



Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr

D. A. Spellberg

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Winner of the "DOST" ("Friend") Award from the Turkish Women's Cultural Association of Istanbul (TURKKAD) for "universal excellence" in Islamic Studies D. A. Spellberg's innovative reading of the life of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr (d. 678), the Prophet Muhammad's most beloved and controversial wife, has become a classic guide to a foundational figure in Islam. Rather than recount 'A'isha's tale chronologically, Spellberg builds a textual and contextual biography from multiple medieval, contesting sources, which depict various interpretations of 'A'isha's life and their impact on the changing status of women in early Islam. 'A'isha's historical legacy straddles the divide between emerging Sunni majority and Shi`i minority visions of the proper role of women in the medieval period. Debates in both communities over an accusation of adultery against 'A'isha as a wife and her bold political engagement as a widow in the first civil war of 656 CE continue to reveal bitter sectarian differences within the Islamic community. Joint Sunni-Shi`i condemnation of 'A'isha's political actions also demonstrate the ongoing, exclusively male control of Islamic discourse. In her new introduction, Spellberg follows renewed interest in 'A'isha among both Muslim women and men, who now promote a positive reinterpretation of her political precedent. Yet in recent Western fictional accounts, Spellberg argues, 'A'isha's fame has grown only through renewed controversy without an additional understanding of her true historical importance.

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