

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# On the straight path

## Women in Islam

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**W**OMEN IN ISLAM. DO THE WORDS immediately bring to mind a silent veiled figure, or a highly qualified college lecturer, doctor or lawyer? Both extremes exist, with many variations in between. In recent years, Islam has attracted attention, among other reasons, for the phenomenon of young women deliberately choosing to follow its rulings with devotion and enthusiasm. This is hardly consistent with the popular stereotype of Islam in the West, and especially of 'women in Islam'. So what makes conversion to Islam such an attractive proposition for many young western women?

In search of a few answers I went first to traditional sources, and then to modern-day Muslim women. A different picture began to emerge. Women can find in Islam a sense of security, identity and spiritual fulfilment which they do not find elsewhere. Islam's very specific and demanding rules of diet, comportment and religious practice, when interpreted from their spiritual aspect, can bring these women a true sense of freedom.

### *Women and the Qur'ān*

First, then, to Islam in its historical manifestation, and to the Qur'ān. Guidance is a vital element in Islam. The Qur'ān itself is described in many places as 'guidance', as a mercy to humankind, freely offered to all people on equal terms (e.g. 6:157). The Fatiha, the 'opening' *sura* or chapter of the Qur'ān, recited by Muslims at every time of worship and on many other occasions, contains only one request: 'Lead us on the straight path, the path of those to whom Thou has been gracious'. Islam recognizes that humankind is foolish, weak and apt to go astray; the soul is 'prone to evil' as Yusuf (Joseph) admits (12:53), but this is the nearest we find to the concept of original sin. Muhammad and his followers look not to a personal saviour but a 'clear message', sum-

moning them to the worship of the One God: not only to ritual, but to an entire life in conformity with the will of God.

To Muslims, the Qur'ān is not merely inspired, but transmits the actual divine words, conveyed by the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad as occasion demanded over a period of some twenty-three years, CE 610–632. Any previous scripture as given to earlier prophets will thus be judged on its conformity to the Qur'ān, for only here is the true, complete, and final divine message.

The Qur'ān is an essential element in prayer, and its words are constantly in the heart and on the lips of the devout Muslim. Someone who knows the whole Qur'ān by heart is a *hāfiz*, one who 'preserves' the word of God and is thus imbued with its blessing. To know and recite portions is likewise a blessing, bringing one closer to God, even without fully understanding the Arabic. Many passages have a spiritual and poetic quality which appeals also to those outside Islam. For a Muslim, to hear the Qur'ān recited is to let the divine word penetrate the mind and heart.

The Qur'ān has guidance for all; but how much of it relates specifically to women? First, it is generally accepted that Islam did improve the lot and status of women. The Qur'ān commands that female children must be brought up (and not killed, as sometimes happened); that orphans and widows must be cared for; that up to four wives (only) may be taken, and must be treated well. On the other hand, in the context of marriage certain verses say that equal treatment is almost impossible, and this has led some to interpret this as forbidding polygamy.<sup>1</sup>

Women's religious value is clearly stated in the Qur'ān. Men and women are equal before God, who created them with their differences:

O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person (or soul); created, from it, its mate, and from these two 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. (4:1)

In their duties, and reward, they are equal:

For Muslim men and women, – for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and

women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise – For them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (33:35)

In each category both the masculine and feminine plural forms are used, making it abundantly clear that both men and women are addressed. Elsewhere, anyone who does good deeds, 'be they male or female', will enter Paradise (4:124). As is well known, there are verses which give women a different status from men, especially regarding inheritance, marriage and divorce; but a great deal depends on interpretation and on the context, as Muslim women themselves are increasingly coming to realize. A good self-image in the socio-economic field, which many Muslim women are developing, must have some connection with a sense of self-worth in a more strictly religious context.

One woman in particular is mentioned at some length in the Qur'ān: 'Maryam' (after whom *sura* 19 is named), Mary the mother of Jesus; the account given of her can be traced to both New Testament and apocryphal sources. In one narrative the angels sent to her say: 'O Maryam! Allah has chosen thee and purified thee, and chosen thee above the women of all nations' (3:42). The parallel narrative in *sura* 19 refers to the messenger as 'our spirit' (*rūh*). Mary/Maryam is described as an example of devotion and purity, receiving special privileges. In the extended sense, she is a 'Muslim woman' for the word itself means simply one who has submitted to God.

In general, though, the Qur'ān does not give a great deal of narrative. It lays down principles and basic commands which are then often explained and elaborated by the *hadīth*: the record of the Prophet's words, actions and approval. The *hadīth* is still very influential, and after the Qur'ān is the second source of Islamic law.<sup>2</sup>

### *Women in the tradition*

Individual items of *hadīth* are often reported on the authority of one of the Prophet's wives, in particular A'isha, his favourite wife, who was married to him when she was very young, and outlived him by many years. Women played an important part in the Prophet's life, and he treated them with respect. His first wife, Khadija, supported him through the troubled early years of his message and preaching, and he

always remembered her with respect and gratitude. Only after her death did he take other wives.

These wives of the Prophet were later known collectively as 'mothers of the believers', after a Qur'ānic verse: 'The Prophet is closer to the believers than their selves, and his wives are [as] their mothers' (33:6); and they are told directly: 'You are not like any other women' (33:62). In some *hadīth*, A'isha is described as 'superior' to all other women – though not to Maryam.

Fātima, the Prophet's daughter by Khadija, was married to Muhammad's cousin 'Ali, one of the first believers and later the fourth caliph or successor to Muhammad. She was a model daughter and wife, and with her father, husband, and two sons, Hasan and Husayn, forms the *Ahl al-bayt*, the Household par excellence. Many traditions about her superiority circulate among the Shi'a Muslims, who follow 'Ali and his descendants and pay particular reverence to his family.<sup>3</sup> She is described as the 'mistress of the female inhabitants of heaven, except for Maryam'; she is to be the first woman to enter Paradise on the last day. But historical facts about her are few.

References to women of piety are shadowy until we come to Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya of Baghdad (c. CE 717–800). Her story has been told in detail by Margaret Smith, who places her in the tradition of asceticism and contemplation reaching back to the Christian Fathers of the Desert.<sup>4</sup> She was considered the equal of a man, and accepted as a guide and teacher by her contemporary, male, Sufis. Even within the context of her time, Rābi'a was exceptional in her disregard of all worldly matters, even thinking that the study of *hadīth* was a distraction from prayer. She wished only to live in total accord with the will of God, and in the end welcomed death. Some of her prayers are often quoted and are widely known:

O my God, if I worship you from fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship you from the hope of Paradise, exclude me from it. But if I worship you for your own sake, then do not withhold from me your Eternal Beauty.

... You have given me life and cared for me, and yours is the glory. If you were to drive me from your door, yet I would not forsake it, for the love that I bear towards you.

Tradition has great importance in Islam, so this historical background is relevant to the position and role of women today, to how they see themselves, how they relate to their history; to the place in their

lives given to prayer and Qur'ān reading; and to how they pass on the faith to their children.

### *Women in Islam today*

First we look briefly at a modern woman scholar, Riffat Hassan, of Pakistani origin, who deals boldly with some areas of deep controversy. These issues, because they stem from the Qur'ān, can affect the lives of women in untold ways.

In a long discussion of creation and the Islamic tradition, she points out inconsistencies in a *hadīth* which says that woman, created from man's rib, is crooked. She holds; 'That Allah's original creation was undifferentiated humanity is implicit in a number of Qur'ānic passages', e.g. 'And of him/it [humanity] He made two sexes, male and female' (75:39). She addresses women themselves, convinced that they must

return to the point of origin and challenge the authenticity of *ahadīth* (*hadīth-s*) which makes them ontologically inferior, subordinate and crooked. It is gratifying to know that these *ahadīth* cannot be the words of the Prophet of Islam, whom history portrays as a staunch upholder of the rights of women.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere she points out how the Qur'ān and *hadīth*, the primary sources, have been interpreted solely by men; and that modern Islamization processes have systematically sought to deprive women of their rights. She is however loyal to that true Islam in which patriarchy is not inherent: 'The Quran, as God's word, cannot be made the source of human injustice'.<sup>6</sup>

I was myself present on one occasion when a talk by Riffat Hassan caused initial consternation, but subsequent reflection and satisfaction, for a group of Muslim women. To go back to the sources, in the company of a woman scholar, they found enlightening and liberating.

Most women do not go so deeply into the theory, but live their faith from day to day, having to work out difficulties for themselves. It is this daily-life kind of faith that was described to me by several women, from a variety of backgrounds: Somali, Pakistani, Indian, Moroccan, Jordanian and English, mostly living in this country. Some of these women were already friends of mine and agreed to talk about their faith – which a few had done before on a number of occasions. Some were introduced to me for the purpose of the interview. Some belong to a Sufi

order or *tariqa*. Most are married with children. Only two have work which is specifically connected with Islam. They do not agree on all points, but are united in their loyalty to Islam and in their sense of responsibility and of contentment as Muslim women.<sup>7</sup> Though they are not, of course, representative of the whole spectrum of Muslim women today – there is no more a ‘standard Muslim’ than there is a ‘standard Christian’ – they are an articulate group who have much to say to us who are outside their faith community but can in some ways identify with them.

Prayer is central, being the basis of a person’s relationship to God and to fellow believers. Islamic prayer has two main aspects: the formal worship known as *salāt*, or *namāz* in Urdu, to be recited five times a day beginning before dawn; and informal prayer, usually called *du‘ā*, which can be added on after the *salāt* or can be spontaneous, at any time.

For these women, prayer gives structure to the day; it fits into the natural cycle, and puts things into perspective. Five times a day, it is a deliberate reaching out to God, putting oneself into the place of creature and worshipper, and a regular reminder of what is really important. One woman says, ‘Prayer makes me feel humble; God has put me here to be a trustee’, and in this way, obeying his commands is easier, and a joyful task.

There is stress on the personal influence on the young exerted by parents, grandparents and the extended family. Children can be taught in quite a relaxed way, encouraged to join in the prayer ritual when they wish. They generally do wish, as it is a sign of becoming grown-up. So is fasting. A few of these women had not had this training in their youth. For one, the discovery of the faith and of the discipline of prayer had totally transformed her life and way of thinking: ‘It was like a miracle’. It is even harder for a ‘new’ Muslim, a convert, to learn the language and actions of the worship; but even so, it is seen as something that is meant to be ‘simple, and not a burden’.

The formal obligatory worship can instil feelings of awe, thankfulness and trust, and can lead on to more private prayer, to ‘talking to God in an informal way’. Guidance can come too, not as a flash of inspiration but from deep within, or from some external contact or advice. There is personal responsibility, but upheld by the divine: ‘The more you pray, the more certain you become of your own decision’.

Ramadan, the month of fasting, can create a greater awareness of spiritual things, sensitivity to others, consciousness of duties towards God. ‘Ramadan is a gift’ despite the very real discipline and sometimes

hardship of going without food or water all day: 'It is a time for reappraisal of your whole life'.

In a Muslim country Ramadan takes on an extra significance, being part of normal life and local culture. There is a sense of solidarity, and of enjoyment in preparing the evening food and meeting friends and family. Almsgiving is encouraged, and the poor are remembered and helped.

Prayer and fasting are both commanded by the Qur'ān. Reading the Qur'ān is a pious duty, and when women gather they will often read an extract and use this as a basis for discussion: it is a constant source of inquiry, teaching and wonder. Women consider it important to know the Qur'ān in Arabic, and will try both to learn themselves and ensure that their children are instructed. One woman saw it as a 'liberation' to know the Arabic and be able to 'go to the source'. There are conflicting views, from the Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, whether to know and also understand is vital or whether to recite is what matters. In both cases, learning by heart is valued.

Muslim women agree that clothes and bearing should be appropriate and 'modest', which in fact applies to men too. The Qur'ān addresses both:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; . . .

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except that [must ordinarily] appear . . . that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to [men to whom they are related]. (24:30–31)

The ways in which 'veiling' has been interpreted throughout history are due to a number of factors, most obviously the cultural milieu, the social status of the women (and their husbands), economic consideration, the general attitude and expectations of the time, and sheer practicality. In its most extreme form, the *hijāb* (literally veil or curtain), or its subcontinental equivalent the *burqa*, may mean completely covering the body to conceal the hair as well as the outline of the female form.

The *hijāb* may be adopted by women who wish to signal that they are devout Muslims, and in some Islamic countries may be a sign of conformity, or indeed the women may be under pressure to dress this way. A non-Muslim observer points out that in this country:

There is a variety of attitudes among Muslims themselves towards the question of whether it is correct for females to cover their heads and for some the 'burqa' is associated with economic status and educational attainment, rather than simply religious 'identity'.<sup>8</sup>

The more independent Muslim women generally have their own ideas, and are well able to sort out the essentials. One spoke of the 'internal *hijāb*' and being confident with her inner self. Another said the scarf is for her a 'protection' and brings respect, as people know she is a Muslim. It is 'not what you wear but what you are' that ultimately matters. Realizing this can leave the individual free to choose her level of veiling, provided of course that family, husband and society agree.

In this and other matters, women of early Islamic times can be seen today as role models, at any rate to a limited extent; and can be a source of strength, showing women's real status in the formative period. But they are not always well known, and this is probably the result of the early education of children, and the way in which these women are presented. Khadija is perhaps a bit shadowy, but also a 'mother figure' and very close to the source. A'isha is acknowledged to be significant in early Islamic history; Fātima, revered by the Shi'a, is also important in Sunni tradition, in her role as daughter, wife and mother. From somewhat later, Rābi'a the Sufi is seen as an independent and influential woman, a source of advice and teaching, the embodiment of religious devotion, and is able to inspire one young woman with 'this same world-negating feel'. In the bustle of modern life, she 'shows how close you can get to your Creator'.

The woman of today, however, has very different pressures, problems, opportunities and prospects. One, a convert, feels 'privileged and fulfilled' as a human being and a woman within Islam, while another speaks of the equal responsibility of man and woman, as she has experienced it. In spiritual matters they see no distinction, because 'the spirit, like God, has no gender'. The physiological differences are acknowledged, for men are stronger physically. One woman described how her attitude changed with the arrival of children: it is they, not the state of marriage, which keep her from other activities.

They agree that young women should be encouraged to develop their gifts and skills, for training and experience are of immense benefit within a family, and the mother is the first teacher of her children. Each woman is different, and has to be 'in tune with her *fitra*' (innate God-given nature); 'We don't all use our potential, but we must for the sake



of humanity'. The *hadīth* on 'seeking knowledge' applies to all equally, though circumstances and abilities differ.

The degree, or lack, of freedom is acknowledged, but is not seen as the fault of Islam: 'The Prophet came to liberate women, not oppress them. Islamic societies do vary, and they are subject to mistakes like any other.' It is this same *fitra* that 'makes all of us seek God, search for something or someone greater than ourselves'.

These women, and many others, strive to keep their faith and daily life in harmony, whether or not they combine work with family duties, while the rhythm of prayer brings the whole consciously into the presence of the Creator. As one very practical woman said: 'Islam is all about worship, and how to relate it to reality. Everything is worship.'

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#### NOTES

1 Qur'ān 4:3, cf 4:129. There are several English versions of the Qur'ān. Verses quoted here are from Yusuf Ali, *An English version of the Holy Qur'ān* (Lahore, nd.). All the verses referring to women can be found in a convenient form (though a different version) in E. W. Fernea and B. Q. Bezirgan (eds), *Middle Eastern Muslim women speak* (University of Texas Press, 1977), pp 7–26. This anthology gives some useful extracts illustrating a wide variety of subjects concerning Muslim women.

2 The *hadīth* records the *sunna*, in brief the path or custom of the Prophet. Passed on orally for several generations, it was sifted and collected in written form in the ninth century CE. The two most famous collections are those of al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

3 The majority of Muslims are of the Sunni branch (those who 'follow the *sunna* of the Prophet'). A sizeable minority belong to the Shī'a, literally the 'party' (of 'Ali and his successors). This division dates from the first century of Islam.

4 Margaret Smith, *Rābi'a the mystic and her fellow-saints in Islam*, Cambridge University Press, 1928. Briefer information about Rābi'a can be found in Smith's *The way of the mystics: the early Christian mystics and the rise of the Sufis*, reprint of an earlier work (Sheldon Press, 1976).

5 Riffat Hassan, 'Made from Adam's rib: the woman's creation question', *al-Mushir* xxvii, 1985 (3), pp 124–55, at pp 143 and 154.

6 Riffat Hassan, 'Muslim women and post-patriarchal Islam' in P. McCooey, W. R. Eakin, J. B. McDaniel (eds), *After patriarchy: feminist transformations of the world religions* (New York: Orbis, 1991), p 60.

7 Interviews carried out mainly between September and December 1997.

8 Marie Parker-Jenkins, *Educating Muslim children* (School of Education, University of Nottingham, 1992), p 14.