

Female Spirituality in Islam

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IN SPEAKING OF FEMALE SPIRITUALITY in the context of the Islamic tradition, one must turn not only to the possibilities of the spiritual life for Muslim women but also to those aspects of Islam which possess a feminine dimension. One must consider the spiritual life of the great female saints, from those who belonged to the household of the Prophet to saintly women who have adorned every century of Islamic history to this day. One must also study the spiritual aspect of those everyday roles of women, which are sacralized by virtue of being lived and practiced according to the *Sharī'ah* and, therefore, in conformity with God's Will. Likewise, one must delve into Sufi teachings and practices as they apply to women and as they provide concrete paths for spiritual realization. Finally, it is necessary to recall the feminine aspect of Islamic spirituality as such, as reflected in the doctrines concerning the nature of God, the wedding of the soul and the spirit, and the feminine symbolism employed in discussing the nature of the Divine Essence and the human being's quest of the Divine Beloved. Throughout all these discussions, one must also remember that female spirituality in Islam partakes of the immutability and continuity that characterize the Islamic tradition itself.

It is, in fact, miraculous that a period of fourteen centuries with all its trials and confrontations could not break the continuity in beliefs, thoughts, and actions between the women who were blessed with the company of the Prophet and led a spiritual life under his guidance (*ṣaḥābiyyāt*) in the beginning of the Islamic era, and those Muslim women who, in the succeeding centuries, followed in the spiritual footsteps of their predecessors even during those recent periods in Islamic history which have suffered from the gradual eclipse of spirituality and the desacralization of knowledge. Such women, adorned with spiritual virtues, live even now in the dawn of the fifteenth century of the *hijrah*. They are inspired by the illustrious lives of

their spiritual models and lead truly spiritual lives in conformity with the tenets of Islam, despite the tendency of present-day society toward desecration and forgetfulness of God. Providentially, they in turn will inspire others to emulate them in the quest for the Divine and to embark on the path toward the One by identification with *al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah* (the Muḥammadan Reality), which is the fountainhead of Islamic spirituality. It is hoped that they will become a viable force for spiritual vitality and progress by combatting the opposing forces, which are on the increase in this materialistic age.

Quranic Impact

Realizing the intensity of the current of change that runs through the centuries, one wonders at this tangible continuity among spiritual women in their modes of belief, thinking, and behavior. Broadly speaking, this continuity is due—in this case, as in all that is Islamic—to the powerful effect of the teachings of the Quran and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad. In other words, Muslim women who follow a spiritual path continue to be alike for the definite reason that their lives are guided by their love of God, which they express according to the Quranic Revelation, with responses that are conditioned by the teachings of the Prophet. Although the crucial events recorded in the history of the world brought along patterns of thinking and styles of living that were not only radically different from those of Islam but even inimical to them, the women who followed the teachings of the Quran, like their Muslim counterparts, strove to model their behavior on the example set by the Prophet, his companions, and his household (*ahl al-bayt*). They thus continued to wear the dress of faith in the Unity and Oneness of God and to proclaim *Lā ilāha illaʾllāh* (There is no divinity but Allah). Their adornment consists in the remembrance of God, and through the travail of spiritual discipline they cultivate virtues such as patience, repentance, humility, charity, chastity, truthfulness, piety, and absolute dependence on God (*tawakkul*). In a spirit of love and devotion, they reach a *maqām* (state) wherein they experience submission to the Divine Will.¹ Consequently, through the grace of God, in this way they begin to partake of His Divine Attributes. In so doing they are following the Prophet's command to the faithful, "Acquire Attributes of Allah." "Know that the Named is One and the Names a hundred thousand, that Being is One but its aspects are a hundred thousand."² "Thy great and sacred Names are a proof of Thy bounty and beneficence and mercy. Each One of them is greater than heaven and earth and angel. They

are a thousand and one and they are ninety-nine: each one of them is related to one of man's needs."³

Proximity to the Divine

Once the seeker is able to translate the acquired spiritual virtues into action, the door of spiritual realization opens wide and the seeker crosses the threshold of gnosis—spiritual realization or proximity to the Divine. The beautiful truth is that God (as mentioned in the Quran and *Hadīth*) is ever close to those (men and women) who seek Him. But those who fail to acknowledge that He is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, knowing and seeing all that they do, remain distant from Him. The very light of God is needed to perceive one's proximity to the Divine. Shabistarī's idea of proximity is expressed in the following way:

In a moment this world passes away,
None remains in the world save "The Truth,"
At that moment you attain proximity
You stripped of "self" are "united" to the Beloved.⁴

God's magnanimous response to those who seek His forgiveness and His majestic Presence is expressed in the following *ḥadīth*:

He who approaches near to Me one span, I will approach to him one cubit: and he who approaches near to Me one cubit, I will approach near to him one fathom, and whoever approaches Me walking, I will come to him running, and he who meets Me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it.⁵

In this *ḥadīth* reference is to both men and women, and women share with men the magnanimous response of God to their spiritual effort.

God's Slaves

One of the features of spirituality in Islam is that, whereas the genuine lover is granted spiritual proximity to the Beloved, the man and woman as a human pair are created to function as the Creator's vicegerents on earth (II, 30); as seekers of the Divine, they always remain slaves (*al-'abd*). The Quran testifies to the primordial covenant between God and man (used here in the sense of both male and female) as mentioned in the verse "Am I not your Lord?" asked God of His slaves. They said, "Indeed Thou art" (VII, 172). The implication is that the bondage of the Master and the slave is not destined to be severed. As such, under all circumstances the seeker or the lover of God remains a slave. However, the slaves' spiritual progress,

by way of attaining the Attributes of the Master, makes the slave worthy of the Master's choicest gifts. Once the slave reaches the spiritual *maqām* of having attained some of the Master's Attributes to a degree humanly possible, then the Master favors the slave with His friendship and *qurb*, or closeness. Nevertheless, the fact is that even those who attain the heights of spiritual realization always remain the Master's slaves. "There is none in the heavens and the earth but cometh unto the Beneficent as a slave" (XIX, 93), for "He is Allah the One! And there is none comparable to Him" (CXII, 1-4). However, the slaves of God are given the glad tidings in the verse or *āyah*: "Gardens of Eden which the Beneficent hath promised to His slaves, the gardens which are (at present) unseen; surely His promise must come to pass" (XIX, 61). Thus, God assigns to His slaves a high and true renown both in this world and in the hereafter. Gardens of Eden are promised by God to both men and women in return for recognizing His perfect Unity and following the straight path. A slave who passed through the hardships of the spiritual path and experienced the Master's Unity expressed it in the following words:

He perfect is alone, and glorious for evermore,
His Unity supreme above imagining,
His wondrous work beyond analysis.
I do not say, He is the soul's soul: whatso'er I
say, that He transcends, for He is free of space,
and may not be attained by swiftest thought or
further sense.

If thou wouldst serve the Friend, and win His
grace, He is thine eye, thine ear, thy tongue, thy brain:
And since through Him thou speakest, and through
Him hearest, before His Being thou art naught;
for so, when shines the sun's own radiance,
the light of stars is darkened.⁶

The attainment of gnosis, or *ma'rifah*, is largely dependent upon the spiritual capability, effort upon the path, and the extent and intensity with which the male or female seeker is blessed with the *barakah*⁷ that results from the absorption of the teachings of the Quranic Revelation as exemplified by the Prophet, his family, and his companions. In the words of Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī, the celebrated Sufi, "If Gnosis (*ma'rifa*) were to take visible form, all that looked thereon would die at the sight of its beauty and loveliness and goodness and grace and every brightness would become dark beside the splendour thereof."⁸ Now this gnosis is a possibility for women as well as for men, and the *barakah* that makes it possible is available even

in a mode of life rooted in the social and family responsibilities which are those of women according to the *Sharī'ah*.

The exemplary lives of the noble women of the Prophet's household and of their physical and spiritual descendants echo the message contained in many verses (*āyāt*) of the Quran and corresponding *ḥadīths* to the effect that a Muslim woman's religious duties lie in keeping an orderly home which breathes tranquillity amid both the plenty and the scarcity of the necessities of life. If she is married, then she must aim to raise her family in accordance with the *Sharī'ah* of Islam. If she is unmarried, divorced, or a widow, as a member of her parents' family, she is expected to share the heavy burden of maintaining a household under the supervision of her parents or the elderly members of her family while seeking the pleasure of God, both in this world and in the hereafter. When a Muslim woman realizes that the sign of the lover of God is that she follows the "Beloved of Allah,"⁹ she then follows the *Sharī'ah* in her daily life as a member of her family in particular and of the society in general. Her sincere attempt to follow the *Sharī'ah* in its exoteric aspects leads to the lifting of the veils and introduces her to the inner or the esoteric aspects of the Divine Law, the assiduous observance of which leads one to the path of *ma'rifah*.

Women and Family

There are those who have criticized the injunctions of the *Sharī'ah* concerning women and the role of women in general in Islam. Such people do not usually understand either the rights bestowed upon women in Islam or the situation of women in religious communities other than the Islamic. The discussion of women's rights, however, is not of concern to the present essay, which aims to discuss female spirituality. Suffice it to say that the Prophet conferred on women a dignified status commensurable with their feminine role and responsibilities. Most important of all, the vistas of spiritual growth and development were fully opened to the female sex. As a result, in the context of Islamic spirituality, once a woman strives in the spiritual life she is able to gain access to all the possibilities of the Islamic tradition and to become, like man, the vicegerent of God (*khalīfat Allāh*) on earth.

Although the Quran is addressed to all of humanity, it also addresses women specifically. In addition to *Sūrat al-nisā'* (women), there are numerous *āyāt* scattered throughout the various suras which refer to women's status, rights, and responsibilities. Thus, the first *āyah* in *Sūrat al-nisā'*:

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul, created, of like nature, His mate and from them twain, scattered

(like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through Whom Ye demand your mutual (rights) and reverence the Wombs (that bore you) for Allah ever watches over you. (IV, 1)

It may be noted here that the male and the female in their relation with the metacosmic Reality are equal. But on the cosmic level, which means the biological, psychological, and social levels, their roles are complementary; in Islam, the roles of men and women are complementary rather than competitive. In any case, before God they stand as equals, but both men and women can approach the Divine only by remaining faithful to their respective forms created by the Creator and to the duties assigned to them by Him as their Master.¹⁰

The demand to be dutiful toward the Creator and toward women as mothers in the same *āyah* is an indicator of the honor bestowed on motherhood and Islam's recognition of the rights of a female in her spiritual role as a mother. There are several well-known *ḥadīths* that either state or imply that motherhood spent in accordance with the *Sharī'ah* is one of the expressions of the spiritual role of a female. The Quran and the *Sunnah* emphasize that the mother deserves reverence, service, and loving care; disobedience to her or deprivation of her needs or rights is severely condemned, and the children are counseled that "heaven lies at the feet of mothers."

In the context of Islamic spirituality, observance of the Divine Law enables the body as the abode of the soul to play a positive role in the very process of spiritual realization. The Creator's miracle of human creation takes place in the womb of the mother—hence the veneration and tenderness shown to an expectant mother. Esoterically, the very process of pregnancy and birth is a part of the Divine Command "Be! and it is" (III, 47). The Quranic description of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, led the Muslims to hold Mary as the symbol of the spirit that receives the Divine Inspiration and becomes the model of purity and the spiritual characteristics of motherhood. The mother bears the "soul to come" in her womb from the moment of conceiving and passes through the succeeding stages, which are described in the Quran in these terms:

Verily We created man from a product of wet earth; then placed him as a drop (of seed) in a safe lodging; then fashioned We the drop a clot, then fashioned We the clot a little lump, then fashioned We the little lump bones, then clothed the bones with flesh, and then produced it as another creation. So blessed be Allah, the Best of Creators! (XXIII, 12–14)

It is an instinctive part of a female's spiritual role to provide for the needs of her offspring, for the newborn's nourishment is a symbol of Divine Providence. It is a living testimony of God's Attributes as the Provider or

Sustainer that the nourishment for the baby comes from the mother's breasts in the form needed by the baby's digestive system for the normal growth and development of the body. In other words, the mother (human as well as the animal) functions as a means for Divine Provision for creatures of the Creator.

Moreover, a spiritual mother nurtures the soul of her child with the powerful effect of the recitation of the *Shahādah*, the oft-repeated prayer (*Sūrat al-fāṭihah*), and the beautiful Names or Attributes of God by singing them as a lullaby for putting the child to sleep or for comforting a wailing or a disturbed child. In doing so, the mother makes her contribution in permeating the very being of the child with the most powerful words of the Quran.

If the mother performs her spiritual role with a sincere intention to please God (to Whom she belongs and to Whom is her return according to the Quran), then the *rahmah* of God descends on her and she herself attains proximity to the Divine.¹¹ Histories of the lives of spiritual adepts or saints frequently reveal that their mothers played a vital role in leading them toward the spiritual path. To cite an example: Sulṭān Bāhū, who is renowned for his spirituality, often mentioned his mother with the utmost reverence and firmly believed that his spiritual attainment was solely due to the efforts of his mother, who was a deeply spiritual person. It is interesting to note that he composed verses with a pun on his mother's name Rāstī, which means "truth." *Al-Ḥaqq* is one of the Names of God, meaning "the Truth." Sulṭān Bāhū said in Persian:

Rahmat-i Haqq bā rāwān-i rāstī
Rāstī az rāstī ārāstī

May the beneficence of the Truth flow on the being of truth
 for I am bedecked by this truth through the Truth.¹²

In simple words, the spiritual master attributed his spirituality to his mother.

As for the role of the Muslim wife, it overlaps the role of the mother. In the Prophet's first wife, Khadījah, the Muslim wife finds her best example. Khadījah enjoys the unique honor of being the first person to accept the testimony of the faith of Islam and to witness the truth of the Oneness of God and the prophethood of Muḥammad, whom she married for his honesty, integrity, and acumen as a trader. She is known for her untold sacrifices in order to spread the message of Islam, while maintaining a household, serving her husband, and rearing her family in accordance with the tenets of Islam—as these were being received by her prophet-husband

in the form of *āyāt* of the Holy Book. In this context, Ibn Hishām says, "So Khadījah believed and attested to the truth which came from Allah. Thus was Allah minded to lighten the burden of His Prophet: Whenever he heard something that grieved him, touching his rejection by the people, he had recourse unto her and she comforted, reassured and supported him."¹³ Thus, the first *umm al-mu'minīn* (mother of the faithful) laid the foundations of Islamic spirituality and family life.¹⁴

The Mothers of the Faithful as Models

It befits a Muslim woman to take example from the mothers of the faithful, for each one of them excelled in one or another aspect of family life and contributed to the fulfillment of the Prophet's mission. The name of 'Ā'ishah is particularly important; it was in her arms that the Prophet died and in her company that he received revelations. She served her husband as his beloved wife. She entered the Prophet's household as a little girl with her toys but was destined to acquire that wisdom which serves as an instrument for attaining spiritual perfection and thereby delivers its possessor from human limitations.

'Ā'ishah, the learned mother of the believers, lived through the rules of the four rightly guided caliphs of Islam and wove the sapiential dimension into the fabric of their reigns. Her most intimate closeness with the Prophet as his wife makes her an inseparable part of him. She survived her prophet-husband for nearly half a century and guided the faithful with her Divine Knowledge. It is recorded that she narrated 2,210 *ḥadīths* of the Prophet, who is reported to have said, "Learn two thirds of religion from 'Ā'ishah." Her narrations about the Prophet have provided the Muslims with a vivid picture of the personality of the perfect man *par excellence*. The Prophet's sayings about the importance of spiritual practices, such as night vigils, and the constant remembrance of God in various forms have been transmitted to the Muslims through her. She served as an authentic source of information and knowledge of the Prophet's personal and private life. She seemed to have observed the Prophet with every breath of her life in a spirit of unflinching loyalty and oneness with his inner self; for she related, "when his eyes slept, his heart did not sleep."

A study of the Prophet's *ḥadīths* pertaining to family life reveals that Islam resolved the conflict between "spirit" and "flesh" by encouraging marriage. Sex finds an enjoyable expression in the bonds of lawful marriage for perpetuating the progeny of Adam and Eve, who were created for fulfilling the obligations and duties of the exalted office of the Creator's vicegerency

(II, 30–33). “On Earth the human pairs have affinity through their Vicegerency for God and they are complementary through being man and woman. The harmony of the Universe depends on analogous sameness and differences not only between individuals, but also between worlds.”¹⁵

The Relationship of the Family to God

In Islam, life in general—and the family life in particular in all its aspects—is an indivisible unity in which the spiritual is not separate from the mundane. The religion of Islam is a definite and distinct way of life based on the *Sharī‘ah* or laws as revealed to the Prophet. As such, religion is intended to find expression in family life in particular and in the affairs of Muslim people in general. Besides the relationships between husband and wife, children and parents, grandparents and other members of the larger family circle, on the one hand, and the relationship of one family to another as units of the Islamic *ummah*, on the other hand, the central feature of the family in Islam is its relationship with God. Raising one’s family according to His commandments and preparing it to be of service to Islam with an awareness that “to God we belong and to Him is our return” (II, 156) is seen as a necessity. It is this relationship between the family and God that makes the family spiritual in its structure and functions. The family that corresponds to this description and serves as the best model for a truly spiritual life is the family of Sayyidah Fāṭimah, the epitome of Islamic spiritual life.

Fāṭimah, also called *Khayr nisā’ al-‘ālamīn* (the best of women in all the worlds), was the blessed daughter of the Prophet of Islam who became the wife of ‘Alī. She was declared by the Prophet as one who served as the gate to the citadel of spiritual knowledge. She was the mother of Imam Ḥasan and Imam Ḥusayn, who both won the coveted crown of martyrdom. She was also the mother of Zaynab, who was the spiritual heroine of the battle of Karbalā’ and who played the role of a veritable princess of female spirituality in Islam.

Although fourteen centuries have elapsed since her departure from this stage of life, Sayyidah Fāṭimah and her family are continually remembered both in the prose and in the poetry of Muslims throughout the world. The Muslims unanimously recognize her as the fountainhead of female spirituality in Islam, because she occupied herself with the purity of the Oneness and Unity of God and was confirmed in her absolute sincerity in the practice of the beliefs and tenets of Islam. She succeeded in attaining the state (*maqām*) in which the pristine purity of the spirit immersed in the Oneness of the Supreme Being enabled her to give up the body and reside in the world of Divine Beauty and Majesty. It was her destiny, however,

to set the pattern for posterity by expressing her spirituality of the highest order through her role as a daughter, wife, and mother. While performing these roles, Fāṭimah lived in and through God. In her Prophet-father's blessed self and teachings, she saw God; in her saint-husband's personality, she saw God; and she brought up her children to serve God. They in turn sacrificed themselves at the altar of love for God and thereby revived His spiritual message.

Female Spirituality and the Styles of Life

Instead of citing extensively the lives of the women closest to the Prophet, an attempt is made here to exercise restraint in giving examples of models *par excellence* of Islamic spirituality, such as Fāṭimah. The rationale behind such caution is based on the fact that, despite deep reverence and love for such models of spirituality, one finds among the Westernized young women of the present generation a growing tendency to ignore the examples of these luminaries on the horizon of spirituality. They argue that these great personalities had the unparalleled advantage of being blessed by the company and the teachings of the Prophet. Therefore, care is taken to cite examples in the lives of those spiritually advanced women who could not be in the company of the Prophet and yet strove to know and follow his teachings with utmost devotion and who became well known for their spiritual attainment.

It is not a rare sight to find small huts presenting a contrast to the lofty and luxurious mansions found in the Islamic world. A particularly striking contrast in styles of living was presented by the hut of Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah, which stood near the Tigris, and the palace of Zubaydah, the queen of Hārūn al-Rashīd of the Abbasid Dynasty. Although Rābi'ah has always worn the spiritual crown of the servant of God and is well known as the queen of saintly women, Zubaydah, queen of Baghdad, was spiritually gifted in her own regal demeanor. The historians describe her as the most desirous of the good, the swiftest to perform pious deeds, and the readiest in benefactions. In discussing the piety and virtues of Zubaydah, on the one hand, and describing Rābi'ah's pure love for God and her complete absorption in Him, on the other hand, an attempt is made here to show that although spirituality may be expressed by individuals who are poles apart in their personal bearing and stations in life, the core of the concept of feminine spirituality in Islam, its mode of discipline, and its goal are always the same. However, the *maqām* of persons on the spiritual path differs from person to person, depending on the intensity of their efforts

(*mujāhadah*) and the descent of God's grace upon them. In the case of Zubaydah it is clear that, while outwardly wearing the robes of a queen, she inwardly passed through many spiritual states and stations, which alone could give her the patience to be a loving wife of a king who was known for his attraction to women. She had the virtue to extend her motherly love to an infant whose deceased mother was a slave girl of her palace. This infant, Ma'mūn, became a claimant to the throne and thus a rival of Zubaydah's only son, Amīn. Later, when Ma'mūn was at war with Amīn for the throne, Zubaydah had the strength of heart to rise above her motherly love for her own son and to behave like a perfectly just queen-mother, as evidenced by the fact that she advised her general to remember while confronting Ma'mūn that he was a son and a brother and must be treated kindly. Although Ma'mūn was held responsible for the death of Zubaydah's only son, she refused to take revenge. In doing so she followed the patient statesmanship of the Prophet, who, after the conquest of Mecca, did away with blood feuds and later, in his sermon of the last pilgrimage, banished acts of revenge as an evil of the past. In the manner of a truly spiritually oriented person, Zubaydah said to Ma'mūn, "If I lost a son who was caliph, I now have a son who is caliph. No mother is bereft who holds you by the hand. There is a day when you two will meet again, and I pray God that He will forgive both of you." "Her magnanimity may have contributed to Baghdad's recovery and to the brilliance of the reign of al-Ma'mūn."¹⁶

Zubaydah's life was a shining example of female spirituality in Islam, for she was graceful in practicing the *Sunnah* of the Prophet in dealing with the affairs of her palace, amid melodious recitations of the Quran by one hundred girls who had memorized the Holy Book and recited three *sipārah*s daily. (A *sipārah* constitutes 1/30th of the Quran.) In addition, inspired by the love of God and His Messenger, she crossed the pilgrims' road to Mecca six times during her life, founding inns, wells, cisterns, and the like to make the journey comfortable for pilgrims. It is she who had the depth of the Zamzam, the sacred well in the sanctuary of the Ka'bah, increased. It is reckoned by the early historians that "the people of Mecca owe their very life to her, next to God." The echo of the slogan, "Allah bless Zubaydah" resounded for many centuries and testified to her spirituality.

Zubaydah's palace and its adornments would tend to blind the person unacquainted with spiritual states and stations to the jewel of spirituality and its light which shone within it. To the same person, Rābi'ah's hut would appear as a dwelling place of a poverty-stricken, illiterate, and perhaps eccentric individual. To the person whose eyes see the inner meaning of things, however, Rābi'ah's hut symbolized *faqr* or spiritual poverty,

which served as a center of *barakah* (Divine Grace). The genuine *faqīrah* (woman who practices *faqr*) is a servant of God alone and desires to be possessionless in order to be possessed only by her love for God. In this voluntary state of material possessionlessness, the servant who is a genuine lover begins her life of service to the Beloved with the aim of reaching the final station on the spiritual path, known as *Ḥaqīqah* (the Truth). Her service is based on pursuing diligently the Master's Divine Commandments, both in their exoteric and esoteric aspects.

The servant's devoted service to the One, coupled with an intense longing for the Master's majestic presence, leads to the development of a close relationship between the two, whereby the servant begins to hear with the ears of the Master and to see with His eyes. It is at this juncture that the servant's hut becomes the treasure-house of spiritual wisdom, blessings, and the choicest gifts of the Master, wherein many seekers find the true meaning of *faqr* and start their journey on the spiritual path.

The perplexing question of how a hut that generally symbolizes poverty can serve as a treasure-house of spiritual wisdom and gifts can be answered by citing an episode from Rābi'ah's life. If the truth of this incident is doubted, the story is still able to serve as an allegory. Once a thief entered Rābi'ah's hut and found nothing save a pitcher of water. As he was about to leave, Rābi'ah called out to him, "If you are really a thief then do not leave without taking something." The thief replied sarcastically, "What is there to be taken?" Rābi'ah replied, "O needy one, perform the ablution with the water in the pitcher, enter this prayer room, and say two rakats of prayer. Then leave after receiving something." The thief obeyed and, when he stood for the prayer, Rābi'ah also raised her hands for prayer and said, "O Lord, this man found nothing here, I have brought him to Thy door, bless him by Thy bounty and grace." In response to Rābi'ah's appeal to the Hearer of prayers, the thief felt spiritual absorption and joy and thus continued his prayers throughout the night. Early in the morning when Rābi'ah entered the prayer room, she found him prostrate before the Almighty and heard him seeking repentance. This much of the incident should suffice to answer the question, How could a hut serve as a treasure-house of wisdom and God's Mercy.

Selfless service performed from the depths of love keeps the lover ready to lay down her life in order to earn the pleasure of the Beloved and develops in her an intense longing for that supreme moment when she will hear the Beloved's voice saying, "O soul at rest, return to thy Lord well-pleased, well-pleasing; so enter amongst My servants and enter My Garden" (LXXXIX, 27-30).

The biographers of Rābi'ah have recorded that the last words she spoke as she was closing her eyes in death showed her to be in a state of eternal bliss in the lap of her Beloved. Indeed Rābi'ah was one of those about whom the Quran says: "But those of Faith are overflowing in their love for God" (II, 165). Thus, Rābi'ah, the absolutely true lover, passed into the presence of her Beloved.

Rābi'ah, a model of selfless love, introduced the concept of love into the somewhat austere teachings of her ascetic predecessors. Rābi'ah dressed her yearnings of love in exquisitely beautiful verses. An example of her concept of Divine Love is the following stanza:

I love Thee with two loves, a love that is passion
And one which besides Thou hast earned as Thy due
The passionate love is the thought which forgetting
All else is of You, aye, for ever of You.
Thou earnedst the other by rending asunder
All veils and disclosing Thyself to my view.
Not mine be the praise for the one or the other
The praise and the thanks are all Thine for the two.¹⁷

Rābi'ah's life was a model of mutual love between the Creator and His creation—a state of perfect love in which the lover ceases to exist for her own person but lives for the Beloved, demonstrates invariable courtesy and efficient service in obeying the commandments of the Beloved, and finally becomes altogether His. Rābi'ah's life is a supreme example of the spiritual state in which lover, love, and Beloved become one.

Women and the Way of Sufism

Divine Union and the Sharī'ah

In Islam, union with the Divine is contingent upon love for the Prophet, who is the last of the spiritual monarchs ruling over the earth. In this respect, the Quranic mandate is as follows: "Say (O Muḥammad, to mankind) if ye love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is forgiving, Merciful" (III, 31). It is noteworthy that this *āyah* addresses itself to the entirety of mankind, and its profound implication is that it applies to posterity till that Last Day in the existence of this world, when, according to the Quran, the heavens and the earth will be rolled up and God (*aḥkam al-ḥākimīn*, the justest of judges) will sit on the Throne of judgment for the announcement of the final reward or punishment to each male and female created by Him. The words "follow me" in the *āyah* refer to following the *Kitāb* and the *Sunnah*. Furthermore, these words are

addressed as much to posterity as to the followers of the Prophet during his lifetime. The exemplification of the *Sharī'ah* by the Prophet, his household (*ahl al-bayt*), and companions for attaining the love of God have made it mandatory for the seekers of the Divine to follow the *Sunnah*.

Since, in their union with the Divine, distinctions are not made among the lovers of God, it follows that no distinction can be made between Muslim men and women in their capacity and longing to reach the Divine. It must be pointed out that the Quran admonishes the seekers of the Divine, both male and female, to love the Prophet as a prerequisite for loving God. No one can claim to love the Prophet unless he or she recognizes that the *Sharī'ah*, in its exoteric reality as well as its esoteric aspects, furnishes a perfect code of life and that it has been given to humanity in order for us to strive to live a perfect life in this world with the aim of passing into the presence of the perfect Being. Perfection, however, can be achieved only when one remains faithful to the innate nature of the form, male or female, in which the perfect Being has placed the soul. It may be emphasized here that, whenever individuals rebel against forms and their corresponding roles, they fall from the pedestal of perfection and the possibility of attaining the spiritual realm.

Although both the male and the female are assigned different roles by nature, in Islam the roles of men and women are seen as complementary rather than competitive. As human souls, both the male and the female are absolutely equal in their relationship with their Creator; and as Muslims both the male and the female need to cultivate the same virtues and perform the same Islamic rites, and before God they bear the same accountability for their actions.

Islamic rites and rituals are basically the same for both men and women. Performance of the rites may differ in minor details for women because of their different role; for example, the woman may not join the congregational Friday prayers held in the mosque but can perform the prayer at home. She may not join the funeral procession, and she is not supposed to take part in the burial rites. She is also exempted from saying the five prayers during menstruation and childbirth. The reasons for her exemptions are obvious. Islam is known as *Dīn al-fiṭrah* (a way of life according to the nature of the male and female) and *Dīn al-sahl* (a way of life in which there is ease). As such, the performance of the religious rites and ceremonies is based on the consideration of offering ease to the performer, which enables women to perform their own role efficiently.

The undeniable additional evidence of the spiritual equality of the Muslim male and female is furnished by the Quranic mode of addressing both men and women as follows:

Men who surrender unto Allah,
 And women who surrender,
 And men who believe,
 And women who believe,
 And men who speak the truth
 And women who speak the truth,
 And men who persevere in righteousness,
 And women who persevere,
 And men who are humble,
 And women who are humble,
 And men who give alms,
 And women who give alms,
 And men who fast,
 And women who fast,
 And men who guard their modesty,
 And women who guard their modesty,
 And men who remember Allah much,
 And women who remember Allah much,
 Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness
 and a vast reward.

(XXXIII, 33-35)

About the men and the women mentioned in the above *āyah*, the Quran provides further knowledge in these words:

The Believers, men and women are protecting friends of one another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they observe regular prayers, and they pay the poor due and they obey God and His messenger. (IX, 71)

These verses not only bring out the spiritual equality of the believers, men and women, but also describe most exquisitely those spiritual virtues whose cultivation is necessary for attaining the greatest spiritual reward.

Keeping in mind the various verses concerning the believers, both men and women, and their obligation to observe the Divine Law, Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī presented the ideas expressed in those verses as follows:

Praise be to God, who created the earth and the heavens . . . and gathered together the believers, men and women, and established the sacred law. . . . And the people of happiness obeyed Him and did His work, from among the dutiful men and women. . . . And when He exhorted the creatures to be obedient, He did not single out the men, but spoke of the Muslims, men and women, and the believers of both sexes and those who observed the law, men and women, and the verses dealing with this are many and are not secret.¹⁸

Ḥasanī's views emphasize the fact that Islam has once and for all made a declaration of the spiritual equality of the male and the female before their Creator, who exhorts them "to be obedient to Him and His Messenger"

(V, 92). Furthermore, the Quran proclaims: "Say, obey Allah and the Messenger. But if they turn back, Allah loves not those who reject Faith" (III, 32). This *āyah* is also clearly addressed to all of the human race and brings out characteristics of human nature common to both the sexes. Hence, it is implied that both the male and the female as human beings share the same basic traits of human nature—the tendency both to do good and to indulge in evil. As such, on the one hand, they are given the choice of choosing the right path (*al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*) and thereby nurturing and developing their souls. On the other hand, if they choose the path of evil, their souls are starved and ultimately perish. These two categories of the males and the females are perfectly contrasted in the following verses.

Concerning those who incur God's wrath:

The hypocrites, men and women, (have an understanding) with each other:
They enjoin evil, and forbid what is just, and are close with their hands.
They have forgotten Allah; so He hath disregarded them.
Verily the hypocrites are rebellious and perverse. (IX, 67)

Concerning those who incur God's mercy:

The believers, men and women are protectors, one of another:
They enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular
prayers, practice regular charity,
and obey Allah and His Apostle.
On them will Allah pour His mercy; for Allah
is exalted in power, wise. (IX, 71)

Since in Islam there is no clergy or ecclesiastical system, every man and woman is recognized as having the potential to practice Islam directly as the perfect religion chosen to complete God's blessing on mankind. "This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favour upon you, and chosen for you Islam as your religion" (V, 3). Therefore, the first step for either the male or the female belonging to the category that incurs God's wrath is to repent and to seek God's forgiveness and thereby take the initial step toward following the exoteric aspects of *Shari'ah*.

If a woman regularly follows the beliefs and the five pillars of Islam in her daily life and if their practice becomes second nature to her, then the *barakah* inherent in practicing the *Shari'ah* will enable her to enter into the esoteric or the inner dimensions of the Divine Laws. Such a woman is already at the starting point of the spiritual path, whether she lives in a hut, in an average house, or in a palace—or, if need arises, moves in and out of these during her lifetime. In any case, such a woman follows the dictate in these verses:

Guard strictly your (habit of) prayers and stand before God in a devout (frame of mind). (II, 238)

Celebrate the praises of the Lord ere the rising of the sun and ere the going down thereof. And glorify Him some hours of the night and at the two ends of the day, that thou mayest find acceptance. (XX, 130)

The first verse alludes to the five canonical prayers and the second to the *dhikr*, remembrance of God along with prayers. It is noteworthy that a sincere obedience to the commandments contained in the verses eventually raises the follower from the level of obedience to that of pure love for the Divine and whispers to her the spiritual message of *taṣawwuf*, confirming to her that love (*‘ishq-i ilāhī*) is the instrument for taking the lover (*‘āshiq*) into the close proximity of the Beloved (*Ma‘shūq*). It thereby enables her to attain *ma‘rifah* (Divine Knowledge).

Sharī‘ah, Tarīqah, Haqīqah

Islam as a religion consists of an essential outward, an irreplaceable exoteric, dimension known as the *Sharī‘ah*. More often than not, those persons who are assiduous in following the *Sharī‘ah* are seen as being led to the *tarīqah* (the path of *taṣawwuf* or Sufism). For the few successful travelers on the path, the grace of God terminates their journey at the exalted station of *Haqīqah* (Divine Truth). An unshakable belief in Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) is the cornerstone of the structure of spirituality in Islam. Therefore, those persons who devoted themselves to the spiritual life came to be called *ahl-i tawḥīd* (people of Unity) or *ahl-i haqq* (people of Truth, i.e., of God).

Taṣawwuf (Islamic mysticism) is appropriately called the “science of purity” of the human soul, and those who adhere to it live a purely virtuous life based on the *Sharī‘ah*. The *Sharī‘ah* and *tarīqah* are both expressions of *taṣawwuf*, like the reverse sides of a coin. These two aspects of *taṣawwuf* as a discipline are aimed at providing the means of union with the Divine. Both the male and the female go through the special discipline provided by *taṣawwuf* and delineated by the renowned masters of the Islamic spiritual orders, who have provided guidance ever since the physical departure of the embodiment of Islamic spirituality, namely, the Prophet of Islam and his companions.¹⁹

The Tarīqah and Its Discipline

The female seeker of the Divine, like her male counterpart, begins her spiritual training by receiving initiation from a living spiritual master (male

or female). Then, under the vigilant eye of her spiritual teacher, she goes through the process of self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). The Quran mentions that one of the functions of the Prophet consisted in purifying his followers and teaching them the scriptures and the wisdom contained in God's Revelation (III, 164; LXII, 2).

One of the individual and group practices that plays a crucial role in bringing about an inner transformation by way of linking the heart with the Divine is *dhikr*, or remembrance of God. This practice is as available to women as it is to men. The Quran mentions the significance of *dhikr* both directly and indirectly in verses scattered throughout the Book, one of which is the following: "Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (XIII, 28).

The significance of *dhikr* is also described in many *ḥadīths*. According to one of these, the best *dhikr* is *Lā ilāha illa 'llāh* (there is no divinity but Allah), and the best prayer is the *Sūrat al-fātiḥah*, the opening chapter of the Quran. Another *ḥadīth* suggesting the momentous practice of *dhikr* may be translated as follows: "When My slave remembers Me quietly in isolation, I too remember him quietly in My own Being. But when he remembers Me in a group, then I remember him in a better group."

In describing the essence of *dhikr*, we must state that through *dhikr* both the male and female seekers of the Divine sow the seed of Truth (*ḥaqq*) in their minds, of perfection (*kamāl*) in their hearts, of vision (*kashf*) in their eyes, and in their very selves an unshakable belief in the Unity and Oneness of their Lord, through which they reap the fruits of everlasting life and proximity to the Divine. In fact, success in this life and in the hereafter is dependent on realizing the Truth and attaining perfection. The Quran gives glad tidings to those who remember God: "And men and women who remember Allah much—Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward" (XXXIII, 35).²⁰

This spiritual discipline is aimed at changing the insinuating self (*al-nafs al-ammārah*) to the state of self at peace (*al-nafs al-muṭma'innah*) (LXXXIX, 27). The characteristic of the self at peace is that it merges into the Divine Will and attains *ma'rifah* or reaches the station of *Ḥaqqīqah*, where the lover experiences the unveiling of the vision of the Beloved. In that sublime moment, the lover experiences the passing away of the personal self (*fanā'*) and entrance into eternal life (*baqā'*), into the Unity of the One Being.

The Position of the Woman Saint

A study of the history of Sufism reveals that the dignity of sainthood is conferred on Muslim women as well as on men. "As far as rank among the

'friends of God' was concerned, there was complete equality between the sexes."²¹ The goal of the spiritual quest being union with the Divine, it leaves no room for the distinctions of sex.

So the title of saint was bestowed upon women equally with men, and since Islam has no order of priesthood and no priestly caste, there was nothing to prevent a woman from reaching the highest religious rank in the hierarchy of Muslim saints. Some theologians even name the Lady Fāṭimah, daughter of the Prophet, as the first "*qutb*" or spiritual head of the Sufi fellowship. Below the *qutb* were four "*awṭād*," from whose ranks his successor was chosen, and below them, in the next rank of the hierarchy, were forty "*abdāl*" or substitutes, who are described as being the pivot of the world and the foundation and support of the affairs of men. Jāmī relates how someone was asked, "How many are the '*abdāl*'?" and he answered, "Forty souls." And when asked why he did not say "Forty men," his reply was, "There have been women among them."²²

Several works on women in Islamic history mention distinguished women saints outstanding in their spiritual character—sapiential knowledge, perfection, wisdom, graciousness, and magnanimity—but the light of the hidden jewel of the inner personality of hundreds of women saints whose shrines are found all over the Islamic world has not shone on the pages of Islamic history, and the memorial to their truly spiritual way of life has not as yet been built.

One of the recent voluminous works entitled *A'lām al-nisā' fī 'ālam al-'arab wa'l-islām* by 'Umar Riḍā Khalāh lists 2,556 distinguished women and gives their life sketches. These women adorned themselves with spiritual virtues and equipped themselves with various branches of Islamic knowledge and learnings and engaged themselves in spiritual activity. However, the list is far from being an exhaustive one, for the writer knows of several women saints who are not mentioned but whose shrines are spread throughout the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. It would not be out of place to mention here that the writer had the good fortune of being in the company of Rābi'ah Baṣrī (a namesake of Rābi'ah al-'Adawīyyah), a truly great saint of Pakistan who passed away a few years ago leaving behind her a valuable spiritual work entitled *Fazān-i murshid*, which is a living testimony of her sainthood.

In conclusion, it is maintained that not only a male but also a female who succeeds in realizing her spiritual potential earns the coveted title of "friend of God" (*ḥabīb Allāh*) and fulfills her destiny as the servant of God ('*abd Allāh*'). It should be recalled that to be '*abd Allāh*' is the proudest rank a Muslim can claim, for the bondage to God implies liberation from all other servitudes. The chosen ones, and especially devoted men and women, are

called slaves of God in the Quran. It is noteworthy that one of the epithets of the Prophet is 'Abd. So a Muslim saint—male or female—is a servant worshiping and fulfilling duties of servanthip ('*ubūdiyyah*). Saintly persons are engrossed in the practices of Aḥmad²³ and are absorbed in the love of Aḥad.²⁴ They occupy their time with all kinds of meritorious work (*qurābāt*) truthfully and righteously. It is about such servants that the Quran says:

Those who believe and do right:
joy is for them and bliss their
journey's end.

(XIII, 29)

Notes

1. *Maqām* is a term used for denoting a well-established station on the spiritual path. It is differentiated from the term *ḥāl*, which means a temporary stage experienced during one's spiritual journey.

2. Saying of Shāh Ni'mat Allāh Walī quoted in E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1928-29) 3:472.

3. Abu'l-Majd Sanā'ī, *Ḥadīqatu'l-Ḥaqīqat*, trans. J. Stevenson (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1910) 1.

4. Maḥmūd Shabistarī, *Gulshan-i-Rāz*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (London: Trubner, 1880) 52.

5. This *hadīth*, from the collection *Mishkāt al-masābīḥ*, is quoted here from S. G. Champion, *The Eleven Religions* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1944) 188.

6. Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī, *The Song of Lovers*, trans. A. J. Arberry (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1939) 22-23.

7. This is a term that is more comprehensive in meaning than the word grace, by which it is usually translated. *Barakah* stands for spiritual blessing issuing from the Sacred and having the power of leading to the Sacred.

8. M. Smith, *The Sufi Path of Love* (London: Luzac, 1954) 118.

9. *Maḥbūb Allāh* is one of the titles of the Prophet Muḥammad. It means literally "the Beloved of Allah."

10. See S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981) 212-13.

11. *Raḥmah*, which is related to the Divine Names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, implies God's Loving-kindness, Forgiveness, and Mercy, which create harmony and put things in order.

12. Sulṭān Bāhū's shrine is located in the eastern part of Pakistan in a village named after him. Several of his biographers have mentioned the verse about his mother in their books. The above is translated from a book entitled *Abyā-te Sulṭān Bāhū*, written in a local dialect.

13. Hishām, son of 'Urwah, was one of the Prophet's biographers. He was honored in receiving the traditions from 'Ā'ishah, the "Mother of the Believers," who is among the most authentic transmitters of accounts of the Prophet's family life.

14. *Umm al-mu'minīn* is the title given to the wives of the Prophet. "The Prophet is closer to the faithful than their selves and his wives are (as) their mothers" (XXXIII, 6).

15. M. Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981) 53.

16. C. Waddy, *Women in Muslim History* (London: Longman, 1980) 45.

17. M. Smith, *The Sufi Path*, 118.

18. From Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī's *Lives of Good Women*. The author was from Damascus and died ca. 824/1420.

19. The Sufi disciplines apply to women as well as men. On female spirituality in Sufism, see L. Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979); and A. M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) 426-35.

20. The word reward in this verse refers to proximity to the Divine in this world and to the attainment of the royal rank of spiritual beings in the hereafter.

21. M. Smith, *Rabia the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* (Cambridge: University Press, 1928) 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 3.

23. Ahmad is one of the names of the Holy Prophet Muḥammad referring to his inner or spiritual nature.

24. The One God, Allah.

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