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Masooda Bano is Professor of Development Studies at the University of Oxford and a Senior Golding Fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford. She has held numerous prestigious research awards, including European Research Council Starting and Advance grants. Bano is the author of *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* (2017) and has edited several volumes on Islamic educational institutions in Muslim-majority countries as well as in the West.

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Edited by

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Preface

As scholars, our disciplinary backgrounds inevitably shape our perceptions of significant questions within our field and the methods deemed suitable for their exploration. A notable entry point for research on women and Islam within Western academia centres on textual reinterpretation. This approach is particularly understandable for Muslim women scholars situated in Gender Studies or Feminist Studies departments, highlighting a clear avenue for the feminist reinterpretation of Islamic texts. Recent years have seen the emergence of compelling scholarship in this domain, to which this volume offers exposure. Drawing from my expertise as a social scientist with a focus on ethnographic studies, I have, however, increasingly come to emphasize the importance of studying lived experiences of Muslim women. Having held multiple substantial comparative research grants has afforded me the opportunity to conduct extensive fieldwork across various Muslim-majority countries and within Muslim diasporas in the West. Throughout my interactions with Muslim women, I have observed a steadfast defence of Islam, noting their profound devotional love for God, the strength derived from their spiritual connections, and the sense of beauty, happiness, and confidence these relationships foster – aiding them in maximizing life's joys and navigating its challenges.

Furthermore, I have documented their justifications for Islamic gender norms, as elucidated by classical Islamic scholarship, which continues to influence religious practices in Muslim societies. These women also critique the perceived limitations of Western feminism, arguing that it renders women more vulnerable than their own positions. I might be one of the few scholars to have documented this evidence across multiple fieldwork sites, but, as we will see in this volume, the growing number of ethnographic studies involving Muslim women is showing that these observations are no longer unique. Beginning with Lila Abu-Lughod's groundbreaking research in the 1980s, which highlighted the agency of even impoverished Bedouin women in Egypt, and

significantly advanced by the 2005 publication of Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety*, focusing on the pietistic agency of mosque-going Muslim women, we have witnessed a consistent increase in studies documenting the agency of Muslim women. These studies explore not only how Muslim women navigate daily life but also their engagement with faith. The beliefs of these women, and the reasons behind these beliefs, are seen as the result of dynamic, reflective processes, rather than merely products of socialization or false consciousness.

This Companion volume aims, on the one hand, to faithfully capture the dynamic intellectual agency of female scholars, most of whom are of Muslim origin, in providing a feminist interpretation of foundational Islamic texts, namely the Qur'an and hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), as well as the broader body of classical Islamic scholarship. On the other hand, it places equal emphasis on highlighting the necessity of understanding Muslim women's experiences by first appreciating why traditional Islamic interpretations of gender norms, which offer a distinct logic of equality different from that demanded by the Western liberal feminist framework, continue to resonate with the majority of Muslim women. We must recognize that for many believing women, particularly those from well-educated and economically affluent backgrounds, this acceptance is not the result of patriarchal structures, but a conscious choice driven by conviction in the logic of an alternative worldview. In this worldview, the spiritual aspect of human life is significant, and gender complementarity – rather than equality, in recognition of biological differences between genders – is seen as logically appealing. This perspective is something Western feminist theory, with its focus on socialization over biology as the primary cause of gender division in societies, is currently reluctant to consider.

In my experience, many educated Muslim women draw on scientific evidence of gender differences to defend the logic behind the Islamic proposed division of labour between genders. This perspective is also shared by prominent Islamic scholars in the West, such as Tim Winter and Hamza Yusuf, who have a strong following among young, university-going Muslim men and women. Recognizing these divisions is not seen as inherently limiting female agency, as it is argued that Islam allows for considerable scope for negotiation between couples to develop a balance that suits them best. Therefore, when evaluating the fairness of Islamic dictates on gender norms against Western feminist ideals, we must be open to allowing space for the critique of those ideals themselves, based on one's initial assumptions about what constitutes the most important human values. This volume introduces the reader to cutting-edge

scholarship on women and Islam, in the hope that it will inspire both graduate and undergraduate students to engage more actively with this field. It aims to help early career researchers identify the most intellectually and socially relevant questions for future research, serve as a useful resource for senior scholars teaching about this subject, and enable ordinary readers to appreciate the richness of Muslim women's experiences. It highlights their energy and dynamism and shows how, for many, their faith in Islam is a fundamental source of strength.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge, for inviting me to consider this project. Initially hesitant to embrace this significant commitment, given the predictable challenge of engaging established and like-minded scholars, I recognized the value of undertaking such an assignment to reach a broader audience. Recruiting authors capable of providing insights into the reasonings presented in classical texts posed a specific challenge, as this work is typically undertaken by scholars trained in the Islamic educational tradition. The emergence of two young but notable Islamic seminaries in the West, Zaytuna College in Berkeley, USA – the first American Islamic liberal arts college – and Cambridge Muslim College in the UK, both of which encourage students to pursue classical Islamic sciences while engaging with Western scholarship, facilitated the identification of two significant contributors to Part I. I am also deeply thankful to Holger Zellentin, a distinguished academic in comparative religion and a dear friend, and Celene Ibrahim, for their support with this project. Additionally, I would like to thank Zora Kostadinova for her indispensable assistance and enthusiasm for this project, and Christopher Jackson for his exceptional copyediting expertise, which went a long way in ensuring stylistic consistency across the text.

This volume would not exist without the contributions of the fifteen authors who recognized the value of joining this endeavour and have condensed years of their research into concise chapters. It is as much their effort as it is mine.

A Note on Foreign-Language Words

Each chapter in this volume is designed to stand alone, with foreign-language terms translated upon their first occurrence. Should the same term reappear after a significant interval, its translation is provided again to facilitate smooth reading. For terms used in a single chapter, we adhere to the author's preferred transliteration style. However, for Arabic terms recurring across chapters, we employ a simplified transliteration approach. To enhance clarity, diacritical marks are generally omitted, except for the apostrophe (') used to denote the Arabic letters *ayn* (') and *hamza* ('). When pluralizing Arabic words, we typically add an 's' to the singular form, except for 'ulama', which remains an exception. Names are presented without diacritical marks, except in rare instances where their inclusion is crucial for accurately identifying the individual. Bibliographical references, however, retain full transliterations as per the original publication or preference of the author.