

SUFI WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: A THEOLOGY OF SERVITUDE

Rkia Elaroui Cornell

The earliest book about Sufi women in Islam is *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidat al-sufiyyat* (Memorial of Female Sufi Devotees), by the great systematizer of Sufi doctrine, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021 CE). Sulami, a resident of the city of Nishapur in eastern Iran, describes Sufi women as practicing a Theology of Servitude. He depicts this theology as a practice-oriented complement to the more theoretical doctrines followed by Sufi men.¹ The Theology of Servitude that was practiced by Sulami's Sufi women is based on the idea that spiritual engagement operates on two levels: an outer (*zahir*) level and an inner (*batin*) level. Each of these levels also has an outer and an inner dimension. On the inner level of spiritual engagement, the outer dimension consists of an engagement with God; this is because God is conceived as being outside of one's self (*nafs*). The inner dimension of the inner level of spiritual engagement consists of an engagement with one's own soul (*ruh*); this is because the soul represents a transcendence of the self (*nafs*), but it is also found within the self. The outer level of spiritual engagement in Sufi women's Theology of Servitude consists of religious practices that are part of the Sufi woman's engagement with her self. The outer dimension of these practices concerns the types of practices employed to discipline and transform the self. The inner dimension of the outer level of spiritual engagement concerns the transformation of the spiritual understanding that the religious practices and spiritual disciplines are meant to bring about.

According to Sulami, Sufi women are different from ordinary Muslim women because they practice *ta'abbud*: literally, "making oneself a slave" (*'abd*). *Ta'abbud* is the Arabic term that Sulami uses to designate the Theology of Servitude. For Sulami, *ta'abbud*, the Theology of Servitude, is the essence of Sufi women's spirituality. It is their means to divine inspiration, and it is the spiritual method that distinguishes them from their male Sufi counterparts.

Although Sulami makes the Theology of Servitude a characteristic of Sufi women, the concept for which it stands has long been part of Islamic piety. The Arabic term for worship (*ibada*) means “servitude.” The famous statement about worship in the Qur’an (Qur’an 51:56), “I have not created Jinn and humankind except to worship me (*illa li-ya‘buduni*),” shows that the concept of servitude is all-inclusive: it envelops not only humans, but other forms of creation as well. The Theology of Servitude is also expressed in the Hadith, the Prophetic traditions of Islam. For example, in the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE), the Prophet Muhammad states that one of the names most favored by God is ‘*Abd Allah* (Slave of God). The other name most favored by God is ‘*Abd al-Rahman* (Slave of the Bestower of Grace). Both names include the term ‘*abd*, “slave.”²

In the Qur’an, the concept of *Islam*—the submission of the self to God—is frequently expressed in terms of servitude. “Selling oneself to God” is the quintessential attribute of the true believer and is one of the spiritual traits that Islam shares with both Judaism and Christianity. This is stated explicitly in the following verse:

Verily God has purchased from the believers their persons and possessions in return for Paradise. They fight in the cause of God and they slay and are slain. This is a binding promise on God, stated in truth in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur’an. Who is more faithful to his promise than [God]? So, rejoice in the sale of yourself that you have concluded, for it is the supreme achievement.

(Qur’an 9:111)

In his exegesis of the Qur’an titled *Haqa’iq al-tafsir* (The Realities of Qur’an Interpretation), Sulami often discusses the Theology of Servitude through the words of Ahmad ibn ‘Ata’ (d. 921 CE), a famous Sufi of Baghdad. In these passages, another term for servitude is used: ‘*ubudiyya*, which is commonly understood as “worshipfulness,” but literally means “slavery.” In his commentary on the Chapter on Women in the Qur’an (Qur’an 4, *Surat al-Nisa’*), Sulami quotes Ibn ‘Ata’ as saying: “Servitude is a combination of four traits: (1) to be true to one’s covenants; (2) to preserve moral rectitude; (3) to be satisfied with whatever one finds; (4) to patiently bear what has been lost.”³

Being true to one’s covenants corresponds to the outer dimension of the outer level of spiritual engagement described above. Engagement with God is expressed in the Qur’an by the covenant struck between God and humanity before the creation of Adam (Qur’an 7:172). Engagement with other human beings depends on other types of covenants such as oaths and contracts, which figure prominently in the Qur’an as well (see, for example, Qur’an 16:94; 5:1, 5:89). Both types of engagements require renewal and reaffirmation, and both types rely on moral rectitude (Ibn ‘Ata’s second trait of

servitude) for their fulfillment. Moral rectitude is the key to the outward process of spiritual engagement. In Islam, moral rectitude entails the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad's actions and the embodiment of his moral fiber, which is fundamental to the concept of *Sunna*. The Qur'an states: "And you [Muhammad] are of great moral character" (Qur'an 68:4). Ibn 'Ata's third and fourth traits of servitude, which are to be satisfied with whatever one finds and to patiently bear what has been lost, correspond to the inner dimension of the outer level of spiritual engagement. These disciplines correspond to the Qur'anic teaching to regard the life of the world as nothing but a "sport and a pastime" (Qur'an 6:32), and help the seeker on the spiritual path turn her attention from the outer life of the world toward the Abode of the Hereafter and the inner life of the soul.

Elsewhere in *Haga'iq al-tafsir* Sulami states: "Servitude (*'ubudiyya*) is built on six principles: (1) exaltation of God without reservation; (2) shame, which consists of the restlessness of the heart; (3) trial, which consists of desire; (4) fear, which consists of the abandonment of sin; (5) hope, which consists in following the example of the Prophet Muhammad and realizing his moral character; (6) awe, which consists of the abandonment of choice."⁴ Most of these principles could be applied to any religion other than Islam with little or no modification. Exaltation of God is symbolic of a resolute faith. Falling for sin or debauchery causes shame and remorse for the ethical and moral person. Trials and tribulations shake one's faith to its core whenever they occur. Fear of punishment for evil deeds haunts everyone with a conscience. Hope for salvation or happiness, when channeled through divine exemplars such as prophets or spiritual masters, is a universal human aspiration. Awe of the Transcendent causes egos to melt away. In such a state, the believer abandons the idea that she is the architect of her own destiny. What is left is: "There is no god but God" (*la ilaha illa Allah*), the fundamental statement of divine unity (*tawhid*) in Islam and the basis of the Islamic creed. This is the Qur'anic meaning of servitude. It is the complete surrender or "sale" of oneself to God.

According to Ibn 'Ata', the sale of oneself to God meant above all else the suppression of the human ego, which, like the self in general, is designated by the Arabic term *nafs*. In the words of Ibn 'Ata', "The worst of your enemies is the *nafs* that is between your two sides."⁵ This inner battle within the self is a prerequisite for the inward spiritual engagement that comprises the second, deeper dimension of the Theology of Servitude. The salvation of the soul, says Ibn 'Ata', can only be purchased with servitude.⁶ Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE), the sixth Shiite Imam stated: "The faithful slave of God must rely on three sets of foundational practices (*sunan*): the *Sunna* of God Most High, the *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), and the *Sunna* of the Friends of God (*sunnat awliya' Allah*). The *Sunna* of God is the concealment of divine secrets. Allah Most High said: '[God alone] knows the unseen, and he does not allow anyone to be acquainted with

His mysteries' (72:26). The *Sunna* of the Messenger of God (Peace be upon him) is the experiential knowledge of creation. The *Sunna* of the Friends of God is the fulfillment of covenants and endurance in hardship and calamity."⁷

A similar understanding of servitude can be found in *Slavery as Salvation*, Dale B. Martin's study of the rhetoric of slavery in early Christianity. Realizing that the metaphor of slavery in the Gospels and the letters of the Apostle Paul stood for more than just humility, Martin examined late antique slavery in its full sociohistorical context and found that it was a complex institution. In the late Roman Empire, where social, economic, and political ties were often based on patronage, slavery might paradoxically be used as a metaphor for authority.⁸ In a wealthy household, the slave-manager (Gr. *oikonomos*) would often have a considerable amount of authority. As a loyal and devoted servant of his master, a trusted slave might even have more authority than a free person of low status. A similar state of affairs existed in the Muslim world of Sulami's day, where relationships of loyalty and intimacy with a powerful patron were also expressed through the rhetoric of servitude. By making a vocation out of service to their divine Master, the Sufi women who practiced the Theology of Servitude could free themselves from the constraints that would normally have limited their role in society. In both cases, the early Christian and the medieval Muslim, slavery to God meant liberation, both from slavery to the self and from slavery to other human beings. Servitude to the Lord trumps servitude to all lesser lords, including one's own self. This is such an important concept in Islam that the word "lord" (*rabb*) as a status category is used only for God. For human beings, the word "lord" is only used in a metaphorical sense, as in the phrases, "head of the family" (*rabb al-'a'ila*) and "the intellectuals" (literally, "the lords of the intellects," *arbab al-'uqul*).

It is in this wider context of the Theology of Servitude that we must understand the statements made by Sufi women such as 'A'isha bint Ahmad of Merv (d. late tenth century CE): "When the slave seeks glory in his servitude, his foolishness is revealed."⁹ Just as the religious metaphor of slavery stands for more than humility, this statement is more than just a warning against the egoism of virtue. Islam, like Christianity, inherited much from late antiquity, including the relationship of slavery as an institution to wider, patronage-based social structures. In the Gospel of John, the Apostles of Jesus, as Slaves of Christ, are rhetorically transformed into the Friends of Christ and thus become figures of religious authority.¹⁰ Likewise, for Sulami, being a Slave of God (*'abd Allah*) was necessary for becoming a Friend of God (*wali Allah*). Thus, the glory that 'A'isha bint Ahmad warns her associates to avoid is not only that of pride in one's virtue but also the vainglory of seeking sainthood for the worldly patronage that it bestows.

Further comparisons can be made between the Christian and the Islamic uses of servitude as a religious metaphor and a spiritual practice.

Besides sharing a common understanding of slavery as a path to salvation, medieval Muslims and early Christians saw servitude as a way of overcoming the limitations of human nature.¹¹ Certain traditions that are critical of women in Islam attribute woman's inadequacy to the deficiencies of the female nature. For example, a well-known hadith in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (ca. 860 CE) reports that the Prophet Muhammad informed a group of women that they were deficient in both intellect and religion.¹² Because of traditions such as these, it is not surprising to find that overcoming human nature—and especially the female nature—was a prominent concern for Sufi women. Commenting on the famous hadith: “He who knows himself (or his inner self) knows his Lord” (*man ‘arafa nafsahu ‘arafa rabbahu*), Futayma the wife of the Sufi Hamdun al-Qassar (d. late ninth century CE) remarks: “When a person truly knows herself, her only characteristic is servitude and she takes pride in nothing but her master.”¹³ This statement is perhaps intentionally ambiguous. Does Futayma mean to say that the Master who must be served before all else is God? Or does she mean to say that a woman serves God by serving her husband as her master? Maybe she means both, because Futayma's husband was a famous Sufi spiritual master. Either way, it is clear that the spiritual path for Sufi women was opened by servitude. The Sufi woman ‘Unayza of Baghdad (d. first half of the tenth century CE) stated: “Human forms [literally, ‘the molds of human nature’] are mines of servitude” (*qawalib al-bashariyya ma‘adin al-‘ubudiyya*).¹⁴

A major advantage of the Theology of Servitude was that it freed early Sufi women from the constraints imposed on them by their societies. As Slaves of God, they could separate themselves from the ordinary masses of women who did not share the same spiritual vocation. Choosing an independent life as “career women” of the spirit, they could travel without a chaperone, mix socially with men, teach men in public assemblies, and develop intellectually in ways that were not accessible to their non-Sufi sisters. This focus on spirituality as a personal vocation explains the surprising comment made by the Sufi woman Nusiyya bint Salman (d. early ninth century CE) upon the birth of her son: “Oh, Lord! You do not see me as someone worthy of your worship. So because of this you have preoccupied me with a child!”¹⁵

As stated above, the spiritual method of the Theology of Servitude works on the outer and inner natures of the human being at the same time. Outwardly, it cultivates the Sufi attributes of scrupulous abstinence (*warf*), patience, poverty, and humility. Without these attributes, the human being is a slave to the ego-self. In the words of the female ascetic Umm Talq (d. mid-eighth century CE), “The ego-self (*nafs*) is a king if you indulge it, but it is a slave if you torment it.”¹⁶ Inwardly, the Theology of Servitude cultivates the attributes of fear, worshipfulness, gratitude, and reliance on God (*tawakkul*). These are the attributes that lead to perfection in religion, according to the words of the famous tradition: “Worship God as if you see Him; for if you do not see Him, surely He sees you.”¹⁷

Sulami's book of early Sufi women implies that once women start practicing the Theology of Servitude, it is no longer acceptable for male authority figures to claim that women are deficient in religion, for servitude is the truest form of submission to God. Even more, because such women are successful in overcoming the lower aspects of their human natures, the highest levels of religious knowledge are now accessible to them. The limitlessness of this potential is reflected in the statement of Umm 'Ali, a Sufi woman from Nishapur, whose brother Abu Mansur ibn Hamshadh (d. 998 CE) was a famous preacher and acquaintance of Sulami: "One who is confirmed in the knowledge of servitude will soon attain the knowledge of lordship."¹⁸ Umm 'Ali's point is made even more strongly in the words of Surayra al-Sharqiyya, a disciple in Nishapur of the Sufi master Abu Bakr al-Tamastani al-Farisi (d. 951 CE): "Eventually, servitude vanishes and only lordship remains."¹⁹

The above discussion has demonstrated that the Theology of Servitude practiced by early Sufi women is a key to many different types of spiritual engagements. The essence of this practice is to transcend the ego-self by "selling one's soul" to God. When stripped of its egoistic attachments, the human soul cannot be labeled as either male or female. The statements and teachings of early Sufi women, which were inspired not by the ego-self (*nafs*) but by the providentially motivated and divinely guided spirit-soul (*ruh*), are universal in their application. Thus, they are able to provide guidance for all human beings, regardless of gender. This, in fact, was why Sulami chose to devote an entire book to them. Today, a conservative reaction across the Muslim world has made of women—both body and soul—a major battlefield in the struggle between an idealized Islam and the West. The result of this struggle, in places as diverse as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, and Darfur, has been to deprive the Muslim woman of her personality and to make her an object for the exploitation of men. It is noteworthy and perhaps highly significant that many of the movements of religious reform in Islam that are most critical of women's role in society also condemn the religious perspective of Sufism. Sulami's book of Sufi women was lost to the Muslim world for more than 500 years, only to be discovered by accident in Saudi Arabia (and ironically in the library of Muhammad ibn Saud University, a major center of Wahhabi teaching) in the early 1990s. One cannot help but feel that the rediscovery of this work was meant to be, and that in current times, when freedoms of personal and religious expression are under severe attack in much of the Islamic world, the voices of the early Sufi women again need to be heard.

NOTES

1. Biographical information on Sulami can be found in the Introduction to Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *Early Sufi Women, Dhikr an-niswā al-muta'abbidat*

as-sufiyyat, Translation and Introduction by Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1999), 54–60.

2. See Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, 14/245.

3. Paul Nwyia, ed., *Trois Oeuvres inédites de Mystiques musulmans: Shaqiq al-Balkhi, Ibn 'Ata', Niffari* (Beirut, 1973), 45. This work contains only selected portions of Sulami's *Haqa'iq al-tafsir*.

4. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *al-Haqa'iq: Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim bi lisan ahl al-haqa'iq* (The Realities: the Interpretation of the Noble Qur'an in the Language of the People of Transcendent Reality). Sulami's exegesis of the Qur'an has not yet been edited definitively in Arabic. The manuscript from which the above quotation is taken was originally copied in 1854 and was registered in the manuscript collection at Bulaq, part of the city of Cairo, Egypt, in 1895 (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, ms. 481), 78.

5. Nwyia, *Trois Oeuvres inédites*, 60.

6. Ibid., 63.

7. Sulami, *al-Haqa'iq* manuscript, 81.

8. Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 56–57.

9. Sulami, *Dhikr an-niswa*, 258.

10. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 54.

11. See, for example, the following statement made in the early Christian hagiographical tradition about the fourth-century ascetics of the Egyptian desert. These are “true servants [literally, “slaves”] of God...[through whom] the world is kept in being, and that through them too human life is preserved and honoured by God.” Benedicta Ward, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. Norman Russell (London and Oxford: Mowbray and Collins, 1980), “Prologue,” 49–50.

12. See, for example, Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-zakat: al-Zakat 'ala al-aqrab (Book of the Alms Tax: the Alms Tax for Near Relatives), hadith nos. 257 and 258.

13. Sulami, *Dhikr an-niswa*, 206.

14. Ibid., 248.

15. Ibid., 92.

16. Ibid., 118.

17. Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj an-Nisaburi (d. 875 CE), *Sahih Muslim bi-sharh al-Nawawi* (Beirut, n.d.), vol. 1, 152–160.

18. Sulami, *Dhikr an-niswa*, 244.

19. Ibid., 246.

VOICES OF ISLAM

Volume 2

VOICES OF THE SPIRIT

Vincent J. Cornell, General Editor and
Volume Editor

PRAEGER PERSPECTIVES

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Voices of Islam / Vincent J. Cornell, general editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-98732-9 (set : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-275-98733-7 (vol 1 : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-275-98734-5 (vol 2 : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-275-98735-3 (vol 3 : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-275-98736-1 (vol 4 : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-275-98737-X (vol 5 : alk. paper) 1. Islam—Appreciation. 2. Islam—Essence, genius, nature. I. Cornell, Vincent J.

BP163.V65 2007

297—dc22

2006031060

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006031060

ISBN: 0-275-98732-9 (set)

0-275-98733-7 (vol. 1)

0-275-98734-5 (vol. 2)

0-275-98735-3 (vol. 3)

0-275-98736-1 (vol. 4)

0-275-98737-X (vol. 5)

First published in 2007

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1