, relative alla maggiore vulnerabilità delle donne appartenenti a una minoranza religiosa.

*Parole chiave:* Predicazione musulmana, sermoni islamici medievali, Islam e genere, egualitarismo di genere, mudéjar.

And in our bygone times there were extremely devout women and worshipping widows who became famous for their virtue, good deeds, exclusive devotion to God, standing awake all night in prayer, and undertaking one fast after another just like those who achieved fame for their virtues during that past period from among the men who were mentioned in our previous preaching sessions.<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation comes from one of the sermons in a unique unedited Arabic manuscript, titled, *Kitāb Zād al-wā'iz wa-rawḍ al-ḥāfiẓ* (The book of the provisions for the hortatory preacher and the garden of the memorizer), which was composed and copied in the early fifteenth century by an Iberian Mudejar preacher named Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Misārīmī.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript is preserved in the Vatican Library and catalogued as Ms. Borg. ar. 130, and is dated Tuesday, 22 Rajab, 803 = August 3, 1401. It was one of several Arabic manuscripts acquired by the Vatican Library in the late seventeenth century from an erstwhile member of the Aragonese Morisco community—the Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity who were expelled from the Spanish kingdom in the early seventeenth. This increases the likelihood that al-Misārīmī was an Aragonese Mudejar. The Mudejars were the Iberian Muslim communities who chose to remain in the territories conquered by the Christians from the eleventh century onward. The conquest of Muslim Aragon was achieved in the first quarter of the twelfth century principally during the reign of Alfonso I «the Battler» (r. 1104-1134).<sup>3</sup>

In the above quotation al-Misārīmī alludes to the virtuous men whom he mentioned in his previous sermons to underscore that the women whom he will be speaking about in this sermon are just as pious and performed the same kinds of devotional practices as their male counterparts. A curious feature of this sermon, which is titled in the manuscript, «the description of the striving religious women and the obedience that is incumbent upon them (*ṣifāt al-mujtahidāt min al-nisā' wa-mā yalzamuhunna min al-ṭā'a*)»,<sup>4</sup> is that while the theme of spiritual gender egalitarianism features prominently in the first part of the homily, in the second part the preacher seemingly contradicts his own discourse by reinforcing a vision of «gender oppositionality»<sup>5</sup> that subordinates women to men and effectively reduces the sum total of female piety and religious obligations to a wife's obedience to her husband. My hypothesis is that al-Misārīmī's

\*An earlier version of this article was presented at the 23rd International Symposium of the Medieval Sermon Studies Society, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minneapolis, 15-19 July, 2022. Research for this article was conducted within the framework of the research project, «Writing Religious, Transcultural, Gendered Identities and Alterities in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean,» P. I. Linda G. Jones (Ref. no.: PGC2018-093472-B-C32 FEDER/MICIU/AEI, 01/01/2018-31/12/2022).

<sup>1</sup> Vatican City, *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* [=BAV], Borgiano arabo [=Borg. ar.], 130, f. 52v.

<sup>2</sup> BAV, Borg. ar., 130.

<sup>3</sup> M. L. LEDESMA RUBIO, *Estudios sobre los mudéjares de Aragón*, Centro de Estudios Mudéjares, Teruel 1996.

<sup>4</sup> BAV, Borg. ar., 130, f. 51r.

<sup>5</sup> A. DUDERJA-A. I. ALAK-K. HISSONG, *Islam and Gender: Major Issues and Debates*, Routledge, London and New York 2020, p. 25.



shift from a paradigm of gender egalitarianism to gender oppositionality reflects not only the prevailing gender ideology of a traditionally male-dominated Muslim community; it could also respond to the pragmatic social concerns of Aragonese Mudejar communities in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in which women in the public spaces were increasingly susceptible to kidnapping and enslavement, coerced prostitution, and religious conversion.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the liturgical sermon or oration (*khuṭba shar‘iyya*), which is an obligatory part of Muslim worship and has a fixed place in the rituals and liturgy for the canonical Friday communal worship and other feast days, the so-called «popular» hortatory preaching assembly was a voluntary affair.<sup>7</sup> Muslim jurists treated its performance and attendance as supererogatory acts of worship that, however spiritually meritorious, were not accorded the same obligatory status as the canonical *khuṭba*. Traditionally, Muslim hortatory preachers practiced asceticism (*zuhd*) or Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and the hortatory preaching assembly or «*majlis al-wa‘z*» often formed part of a larger ritual complex in which Sufi men would gather to perform their devotional practices. From the thirteenth century onward, the *majlis al-wa‘z* increasingly became a forum for the dissemination of certain ascetic-Sufi ideals, ethos, and emotional practices to the broader public.

Scholarship on the premodern Islamic hortatory preaching and storytelling assemblies has focused mainly on political issues, such as the social role of the «popular» hortatory preacher, the degree to which these preachers and storytellers challenged the authority of religious officials, and, to a lesser extent, on the rhetorical and narrative features of these sermons.<sup>8</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere, during the period of Islamic rule in al-Andalus (Muslim Iberia), it was common practice for liturgical preaching and hortatory preaching to be carried out by different persons, even if there is evidence that the same person occasionally delivered both types of sermons. This situation gradually changed under Christian rule. The immigration of members of the religious intelligentsia to Muslim-ruled lands, combined with the greater challenges to maintain and transmit the normative Islamic traditions led to the consolidation of multiple religious and legal positions within the hands of fewer individuals. In the

<sup>6</sup> C. VILLANUEVE MORTE, «Las mujeres mudéjares en Aragón. Balance y perspectivas», in M. S. CARRASCO URGOITI (ed.), *Actas X Simposio Internacional de Mudejarismo, Teruel, 14-15-16 septiembre 2005*, Centro de Estudios Mudéjares, Teruel 2007, pp. 513-578.

<sup>7</sup> L. G. JONES, *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, J. P. BERKEY, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 2001; J. PEDERSEN, *The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher*, in «Die Welt des Islams» 2 (1953), pp. 215-231; M. L. SWARTZ, «The Rules of the Popular Preaching in Twelfth-Century Baghdad, According to Ibn al-Jawzî», in G. MAKDISI-D. SOURDEL-J. SOURDEL-THOMINE (eds.), *Prédication et propagande au Moyen Âge, Islam, Byzance, Occident*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1983; and L. G. JONES, *Exhortatory Preachers in Medieval al-Andalus and the Maghreb*, in «Al-Qantara» 28.1 (2007), pp. 73-100.

prologue of the manuscript al-Misārīmī reveals that he was «pluriemployed»<sup>9</sup> as the official liturgical preacher (*khaṭīb*) and the hortatory preacher for his community. Yet, significantly, he placed the hortatory preacher (*wā'iḏ*) «at the head of the best religious scholars (*al-wā'iḏ 'alā ra's al-'ulamā' al-akhyār*)». As the liturgical and hortatory preacher al-Misārīmī had a privileged access to his community. Muslim preachers were «frontline agents who taught the masses» about their religious duties, morals, and ethics and shaped their notions regarding appropriate gender identities and roles.<sup>10</sup> The prologue suggests that al-Misārīmī was aware of his special responsibility as a hortatory preacher in ensuring the survival of the authoritative Islamic traditions in Christian-ruled Aragon, and this included Islam's gender ideology.

It is clear from al-Misārīmī's exclusive and consistent use of female pronouns and verbal forms that the sermon on «striving religious women» was preached before an all-female audience. What is less clear is whether the women of his community also attended the other thirty preaching assemblies. There is insufficient data from the Aragonese Mudejar or Christian primary sources to determine whether Mudejar women participated in these extra-canonical religious activities. We know from the hagiographic compendia compiled by Sufis such as the renowned Andalusī saint Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) that there were ascetic-Sufi women who devoted themselves exclusively to God, some of whom engaged in religious exhortation typically before groups of pious women, although there are a few notices of women preaching one-on-one to men. It should be remembered, however, that these women resided in territories under Muslim rule; for the reasons alluded to above, it is unlikely that Mudejar women would have carried on these traditions. This brings us to the understudied subject of the relationship between gender and premodern Islamic preaching. The scholarly neglect of hortatory preaching is largely due to the perennial controversies surrounding women attending these assemblies or preaching before mixed audiences, the non-existence of sermon texts by women preachers, and the fact that the extant hortatory sermons by male preachers typically treat generic topics such as the remembrance of God, the merits of performing the ritual prayer, and reminders of death and the last judgment, which do not provide substantive material for a study of gender.

Recent investigations by Linda G. Jones and Özgen Felek have shown, however, that hortatory sermons and preaching manuals do contain rich materials for the study of gender identities and relations. Jones's analysis of juridical and prosopographic data about female preachers in Arabic biographical and hagiographic compendia has uncovered data about pious women in al-Andalus, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Persia who held hortatory preaching sessions for women. Although none of their sermons

<sup>9</sup> On the multitasking of Mudejar 'ulamā', see K. MILLER, *Guardians of Islam Religious Authority and Muslim Communities of Late Medieval Spain*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, p. 135.

<sup>10</sup> Ö. FELEK, «The State of Research on Early-Modern Islamic Sermons in an Ottoman Context», in C. FERRERO HERNÁNDEZ-L.G. JONES (eds.), *Propaganda and (Un)covered Identities in Treatises and Sermons: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Premodern Mediterranean*, Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra 2020, pp. 153-168: 156-157.

survives, the geographical regions in which these women lived and preached suggest that female hortatory preaching was practiced across the Muslim world.<sup>11</sup> Jones and Felek's examinations of hortatory sermon collections and preaching manuals produced by men in Egypt and Iraq during the late Middle Ages and in early modern Ottoman Turkey, respectively, have yielded similar results in terms of the representations of women and male-female relationships. While both studies corroborate the prominence of the theme of the wife's duties and responsibilities toward the husband, which extols the traditional patriarchal hierarchical views of gender relations, they also examined Sufi and ascetic hortatory sermons that reflect images of male and female equality in terms of piety and devotion to God.<sup>12</sup>

The present article seeks to build upon this previous research by analyzing how Aḥmad al-Mīsārīmī's sermon on «the striving religious women and the obedience that is incumbent upon them» reflects the uneasy coexistence between gender oppositionality and gender equality within the Islamic authoritative traditions. Specifically, I will examine and attempt to account for the incongruities between the discourse of gender egalitarianism, which predominates in the first part of the sermon, and the discourse of gender oppositionality that prevails in the second half of the sermon. Toward this end my analysis draws inspiration from scholars of gender studies, For instance, Aisha Geissinger's approach to the Qur'anic exegetical traditions helps illuminate how the marginality of women is textually produced and sustained in al-Mīsārīmī's sermon.<sup>13</sup> When analyzing representations of women in male-authored texts, medievalist gender historians caution that we must beware of the author's gender identity and look beyond the description of a female character's actions or speech to discover what the male author intended to achieve by narrating the stories about these women to his target audience.<sup>14</sup> Although space does not permit a systematic comparison of this sermon with al-Mīsārīmī's other sermons on pious ascetic men, a brief consideration of relevant passages from one of the sermons will suffice to demonstrate how the preacher adjusted his messages depending on whether he was addressing a male or a female audience.

<sup>11</sup> L. G. JONES, «Medieval Islamic Preaching as a Resource for the Study of Gender and Islam», in C. FERRERO HERNÁNDEZ-L.G. JONES (eds.), *Propaganda and (Un)covered Identities in Treatises and Sermons: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Premodern Mediterranean*, Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra 2020, pp.139-151: 141-143.

<sup>12</sup> L. G. JONES, «Medieval Islamic Preaching», cit.; and Ö. FELEK, «The State of Research», cit.

<sup>13</sup> A. GEISSINGER, «Female Figures, Marginality, and Qur'anic Exegesis in Ibn al-Jawzī's *Šifat al-ṣafwa*», in N. REDA-Y. AMIN (eds.), *Islamic Interpretive Tradition and Gender Justice*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Chicago-London 2020, pp. 151-178.

<sup>14</sup> See the entries on Christianity and gender in J. BENNET-R. MAZO KARRAS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

## 1. Gender egalitarianism and female saintly authority

Al-Mīsārīmī dedicated sermons thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen to «the description of the pious men and the conduct of the ascetic men» (*ṣifāt al-ṣāliḥīn wa-siyar al-zāhidīn*) and sermon sixteen to «the striving religious women and the duties imposed upon them» (*ṣifat al-mujtahidāt min al-nisā' wa-mā yalzamuhunna min al-ṭā'āt*). As noted, I will not be discussing the sermons on pious men in detail in this article. For our purposes it suffices to note that all four sermons follow the same structure and contain the same homiletic elements. Each begins with the recitation of a Qur'anic verse, which provides the basis of the preacher's homiletic theme. This is followed by the doxological praises of God and liturgical blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad; a direct address to the audience using vocative expressions; the introduction of the main body of the sermon typically comprised of the preacher's own explanations and elaborations on the Qur'anic themes; narratives of exempla and anecdotes about the sayings and deeds of the pious ascetic men or the devout religious women, which take the form of quotations of the individual, often an alleged eyewitness, who originally transmitted the report about the saintly protagonist. These reports are introduced by the verbal phrase, «it was transmitted by» (*rawā 'an*), although al-Mīsārīmī does not cite his sources. The narratives section is followed by a second direct address to the audience, this time expressed in the form of exclamations reprimanding the «neglectful, sinful» men or women, imperatives warning about the consequences of committing specific sins and the fate of sinners, and interrogatives or rhetorical questions constructed to prompt the audience toward accepting the preacher's intended moral lesson. Finally, each sermon ends with direct exhortations toward piety and repentance.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Mīsārīmī began the sermon on striving religious women with the recitation of Qur'an 33:35:

God Almighty and sublime said, 'For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for sincere men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise – for them has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward'.<sup>16</sup>

This scriptural verse consistently employs gender inclusive language and grammar – Muslim men and women (*al-muslimūn wa-l-muslimāt*), believing men and women (*al-mu'minūn wa-l-mu'mināt*), etc. – to emphasize that God does not discrim-

<sup>15</sup> On the characteristic elements of hortatory sermons, see JINAN FEDHL AL-HAJAJ, *A Taxonomy of Behavioural Discourse: A Linguistic Investigation into the Strategies of Preaching in Moby Dick and Adam Bede*, in «Journal of the College of Arts. University of Basra» (2007), pp. 33-69: 46-56.

<sup>16</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, f. 52v.

inate according to gender, insofar as he imposes the same religious and moral duties upon men and women alike and he rewards or punishes them equally in accordance with their deeds. Al-Mīṣārīmī deliberately chose this verse for its explicit messages of spiritual gender equality. In his subsequent commentary on the meaning of this verse al-Mīṣārīmī quoted a hadith transmitted by Muhammad's wife Umm Salamah, which explains the circumstances in which this scriptural revelation occurred. Umm Salamah asked Muhammad, «Oh Messenger of God, why are men [always] mentioned in the Qur'an and the women are not mentioned»? Because this verse was reportedly revealed immediately in response to Umm Salamah's query, modern Muslim feminists have invoked it as proof of an original egalitarian ethos in Islam that was subsequently «hijacked» by misogynist male interpreters.<sup>17</sup> While it is debatable whether al-Mīṣārīmī fully subscribed to this egalitarian ethos, there is no doubt about his skillfulness in beginning his sermon by directly addressing the problem of female marginality as a strategy of *captatio benevolentiae* of his female audience.

In the direct address to the audience al-Mīṣārīmī reinforces the theme of gender egalitarianism by recounting that when God created humanity he originally «joined together men and women in plain and simple nudity on an equal level (*fī ṣa'īd wāḥid*) in humble submission (*khāshi'īn*) [to God]». He went to affirm that God imposed the same duties (*farāḍa*) upon women and men and promised them the same rewards or punishments for their deeds. As proof, al-Mīṣārīmī stated that in the early Muslim community there were pious faithful women «who became famous for their virtue, good deeds, exclusive devotion to God, standing awake in prayer all night, and undertaking one fast after another just like the men who were mentioned in our previous preaching assemblies».<sup>18</sup>

At this point in the sermon al-Mīṣārīmī narrated a succession of anecdotes about the prodigious deeds, acts of extraordinary piety, and sayings of famous ascetic women from the eastern Arab world who lived in the eighth and ninth centuries. The women featured include 'Ajrada al-'Amyā' (the blind woman), Ḥabība al-'Adawiyya, 'Afayra al-'Ābida (the slave woman), Sha'wāna al-'Ābida, Mu'ādha, as well as several anonymous servant girls (*jawārin*; s. *jāriya*). In my analysis of how al-Mīṣārīmī represented these devout women to his early fifteenth-century all-female audience, I apply the approaches of three feminist scholars. Ruth Mazo Karras cautions that when reading texts authored by men about women, we must interrogate not «only who is speaking but from whose perspective» and look beyond the description of a female character's actions or speech to discover what the male author intended to achieve by narrating the stories about these women to his target audience. Afsaneh Najmabadi's discussion of the «internal fractures» in the construction of maleness and femaleness illuminates

<sup>17</sup> See F. MERNISSI, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. M. J. Lakeland, Perseus Books, Cambridge [MA] 1991, p. 118; and A. DUDERJA-A. I. AL-AK-HISSONG, *Islam and Gender*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, f. 52r.

how the author – or in our case, how al-Mīṣārīmī intervened in the narratives to highlight and promote what he considered the ideal femininity by ignoring, eliding, or subverting certain characteristics of female authority and autonomy and gender egalitarianism that contravened the ideology of gender oppositionality that he sought to transmit to his all-female audience. For her part, Aisha Geissinger argues that «the marginality of...female figures» «is not an incidental or accidental literary feature», rather, «it is an important aspect of their portrayal» that should be analyzed in order to understand how «the marginality of women is textually produced and sustained».<sup>19</sup>

An essential component of my argument is that al-Mīṣārīmī achieves the shift in his discourse from gender egalitarianism to gender oppositionality by marginalizing the striving religious women as models for his all-female audience. The marginality of these women is textually produced and sustained in al-Mīṣārīmī's sermonary in four ways. First: through the inclusion of only one sermon specifically about and addressed exclusively to women compared to the three sermons on the characteristics of the pious and ascetic men. (As mentioned, we know this because of the consistent use of female-gendered language: the plural feminine suffixes and pronouns, etc.). Second, male priority over women is established within the structure of the sermonary through the placement of this single sermon devoted to women *after* the three sermons on ascetic males. Third, a close reading of the anecdotes about these pious women of bygone times reveals that al-Mīṣārīmī has made editorial choices that elide, ignore, or subvert certain aspects of the religious and gender identity of these women to suit his own gender ideology. Finally, a cursory comparison of the post-narrative direct exhortations in the sermon addressed to women with those in the sermons on pious ascetic men suffices to demonstrate that al-Mīṣārīmī deliberately refrained from exhorting his all-female audience to follow the example of these early Muslim pious women because he did not consider them to be suitable models of femininity and female piety for his female audience. By contrast, he explicitly urged his all-male audience to imitate and model their conduct on the pious ascetic male heroes.

To illustrate al-Mīṣārīmī's gender-ideologically driven editorial choices I will focus on three of the narratives on the striving religious women. As noted, al-Mīṣārīmī does not cite his sources; he merely introduces each anecdote with the verbal phrase, «it was reported that/about/by» such-and-such a person. Al-Mīṣārīmī includes several anecdotes about women acclaimed for their charismatic religious weeping, one of whom was a woman named Sha'wāna who hailed from the Iraqi port city of al-Ubulla.<sup>20</sup> He introduces the notice stating,

<sup>19</sup> A. GEISSINGER, «Female Figures», cit., p. 152.

<sup>20</sup> On Sha'wāna and other medieval Muslim ascetic female weepers, see R. E. CORNELL, *Rabi'a From Narrative to Myth: The Tropics of Identity of a Muslim Woman Saint*, Ph.D. Thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2013, pp. 95-98.

it was reported that Yaḥyā ibn Biṣṭām and a male companion of his came to Sha‘wāna to speak to her about showing more compassion for herself. They said to her, ‘If only you would have more compassion for yourself and curtail [your crying] (*law rafaḳti ‘alā nafsiki wa-ḡtaṣarti*), this would give you more strength to attain your desire’. [Al-Biṣṭām] said, ‘She wept and replied: I swear by God, I would like to cry until no tears are left. Such a shower of blood would I then weep until no drop of blood remained in any part of my body’.<sup>21</sup>

As presented, the dialogue between Yaḥyā and Sha‘wāna tacitly acknowledges her spiritual authority over her male interlocutors since she does not defer to their counsel to lessen her tears but rather ups the ante by articulating her yearning to shed tears of blood in quasi-martyrdom fashion. And yet al-Mīṣārīmī omits an important detail from the beginning of Yaḥyā ibn Biṣṭām’s testimony that appears in the hagiographic accounts compiled by al-Sulamī<sup>22</sup> and Ibn al-Jawzī.<sup>23</sup> According to their versions the first thing Yaḥyā said was that «I used to frequent the *majlis* (preaching session) of Sha‘wāna a lot and I used to observe what she would do to herself (regarding her devotional weeping)».<sup>24</sup> This detail is important because it establishes that Sha‘wāna was a hortatory preacher and that she preached publicly before mixed audiences who included non-*maḥram* men (men whom Islamic law forbids women from interacting with in order to avoid sexual temptation). According to al-Sulamī, Sha‘wāna’s mixed audience included male ascetic renunciants (*zuḥḥād*), worshippers (*‘ubbād*), and men who achieved proximity to God (*mutaḡarribūn*), female practitioners of self-mortification (*mujāhidāt*), self-disciplinarians (*mujtahidāt*) who imposed a regimen of voluntary ascetic and pietistic practices upon themselves, charismatic religious weepers (*bākiyāt*), and female inducers of weeping (*mubkiyyāt*). Although Sha‘wāna included herself among the category of self-disciplinarians (*mujtahidāt*), al-Sulamī noted that she was famous for her charismatic tears and her ability to make others cry.<sup>25</sup> I believe that al-Mīṣārīmī deliberately omitted the information about Sha‘wāna’s public preaching assemblies and her charismatic ability to make her audience cry because this display of female spiritual authority and autonomy contravened the traditional gender norms of his society that favored the heightened seclusion of women, demanded women’s deference to male authority, and censured female preaching.

Al-Mīṣārīmī’s omission of any direct references to the unmarried status and celibacy of these female ascetics is the most significant editorial departure from the hagiographic accounts that exposes his preferred gender ideology, which extols the figure of

<sup>21</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, f. 52r.

<sup>22</sup> A. R. AL-SULAMĪ, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-muta‘abbidāt aṣ-ṣūfiyyāt*, tran. R. E. Cornell, Fons Vitae, Louisville [KY] 1999.

<sup>23</sup> ‘A. R. IBN AL-JAWZĪ, *Ṣifāt al-ṣafwa*, ed. A. b. ‘A. al-Nashir, Dār al-Ḥadīth, Cairo 2000.

<sup>24</sup> AL-SULAMĪ, *Early Sufi Women*, cit., p. 301; IBN AL-JAWZĪ, *Ṣifāt al-ṣafwa*, cit., vol. II, p. 263.

<sup>25</sup> AL-SULAMĪ, *Early Sufi Women*, cit., p. 97.

the obedient wife as the ideal of normative femininity. As Rkia Cornell points out, there is a long history of voluntary «vocational celibacy» in Islam. By this she means that while «celibacy [was] not a majoritarian practice for ascetics and [was] not sanctioned by either law or scripture», it was tolerated and «accepted as part of the ascetic life but was not seen as fundamental to the practice of asceticism itself». Cornell refers to this type of celibacy as «vocational» «because it is based on individual choice and views marriage and family as impediments to the ascetic's principal vocation, which is devotion and service to God».<sup>26</sup> Although al-Mīṣārīmī does not state so explicitly, we may infer from the following notices about the ninth-century Basran ascetic Ḥabība al-'Adawiyya and an anonymous ascetic Sufi women that both women were either unmarried or practiced vocational celibacy. Regarding Ḥabība al-'Adawiyya Mīṣārīmī quoted the following anecdote:

It was reported that after the ritual night prayer, Ḥabība used to stand on a balcony and (continue) praying, saying, 'My God, the stars have set; eyes are closed in sleep; kings have barred their gates. But your gate is open: every lover is alone with his beloved (*kull ḥabīb bi-ḥabībīhi*) and this is my place [lit. (mystical) station] in your presence'. At the break of dawn, she would say, 'O God, this night has slipped away and this day has unveiled itself. If only I knew: Has my night pleased you, so that I might rejoice?'

The nocturnal setting of Ḥabība's prayers and her statement that while other lovers are alone with their beloved at night, her place is in the presence of her beloved God evoke the trope of the ascetic or mystic as a lover of God. As Rkia Cornell observes, early ascetics envisaged a four-stage path of asceticism, progressing from worldly renunciation (*zuhd*), to the fear of God (*khawf*), to the desire for heaven (*al-shawq ilā al-janna*), culminating in the fourth stage of love of God (*al-maḥabba li-Llāh*). Progress along the ascetic path required not so much rejecting the material world as detaching oneself from it,<sup>27</sup> and this includes detaching oneself from the bonds of marriage and familial relations.

Another facet of ascetic or Sufi love of God is the exclusive reliance upon and trust in him. This is seen in the anecdote about an encounter between the Egyptian Sufi preacher Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. ca. 860) and an anonymous Sufi woman:

It was reported from Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī that he said, 'I came upon a woman wearing a woolen cloak and in her hand was a copper pot. She said: Who are you? And he noted that she was not afraid [of being alone with] him. And I said to her: A strange man who is alone. Then she said: Do you think a woman alone with God is alone?'

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127. Cornell is arguing against the claims of other scholars such as Margaret Smith, who believed that Islamic celibacy was directly influenced by Christian practices.

<sup>27</sup> R. E. CORNELL, *Rabi'a From Narrative to Myth*, cit., pp. 109-111.



In this anecdote the marital status of the anonymous woman is less significant than the fact that she was alone in the company of a non-*maḥram* male. Muslim religious and social conventions dictate that she should have been «afraid of being alone with him» due to the legal penalties attached to the sin of fornication and the attendant social stigma of losing one's honor. Yet the woman's rhetorical question, «Do you think a woman alone with God is alone?» defies social conventions by not deferring to Dhū al-Nūn's authority as a man and as a Sufi leader and instead reveals her superior gnosis and God-consciousness by showing that those truly aware of God's omnipresence are never alone.

Al-Mīsārīmī's motivations for downplaying the unmarried status of celibacy of these ascetic women are obvious: they do not provide suitable models of female piety and ideal gender relations that he wished to inculcate in his all-female audience. This will become especially apparent when we consider the second part of al-Mīsārīmī's sermon when he transitions to speaking about the duties incumbent upon striving religious women. But first, it is necessary to take a brief detour to compare how al-Mīsārīmī treats the topic of vocational celibacy in his sermons on pious ascetic men. A brief example from sermon thirteen will suffice to illustrate the differentiated gender ideology. This sermon begins with the recitation of Qur'anic verse 24:37, which emphasizes male detachment from worldly matters and exclusive devotion to God:

[God's] praises are sung there (in the mosque) morning and evening, by men whom neither trade nor selling diverts them from the remembrance of God (with heart and tongue), nor from performing the *ṣalāt*, nor from giving the *zakāt*. They fear a Day when hearts and eyes will be overturned (from the horror of the torment of the Day of Resurrection). May God reward them according to the best of their deeds.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas the Qur'anic verse refers specifically to men's detachment from the realm of work – trade and selling –, in his commentary on the verse al-Mīsārīmī intimates that men must also divert their attention from female companionship, sexual relations, marriage, and familial responsibilities:

[...] those men have abandoned the mundane world...and taken piety (*al-taqwā*) as (their only) companion (*ṣāhibān*), men who impose (additional) fasting upon themselves, who cry many (pious) tears, who prolong their ritual prayers, who lower their gaze to the ground to avoid the sinful passions, who only rely upon God as their ballast...those men who spend their days fasting and their nights kneeling in prayer, who flee from the sinful passions, and who prefer solitude.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> BAV, Borg. ar., 130, f. 43r.

<sup>29</sup> BAV, Borg. ar., 130, f. 44r.

The allusions to taking piety as their only companion, fleeing from the sinful passions, and the preference for solitude portray the ideal pious ascetic male rejecting the company of women and marital life. This is made explicit in one of the many sayings of famous pious male ascetics that al-Mīṣārīmī quoted in this sermon: It was reported «from ‘Ābir b. ‘Abd al-Qays that he said, ‘The mundane world has four compensations (*ajran*): money, women, food, and sleep. As for women and money, I have no need for either of them (*lā ḥājatan lī bi-himā*)’».<sup>30</sup>

The objective of this brief comparison was to illustrate that al-Mīṣārīmī’s depictions of pious women and men are virtually identical in fulfilling their religious devotions – staying awake all night in prayer, imposing additional prolonged fasts, charismatic religious weeping, and so forth, which corroborates his discourse of spiritual gender egalitarianism. Yet the gender disparities emerge in the treatment of the relationship between piety and marital status, sexuality, and celibacy. As we have seen, al-Mīṣārīmī avoided any explicit references to the vocational celibacy and unmarried status of the ascetic women. By contrast, the quotation attributed to the ascetic ‘Ābir b. ‘Abd al-Qays boasting of his ability to dispense with women and wealth highlights male sexual renunciation and detachment from women and familial responsibilities as signals of ideal ascetic masculinity.

## 2. From gender egalitarianism to gender oppositionality

Although al-Mīṣārīmī did not cite any of the sources he used in composing the exempla narrative section of his sermons, he most likely derived his material from the hortatory sermon collections and hagiographic works he listed in the prologue. Islamic hagiography serves several purposes: stories of the extraordinary deeds of pious male and female «friends of God (*awliyā’ Allāh*)» seek to inspire and deepen faith in God’s omnipotence and provide proof of the sanctity of ascetic and Sufi practitioners. For broader audiences they also serve the ethical purpose of «teach[ing] lessons and motivat[ing] listeners to mend their ways».<sup>31</sup> While the seemingly superhuman, extraordinary, and fantastical deeds of certain saintly individuals were clearly beyond the capabilities of the masses and could «inspire no more than distant admiration for the Friends they depict», others figures provided more accessible models of pious behavior that could be imitated by the average person.<sup>32</sup> Hortatory preachers readily incorporated such materials into their sermons. We must therefore ask what al-Mīṣārīmī’s purpose was in narrating these anecdotes. Did he intend for them to serve as models for his audience? If so, what are

<sup>30</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, f. 44r.

<sup>31</sup> J. RENARD, *Friends of God: Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servitude*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> RENARD, *Friends of God*, cit., p. 8.

the implications with respect to the transmission of notions about gender identities and relations?

As noted in the outline of the structure of these sermons, after narrating the exempla of the deeds and sayings of the pious men and women, al-Mīsarīmī directly addressed his audience, first by recriminating them and calling them «neglectful, heedless, or sinful» women or men and then exhorting them to repent and rectify their conduct. These direct exhortations reveal al-Mīsarīmī's ultimate homiletic goals in narrating these stories. They also tell us a great deal about his gender ideology. In all three of the sermons on pious ascetic men al-Mīsarīmī consistently exhorts his all-male audience to emulate the examples and conduct of the saintly men featured in the narratives. The post-exempla exhortations in sermon fourteen will suffice to illustrate:

Oh you people of much neglect and manifold sins [...]. How long of a respite will you have in this mundane world with its vanities?! [...] Beware of the conduct of the neglectful men, think about standing before the Lord of the worlds (on Judgment Day), and imitate the path of those [early] pious male ascetics and be followers of their conduct, treading in their footsteps [...]. Oh you men neglectful of the obedience of your Lord, you men who give in to your passions! Think about those (early pious Muslim ascetic men) and cling to fasting, deny yourselves sleep, repent to God before your death... Oh men, beware of neglect, desiring to prolong life (in this world), and mundane occupations with the world and prolonging hope in this world. Model your lives on those pious men, devote yourselves exclusively to piety... increase the number of your pious deeds before the End comes. For then neither your wealth nor your children will be of benefit to you: the only thing that will matter are the good deeds you carried out.<sup>33</sup>

All the sermons addressed to the men contain similar recriminations of their neglect and sinfulness followed by direct exhortations to «model», «imitate», and «follow» the conduct of the early Muslim ascetics, explicitly referencing such practices as extended prayers, prolonged fasts, sleep deprivation, religious weeping, and detachment from «the mundane occupations with the world». Significantly, the latter entails not only detachment from material wealth but also from the *'ayyāl*, meaning one's dependents, i.e., wives, children, and other family members, as we see in al-Mīsarīmī's final warning, «For then neither your wealth nor your children will be of benefit to you: the only thing that will matter are the good deeds you enacted». The saying echoes the Qur'anic Surah 60: 3: «Neither your relatives nor your children will be of any benefit to you on Judgment Day. He (God) will decide between you all (on your merit alone)». Hence al-Mīsarīmī's conception of ideal ascetic masculinity completely marginalizes the role of women and the relationship between the two genders and makes manly piety and salvation depend exclusively on the direct relationship between man and God.

<sup>33</sup> BAV, Borg. ar., 130, ff. 49r-49v.

By contrast, the continuity that we see between the narratives about the early pious ascetic men and al-Mīṣārīmī's exhortations to the men in his audience is missing entirely from the sermon addressed to women. Where we would expect to find exhortations to the women in his audience to «imitate the example» of the early female ascetics he mentioned, instead we read the following:

O you neglectful, heedless, careless, sinful women! Where are you [in comparison with] those devout women?! So fear God and obey your husbands: perhaps you will [reach] the higher ranks (in proximity to God). Beware of adorning and displaying yourselves ostentatiously, of lying, of abandoning your religious duties, and of disobeying your husbands: For God has promised the good righteous women among you a great reward and he has promised the sinful women among you a painful torment.<sup>34</sup>

The difference between al-Mīṣārīmī's upholding of the saintly pious ascetic males as models for his all-male audience and his marginalization of the devout religious women as exemplars for his all-female audience is patent. His directives to his all-male audience to model their conduct on the male ascetics of the early period of Islamic history are especially intriguing if we recall that al-Mīṣārīmī and his congregation were Mudejars residing in the Christian kingdom of Aragon at the dawn of the fifteenth century. By this time, the Mudejars faced increasing restrictions upon the free practice of their religion and the autonomy of certain religio-legal institutions and officials was increasingly compromised by greater interference from the Christian royal, feudal, and ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>35</sup> While various scholars have drawn attention to the Mudejars' attraction toward ascetic-Sufi writings, practices, and ethos,<sup>36</sup> al-Mīṣārīmī's exhortation to his all-male audience to «model their lives on those pious men» hints that there may have been a community of Aragonese male ascetic renunciants who devoted themselves exclusively to God by performing supererogatory prayers and fasting and practicing voluntary celibacy.

At the same time, one infers from al-Mīṣārīmī's exhortations to his all-female audience that he did not consider the life and practices of the devout ascetic women of bygone times to be suitable models of piety for the women of his contemporary

<sup>34</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, f. 54r.

<sup>35</sup> E. SARASA, *Sociedad y conflictos sociales en Aragón. Siglos XIII-XV*, Siglo veintiuno editores, Mexico 1981; M. B. BASAÑEZ, *La aljama sarracena de Huesca en el siglo XIV*, Consejo superior de investigaciones científicas, Barcelona 1989; and M. T. FERRER I MALLOL, *La frontera amb l'Islam en el segle XIV. Cristians i sarrains al País Valencia*, CSIC, Barcelona 1988.

<sup>36</sup> See the texts listed in I. HOFMAN VANNUS, *Historias religiosas musulmanas en el manuscrito mudéjar-morisco de Ocaña: edición y estudio*, Ph.D. Thesis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid 2001; P. LONGÁS BARTIBÁS, *Vida religiosa de los moriscos*, Editorial Universidad de Granada, Granada 1948; and X. CASASSAS CANALS, «Devoción y sufismo en los manuscritos aljamiado-moriscos», in A. GONZÁLEZ COSTA-M. A. AMINA-LÓPEZ ANGUIA (eds.), *Historia del sufismo en al-Andalus*, Almuzara, Córdoba 2009, pp. 207-237.

audience. The rhetorical question and immediate response that he offers them, «Where are you [in comparison with] these devout women?! So fear God and obey your husbands: perhaps you will [reach] the higher ranks (in proximity to God)» marginalizes and effectively nullifies the early devout Muslim female worshippers as viable models for the Mudejar women through a discourse that relegates the former to the remote past and insinuates that their prodigious devotional practices could not be imitated by the latter. Al-Mīsārīmī's response displaces and reduces the sum total of the extraordinary feats of worship – staying awake all night in prayer, prolonged voluntary fasting, weeping copious tears of devotion, and so forth to obedience of one's husband.

Since al-Mīsārīmī could not invoke the aforementioned Ḥabība al-'Adawiyya, Sha'wāna, the anonymous Sufi or other ascetic women mentioned in the sermon as models of wifely obedience he had to resort to another source – a fragment from the famous account of the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous Night Journey in which the archangel Gabriel guided him on a tour of heaven and hell. The passage cited relates Muhammad's descriptions and his subsequent explanations to his daughter Fatima of the gendered torments awaiting women in hell. For instance, the woman hanging from her hair had failed to cover her head from strange men. The woman hanging from her tongue had answered back to her husband and insulted him. The woman hanging from her breasts was an adulteress. A blinded woman hanging upside down from her feet had left her house without her husband's permission.<sup>37</sup>

According to Roberto Tottoli, in the earliest versions of Muhammad's Night Journey, which date to the late ninth century, the correlation between the gender of the sinner and their sin and punishment is less pronounced. With the exception of women who commit adultery and subsequently kill their infants, all the other inhabitants of hell whom Muhammad saw had committed sins that were gender neutral: «Those who commit adultery, those who commit usury», those who consume the property of orphans, and those who slander others.<sup>38</sup> In the late tenth century a Shi'i text compiled by Ibn Babawayh (d. 992) appeared which included eleven categories of female sinners and their respective punishments, which are directly correlated to marital relations:

Women who did not cover their head to conceal it from men other than their husbands; who irritated their husbands; who abstained from marital relations; who went out without their husbands' permission; who beautified themselves for other people; who did not clean themselves from impurity; who bore children from adultery and imposed them upon their husbands; who did not cover themselves from men; who acted as matchmakers; who slandered and lied; and who sang and mourned.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, ff. 54r-54v.

<sup>38</sup> R. TOTTOLI, «Tours of Hell», in C. J. GRUBER-F. S. COLBY (eds.), *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'raj Tales*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2010, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Ibn Babawayh's version influenced others, including the widely disseminated recension by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (d. 1294). These later versions of the Night Journey were incorporated into hagiographic writings and collections of hortatory sermons and stories,<sup>40</sup> which were disseminated throughout the Muslim world, including the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>41</sup> I have not been able to determine which text al-Mīṣārīmī consulted, however it is clear that he drew inspiration from this later material, which inserts a final threat and promise issued by the Prophet Muhammad, «Woe unto a woman who makes her husband angry and blessed be the woman with whom her husband is satisfied»,<sup>42</sup> for he added his own threats and promises, which included the following:

Any woman who rejects her husband in his bed will be raised up blind and dumb at the Gathering (resurrection) [...]. Any woman who honors her husband, makes his life pleasant, and forgives him God will grant her untold blessings and remove from her all her sins. Any woman who washes her husband's hair and trims it or his nails, God will grant her a great reward and accept her ritual prayer and fasts [...]. Any woman who washes the hands of her husband or prepares water for him to do his ablutions will receive untold rewards in the gardens of paradise [...]. And so fear God with respect to your husbands, and obey God through them, and help them (in fulfilling) their religious (obligations) and in their mundane life.<sup>43</sup>

The above passages confirm the decisive shift in female religious agency: The devout ascetic women of al-Mīṣārīmī's narratives who established direct intimate relationships with God through their obligatory and supererogatory religious practices, who challenged normative patriarchal conventions by meeting and speaking with non-*mahram* men, and defied masculine religious authority have been relegated to distant places in the remote past even though there were hagiographic works written by Andalus in the thirteenth century, which included anecdotes about ascetic and Sufi women leading autonomous pious lives and exhibiting spiritual authority over men in ways remarkably similar to those eighth- and ninth-century female ascetics from Iraq.<sup>44</sup> It is impossible to know whether al-Mīṣārīmī and his Aragonese Mudejar community were aware of these religious currents taking place in the southern regions of Iberia still under Muslim rule. What is clear is that he made a deliberate choice to marginalize the Islamic discourse of gender egalitarianism in favor of promoting a patriarchal gender

<sup>40</sup> F. S. COLBY, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn 'Abās Ascension Discourse*, State University of New York, Albany 2008.

<sup>41</sup> For a list of religious texts produced and or transmitted in Muslim Iberia, see M. FIERRO, «Ascetismo. Mística. Obras de contenido religioso en general», in *Historia de los Autores y Transmisores Andalusíes (HATA)*, EEA CSIC, Madrid 2019, cap. V, <https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/enlaces.php> (last consultation: 26/09/2022).

<sup>42</sup> R. TOTTOLI, «Tours of Hell», cit., p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> *BAV*, Borg. ar., 130, ff.54v-55r.

<sup>44</sup> IBN 'ARABI, *Los sufís de Andalucía*, trans. D. García Valverde, Editorial Sirio, Málaga 1990, pp. 162-168, 186-188.

cosmology in which the wife's intimate domestic gestures of devotion and affection toward her husband are represented as a more easily attainable means for women to obey God and receive the «untold rewards of paradise» than the strenuous ascetic path of nightly prayers, perpetual fasting and weeping of the past ascetic women.

### Conclusion

The gender disparities between al-Mīṣārīmī's exhortations to his male audience and those to his female audience corroborate the observations of feminist scholars regarding premodern Islam's gendered and hierarchical cosmology of human existence in which «men have direct, unfettered access to God», while «women's relationship to God is mediated by the men» – husbands – to whom they owe obedience. When addressing his female audience directly, al-Mīṣārīmī deliberately marginalized and shifted the focus away from the unmarried celibate worshippers (*'ābidāt*) who spent all day fasting and all night praying, wept incessantly, and interacted with and exhibited spiritual authority over non-*maḥram* men because these women were not appropriate models of feminine piety for the Mudejar women living under Christian rule in early fifteenth-century Aragon. By delimiting ideal femininity and feminine piety to the figure of the obedient wife al-Mīṣārīmī effectively denied any female subjectivity independent of the hierarchical gender relationship. By contrast, in his sermons to the men, al-Mīṣārīmī constructed an ideal manliness that emphasized detachment from wives and family through the theological discourse that they are irrelevant, if not an impediment to ascetic masculinity and male salvation. While the message to his male audience is that «neither your wealth nor your children will be of benefit to you on Judgment Day», the message to his female audience is that *only* thing that will be of benefit to you on Judgment Day will be the degree of your obedience to your husband and the extent to which you pleased him.

