 CHAPTER 1.5

THE LIFE OF TWO MUJTAHIDAHS: FEMALE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRAN

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A nascent stream of scholarship has brought to light the quite significant involvement of women in the transmission of hadīth, especially between the tenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ Jonathan Berkey, Muhammad Akram Nadwi, Richard Bulliet, and Asma Sayeed have documented why the field of hadīth transmission was particularly amenable to women, compared to theology and law.² By contrast, the role of women in the generation rather than transmission of Islamic knowledge is as yet little documented. Although there are numerous references to individual examples of female scholars, and at times even jurists, their lives and work have hardly been the subject of scholarly inquiry. In the case of modern Iran, we know of more than one hundred women, mostly daughters and wives of influential scholars, who made a name for themselves in fields of Islamic learning, among them dozens who attained the mujtahid rank. Yet their presence in the

¹ For a brief overview of the literature and introduction to some biographical collections, see Mirjam Künkler, “Of ‘Alimahs, Wa’izahs, and Mujtahidahs: Forgotten Histories and New State Initiatives,” manuscript.
contemporary literature is limited to brief references to their names and origins. Analyses of their works and contributions to Islamic knowledge, as well as the limits thereof, are still wanting.

The present chapter introduces two Iranian female mujtahidahs, Nuṣrat Amīn (1886–1983) and Zuhrah Ṣifātī (1948–), who represent like few of their contemporaries the status of female religious authority in twentieth-century Iran, divided by the important cesura of the 1979 revolution. Nuṣrat Amīn is one of the most influential Shi‘ah female religious authorities of modern times, who in her own right granted men ījāzahs of ījtihād and riwāyat. Zuhrah Ṣifātī is the most prominent female religious authority of the Islamic Republic and was a long-time member of the Women’s Socio-Cultural Council (shūrā-yi farhangī i’jtimā-i zanān), where she headed the committee on jurisprudence and law. Both women’s work was strongly influenced by the socio-political environment in and against which they defined themselves. Nuṣrat Amīn experienced Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1906 in her early twenties, Zuhrah Ṣifātī the Islamic Revolution in her late twenties. While Amīn underwent her formative period as an Islamic scholar at a time when madrasahs were slowly replaced by secular public schools and religious courts by the apparatus of a modern state judiciary, Ṣifātī experienced the reversal of some of these reforms when the 1979 Islamic Revolution sought to Islamicize the entire legal system and expand the status of religious learning.

A comparison of the two women’s lives and works reveals the extent to which political circumstances have shaped the opportunities for women to aspire to and acquire religious authority. The theoretical framework this volume adopts between female initiative, male invitation, and state intervention, helps our understanding of the career paths these female scholars chose. In the case of both women, their own initiative was key to propelling them to seek out knowledge and produce scholarship. Male agency played a role in so far as it was Amīn’s father who supported her intellectual interests and financed

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3 Ījāzah-i ījtihād is the permission to engage in ījtihād, usually appended to a book or other writing, certifying that the one who is granted the permission has studied the materials to the teacher’s satisfaction and is fit to interpret the sources. Ījāzah-i riwāyat is given to capable scholars who are deemed apt at transmitting ahadīth (sayings of the prophet) and, in the Shi‘ah world, the akhbār (interpretations of the Shi‘ah imāms), so as to ensure a reliable chain of transmission. For a detailed discussion of the concept of ījāzah, see for example George Makdisi, The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 140–48.