

Female Conversion to Islam

The Sufi Paradigm

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Conversion to Islam is increasingly attracting attention worldwide. It is said that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the contemporary world, and that despite the negative image and bad publicity about the faith, the number of people converting to Islam is on the increase.¹ There is no reliable figure as to the number of converts worldwide, or at the national level in individual Western countries, primarily because censuses in most Western countries do not ask about religious affiliation. In Britain, where this issue was brought up in the last census, that of 2001, the question was confined to religious background only; the issue of religious conversion was left out. Moreover, most mosques and Islamic centers all over Britain (and by extension Europe and America) do not issue certificates of conversion, nor do they record the number of persons who convert to Islam, let alone their age group or social, economic, or educational backgrounds—an issue that makes the attempt at estimating approximate numbers too haphazard. Having said that, however, one can certainly affirm that the religion is claiming some followers, especially in the Western world. To take one simple example, which could be used as a gauge to indicate the number of people who are attracted to Islam: in 2002, the Muath Welfare Trust, a community center catering to the needs of the Muslim community in Birmingham, England, ran a “New Muslims” project. The leader of the project reported twenty-four converts. Seventeen among them were white women and the rest, seven, were men. One man was of African Caribbean origin; the other six were white.²

In the past, the dominant group embracing Islam was composed of those of either African Caribbean or African American background, whereas recently a string of white people have become Muslim. In the UK, some of these white people come from affluent backgrounds, such as, for example: Joe Ahmed-Dobson, the son of former cabinet minister Frank Dobson; Mathew Wilkinson, a former head boy of Eton; Nicholas Brandt, son of an investment banker; Jonathan Birt, son of the former director-general of the British Broadcasting

Corporation (BBC), John Birt; and the son and daughter of Lord Justice Scott, who investigated the arms to Iraq deal.

Despite the stereotypes that portray Muslim women as oppressed and mistreated, it has been noted that more women are converting to Islam than men. For example, in Britain, women converts outnumber men by two to one (*British Muslims Monthly Survey* 2002), while in the United States they apparently outnumber them by four to one (Wadud 2003, 275). The majority of the women are said to be white, young, and unmarried. The director of the Florida chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations states: "In the past there were more African-Americans coming into Islam, now I am seeing an influx of white, Caucasian females."³ In Britain, it is interesting to note that some of these women, such as the daughter of Lord Justice Scott, Jemima Goldsmith, and the former TV presenter Kristiane Backer, come from middle-class backgrounds. The number may not be so significant, but the fact of conversion itself, especially among the elite, is revealing—to some, utterly incomprehensible—given the extremely negative image of Islam in the West and the consequent tensions and difficulties generated by conversion to this religion.

In this chapter I will deal with the issue of how Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, underpins or permeates the general Islamic principles that have found acceptance or attraction among Westerners, especially women. My approach in this context is theological rather than sociological, looking at how Sufism has informed the overall Islamic principles, thus making them ever more appealing to certain sectors within Western society. The key theme to be explored here is the ways in which Sufism—or the Sufi perspective on Islam—has contributed to the process by which Islam is made not just into an interesting approach to life, but into an acceptable, and, for some, an irresistible way of life. This phenomenon is all the more important given the increasingly grim picture of Islam that prevails in our times. But before dealing with the main theme, we need to put the subject into perspective and look at the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in a wider context.

Conversion to Islam

It must be stressed that there is no such word as conversion in the Arabic language; rather, the emphasis is on the idea of becoming a Muslim, that is, "submitting" to God in the form prescribed by his final revelation. Hence, to understand conversion to Islam requires an understanding of the word

"Islam" itself. Islam denotes an act of submission and envisages not only "the acceptance of the outward forms of any one particular prophet's practice, not even that of the seal of the prophets, Muhammad. Rather, the word represents that pure worship of, and obedience to, the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all those prophets, from Noah, through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, to the seal of the prophets, Muhammad" (Dutton 1999, 153). Hence, to accept Islam is in reality "to take on the ancient, Abrahamic, way of worship, albeit given the specific detailed requirements reflected in the outward practice of the seal of the prophets, Muhammad" (Dutton 1999, 153).

Furthermore, conversion, from the Islamic viewpoint, is also a remembrance and an affirmation of the primordial testimony to the Lordship of God, as the Qur'an says, "when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves. He said: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yea, we testify!' That was lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: of this we were unaware" (Qur'an 7: 172).⁴ Accordingly, those who embrace Islam often refer to themselves as "reverts" rather than converts.

Becoming a Muslim entails public acceptance of the declaration of faith in front of at least two witnesses, this being the first pillar of Islam. Once this is publicly stated, it is assumed that the "new Muslim" would live according to Islamic rules and regulations dictated by God and the Prophet Muhammad. This involves: the performance of the ritual prayer five times a day, payment of the annual alms-tax of *zakat*, fasting the month of Ramadan, and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. In addition, the new Muslim is obliged to stop consuming alcohol and eating pork and non-*halal* meat, and abide by the prohibitions related to issues such as stealing and committing adultery and murder. Most new Muslims tend to take on Islamic names, although this is not obligatory (Dutton 1999, 153–156). Some of those who choose not to adopt a Muslim name indicate that they decline on the basis of maintaining their social acceptability and avoiding discrimination at work. In a personal conversation, David Wanies, former head of the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University, who himself is a convert, stated that some lecturers and teachers who prefer to keep their original names do so for pedagogical reasons.⁵

For women, becoming Muslim can also entail a radical change in their appearance. Islamic law instructs women to dress modestly, and this includes covering the hair. The *hijab* is no longer seen as an innocent mark of a woman intent on maintaining her cultural or religious identity, but as a threatening

symbol of a pathologically anti-Western ideology. The following statement by a Muslim woman demonstrates what this can lead to: "People would shout, 'Go back to your own country.' I had someone spit at me once when I was standing at the bus stop at College."⁶ Covering the head could also prove to be an obstacle toward upward social mobility in society, especially among educated Western women, and for that reason, some of them choose not to don the *hijab*. From personal experience, I know of at least two university lecturers who decided not to wear the *hijab*, and a third one is in the process of abandoning it. The latter informed me that her motives for taking off the *hijab* are twofold: social acceptability ("I have been treated like them," she said, meaning immigrants and refugees) and job security and promotion. In a private conversation with her she stated that recently she had lost an opportunity for a senior position in a particular university primarily because of her *hijab*.⁷ The *hijab*, for convert women, brings not only outside rejection and hostility but also strong family opposition. This could jeopardize family ties, which are already under strain as a result of conversion. A typical response is this: "You chose your religion over us . . . people will discriminate against you. You are making yourself a third-rate citizen. You have basically painted a bull's-eye on you saying—'shoot me.'"⁸ However, reactions within a family can vary: "My mum said—'if you are happy, I am happy'—but obviously she was not. My dad said it and he meant it, that was the difference between them."⁹ Others cautiously accept it: "My mom loves me so much she [would] buy me scarves sometimes. My grandmother gave me a beautiful, velvet embroidered scarf. They will respect my prayer, but at the same time ask—'why are you so fanatical?'—"¹⁰ The question that needs to be asked is: But why, then, are these women embracing Islam against all the odds?

First, a large number of Western women who convert to Islam do so on the basis of personal connections such as marriage with Muslim men. That said, however, recently and increasingly, they are embracing Islam primarily because of their convictions. In 2002, the Muath Welfare Trust in Birmingham reported that seventeen women converted to Islam, eight of them through marriages, while the rest, nine, came to Islam as the result of a personal search.¹¹ Taking a closer look at those convictions, the appeal of Islam to Western women can be attributed to a wide range of factors. One can begin with the familiar idea of Islam as a form of liberation theology offering an accessible language of protest for marginalized groups in society (Winter 2000, 100). For example, women who are in general excluded from public life struggle because of that to achieve happiness. Islam in this context can

offer them a practical alternative: "I was looking for peace, I had a rough past. My teenage years were not great; I was bullied at school, people called me fat and ugly, and I was looking for something to make me happy. I tried to go to Church once a week but . . . I did not feel in place there. [Islam] gives you a purpose in your life. The Koran is like a guide to help you: when you read it, it makes you feel better."¹²

Second, arguably, the nature of the religion itself and its simplicity appeal strongly to the religious consciousness of people who are drawn to its emphasis on the simple message of monotheism, thereby attracting those who are "confused by Christo-logical and Trinitarian controversies" (Winter 2000, 100). As another convert seeks to explain: "Something vital seemed to be missing from my life and nothing would fill this vacuum. Being a Christian did not do anything for me, and I began to question the validity of only remembering God one day a week—Sundays! As with many other Christians too, I had become disillusioned with the hypocrisy of the church and was becoming increasingly unhappy with the concept of Trinity and the deification of Jesus."¹³ Many Western women come from a tradition that is historically dominated by male clergies and characterized by a strong aversion to and fear of the feminine, a tradition in which the concept God qua Father (a supreme male figure) dominates the overall understanding of the Ultimate Reality; such women can discover in Islam, with its emphasis on totality and integration, an appealing alternative. Despite its patriarchal features, they find in Islam an equilibrium on the plane of the "heart," in its relationship with God. I shall return to this theme below. The following testimony by a female convert hints at the kind of equilibrium to which Islam gives access: "There was an inner void that was not completely satisfied with academic success or human relationships. I had spent my life longing for a truth in which heart would be compatible with mind, action with thought, intellect with emotion. I found that reality in Islam."¹⁴

Third, in view of current social trends fostering widespread moral uncertainty, those aspects of Islamic teaching relating to morality, modesty, security, the sense of belonging, the sense of identity, close family ties, care and community, and deference to the elderly, as well as traditional notions of respect for women, have proven to be very popular among Western women. We hear the voices of women who say: "I am now more confident, happy and satisfied. I have achieved the fulfillment I was looking for."¹⁵ Commenting on the supposedly outmoded traditional respect for women, one convert states: "You seem to be really looked after. [Pious] Muslim men really respect

you; they do everything for you. You are highly thought of and protected.”¹⁶ These sentiments are echoed by another woman who extols, in the capacity of Muslims to participate in more traditional family/community values, “a feeling of belonging to a family . . . when with Muslim friends. . . closeness, love, kindness, caring: these are the benefits I have gained” (Haleem 2003, 94). Another convert goes further, considering current liberal social cultural trends as “false”: “Islam made me feel the need to discipline my life in a positive way and to bring about the necessary modifications to bring my whole being into balance. To set myself free from the false standards of society” (Haleem 2003, 94).

Underpinning the above factors, and by extension the overall attraction to Islam, I would argue, is Sufism, or the spiritual values of the faith, which are the core or the essence of the religion of Islam. For Sufism is Islamic spirituality, even if Islamic spirituality is not confined to the phenomenon of Sufism. The spiritual values of the religion of Islam are brought into sharp focus by the Sufis and are implemented practically by them in various ways. But the Sufis do not claim that these values and the doctrines and practices emerging therefrom are anything other than those of quintessential Islam. Their “esotericism” is but the complement to the exotericism of the formal religion, and both alike are rooted in the sources of the Islamic revelation—the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. To understand the inner, spiritual values of the revelation, one can turn to the Sufis, who have incorporated these values organically into a dynamic way of life. Inasmuch as most Sufis integrate these inner values with outer Shari’a practice, the result of their presence in Islamic society is a strengthening of the religion as a whole; the Sufis do not promote these inner values at the expense of the outer forms of Islam.

Sufism . . . became the framework within which all popular piety flowed together; its saints, dead and living, became the guarantors of the gentle and co-operative sides of social life. Guilds commonly came to have Sufi affiliations. Men’s clubs claimed the patronage of Sufi saints. And the tombs of local saints became shrines which almost all factions united in revering. It is probable that without the subtle leaven of the Sufi orders, giving to Islam an inward personal thrust and to the Muslim community a sense of participation in a common spiritual venture quite apart from anyone’s outward power, the mechanical arrangements of the Shari’a would not have maintained the loyalty essential to their effectiveness. (Hodgson 1974, 125)

Sufism, as Martin Lings says, “is necessary because it is to Islam what the heart is to the body. Like the bodily heart it must be secluded and protected

and must remain firm-fixed in the centre; but at the same time it cannot refuse to feed the arteries with life" (1975, 106–107; see also Nurbakhsh 1981; Nicholson 1997; Eaton 1994).

If one wishes to appreciate the deeper motives for conversion to Islam, one cannot afford to ignore this inner aspect of the religion, especially, as will be seen below, in regard to women converts. The following quotation illustrates this well:

I knew that I yearned for more spiritual fulfillment in my life. But, as yet, nothing had seemed acceptable or accessible to me. I had been brought up essentially a secular humanist. Morals were emphasized, but never attributed to any spiritual or divine being. As I met more Muslims, I was struck not only by their inner peace, but by the strength of their faith. In retrospect, I realize that I was attracted to these peaceful souls because I sensed my own lack of inner peace and conviction.¹⁷

Women—in particular those belonging to the higher classes or the elite, who have no social, economic, or racial motives for conversion—are, in my opinion, drawn to Islam by the spiritual values of Islam that Sufism has espoused, even if this is not always made explicit. But before elaborating this claim, it is necessary to give a brief summary of the role of Sufism as a vehicle for conversion to Islam.

The Importance of Sufism as an Agent for Conversion to Islam

Historically, Sufism has played a major role in spreading Islam and recruiting non-Muslims to the faith. It has been stated that the spread of Islam beyond the frontiers of the Muslim states, and therefore the Islamization of such areas as Anatolia, Bosnia, Kashmir, Indonesia, India, and West Africa, should be attributed in large part to the efforts of Sufi saints. This is the conclusion reached by Thomas Arnold, in his classic and still unsurpassed study of the spread of Islam, *The Preaching of Islam* (1935). Arnold shows that, far from being "spread by the sword," as the common stereotype would have us believe, Islam was, in fact, spread by peaceful means: by the preaching of the Sufis, on the one hand, and by the impact of traders, on the other. Often the two went hand in hand, as traders were themselves often members of a Sufi order, from the thirteenth century onward. The appeal of the Sufis continues to this day, providing one of the main points of entry to Islam, especially for contemporary Europeans and Americans (Dutton 1999, 163). Nasr describes Sufism as "the flower of the tree of Islam . . . or the jewel in the crown of the

Islamic tradition" (1975, 49). Its emphasis on a universal supra-intellectual but very real *tawheed* (or science of God's unity), its focus on inner practices as a force for the transformation of individuals, its insistence on the detachment of the individual from the world rather than abandonment of it, its care for the welfare of the community, and its aim to bring about justice through injecting moral and ethical values into human lives have made it one of the most attractive forces within the religion of Islam, especially in Western society (Dutton 1999, 163; Lapidus 1988, 445–446).

In addition, its ability to fill the spiritual vacuum created by such ideologies as secularism, socialism, and modernism has made it particularly important as an avenue to converting to Islam. As a consequence, a considerable number of Westerners, including women, are attracted to Sufism and then to Islam. Currently there are many Sufi groups in Europe and America that are able to attract converts to Islam (Haddad and Lummis 1987, 22, 171). Moreover, there are centers in the West dedicated to the study of Sufism, chief among them being the Muhyiddin ibn Arabi Center in Oxford. The number of people who have adopted Sufism and then Islam both in Europe and the United States is considerable; they include "ordinary" people who sought inner peace, such as now-middle-aged people who lived through the "hippie" periods in the 1960s and '70s, those who were disillusioned with the Western material way of life and decided to embrace Islam to fulfill their spiritual needs. Also, a significant number of Western intellectuals found consolation in the wisdom of Sufism. These include the late French philosopher René Guénon—whose teachings on Sufism have become a model for Europeans interested in the spiritual dimension of Islam (Le Pape 2003, 232–234), such as the English mystic Martin Lings—and Swiss intellectuals Fritjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt (Köse 1996, 20, 142–143). The same can be said regarding Nuh Keller of the Shadhiliyya order and his New Zealand wife, Umm Sahl, Tim Winter of Cambridge University, and James Morris of Exeter University.

The women (and men), especially from the elite, who have shown interest or entered into Islam did so by virtue of the fact that they were challenged by what one might call "the spiritual intellectuality" of the inner dimension of the religion. Having read literature on Sufi spirituality written both by practicing Muslims/Sufis and objective Western academics, they became aware of the link between the inner, universal spirit of the faith and its outer, particular form. While in the 1960s Sufism was part of the "hippie" movement, and divorced from its Islamic roots, in the 1990s, it was becoming known increasingly, and more accurately, as the form taken by Islamic mysticism.

Many intellectuals came to see such values as secular cleverness, wealth, relativism, and pragmatism in the light of Sufi ideals of wisdom, sacrifice, a sense of the absolute, and idealism. These characteristics ultimately lent a sense of balance and completeness, primarily through the power of integration proper to Sufism. Integration means *tawheed*, the verbal noun stemming from the verb *Wahhada*, literally, “to make one.” Whereas theologically, this means declaring or affirming God’s oneness, in Sufism, it comes to mean realizing oneness—the oneness of God, but also the oneness of being, and thus the necessity of “being one,” or being “integrated” as a personality, in order to properly affirm and realize the oneness of God. Thus, *tawheed* is fully realized when God is worshiped by the “whole” human being: to be “whole” is to be “holy” (the words being etymologically related). This state of integration is ultimately antipodean to the dissipation and agitation that so many feel is generated by modern life: “For to be dissipated and compartmentalized, to be lost in the never ending play of mental images and concepts, or psychic tensions and forces, [means] to be removed from that state of wholeness which our inner state demands from us” (Nasr 1972, 43–44). Sufism strives toward the attainment of the state of purity and wholeness “not through negation of intelligence, as is often the case in the kind of piety fostered by certain modern religious movements, but through the integration of each element of one’s being into its own proper centre” (Nasr 1972, 44). Accordingly, the spiritual method is crucial for the integration of the person. For it brings the dispersed elements in human beings back together and ensures that the outward-going tendency is controlled and reversed, so that the person can live inwardly with his/her emotions, reactions, and tendencies, aiming primarily at the center rather than the rim (Nasr 1975, 3–17), “for at the centre resides the One, the Pure and ineffable Being which is the source of all beatitude and goodness, whereas at the periphery is non-existence, which only appears to be real because of man’s illusory perception and lack of discrimination” (Nasr 1972, 49).

Normative Sufism does not go outside the framework of the law to achieve such transformation in the human mind, body, and spirit, but seeks to base its practices on the injunctions of the Shari’a. Sufism integrates the outward (*zahir*) and the inward (*batin*) aspects of the faith and integrates male and female on the basis of the integration within God of *Jalal* (Majesty) and *Jamal* (Beauty), ultimately resulting in a totality on the metaphysical plane, which implies complementarity at the human level within and between man and woman. This is very much a part of the traditional Islamic conception of the

nature of things. Therefore, when men lack beauty (*jamal*) of soul, they tend to oppress those weaker than themselves through lack of compassion, thus disobeying God, in the process, through lack of wisdom and submission. When women lack strength (*jalal*) of the soul, on the other hand, they are unable to assert their true strength, whereas Sufi women have always been able to bring forth their reserves of strength and remain impassably independent. Sufi women throughout the ages have been an inspiration to other women and have taken on male disciples (Smith 1984; Nurbakhsh 1983; El-Sakkakini 1982). This affirms the necessity of the feminine/spiritual dimension as a balancing factor; for when men (and women) lose the balance between the two sides of their nature, then *ihsan*—that is, virtue or beauty of soul—loses its meaning. Where there is no perception of or conformity to beauty—*ihsan* in the deepest sense—there is no virtue, and where men (and women) have no virtue, society collapses into the kind of chauvinism and abuse that characterize male-female relations in so many parts of the Muslim world on the whole.

In addition to the appeal of the spiritual values of Sufism to many Westerners, the Sufi gender paradigm in this context is also of particular relevance. Sufism offers a particular notion of feminine equality and dignity. To understand this concept, it is important to consider the Sufi approach to the feminine principle within Islam. The capacity of Sufism to incorporate and encourage feminine activities within its sphere in both spiritual and social terms attests to the importance attributed by the Sufis to the feminine element in the Divine Nature itself. We shall examine each of these elements in turn.

Sufism and the Acceptance of Feminine Activities

Sufism continues to favor the development of feminine activities more than any other branch of Islam. The Qur'anic emphasis on the spiritual equality between the sexes: "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women; for devout men and women; for men and women who are patient; for men and women who humble themselves; for men and women who give charity; for men and women who fast; for men and women who guard their chastity; for men and women who remember Allah much—for them all has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward" (Qur'an 33: 32). "And whoso doeth good works, whether male or female, and is a believer, such will enter paradise, and will not be wronged the dint of a date-stone" (Qur'an 4: 124–125). And its

constant reminder of the ability of women to fulfill their spiritual needs; the respect of the Prophet for women in general and his ideal relationships with his wives. His kindness and care for his daughters “excluded that feeling of dejection so often found in medieval Christian monasticism” (Schimmel 1975, 426; Jawad 1998, 11–14, 26). Despite the fact that one can find what could possibly be seen as antifeminine sayings in the traditions and among some early Sufis, “the Muslims scarcely reached the apogee of hatred displayed by medieval Christian writers in their condemnation of the feminine elements” (Schimmel 1975, 429). For example, Eve was never regarded as the cause of the fall of Adam, nor was the possibility that women did not have souls ever considered. On the contrary, the Prophet declared that “God has made dear to me from your world women and fragrance, and the joy of my eyes is in prayer” (Schimmel 1997, 21). Such principles from the Qur’an and the prophetic example gave rise in Sufism to a particularly rich tradition of female spirituality. Hence, large numbers of women followed (and continue to follow to the present day) the spiritual path and in due time excelled in their virtues and piety. Chief among them was Rabia al-Adawiyya, considered to be the first woman saint in Islam (after the Prophet’s wife, Khadija, and his daughter, Fatima). She is credited with introducing the concept of unconditional love of God into Sufism, thus transforming “sombre asceticism into genuine love mysticism” (Schimmel 1997, 34). The following anecdote illustrates the notion of unconditional love: “[One day Rabia] ran through Basra with a bucket of water in one hand and a burning torch in the other, and when asked about the reason behind her actions, she replied: I want to pour water into hell and set paradise on fire, so that these two veils disappear and nobody shall any longer worship God out of a fear of hell or a hope of heaven, but solely for the sake of His eternal beauty” (Schimmel 1997, 34–35). Her devotion, and asceticism, and her contribution to the development of Islamic mysticism earned her the respect and affection of all the Sufi masters of her time (Al-Din Attar 1990, 39–51).

Rabia was not the only such woman of her times. Several other women at the forefront of the Sufi tradition developed and articulated the Sufi way of life. There were Maryam of Basra, Rabia of Syria, Fatima of Nishapur, to name but a few; they attended Sufi meetings, consorted freely with Sufi masters, sponsored Sufi activities, and organized circles in the pursuit of the mystical path. Some of them who were advanced in learning and mystical knowledge guided their husbands in religious and practical matters, and contributed to the spiritual formation of future Sufi masters, educating great mystical thinkers such as Ibn Arabi, who was taught for two years by the great Sufi saint

Fatima of Cordova. His early encounter with her and other female mystics greatly influenced his positive attitude toward the feminine role in Sufism.

In general, these women played an important role in shaping the image of the ideal, pious Muslim woman, respected and venerated for her spiritual endeavors. These feminine activities continue to take place in modern times and can be found in some parts of the Muslim world, where Sufi women still teach and train souls who are longing for spiritual enlightenment, maintaining continuity with the early example of Rabia al-Adawiyya and her fellow Sufi women following the spiritual path (Schimmel 1975, 426–427, 430–435; Nasr 1980, 74; Nurbakhsh 1983). The example of Rabia and other pious Muslim women like her serves as an inspiration and a model to be emulated in Sufis' personal lives, especially at a time when there is widespread antiritualism (Sherrard 1987), the desacralization of knowledge, the diminution of feminine spiritual values, and the distortion of feminine dignity. For an ailing society, inner renewal and purification are the first step toward a more general cure for society as a whole. In this context the following quotation is of importance:

The more I pondered, the greater emptiness I felt within. I was slowly beginning to reach a stage where my dissatisfaction with my status as a woman in this society, was really a reflection of my greater dissatisfaction with society itself. Everything seemed to be degenerating backwards, despite the claims . . . of success and prosperity. I wanted to find that thing which was going to fill the vacuum in my life. [This was achieved when I was] drawn . . . [to] Islam.¹⁸

Sufism and Feminine Social Values

The emphasis by Sufis upon upholding the feminine values pertaining to the family, whilst at the same time maintaining a dignity and strength as a worshiper before God, has a special appeal for women who choose to fulfill an orientation toward the family and community. This balancing of values is set against a time when feminine social values are diminishing and no longer esteemed, when, in fact, there are constant efforts to undermine them in society. Ideals and concepts pertaining to womanhood and the family are no longer regarded as sacred, but on the contrary, as stigmatizing and stereotyping, resulting in confusion and leading to a void in the life of millions of women who want to be fulfilled by the capacity to nurture and strengthened by an independence of faith, qualities often pejoratively associated with

“traditional norms.” Sufism, with its strong affirmation of the sacred role of womanhood in society, presents an attractive alternative to fill the vacuum for those women who desire to live their lives as mothers, wives, or daughters in a spiritual way. For example, Sufis (and Muslims in general) highly respect mothers; the exhortation in the Qur’an and by the Prophet to be respectful to mothers testifies to the honor bestowed upon the maternal role, especially in its spiritual aspect. “There are several well-known hadiths that either state or imply that motherhood spent in accordance with the Shariah is one of the expressions of the spiritual role of a female” (Chishti 1989, 204). One of the most detailed hadiths, which brings to life the spiritual reality of the travails of motherhood, was related by Anas, who had heard from Sallama, the nurse of the Prophet’s son Ibrahim: “O Messenger of God, you have brought good tidings of all the good things to men, but not to women.” He said: “Did your women friends put you up to asking me this question?” “Yes they did,” she replied, and he said:

Does it not please any one of you that if she is pregnant by her husband, she receives the reward of one who fasts and prays for the sake of God? And when the labour pains come no-one in the heavens or the earth knows what is concealed in her womb to delight her? And when she delivers, not a mouthful of milk flows from her and not a suck does she give, but that she receives, for every mouthful and every suck the reward of one good deed. And if she is kept awake at night, she receives the reward of one who frees seventy slaves for the sake of God. (Schleifer 1997, 49)

The Qur’an and the Sunnah demand that mothers be venerated, and cared for, especially in old age; the famous hadith of the Prophet “heaven lies at the feet of mothers” provides much cause for reflection in the life of the pious Muslim, who then endeavors to ensure that mothers are always respected, treated kindly, and gracefully obeyed. The very fact that the word for womb in Arabic, *rahm*, derives from the word *rahma* (mercy), which itself stems from the divine attributes of Ar-Rahman (the Compassionate) and Ar-Rahim (the Merciful), signifies the tremendously rich and deep understanding in Islam of the creation process as deriving from the very unfolding of compassion and mercy, so that each and every dimension of motherhood precipitates and participates in that unfolding. For Sufis this symbol, and in fact spiritual reality, of the maternal facilitation of Divine Mercy was irresistible and is exemplified in many Hadith Qudsi (the very words of God spoken on the tongue of the Prophet), such as that reported by Ghazzali: “If my servant falls sick, I care for him as a loving mother tends her son.” Also, the great mystic Rumi is

reported to have said: “[Since] a mother’s tenderness derives from God, it is a sacred duty and a worthy task to serve her” (Schimmel 1997, 89, 93). For the believers who benefit from the Sufi exegesis of the metaphysical understanding of the creation process, it is no wonder that they hold their mothers in awe and do their best to be good to them so that the blessings of God descend upon them, for pious spiritual mothers possess *baraka* (the quality of the sacred) by virtue of their proximity to God.

The role of spiritual mothers originates with Maryam (Mary), the mother of Jesus and the only woman after whom a chapter in the Qur’an is named. She is considered the “Chosen amongst all women” and highly revered (among Muslims) for her piety, purity, and submission. In this context, the following hadith is of great importance: “Aisha [the wife of Muhammad] asked Fatima [the daughter of Muhammad]: Did I see [you truly] when you leaned over the Messenger of God and cried; then you leaned over him and you laughed? She said: He informed me that he would die from his illness, so I cried; then he informed me that I would precede the other members of his family in being reunited with him, and he said, You are the chief lady (*sayyida*) of paradise, with the exception of Mary the daughter of Imran” (Schleifer 1997, 63).

Amongst the women in the history of Islam, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, Khadija, was the first to enter Islam, and she, while supporting her husband in his mission as messenger of God, also looked after her children and ensured that peace and tranquillity prevailed in her home, thus becoming the “embodiment of devotion and noble qualities” (Smith 1984, xxx) for Muslims, especially Muslim women. Her daughter Fatima, mother of Hasan and Hossein, is regarded as the fountainhead of female spirituality in Islam; her extreme piety and devotion to her family elevated her to a high station. She and her mother “stand at the beginning of Islamic piety and occupy a very distinguished rank” (Smith 1984, xxx). Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet, is also highly honored and respected; she served her husband as devoted wife and guided Muslims with her divine knowledge; her close relationship with the Prophet made her an authentic source of knowledge about his personal life and so ranks her amongst the most reliable sources in the tradition of hadith science (Smith 1984, xxx). Other wives of the Prophet followed suit in their holiness and piety. They all set examples for Muslim women by expressing their spirituality through their roles as mothers, wives, or daughters.

Thus, from the Islamic spiritual, and therefore Sufi, perspective, the role of women within the family is highly valued and considered to be sacred, as they are viewed as no less than the unfolding of God’s mercy. Feminine

qualities and the homage paid to womanhood and their social and family roles become vital for women who desire to live in and through God, although, because of the very fact that mercy is understood to have derived from the feminine attributes of God's Nature, the example of women who bore no children but dedicated their lives to God was also a source of reverence and inspiration, as we shall discuss below.

Sufism and the Feminine Element in Spiritual Life

Conscious of the positive aspects of womanhood, the Sufis more than others highlighted beautifully the role of women in spiritual life and thereby ensured that Sufism is permeated throughout with feminine traits. Within this context, the purely spiritual role of females is fully accepted and elevated to a high degree. They bestowed upon women (in equality with men) the title of saint and accepted a woman (Rabia) to be a leading figure in the early development of Islamic mysticism (Smith 1984, 2–3). Ibn Arabi, in particular, played a major role in explaining the importance of the feminine element as a component of the Divine Reality (Schimmel 1997, 105). His belief that the Divine Reality ultimately contains and transcends the polarity of the masculine and the feminine continues to exert influence on Sufis until the present day. He declared that “there is no spiritual quality pertaining to men without women having access to it also” and “men and women have their part in all degrees [of sanctity] including that of the function of [spiritual] pole [a designation attributed to the most formative and inspiring figure of any particular phase in the life of the religion]” (Chodkiewicz 1986, 126). For Ibn Arabi, woman reveals the mystery of the compassionate God, and the feminine aspect is the form in which God can best be contemplated. He stresses: “God cannot be seen apart from matter, and He is seen more perfectly in the human material than in any other, and more perfectly in woman than in man” (Schimmel 1997, 103). In doing so, he elevates the image of the feminine to a high degree and paves the way for other Sufis to follow suit. For example, in the eighteenth century, Wali Muhammad Akbarabadi, a commentator on Rumi, declared: “Know that God cannot be contemplated independently of a concrete being and that He is more perfectly seen in a human being than in any other, and more perfectly in woman than in man” (Austin 1984, 12).

Thus, from the spiritual perspective, women embody and express aspects of the Ultimate Reality, which comprises the masculine and the feminine principles, as prefigured in the ninety-nine names of God. These names “are

traditionally classified according to Majesty (*Jalal*—the archetype of masculinity) and Beauty (*Jamal*—the archetype of femininity). God is conceived, for example, both as the ‘wrathful’—an eminently masculine trait—and as the ‘merciful’—identifiable as a feminine quality. Moreover, if God is referred to as a He, the essence of God is referred to as a She” (Shah-Kazemi 1996, 2). In their approach to Divine Reality, the Sufis have always stressed the feminine dimension of that Reality. As Murata explains, while the legalistic authorities emphasize the incomparability and distance of God, the Sufis insist on the comparability and nearness of God. Hence, for the dogmatic theologians, God is wrathful, distant, dominating, and powerful. His rules must be obeyed, otherwise there is only punishment and hellfire. In other words, God’s attributes “are those of a strict and authoritarian father” (Murata 1992, 8–9). In contrast, the Sufis see God as gentle, kind, and near. They believe “that mercy, love, and gentleness are the overriding reality of existence and that these will win out in the end.” For them, “God is not primarily a stern and forbidding father, but a warm and loving mother” (Murata 1992, 9). Accordingly, they argue that the God of the theologians is a God whom nobody would ever love, essentially because he is too distant and difficult to comprehend, while the God of the spiritual authorities is a God who is compassionate and loveable because his prime concern is the care of his creatures; as a result, his creatures love him in reciprocal terms. This loving, caring God can easily be understood and approached (Murata 1992, 8–9).

To conclude, the dogmatic theologians, while accepting the feminine characteristics of the Divine Reality, lay strong emphasis on the masculine dimension of that reality, reducing in the process the feminine aspect to second place. In contrast, the Sufis affirm the supremacy of the feminine dimension, primarily because the famous hadith of the Prophet—“God’s mercy precedes His wrath” (implying that God’s feminine characteristics take priority over his masculine qualities)—permeates their understanding and their approach to the Ultimate Reality (Murata 1992, 9).

These spiritual ideals related to femininity are not only derived from mystical interpretations, but comprise the very fabric of the authentic Islamic tradition; they are enshrined in the Arabic language, which powers Islamic theology, and are reflected in the intellectual and social manifestation of the overall Islamic heritage. These ideals

permeated the ethos of traditional Islam. They may not have been articulated or even respected by all, but they were nonetheless implicit in the cultural ideals that defined gender relationships in societies that remained true to integral Islam. Ideals which

continue to influence those who are trying to live according to the inner spirit of the tradition and not just outward prescriptions. This spirit leads to women being venerated and not incarcerated, held in awe and not treated with contempt. (Shah-Kazemi 1996, 2)

Taking into consideration the above discussion, it is important to stress that Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, is a key factor in influencing and shaping the main Islamic principles that have found an acceptance among certain sectors of the population within Western society, thus presenting Islam as a credible alternative way of life for some, especially women.

Notes

1. The rate of conversion to Islam apparently surges at times when there are strong anti-Muslim feelings such as those following the Bosnian conflict, the Gulf War, and the Rushdie affair (Winter 2000, 108). After September 11, 2001, "the number of conversions has risen in the UK, US and across Europe. A Dutch Islamic center claims a tenfold increase, whilst a steady stream of converts are reported at the new Muslim project in Leicester" (*British Muslims Monthly Survey 2002*). Similar activity is evident in mosques in cities such as London, Manchester, and Glasgow in the UK. Yet these numbers have to be taken with caution. See also the introduction to this volume.

2. Personal interview, Muath Welfare center, Birmingham, England, September 2003.

3. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/mum.htm>.

4. Cited in Winter 2000, 95–96.

5. Personal conversation, Lancaster, England, October 1997.

6. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/mum.htm>.

7. Personal interview, Amsterdam, March 2003.

8. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/yfm.htm>.

9. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/mum.htm>.

10. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/yfm.htm>.

11. Personal interview, Birmingham, England, September 2003.

12. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/mum.htm>.

13. <http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/women/women3.htm>.

14. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/newmuslim/karima.html>.

15. <http://www.thetrue religion.org/mum.htm>.

16. Ibid.

17. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/newmuslim/karima.html>.

18. <http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/women/women3.htm>.

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Women Embracing Islam

GENDER AND CONVERSION IN THE WEST

Edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS  AUSTIN

All photographs are by Kevin van der Brug,
who received the Gold Award in the
category "People and Portraits" from the
PANL (Photographers Association of the
Netherlands) for his series on Dutch Muslimas.

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Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2006

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© The paper used in this book meets the mini-
mum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992
(R1997) (Permanence of Paper).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women embracing Islam : gender and conversion in
the West / edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk. 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-292-71273-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-292-71273-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-292-71302-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-292-71302-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Muslim converts from Christianity—
Europe. 2. Muslim women—Europe. 3. Women
in Islam—Europe. 4. Gender identity—Europe.
5. Sex role—Religious aspects—Islam.
I. Nieuwkerk, Karin van, 1960—

BPI70.5.W66 2006
297.082'091821—dc22

2005037096