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# Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountab

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*Sexual Violence  
in Muslim  
Communities*

Towards Awareness  
and Accountability

Edited by Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer

Foreword by Kecia Ali

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**A Critical Approach to the Study of Religious and Sexual Abuse  
in Sufi Communities**

*Rose Deighton-Mohammed*

**Abstract**

Popular stories about Sufi teachers conjure the image of a mystically powerful figure whose actions, whether love-drenched or harsh, stem from their proximity to God. The possibility that the Sufi guide could be a flawed human being goes widely undiscussed. The stories of individuals who were harmed by their Sufi guides force us to reconsider how we talk about Sufism. This chapter examines the stories of two Sufis whose experiences with their Sufi guides demonstrate the risks associated with authoritarian approaches to Sufi pedagogy. Both figures came into knowledge of their Sufi guide's sexual misconduct and were instructed to mistrust both their sense perceptions and conscience as reliable tools to make sense of the situation. Their narratives highlight how the training guide model (*shaykh al-tarbiya*) can usurp individual moral agency (*khalifah*) and conscience (*ḍamīr*) from Sufi students, making it difficult for them to self-advocate in situations of abuse. Through an analysis of the writings of the fifteenth-century Sufi jurist Aḥmad Zarruq (d. 1493) and the digitally published blogs, podcast appearances, and speeches of the contemporary Yousuf Azhar, I argue that the preservation of individual moral agency and conscience are paramount to promoting safety within the Sufi student-teacher relationship.

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**Introduction**

Popular stories about Sufi teachers conjure the image of a mystically powerful figure whose actions, whether love-drenched or harsh, stem from their proximity to God. The possibility that the Sufi guide (*shaykh* (masc.)/*shaykha* (fem.)) could be a flawed human being goes widely unacknowledged and undiscussed. The stories of individuals who were harmed by their Sufi guides force us to seriously reconsider how we talk about Sufism. When we only depict Sufi guides through a mystical imaginary that presumes their benevolence, we overlook the lived reality of many Sufi practitioners. More seriously, we contribute to a culture that conceals stories of abuse in order to preserve a sanitized image of Sufism as virtuous and otherworldly.

The stories of the fifteenth-century juridical Sufi Aḥmad Zarruq (d. 1493) and the contemporary Yousuf Azhar demonstrate the risks associated with authoritarian approaches to Sufi pedagogy. Both Zarruq and Azhar were initiated into a student-teacher dynamic that scholars have identified as the training guide model (*shaykh al-tarbiya*) (Meier 1972; Ajmal 1984; Trimmingham 1988; Nanda 1989; Jahanbakhsh 2000; Silvers 2003;

Karamustafa 2007; Abun-Nasr 2007; Green 2013; Hofer 2015). This pedagogical model typically requires students to assign absolute authority to their teachers and obey their instructions. Despite the extensive documentation of a plurality of historical Sufi pedagogies, an authoritarian version of the training guide model is often treated as the only legitimate approach (Silvers 2003; Kugle 2006). Zarruq and Azhar's narratives demonstrate how harmful Sufi teachers can harness an authoritarian version of the training guide model to evade accountability for their actions. Both figures came into knowledge of their Sufi guide's sexual misconduct and were instructed to mistrust both their sense perceptions and conscience as reliable tools to make sense of the situation. Their narratives highlight how the training guide model usurps individual moral agency (*khalifah*) and conscience (*ḍamīr*) from Sufi students, making it difficult for them to self-advocate in situations of abuse. Zarruq and Azhar's stories illuminate how the asymmetries of power built into this pedagogical model, as well as certain Sufi theological ideas, render students vulnerable. Based on Zarruq and Azhar's interpretation of their experiences, I argue that the preservation of individual moral agency and conscience are paramount to promoting safety within the Sufi student-teacher relationship.

This research is based on publicly available materials discussing the stories of Zarruq and Azhar. The section on Zarruq is based on the experiences he recorded in his autobiographical writings and other biographical writings about his life (Kugle 2006 a, b; Istrabadi 1988; Shams-ur-Rehman, 2012). The section on Sidi Yousuf Azhar is based on several of his public speeches, interviews, podcast episodes, and digitally published writings. Though these two examples come from different historical periods and communities, they reflect similar experiences and a common conclusion regarding the ideal limits of a Sufi teacher's authority. They both highlight the danger of valorizing authoritarian power in Sufism and viewing such power as the basis of a Sufi teacher's mystical authenticity.

## **Approaching the Study of Religious Abuse in Islam**

Since 2017, Muslim-led non-profit organizations have led the movement to address religious abuse in Muslim communities.<sup>1</sup> Psychologist Rania Awaad defines spiritual abuse

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<sup>1</sup> The non-profit organization FACE (Facing Abuse in Community Environments) was founded by Alia Salem in 2017. This organization does in-depth community investigations of reported cases of spiritual abuse and has helped in major court cases in which mosque imams and other Muslim community leaders have been found guilty of grooming and abusing their constituents. They also provide free counseling services to survivors. As of 2020, they had so many cases that they reported having at least four years worth of investigating ahead, with cases reported up to April 2020. See their website and work here: <https://www.facetogether.org>. See also Nancy Khalil's chapter in this volume (Khalil 2024).

The website In Shaykh's Clothing has used informative blogs and anonymized survivor narratives of spiritual abuse to provide substantial education and awareness about the nature of spiritual abuse. See <https://inshaykhsclotthing.com/>. Rania Awaad and Tabish Riaz, both medical doctors with expertise in psychology, presented on the nature of the consequences of spiritual abuse at the 2020 inaugural Hurma Project Conference, dedicated to eradicating spiritual abuse from Muslim communities. In their analysis, they focused on a case in which a shaykh groomed a young woman with a history of childhood trauma from the ages of 13 to 18. He engaged in a sexual

(which I call religious abuse)<sup>2</sup> as “the misuse of religious position for financial gain, personal gain, bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct, manipulation or exercising control over another individual. Some apply the term spiritual abuse to any kind of psychological, physical, or sexual abuse that takes place in a religious context” (Awaad & Riaz 2020). Awaad claims that religious abusers often have similar patterns of behavior, including but not limited to grooming, religious duress, and boundary violation. Grooming of a pupil by an individual with spiritual authority manifests as “slow and deliberate advances towards a congregant to develop a closer relationship.” (Awaad 2021 and 2021a) Religious duress is the condition in which the implied religious authority of the spiritual leader produces an “incapacitating fear which impacts a victim’s ability to accurately process and recognize seductive red-flag patterns in the process” (Awaad & Riaz 2020). Boundary violation includes gradual and deliberate violations of the student-teacher relationship, either by breaking ethical codes established in the community or by making advances to groom and exert control, sexual dominance, and other forms of power over individuals.

Academic research is slowly integrating the knowledge and expertise cultivated by these organizations into its mode of inquiry and subject matter. Unfortunately, there are several barriers which limit their inclusion in research. First, Sufi teachers who misuse their authority to enact harm often claim that their students misunderstand the harm due to their own spiritual ineptitude. Unfortunately, academic research often fails to critically engage the possibility of deliberate harm coming from the Sufi teacher. In fact, researchers in the field of Sufi Studies often replicate Sufi narratives of the unflinching spiritual integrity of Sufi teachers and explain away potential abuse as a sign of the student’s spiritual shortcomings. Second, religious survivor narratives are often publicly consumed in voyeuristic ways for the purpose of deeming a religious community uniquely dangerous (Goodwin 2020). This charges these discussions in complicated ways. In light of the very serious problem of contemporary Islamophobia, some feel a justifiable reticence to discuss forms of abuse that could be exploited by Islamophobes to malign and cause harm to Muslims. Megan Goodwin claims that historically, narratives of abuse in minority religions are not circulated for the purpose of eradicating abuse but rather to further cement the “incorrect but tenacious assumption that religious difference causes sexual abuse” (Goodwin 2020, 1). Goodwin’s scholarship on American minority religions grapples with the white-supremacist and Islamophobic American culture in which stories of abuse circulate. Within such a context, Goodwin claims that scholars should focus on the people doing abuse rather than their religion as the source of harm. However, survivor narratives often claim a connection between the perpetrators of their abuse and the dynamics of power that are elocuted through their religious community *via* their relationship with religious teachers and

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relationship with her, having planned to marry her, but then revoked his offer, causing mental, psychiatric, and spiritual trauma. See Awaad and Riaz 2020; Khan 2020.

The Religion and Sexual Abuse Project, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, is a multi-year, interdisciplinary, and multi-traditional scholarly effort to establish academic methods, ethical dialogues, and foundation research on religious abuse. The project supported the creation of this volume. See <https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org>.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term religious abuse rather than spiritual abuse because I believe spiritual abuse is one distinct modality of religious abuse, which can also encompass psychological, sexual, financial and other forms of abuse.

theological teachings. For this reason, I do not believe we can neatly distinguish what survivors claim about their experiences from the frameworks we use to categorize and understand religion. I view the survivors discussed herein as contributing to the articulation and transformation of religious traditions. I take their testimonies about their experiences, including the theological ideas and community dynamics they mention, as important sources of theological and communal transformation worthy of academic analysis.

To address some of the concerns Goodwin highlights, I foreground the concept of gendered Islamophobia in my approach to the study of religious abuse in Muslim communities. Gendered Islamophobia refers to the different ways Islamophobia impacts individuals based on gender, especially women and queer Muslims. It also balances the need to center survivors while remaining cognizant of how their stories are consumed (Zine 2012, 210-211; Hammer 2013). Muslim women often note that experiences of abuse – religious and sexual – are silenced within Muslim communities because of the ways these discussions are exploited by Islamophobes for the purpose of justifying discrimination and violence against Muslims. I follow Muslim activists who use the framework of gendered Islamophobia to encourage members of their community to take the stories of survivors seriously. Muslim feminists argue that decentering survivors for the purpose of insulating the broader community from Islamophobia is not an adequate method of response (HEART 2020, 3-4). I adopt this position and seek to center survivor narratives while always highlighting the exploitative ways in which Islamophobes appropriate their stories.

The work of Amy Langenberg and Ann Gleig offers a compelling methodological approach to the study of religious abuse through survivor narratives. They adopt a survivor-centered ethnographic method, which they define as an intersectional feminist approach that prioritizes “the perspectives, needs and interests of survivors, and placing these at the center in developing and implementing interventions toward the eradication of gender-based violence.” (Gleig and Langenberg 2022). Although Gleig and Langenberg engage a methodology of structured ethnographic interviews and I am reading survivor narratives recorded in publicly available textual and digital mediums, my choice to focus on survivor narratives and interpret them as forms of religious knowledge creation is similar.

In this chapter, I analyze how two Sufi figures account for the normalization of abuse and misuse of authority in their communities. However, it is important to note that neither Zarruq nor Azhar came away from these experiences viewing their religions as inherently abusive. Rather, both figures desired to reframe specific ideas and power structures to preserve the integrity of the Sufi tradition. While this chapter focusses on the theological and pedagogical features of Sufism that have been used by abusers to normalize harm, elsewhere, I have written about contemporary Sufi guides who are working to prevent abuse in their communities (Deighton-Mohammed 2024). These Sufi guides have worked with their students to develop ethical guidelines for the Sufi student-teacher relationship, and they have reframed pedagogies, teachings, and community structures with the intention of preventing harm. Like these teachers, I contend that by acknowledging simultaneously that individuals do engage in abuse – both religious and sexual- and that they often depend on structural features of their community to get away with abuse – including religious discourses and community configurations of power and authority- we are empowered to develop culturally and religiously relevant models of prevention and survivor care.

## Two Case Studies

### 1. Ahmad Zarruq

Most people know the fifteenth-century Shādhilī Sufi Shaykh Aḥmad Zarruq (d.1493) as one of the great figures of juridical Sufism who spent his life navigating the tensions between juridical norms and spiritual authority (Kugle 2006). His writings indicate that he was also someone who thought deeply about the Sufi pedagogical relationship and the ways its various configurations aligned with or departed from norms of Islamic ethics and jurisprudence (Kugle 2006; Istrabadi 1987; Shams-ur-Rehman 2012; Landorf 2023). One story from his autobiography highlights his concerns about Sufi teaching relationships that require abandoning Islamic law, reason, or personal conscience. The story of his relationship with his teacher, the Qādirī-Shādhilī Sufi Shaykh Muhammad al-Zaytūnī (d. 1465), brings up a number of relevant questions for our current inquiry into the nature of religious abuse in Sufism and the parameters of the pedagogical relationship.

Zarruq had several teachers in his lifetime, beginning with his grandmother, who was an esteemed jurist in Fez (Kugle 2006; Istrabadi 1988, 18). At the age of twenty-four, Zarruq found himself studying with two main teachers, his Sufi teacher al-Zaytūnī and the Sufi jurist Muhammad al-Qurī (d. 1467). In Zarruq's autobiography, he describes a disturbing encounter with his Sufi shaykh, al-Zaytūnī. Scott Kugle recounts the story stating:

The hagiographic story presents Zarruq as perceiving his master in an adulterous affair. According to this story, Zarruq once knocked on the door of al-Zaytūnī's home but heard no answer. Upon finding the door open, he went inside and upstairs. There, he witnessed al-Zaytūnī seated between two women, turning to kiss one after the other. Having called his master a hypocrite for carrying out an adulterous affair, al-Zaytūnī cursed Zarruq for over-stepping the bounds of etiquette with his master. The hagiographic story reinforces the normal pattern of spiritual authority asserted by masters: Zarruq was misled by his own acute skepticism, while al-Zaytūnī asserted that, "the person whom you saw to my right, she is really this world (*al-dunyā*) and the one you saw to my left is really the next world (*al-akhira*)" (Kugle 2006, 117).

Scholars have interpreted this event in different ways. In her doctoral dissertation, which includes a complete translation of Zarruq's famous work *The Principles of Sufism* (*Qawā'id al-Taṣawwuf*), Zeinab Istrabadi reads this encounter as one of several spiritual tests al-Zaytūnī used to assess Zarruq's loyalty (Istrabadi 1988, 19-21). Istrabadi's reading follows a traditional assessment of the student-teacher relationship, which assumes the teacher's integrity and takes their interpretation of events as fact.

Brittany Landorf contextualizes al-Zaytūnī's behavior in terms of his belonging to a class of saints known as *majdhūb*, an Arabic term popularly translated as "mad," but which signals being enraptured by God, radically pulled toward God, or being completely filled with God (Landorf 2023, 3). Landorf claims that these Sufis often engage in strange and ecstatic behavior, which is coded deviant because it transgresses religious laws and social mores. Landorf notes that hagiographers often comment on the problem of trying to "rear" *majdhūb* Sufis, and through her analysis of al-Zaytūnī and Zarruq, she notes the potential dangers of

the opposite scenario, in which *majdhūb* Sufis are in charge of spiritually “rearing” disciples. Thus, Landorf’s analysis of Zarruq’s encounter with al-Zaytūnī departs from the interpretation of this event as a narrative of his failed Sufi training. Instead, she frames the encounter as one that highlights that *majdhūb* saints act in ways that are not merely strange or transgressive but also spiritually and materially harmful (Landorf 2023, 6). Landorf’s reading of this encounter highlights that whether or not this encounter was an intentional spiritual test or the result of a *majdhūb* state, it represents a kind of spiritual and material harm that is often overlooked in discussions of Sufism that assume all Sufi teachers to be righteous and benevolent. It is unclear whether or not the women in question were consenting, and thus I focus my reading of this narrative on Zarruq’s personal experience of potential psychological and spiritual harm. I contend that witnessing sexual misconduct and being told not to trust his sense perceptions and conscience is a form of psychological and spiritual harm because it diminishes self-trust. Moreover, it renders the student wholly dependent on their teacher to arbitrate truth, while the teacher is not held accountable to the student (or their own tradition and moral teachings).

After being banished, Zarruq left Fez and is said to have put his complete faith in God and is later recognized for his saintliness as a result of a purifying process he experienced in his isolation. Zarruq would go on to think deeply about the function of the Sufi guide in the spiritual growth of the Sufi student. According to Kugle, Zarruq’s writings claim that it is not only possible to attain spiritual maturity without a living Sufi guide, but crucial to maintain specific boundaries with spiritual mentors once in relationship with them. For Zarruq, one should always gauge the advice of their Sufi guide against three measuring sticks: Islamic law, common reason, and, importantly, one’s conscience (*ḍamīr*.) (Kugle 2006; Shams-ur-Rehman 2012). The fact that subverting this coercive dynamic was significant to him reminds us that already within the historical sources of the Sufi tradition, we have examples of individuals concerned with preventing harm and honoring the moral agency and conscience of Sufi students. This is precedence for the kind of transformative pedagogies emerging in contemporary Sufi communities. It also highlights that a commitment to justice is central to the Sufi tradition.

## 2. Sidi Yousuf Azhar

Sidi Yousuf Azhar is a contemporary Muslim American and a survivor of religious abuse in Sufism. Azhar was part of a transnational Sufi community for 13 years. In a public lecture and a number of online articles and podcast interviews, Azhar identifies specific institutional structures and Sufi teachings which he believes functioned to enable and normalize abuse in his community. Azhar experienced a moral crisis when he discovered that his Sufi guide had been sexually abusing women in his community (Azhar 2019; Azhar and Qasim 2019; Azhar 2020; Azhar 2023). I read his story as containing two overlapping forms of abuse: the initial sexual abuse of women in his community (whose testimonies I do not have access to and who may have experienced other forms of harm) and the secondary psychological and spiritual abuse of Azhar, who objected to the harm and was told not to trust his sense perceptions and personal conscience. Azhar has discussed his experiences publicly as a way to illuminate how some widely accepted Sufi norms enabled harm and made it difficult for individuals like him to seek accountability.

Azhar claims that several overlapping types of harm were enacted in his community. These included emotional abuse, abuse of religious traditions for the purposes of controlling individuals, financial abuse, and alleged sexual abuse (2023). The main shaykh in Azhar's Sufi community lived abroad and delegated spiritual authority to appointed *khalifahs* or representatives, who were in charge of providing spiritual guidance to his large American following (Azhar estimates between the hundreds and thousands) (Azhar 2023).<sup>3</sup> According to Azhar, his Sufi order was extremely hierarchical and required absolute obedience to appointed authorities. He describes this environment as coercive, but significantly, coercion was accomplished through appeals to the kinds of divinely sanctioned authority that people recognized and trusted: that which is rooted in scripture (2023, 1:21). He claims that grooming took place through a dynamic process of love bombing new students, who were often already vulnerable due to previous traumas. Love bombing is a term that describes the use of excessive love, affection, and support to gain influence over an individual for the purpose of making them vulnerable and dependent on the love-bomber. Azhar's experience of love-bombing was accompanied by the promise that through direct obedience to their teachers, students could receive *nisba*, which Azhar defines as a direct connection to God *vis-à-vis* their shaykh.

Azhar illuminates how the Sufi concept of *nisba* was used by teachers to establish a highly coercive environment. He was told that only through direct obedience to their teachers, students could receive *nisba*. He states:

They have this concept called *nisba*, which means connection. And even they say, "oh it's hard to define this term but it's this thing we have." And so, the idea is that the shaykh and whoever they've decided fits this description is connected to Allah. So the *nisba* is to Allah, to God. And so now what this does is there's this assumption that whatever the shaykh is doing is based on that connection to God and so it's special (Azhar 2022, 12:04-12:28).

In an interview with Danish Qasim, he elaborates, stating "*nisba* is a vague concept that once a murid (student) is given, it means they are connected to Allah. To earn *nisba* one had to do a lot of service to the Shaykh and his representatives along with zikr and other devotional acts. There was a yearly meeting, and in that meeting we'd find out who gets *nisba* and who becomes a *khalifah* (representative of the Shaykh)" (Azhar and Qasim 2019).<sup>4</sup> A student's qualification to receive *nisba* was heavily monitored through weekly reports of their worship activity that were sent to their *khalifah*. The concept of *nisba* had a function in student grooming but also helped teachers maintain their power and keep students in a condition of religious duress. Azhar was told, "don't even have a negative thought about your shaykh because if you do, you won't be able to benefit" (from their teaching), suggesting that the *nisba* connection to God is also cut off when one questions their shaykh. (2023, 1:19).

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the term *khalifah* is used in this essay both to designate the formal, appointed position of being a representative of a Shaykh and, thus, a Sufi guide with less institutional authority. It also is used to designate the Arabic term for moral agency.

<sup>4</sup> Note that I have not transliterated *khalifah* in this instance intentionally, because the speaker is using it in his anglicized context.

Azhar's shaykh and *khalifah* maintained a high level of control over students. Students were expected to consult their teachers any time they made a personal decision. Azhar explains that because teachers constantly belittled students, he experienced "constant guilt, feeling bad, fear of upsetting the shaykh or losing/diminishing his love for you" and "everyone is vying for his attention to get decisions made for you" (2023, 2:04-2:05). For Azhar, this community made students feel the need to submit their moral conscience to higher ranking authorities (2023, 1:21).

It was in this kind of highly controlled environment that Azhar became aware that his shaykh had allegedly been abusing women. He learned that despite the highly gender-segregated nature of his Sufi community, several women were being taken for secretive individual meetings with the shaykh under the premise of providing spiritual guidance. During these meetings, the teacher allegedly sexually abused them. According to Azhar, leaders in charge of the administrative dimensions of the community would even block and monitor the doors, thereby implicating themselves in the abuse as well. When Azhar first received this information, he had learned through a friend of his wife that his *khalifah* in Chicago had left the main shaykh based on this transgression. However, when he sought more information from the *khalifah*, he was told to stop seeking this information because this knowledge had the potential to undermine his faith. Thus, his agency was thwarted by those who sought to prevent him from having a complete understanding of the circumstances. Ultimately, he was given the adage, "If you ever see your shaykh doing something haram with a woman, you should distrust your own eyes and assume that the shaykh is innocent" (2019, 15:27-15:40).

Azhar explains how this experience led him to distrust the concept of taking a Sufi guide, though he remained committed to the Sufi path of purification of the heart (2019, 2023). After 13 years of membership in the community, which impacted every aspect of his life, Azhar experienced immense cognitive dissonance. The abuse was handled poorly by community leaders and overlooked by some of his beloved peers. Like Zarruq, Azhar's experience highlights the patterns, behaviors, and ideas that can make people vulnerable to similar kinds of harm. It is for this reason that he came to mistrust the kind of Sufi teaching relationship that is premised on the absolute obedience of the student to the guide.

## **Conclusion**

The stories of Zarruq and Azhar demonstrate how authoritarian versions of the training guide model that usurp individual moral agency and conscience make students vulnerable to harm. While Zarruq's story does not dwell on the psychological effects of his experience, his decision to reframe the Sufi teaching relationship and encourage students to maintain boundaries with their guides is a significant takeaway. Azhar's decision to share his experience publicly through online blogs and podcasts similarly indicates his desire to help others identify and avoid potentially harmful environments. Their stories are significant sources for scholarly analysis and advocacy. They alert us to the ways Sufi teachers have misused their positions of power and illuminate how abusive teachers use familiar Sufi ideas to normalize harm and avoid accountability for their actions. It is an imperative first step for scholars, community leaders, and Sufis to commit themselves to learning from survivors,

listening to their stories, and acknowledging that abuse happens within Sufism. To truly honor survivors, and to preserve the integrity of the Sufi tradition, this knowledge must be followed with decisive action to prevent abuse, hold abusers accountable, and support survivors.

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**Dr. Rose Deighton-Mohammed** is a scholar of Islam, Gender, and Sufism. She works as an Assistant Teaching Professor at Emory University in the Institute for the Liberal Arts. Her research examines Sufi pedagogy and training methods with a focus on questions of gender, authority, and religious abuse. She is especially interested in Sufi theologies of the self and the body. Her current book project, *Contemporary Sufism and Gender*, analyzes how modern Sufis are redefining spiritual training, teaching pedagogy, and community dynamics on the basis of liberatory renderings of Sufism, trauma-informed ethics, and examinations of gendered power. Deighton-Mohammed's research publications can be accessed in the *Journal of Islamic Ethics*, *Religion Compass*, *Body and Religion*, and *Culture and Religion*.

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