

Women and Scriptures in the Arab World

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INSTITUTE FOR
WOMEN'S STUDIES
IN THE ARAB WORLD



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The Lebanese American University founded the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in 1973. The history of the Institute is closely linked to that of the first women's college in the Middle East, the American Junior College for Women, which was established in 1924 by the Presbyterian Mission. The College, which educated Middle Eastern women for half a century, became coed in 1973. In order to honor the college's unique heritage as the first educational institution for women in the region, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World was established that same year.

Mission

- Engage in academic research on women in the Arab world.
- Develop and integrate women's studies in the Lebanese American University curriculum.
- Empower women in the Arab world through development programs and education.
- Serve as a catalyst for policy changes regarding the rights of women in the Arab world.
- Facilitate networking and communication among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with women in the Arab world.
- Extend ties with international organizations and universities working on gender issues.

Al-Raida Quarterly Journal

IWSAW issues a quarterly journal, *al-Raida*, whose mission is to promote research and the dissemination of updated information regarding the condition of women in the Arab world.

Each issue of *al-Raida* features a file which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews, and art news.

All submitted articles are reviewed by IWSAW. IWSAW reserves the right to accept or reject the articles submitted. Those articles that are accepted will be edited according to journal standards.

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al-raida

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Women and Scriptures in the Arab World

Hosn Abboud

The subject of women and scriptures is very important, especially for Arab and Muslim women who are witnessing a phase of religious revivalism, which is keen on redefining Islam in many different ways. Moreover, to raise issues by women on women's rights in the context of the Arab world opens the discussion for reform and for a new interpretation of religious symbolism, rituals, and traditions. Historically, the interpretation of sacred texts by male exegetes and theologians exclusively has contributed to the oppression of women and to their exclusion from sacred space. However, rising literacy and awareness of their rights have led Arab women to increasingly access scriptural knowledge. Since the 1970s, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women including scholars, historians, literary critics, psychologists, feminist theologians, activists, and devout women attending to their rituals in the synagogue, the church, or the mosque, have studied the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the *Qur'an* throughout the Arab world.

Turning to women scholars in the Arab World who have undertaken scriptural studies and published specifically in the Arabic language, one will find only a few names, among them the *Qur'an* scholar Aisha Abdul Rahman (also known as Bint al-Shati'), featured in this issue. It should be noted that there is an obvious lack of interest among women scholars to pursue scriptural scholarship, either due to the difficulty of the subject matter or because universities and institutes of religious studies continue to exclude women or to rely on male leadership and traditional methods of education.

This issue of *al-Raida*, on women and scriptures in the Arab world, introduces the subject of Arab women's involvement in studying or living the sacred word. It includes critical essays, ethnographic studies, and journalistic pieces submitted by women or men scholars on a variety of subjects related to gender and women's rights and scriptures; from the spiritual quest and women's experience, to paradigmatic religious women in pictorial art and cinema – all in relation to the venerated Word of the God of the two monotheistic religions: Christianity and Islam. Special attention is given to the study of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, both in the New Testament and the *Qur'an*. Mary has a particularly important role in the beginning of Luke's Gospel and in the Gospel according to John. She has played a significant role in the development of early Christian theology beyond the New Testament. Mary is also one of the very few female figures named in the *Qur'an*, which puts her apart from other female figures, and gives her a story of her own. The *Qur'an*, moreover, seems to discuss issues of the feminine and the maternal and women's entry into sacred space through the figure of Mary.

Hosn Abboud's article "Is Mary Important for Herself or for Being the Mother of Christ in the Holy *Qur'an*?" is based on a lecture originally given at the forum of Christian-Muslim thought at the Near Eastern School of Theology. The question of whether the *Qur'an's* concern was with the person of Mary or with her relationship to Jesus was originally raised by the director of

the NEST, Dr. George Sabra, who invited Abboud to join the ongoing discussion between the Catholics and Protestants. Abboud redirects the question from a theological one to a feminist one, criticizing the religious discourse that emphasizes and values the role of the female in family relationships only. Female figures who are mentioned by name in the Greek and Arabic scriptures are always portrayed as mothers, sisters, daughters or wives, and rarely as persons in their own right. Abboud reviews the narrative accounts of Maryam (originally the Syriac rendering of the Greek name Maria), both in the Meccan and Medinan *Qur'anic suras* (or *Qur'anic* chapters), highlighting the high status that Mary enjoys throughout the *Qur'an*.

Johnny Awwad, in “Liberation and Universality: Women in Luke’s Gospel”, turns to Luke, the evangelist most sensitive to the role of women in the story of Jesus. Luke is also the New Testament writer who developed Mary’s role at length and reconfirmed the long history of women singing the praises of the Lord, namely the famous Mary song or Magnificat. In this article, the reader learns how to read Luke using a gendered perspective and to understand how Luke classified the women mentioned in his Gospel. Awwad highlights the Lukan technique of pairing, which he uses to analyze the narratives of men and women as portrayed by Luke. Professor Awwad, at the Near Eastern School of Theology, is the only scholar in Lebanon who teaches a course on “Women in the New Testament” in schools of theology.

Mahmoud Zibawi’s article entitled “The Annunciation to Mary, Mother of Jesus in Medieval Christian and Islamic Art of the Book” surprises the reader who may not be aware of the existence of pictorial art in medieval Islam. This article, which originally appeared in Arabic (in the weekly supplement to the Lebanese daily *An-Nahar*, August 15, 2009), seeks to show the veneration Mary enjoys in Islam. Zibawi makes a selection of miniature paintings depicting the annunciation scene to Mary in the Islamic Art of the Book, and discusses their artistic features and the schools which produced these art books and which were famous for being centers of culture, religion, and art in medieval Christianity and Islam.

It is worth mentioning that, recently, some Lebanese, both Christians and Muslims, started celebrating every year the annunciation feast (*eid al-Bishara*), on the twenty fifth of March. They get together and share their veneration, rituals, and arts that are devoted to Mary and the symbols she represents. This initiative, which was launched by many Lebanese organizations and societies for inter-faith dialogue, aims at spreading the culture of peace and harmony among the Lebanese. It is an unprecedented initiative not only in the Arab world but also in the Islamic world.

Nancy Jabra’s article on “Women’s Marian Devotions in a Melkite Greek Catholic Village in Lebanon” deals with May and Corpus Christi, which are two devotions to Mary celebrated in a village in the Beqa’ valley of Lebanon. As she argues, these devotions, while not commanded in Christian scripture, have enabled women to carve out a spiritual place for themselves in a patriarchal church.

The late Aisha Abdul Rahman (1923-1998), an Egyptian *Qur'an* scholar, gave a lecture entitled, “The Islamic Conception of Women’s Liberation” to a Sudanese audience at Umm Durman University in Khartoum, Sudan in 1967. This lecture, which is being made available in the English language in this issue of *al-Raida*, is considered to be the first essay written by an Arab Muslim woman scholar on gender and the *Qur'an*. Her short interpretation of some key verses, which Muslim women scholars today are engaged in rereading and interpreting for the

sake of women's rights in Islam (e.g. Aziza al-Hibri, Fatima Omar Naseef, Amina Wadud, and Umayma Abu Bakr), is pioneering and enlightening. It is worth mentioning that Bint al-Shati', the pseudo-name of Aisha Abd al-Rahman, contributed seven books to the *Qur'anic* library. She is the first Muslim woman to write and publish a methodological rhetorical exegesis on the *Qur'an* (covering 14 Meccan suras), entitled *al-Tafsir al-bayani lil-Qur'an al-karim*.

Julia Droeber and Ines Weinrich contributed, separately, ethnographic studies using anthropological approaches to the subject of women and scriptures. Droeber's article, "Women and Writing in the Absence of 'Text'", explores the limitations of "texts" accessible to women in the context of a rural Kyrgyzstan community, in the former Soviet republic. She records incidences when either there is no written text to inform religious practice or when there is a text but women cannot read it. She demonstrates how women's religiosity can be less "orthodox" and scripture-based than men's. Her experiences with more performative religious practices make her wonder if the recent scholarly focus on "scripture" is not in effect harming the "unorthodox" religious experiences of marginalized groups.

In a similar context but in another *milieu*, a women's spiritual gathering, culminating in the practice of *dhikr* (i.e. invocation of God), is recorded by Ines Weinrich. Fifteen to thirty women come together on a weekly basis in a *Sunni* neighborhood in Beirut. They meet in the private house of the *sheikha* (i.e. woman religious leader) who leads the readings from "texts" and the performing section of *dhikr*. Here the Word of God is lived and expressed both as an act of reading (from scripture) and in an artistic form that involves chanting, rhythmic utterances, and bodily movements. The *sheikha*, a middle-aged woman who has a beautiful voice, is licensed by her *sufi* teachers (men and women) to be a leader of her own group. *sufi* Muslim women gatherings are therapeutic, empowering, and a learning experience for women who need to understand and live the divine word.

Lise Galal, also an anthropologist, treats the subject of "Sacred Women in Coptic Cinema" in the context of Egyptian Coptic revivalism. The movies about Coptic saints and martyrs produced in Egypt since 1987, including the two films discussed by Galal, are part of this revivalism. Galal retells the stories of the protagonists, and explores the themes and the "minority strategies" related to different historical contexts. She offers an analysis of the two films which differ in the strategies they draw on and the message they send to the Coptic audience among the young generation. Although Galal describes the Copts in Egypt as a Christian minority, expressing "a minority identity" and "minority experiences", it should be noted here that the Copts in Egypt do not like to refer to themselves as a minority group.

To what extent have women attained knowledge of the scriptures of the three monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Women scholars, especially in North America, have already contributed to the publication of important work on women in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the *Qur'an*. Women scholars in the Arab world have only recently started to contribute to this field, especially with regard to women and the *Qur'an*. This issue of *al-Raida* is an attempt to add to what is still a very nascent field of studies in the Arab world, but one that is very crucial if age-old patriarchal interpretations of scriptures and religious traditions are to be effectively challenged.

Women and Scriptures in the Arab World



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Liberation and Universality:

Women in Luke's Gospel

Johnny B. Awwad

Introduction

It has long been observed that Luke's Gospel* shows greater interest in women than any other New Testament writing. The observation is based on the frequent mention of, or reference to, women not only in the narrative of Luke's Gospel – which recounts the story of Jesus' birth, public ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension – but also its sequel the Book of Acts which recounts the story of the movement of the good news of salvation from Jewish territory to the ends of the Gentile world mainly through the labor of Peter and Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What merits attention is Luke's distinctive organization of the material on women. Terms like “doubling” or “pairing” have been suggested to describe a Lukan literary device or technique whereby stories about, or references to, women characters are set beside stories about, or references to, men characters so as to create a deliberate gender pair.¹

It has also been noted that most of, and not necessarily all, the stories about women that Luke uses in his pairing technique come from special Lukan material (L), i.e. material found only in Luke. To understand this point, it is important to draw the reader's attention to a very important working hypothesis on the relation between the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) used by New Testament scholars. The hypothesis states the following: The Gospel of Mark was the first written Gospel, and both Luke and Matthew used Mark as a primary source in their Gospel compositions. In addition, Luke and Matthew utilized a second source called Q (for the German word *Quelle* meaning “source”) which explains the common material found in Luke and Matthew but not in Mark. Stories and material that are exclusively found in Luke, and not in Mark or Q or for this matter in Matthew are identified as “L” such as the Annunciation story (the appearance of the angel to Mary and the famous Magnificat) which will be dealt with in detail later on. These methodological clarifications make it evident that the Lukan technique of pairing or doubling was intentional and deliberate, particularly when gender pairs are created through the use of special L material.

* The Bible version used in this article is the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

1. For a listing of all the gender pairs that have been identified by scholars, see: Mary Rose D'Angelo, 1990; Turid Karlsen Seim, 1995.

In what follows I will explore samples of the evidence. I have chosen to limit the investigation to four stories of women that appear within what we defined above as a “pair”, since an exhaustive examination of all the evidence is beyond the scope of this article. Three of the four examples come from Lukan special material “L”. All the examples deal with real characters and not fictional ones like in a parable or a simile. While part of the investigation will show how Luke organized his special material on

women, the contexts within which he placed them, the qualities they exhibit, and the roles they play, the other part will answer the following question: why does Luke do what he does?

The thesis that I wish to defend in this article is the following: Luke's interest in women is evident not only from the exclusive and special material on women he imports into the composition of his narrative, but also from the way he organizes this material through his pairing technique. But this is just an articulation of something deeper. Luke's interest in women stems from his understanding of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God and his public ministry as one of liberation and release to the marginalized in society, which includes not only women but also the poor, the lowly, the sick, the possessed, and the aliens. It is a ministry where social, ethnic, gender, and economic boundaries come tumbling down. This conviction on Luke's part is the driving force behind the frequent mention of women, as well as his pairing technique. Stories about women demonstrate the certainty and the proof of his convictions. Although the investigation will be limited to a sampling of women stories from the Gospel of Luke, the theme of liberation is transposed in the narrative of Acts, Luke's second volume, into a clear universality touching the lives of Gentiles, and women as well.

Zechariah and Mary

The first sample comes from a pair found in the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel (chapters 1–2). There we have two angelic announcements. The first is given to a priest called Zechariah, who along with his wife Elizabeth, is depicted as righteous before God (Luke 1:6). The angel reveals to Zechariah that his old and barren wife will bear a child whose name shall be John (known later in the narrative as the Baptist). The second announcement is given to a young virgin, betrothed to a man named Joseph, and the virgin's name is Mary. She is told by the angel that she will conceive in her womb and bear a child, and the child's name shall be Jesus (Luke 1:31ff.).

These two announcements clarify Luke's pairing technique whereby a story about a woman is placed side by side to a similar story about a man. Both announcements are found only in Luke's Gospel, and it is a good example of Luke's special material (L). No other Gospel contains this material or displays such a pair. The only other Gospel in the New Testament that has a birth narrative is Matthew, but there it is Joseph and not Mary who is the recipient of the angelic announcement. This shows that Luke has more interest in Mary's experience than Joseph's.

What is more fascinating is not so much the fact that we have a pair, but how that pair functions. How are the characters depicted? What responses do they make? What does the author want to communicate through these characters? Do they have a leading role in the narrative or do they function as exemplary characters for the readers?

If one were to comment on the responses made by these two characters to the angelic announcements, one will come up with the following observations. While both may have been terrified by the angelic voice (Luke 1:13, 30), Zechariah's response is more skeptical: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). Mary's response on the other hand is more trusting: "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" (Luke 1:34). Unlike Zechariah who is interested in

“knowing”, Mary’s response is about “understanding”. Mary’s response is one of wonder: “How shall this be?”. She asks but does not question. Jane Kopas (1986) describes these two different responses in an eloquent way when she says:

Zechariah’s question is the question of a skeptic, the question of one who seeks knowledge more than understanding. His concern is reason and certainty ... Mary, on the other hand, asks out of wonder. She wonders how the promise of the angel can come to pass since she is a virgin. Despite a superficial similarity to Zechariah’s question, Mary’s question must have been rooted in faith that was willing to be moved to a deeper level of mystery”. (p. 195)

The nature of the responses determines the course of events. Zechariah leaves dumb, and unable to speak, because he did not believe that the words of the angel will be fulfilled in their time (Luke 1:20). Mary leaves with a saying that reflects her contemplative experience and wonder: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary’s obedient response is active and participatory, and does not need to be seen in passive and submissive terms.

As the story continues, Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth who describes her as “blessed”. Why? It is because she “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45). Mary’s blessedness stems from the fact that she believed that the things spoken to her will in fact come to pass. From Luke’s perspective Mary exemplifies true faithfulness that seeks understanding by placing herself under the word of God spoken to her by the angel and not questioning it. Luke reminds us of this type of blessedness in two other places of his Gospel. In Luke 8:21, when the crowd tells Jesus that his mother and brothers are standing outside desiring to see him, he replies: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it”. In Luke 11:27-28, when a woman from the crowd cries out to Jesus saying: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked”, Jesus responds to her: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it”. In many ways, Mary is the first disciple of her son. From Luke’s perspective, Mary is an exemplary and paradigmatic character. She epitomizes true faith in her openness to the divine and true discipleship in doing or keeping what she hears.

As Mary hears Elizabeth’s words she bursts into a song of praise (The Magnificat): “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever” (Luke 1:46-55).

Mary’s song raises a number of themes. First, and most importantly, it announces the reversal of fortunes for the lowly and the marginalized, which is a pervasive theme in Luke’s Gospel. She is describing her own experience, how in the age of God’s coming Spirit those who are no-bodies, by patriarchal traditional societal structures, have been

graced, lifted up, and regarded. Through the no-bodies God is now doing something. Mary is an empowering testimony to other women of the possibility of a partnership with God to achieve God's purposes for creation, provided these women have the faithfulness of Mary. Mary's story of faith demonstrates that the restraints placed upon women, as well as the roles imposed on them by their societal structures, are not God-given but human-made. As it will be shown later on, Mary's song is in many ways an anticipation of the good news of salvation and liberation proclaimed by Jesus her son. Second, Mary's identification with the lowly and the marginalized is not intended to reinforce the subservient and passive roles of women, but rather to express solidarity with women who yearn for a similar deliverance under a merciful and a compassionate God (Kopas, 1986).

Men and Women Disciples

The second example is the intended pairing between Luke 6:12-19 (cf. Mark 3:12-19) and Luke 8:1-3 (special "L" material). These two texts do not follow each other as in the earlier example, but the intended connection between them cannot be missed as we will see later on.

In the first text, we are told that Jesus, after calling his disciples, chose from among them twelve males and called them apostles (Luke 6:12-19). Luke 6:12-19 contains a listing of all the names of the twelve male apostles. The rest of chapter 6 is a collection of sayings and teachings by Jesus. Chapter 7 contains two miracle stories, a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples of the Baptist, and the story of the woman who weeps at Jesus' feet and whose sins are forgiven. Immediately afterwards at the beginning of chapter 8, Luke informs us in a summary fashion that:

Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided them out of their means. (Luke 8:1-3)

In this text Luke provides the reader with a list of women disciples. Three of them are mentioned by name, and many others unnamed. This list is intended to function as a parallel to the list of male disciples in chapter 6, and together they must be viewed as a pair. What this text further suggests is that Jesus' close circle was not exclusively made out of male disciples but also of women disciples who were socially and economically prominent. Joanna was the wife of Chuza, King Herod's steward. The fact that these women were able to finance this newly emerging movement led by Jesus suggests that they were economically well to do.

More importantly, the presence of women disciples among Jesus' close followers suggests that the Jesus movement practiced social openness. In a patriarchal Jewish context like the one Jesus lived in, a woman was considered the property of her husband, a second-class citizen, whose legal status was mediated by her husband or father. Jesus challenged this mindset and allowed many women to participate in his ministry and made them witnesses to the breaking in of the kingdom of God. In this context, it is important to

underline the courage of these women who left their homes and families and followed Jesus, accepting the social challenge he introduced to that culture. The women who followed Jesus were, undoubtedly, women of great courage.

Unfortunately, we do not know much about these women. All we know is that they were healed by Jesus of evil spirits and infirmities. Among them was the acute case of Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out.² This is not the place to engage the phenomenon of demon possession, but given the primitive medical knowledge of first century Palestine, it was natural to attribute emotional illnesses, schizophrenia, psycho-somatic disorders (physical illnesses attributed to mental or emotional disturbances), or even physical illnesses like blindness, deafness, lameness, or epilepsy, to demon possession.³ We simply have no evidence so as to diagnose the infirmities of these women. All we know is that they were healed by Jesus, and as a gesture of gratitude they followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem events surrounding Jesus' life and ministry intensify. Opposition to Jesus by the Jewish religious leadership escalates. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve male apostles, betrays him (Luke 22:47-53). Jesus gets arrested, is tried, and then condemned to death. As the events intensify, Peter, a leading and representative figure of the twelve, denies him (Luke 22:54-62). The rest of the male disciples abandon him. In the darkest moment of his life, I mean when he was nailed to a piece of wood, none of his male disciples stood by him. Only Mary Magdalene and the other women, who followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and who provided for him from their own means, were present watching things at a distance. While Luke 23:49 speaks about "acquaintances" of Jesus present at a distance, there is nothing to suggest that the twelve male disciples were among them. What Luke wishes to articulate from all of this is the fidelity, commitment, and loyalty of female discipleship.

No wonder then that these women were given the privilege to be the first recipients of the good news of Jesus' resurrection (see Luke 24:1-11). When they went to announce this good news to the rest of the male disciples, we are told that they did not believe them for their words seemed to them "an idle tale" (Luke 24:11). As the story unfolds, the male disciples come to believe that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, and consequently, the women's testimony was not "an idle tale". In highlighting their experience of the resurrection, Luke wishes to shatter stereotypes about women's words, testimony, and witness.

If this is so, someone may ask: why didn't Jesus choose some women as apostles? The answer to this question is fairly easy and simple. The reason why we do not have women apostles is because the "twelve males" have a symbolic meaning in Jewish religious heritage. They symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve male children of Jacob among whom Joseph, who was abandoned by his brothers and ended up in Pharaoh's court in Egypt, is well-known. Jesus' choice of twelve males symbolically meant that he is the one re-gathering Israel under his leadership, so that Israel might be a light to the nations. This thought is clearly articulated in one of Jesus' sayings to the disciples in Luke 22:28-30: "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel".

2. The number seven was known as a number perfection. The reference to seven demons is not to be taken literally. Rather, it describes the serious condition of her case.

3. See on this John Meier, 1994; and Johnny Awwad, 2005.

The women from Galilee serve important functions in Luke's presentation of women. Like men, they are the recipients of God's liberation that is breaking into the world. Their release from their infirmities is to say that the benefits of the Messianic age are to be shared equally by men and women. That is to say, their equality is God's given gift. It is a right that they have and not a right they have to claim. In tracing their journey with Jesus we have discovered Luke's interest in underlining their fidelity and commitment to Jesus, a commitment that surpasses that of his male apostles. We have seen their faithfulness in their active discipleship. They are women of courage who shatter the fixed roles set for them, or imposed upon them, by society. They are empowering characters for women who wish to actively participate in leadership positions in religious life but have been hindered by cultural restraints. In their witness to the resurrection they shatter a stereotype that is commonly present in traditional patriarchal societal structures that women's talk is an "idle tale". The word of a faithful and serious woman must be taken seriously.

The Hemorrhaging Woman in the Context of a Pair

The third example is not a clear cut part of a pair, but it can be seen as such. It comes at the end of chapter 8 (Luke 8:26-56). The material in this section is not exclusively special Lukan material (L). It is taken from the Gospel of Mark and follows the same Markan order (Mark 5:1-43). Luke's borrowing of it means that he wishes to utilize it and add it to his archive of stories about women.

It is a section made out of three miracle stories by Jesus. The first involves a man from the country of the Gerasenes who is possessed by demons, and whom Jesus heals (Luke 8:26-39). The second story is about the healing/raising of a twelve year-old girl, the daughter of a certain Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, who was on the verge of dying/died (Luke 8:40-42; 49-56). The second story is interrupted by a third story, the story of a hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:43-48), after which the second story is brought to closure.

After the possessed man from Gerasene is healed, he begs Jesus to be with him. Jesus, however, refuses and tells the man: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39), and the story continues that he went away "proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done to him" (Luke 8:39). As Jesus leaves the country of the Gerasenes, he is approached by a group of people who inform him that a girl, twelve years of age and the daughter of a certain Jairus, is dying and begged him to go to his house. Jesus heads toward Jairus' house, but gets interrupted on the way by a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years and could not be healed by anyone. As the crowds pressed upon Jesus, the woman comes close to him and touches the fringe of his garment. The moment she touches his garment the flow of blood immediately ceases. Suddenly Jesus stops and asks: "Who was it that touched me?" (Luke 8:45). Even though Peter tries to explain that being touched is something natural given the multitudes and the crowds that press upon him, nevertheless, Jesus insists on knowing: "Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone forth from me" (Luke 8:46). Recognizing that she was no longer unnoticed, the woman approaches Jesus with fear and falls down before him as a public declaration that she was the one who touched him and that she was immediately healed. Jesus looks at her and says: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:48). While

Jesus is still speaking, a delegation from Jairus' house informs him that the young girl has died and that he need not trouble himself to go there. Jesus insists on going. When he arrives he takes the young girl's hand and tells her: "child arise". And she immediately rises (Luke 8:49-55).

The way I related the three stories shows that I am interested in focusing on the story of the hemorrhaging woman. Jewish religious rituals consider a menstruating woman or a woman with a flow of blood to be unclean and impure. Touching her is a source of contamination that requires going through prescribed purity rituals. Given the woman's chronic condition, and the fact that she has tried for twelve years to be healed, it must be that her condition is now public knowledge. She is to be avoided lest any accidental touching of her will contaminate others.

There is something intriguing about the story of this woman. Why would Jesus expose her? Why does he publicly embarrass her by insisting on knowing who touched him? These are legitimate questions and need to be answered. However, before we do so, a comment about her healing is in order. The woman approaches Jesus as a woman of faith and trust. She believes that if she touches his garment she would be healed. This is what happens. Jesus' final words to her commend her for that faith: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:48). Jesus does not object to the fact that a hemorrhaging woman touched him, nor does he have any reservations about touching the hand of the young girl who, given her age, may have been menstruating. He just wants to know who touched him. By insisting on knowing who touched him, and yet without objecting to it, Jesus redefines what makes a person clean or unclean. The cleanliness of a woman is not determined by her feminine biological functions but by her faithfulness and trust.

Why does he publicly expose her? Jesus exposes her publicly not to embarrass her but to embrace her. He wants to publicly announce that the woman who touched him is no longer unclean and to be avoided. His action is a public declaration that this woman must be reintegrated into society like everyone else. By exposing her, Jesus helps her overcome her social insecurities. In a culture where social marginalization gets intensified by sickness and impurity, the stories of the hemorrhaging woman and the possessed man from Gerasene have far reaching social effects. Both stories demonstrate the shift from social marginalization to social integration. Liberation and release from sicknesses and infirmities have social implications too.

The Bent-Over Woman and the Man with Dropsy

The fourth and final example of a pair is two healing stories on a Sabbath. The first is a healing story of an older woman on a Sabbath day who for eighteen years, and because of an evil spirit, was bent-over and unable to fully straighten up (Luke 13:10-17). The second is a healing story of a man on a Sabbath day with dropsy at the house of a Pharisee (Luke 14:1-6). Although the stories do not directly follow each other, what makes them an intended pair is that both are healing stories on a Sabbath, which is a day of rest, and the cause of a controversy between Jesus and the Jewish religious leadership. Both stories come from special Lukan material, though the story of the man with dropsy has similarities with a story in Mark about a man with a withered hand (see Mark 3:1-6).

Both stories are the cause of a controversy. In both cases Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath. To defend his action, Jesus throws questions at his critics. In the story of the man with dropsy, Jesus asks a question to which his opponents could not respond: "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5). In the story of the bent-over woman Jesus asks two questions that put his opponents to shame: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15-16). Jesus' questions are intended to say that actions of liberation and release are not subject to Sabbath rules. As acts of liberation, they are above the Sabbath. In fact Jesus is saying that if God is at work healing, releasing and liberating on a Sabbath, aren't we also supposed to do so? What is intriguing in Jesus' question to his critics in the story of the older woman is his description of her as a "daughter of Abraham". This is the only place in the entire New Testament where a female is described as such. The description has tremendous implications. If women are daughters of Abraham, then they are Abraham's progeny, and as Abraham's progeny, they are equal beneficiaries of the promises to Abraham. These promises were articulated earlier in the narrative by Mary's song. They are the promises of a merciful God, who reverses human fortunes, who lifts up the lowly, and gives regard to the destitute, and who fills the hungry with good things. As Mary sings, these promises are spoken "to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his posterity for ever" (Luke 1:55). By designating her as a "daughter of Abraham", Jesus declares the woman's right as an equal beneficiary of the mercies of God promised to Abraham. If the promises are to Abraham and to his posterity, then, as a "daughter of Abraham", being healed is her God-given right. If God is healing, even on a Sabbath, nobody has a say in it. The story of the bent-over woman is not only about liberation and release from an infirmity; it is also about the right of women to be equal participants in the religious cycle of life in Israel.

Jesus' Ministry and the Dawning Age of Liberation and Release

The four examples we have examined have shown tremendous potentials in Luke's presentation on women. They are stories of liberation and release not only from sickness and disease, but also from the restraints of traditional patriarchal societal codes and cultural stereotypes about women. The inevitable question is what prompts Luke to do so, or why he does what he does.

The answer is to be found in Luke's understanding of the ministry of Jesus as one of liberation and release. In other words, the liberation stories of women that Luke celebrates through re-telling in his narrative demonstrate that the age of liberation and release has truly arrived in Jesus' ministry. God's mercy and compassion for his creation are now being revealed and felt. Luke's primary interest is not in relating stories of liberation of women as such, but rather in how the dawning age of liberation in Jesus' ministry impacted society including the lives of women.

To demonstrate this primary concern in Luke's Gospel, I will focus on one text which has been considered programmatic and descriptive not only of Jesus' vision of his own ministry in Luke's Gospel but also of the ministry of his apostles in the Book of Acts. This text comes at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. After his baptism

(Luke 3:21-22) and the experience of temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), Jesus returns in the power of the Spirit to Galilee to his hometown Nazareth. There he goes to the synagogue on a Sabbath day and is given the book of the Prophet Isaiah. He opens the book and reads the following passage from it:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:2)

Then he closes the book, sits down, and begins to say to the people: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The text that Jesus reads is Isaiah 61:1-2 which, in its original context, promises deliverance and restoration to Israel. In it Jesus finds, and always from a Lukan perspective, an encapsulation of the vision that will inform and define his public ministry. Jesus is the anointed one of God spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah, who gets anointed by the descent of the Spirit upon him during his baptism (Luke 3:21-22), and the same Spirit accompanies him throughout his temptation and leads him to his hometown Nazareth. He is sent on a mission of liberation and release: proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, setting free the oppressed, proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord (the Jubilee year of release of slaves and debts). Jesus' words in Nazareth are a messianic "manifesto". "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" means that what the prophet Isaiah announced a long time ago about the restoration and deliverance of Israel has begun. The rest of the Gospel must, therefore, be seen as an implementation of this programmatic statement and vision. All the healings, exorcisms, miracles, and parables in Gospel are to be read as signs of God's kingdom breaking into the world to liberate, release, and deliver, where justice and compassion for the poor and the marginalized prevail (Hays, 1996).

In the seventh chapter in Luke's Gospel, there is an interesting episode about an encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. The text relates that John the Baptist, who is now in prison, has sent his disciples to ask Jesus a question: "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?" (Luke 7:18-23; esp. 20b). Jesus answers them: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:22-23). Jesus' response to the Baptist's followers is an indirect allusion to many texts in Isaiah (29:18; 35:5-6; 42:18; 26:19; 61:1), and it reiterates his vision in slightly different terms. The material between chapters 4 (the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Nazareth) and chapter 7 (the Baptist's question to Jesus) is a catena of stories of liberation and release in the implementation of the vision.

Back to the story in Nazareth, the people that heard Jesus speak about the fulfillment of Isaiah's words in their hearing react with wonder and ask a question: "Is not this Joseph's son?". The question provides Jesus with the opportunity to respond with a saying and an allusion to two stories from the Old Testament. At first sight the

question might seem straight forward and innocent. However, given the nature of Jesus' response, the question must be viewed as an indirect statement of ridicule and cynicism: Is not this Joseph's son, whose mother is Mary? We know who he is. By what authority does he claim to be the one fulfilling the hopes of deliverance and restoration to Israel as stated in the Prophet Isaiah? Who does he think he is? While it is true that Joseph is the adoptive father of Jesus, however, from a Lukan perspective, Jesus is the Son of God. Regardless of whether the people's question is informed or uninformed by Luke's Christological concern, the question itself ("Is not this Joseph's son?") is of a condescending nature. The people of his hometown will neither perceive who Jesus truly is, nor will they honor and accept him as a prophet. He is simply someone's son.

The people's question provokes a sharp answer by Jesus who says:

Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country'... Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:23-27)⁴

With this response Jesus sets himself within the prophetic tradition known for its concern for compassion and justice. Like the prophets of old, his ministry will not be appreciated by his own people. More importantly, he refuses Israel's claim as the sole and exclusive beneficiary to God's mercy and compassion. The two examples he gives from the Old Testament illustrate God's mercy and compassion extended to a Gentile woman from Sidon and a Syrian leper. God's mercy and compassion is for all of God's creation. It transcends ethnicity, gender, and social status. With these examples, Jesus gives a universal outlook to the mercy and compassion of God. This universal outlook will be materialized in the second volume of Luke's narrative, I mean the Book of Acts, in a mission to the ends of the earth embracing men and women in the non-Jewish Gentile world. Jesus' Nazareth incident proves to be programmatic not only to Jesus' ministry of liberation and release in the Gospel itself, but it also prefigures the extension of God's salvation and liberation beyond the boundaries of Israel into the Gentile world.

From its very beginning, Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel is tuned toward liberation and universality. His stories on women ought to be seen in this context. They are demonstrations of how God's Kingdom of liberation and release is breaking into the world through his ministry touching their lives, reversing their status, and reshaping and reconfiguring their roles. Mary's song is a testimony to this reversal of fortunes. The story of the women disciples is a witness to how liberation and release reshape and reconfigure one's life. The story of the hemorrhaging woman and the bent-over older woman are living testimonies of the freedom they have attained, both socially and religiously.

4. Note how the two stories from the Old Testament form a gender pair.

Conclusion

Luke does indeed show great interest in women. His archive of stories on women (especially Lukan exclusive material), as well as his way of organizing these stories (pairing technique), reveal this interest. More importantly, women are given a voice in Luke's story. It is a voice that testifies to the breaking in of a new world order where the no-bodies have become some-bodies and participants in the unfolding of God's salvation history. It is a voice that testifies to a reversal of fortunes raising them to the status they had not formerly enjoyed. It is a voice that calls for social and religious re-integration. It is a voice that calls for equality between the sexes. It is a voice that shatters traditional patriarchal societal stereotypes and codes. We need to hear their voices and take them seriously, because they have shown to be exemplary characters in faithfulness, commitment, loyalty, and courage.

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A Different Kind of “Scripture”:

Women’s Access to Religious Knowledge Without the Written Word

Julia Droeber

Prologue

It was on the second day of my fieldwork stay in a remote mountain village in Kyrgyzstan in 2004.¹ My hostmother² Nurgul and her best friend Ainura decided to show me an important site just outside the village. Together with my two hostsisters, nine and fourteen years old, we set off and twenty minutes later we arrived at an overgrown site: a field, the size of a football pitch, surrounded by what could have been the overgrown remainder of ruined walls. It was an awe-inspiring sight – the snowcapped Altai-mountains in the background, lush vegetation around us, an azure sky above, and not a sound to be heard. This was, my hostmother explained, the place where Manas, the Kyrgyz national hero, had built a fortress, and it was a sacred site. We circumambulated the site while listening to more stories about Kyrgyzstan’s hero of a thousand years ago. Then, just before we turned to walk home, my hostmother suggested to her friend to “read the *Qur’an*”. We squatted down in that typically Central Asian way and fell silent. Then Ainura cupped her hands in her lap and began to “read the *Qur’an*”. Only there was no *Qur’an*. And her recitation was in an Arabic I could not even remotely recognise. We finished our prayer with the “*omeen*”³ gesture and made our way home.

Texts and Contexts

Islam is often described as a scriptural religion, and the past few decades have seen a renewed emphasis on the core texts in an effort to reinterpret them and reform Muslim practice. Increased literacy and a shift towards Islamic basics have led to increased access to religious knowledge, and women and other previously marginalised groups seem to have benefited from this. Women have begun to claim rights in the name of Islam – sometimes referred to as a “gender *jihad*” (Wadud, 2006) – and scholarship by and about Muslim women has increased dramatically. There can be no doubt that “scripture” has taken centre stage again across the Muslim world. Or has it? The episode described above seems to tell a different story. In a Kyrgyzstani context this was not an exceptional incident, and I suspect Muslims in other parts of the world have a similarly unorthodox access to scripture. In this paper, I explore situations where scripture is absent, where context, not text, is everything, and where oral culture and (religious) illiteracy inform Muslim practice. I refer to incidents that trouble the smooth “success story” of empowerment through access to scripture and religious knowledge. Emerging from my observations is a more complicated picture

1. The ethnographic data, on which this discussion is based, is mainly from fieldwork I conducted in Kyrgyzstan between 2002 and 2004.

2. I was “adopted” into a family in the village and took on the role of a “daughter” in the household; I refer to the female head of household as my “hostmother”.

3. *Omeen* or *Amen* in English refers to wiping over your face with usually both hands, pronouncing “omen” (often silently).

that cautions us not to lose sight of different kinds of “scripture”, different kinds of “access” to religious knowledge, and different ways of constructing power and authority beyond the primacy of the written religious word. This shift in focus has both methodological, theoretical, and epistemological connotations as I will explain in what follows.

Anthropologists have historically conducted research in societies where the written word – “text” in a very narrow sense of the term – was either absent or access to it limited to a literate elite (Fischer, 1992 ; Jones, 1992). Needless to say that this exclusive anthropological focus on “oral cultures” holds no longer true, and boundaries between “oral” and “scriptural” traditions have become rather blurred in today’s world. Non-anthropologists have also reminded us that it is sometimes useful to go beyond the bias of considering written sources as our primary data (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1978). Furthermore, the “literary turn” in anthropology has reminded us that scholarly activity amounts to “writing culture” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Behar & Gordon, 1995).

What these debates have highlighted, amongst other things, is the fact that a scholarly focus on “texts” in the narrow sense of ink-on-paper, especially when taken out of context, does not capture the full picture and can, thus, be rather misleading. Context is crucial to our understanding of how power relationships are enacted, authority assigned, and knowledge constructed, as every aspect of human behaviour is embedded in socio-cultural contexts and in webs of power relations. Human beings are essentially relational and narrative beings (Joseph, 1999). Taking behaviour out of context – in laboratory situations, for instance – thus constitutes an epistemological and methodological fallacy.

What I would like to reiterate here is the argument that “text” needs to be understood and studied in its broadest form and shape, beyond its written form. The contexts, in which “texts” are produced and used, are absolutely essential for our understanding of the dynamic power relationships between those engaged with and through “texts”. In what follows, I will explore the opportunities and challenges of “texts in contexts” and of reading and texts as events or performance, particularly as they occur in situations, where oral culture predominates either due to the absence of the written word, or the inability to read (and write), or due to cultural preferences.

4. *Moldo* describes the function and position of someone otherwise known as *imam*. The religious terminology of Kyrgyzstani Muslims is largely influenced by Turkish and Farsi, and it thus differs greatly from Arabic terms used elsewhere in the Muslim world.

5. *Namaz* is the Central Asian/Farsi/Turkish word for the Arabic *salat*, (i.e. prayer).

Interlude

A couple of weeks into my stay in the Kyrgyzstani mountain village I paid the local mosque a visit. It had been built a few years earlier by a “son of the village”, who had become a wealthy businessman in the country’s capital. The mosque was usually locked, and even on a Friday it hardly attracted any worshippers. The few who came were elderly men. I had patiently waited for the young *moldo*⁴ outside the mosque after Friday *namaz*,⁵ when he finally emerged to greet me. He let me in and after a few minutes of meditative silence we started a conversation. I explained my background and research, and he asked if I could read Arabic. To test me he asked me to read the writings on the wall in the prayer hall – the name of the Prophet, God, the *basmallah*, and a few other things. He seemed impressed and obviously decided to test me further. He left the room and came back with a battered old copy of the *Qur’an*,

the only one in the mosque as it turned out. He handled it with utmost reverence and said he liked reading it. Only he could not read Arabic well, let alone understand it.

Literacy and Modernity

What the two episodes I recorded in Kyrgyzstan show quite clearly is that Muslim practice in this remote part of the former Soviet republic is informed by religious scripture in what would commonly be labelled an “unorthodox” way. I and others have taken issue with this labelling elsewhere and it shall not concern me here (see Droeber, forthcoming; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008). I am also not concerned with the scriptural focus of Muslim theological scholarship, which places great store in textual “authenticity”, linguistic exegesis, and scriptural evidence, particularly in the legal sphere. What is at issue for me here is the question of how we account for a situation where there is no written text to inform religious practice, or when there is a text, but people cannot read it. Given the focus on written/printed texts in much scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies, are we effectively marginalising the religious experiences of those for whom access to scripture in its written/printed form is not the norm? And if we take these experiences seriously what do such situations teach us about the relationship between scripture and religious practice?

It has been argued that both literacy and print technology have had a crucial impact on the ways in which human beings thought and organized their societies (McLuhan, 1962), and that the emergence of literacy has historically been closely linked to the creation of social difference (Goody, 1968; Goody, 1977). With its emphasis on objectivity and progress, the project of modernity has been squarely founded on the codification of knowledge in the written word, and on the ability to access it. In a variety of contexts, including academia and religion, writing subsequently acquired a status of objective medium of knowledge and facts, rather than a way of knowing in and of itself (Williams, 1983). Access to such codified knowledge, in this case reading, thus became an essential tool of empowering oneself through “objective” knowledge. Especially as a consequence of colonial encounters – as in much of the Muslim world, literate classes came to enjoy considerable privileges. In other words, the modern emphasis on codified language privileges certain kinds of knowledge production and transmission over others, thus marginalising some groups and empowering others. This is often reflected in religious contexts, where some scriptures obtain their “neutrality” and infallibility through divine origin, and the ability to read them has become an essential pillar of piety. I am, however, interested in the practices in the margins of literacy.

Going back to the two episodes I recorded in Kyrgyzstan, we can then see that both Ainura and the village *moldo* can, on the surface, be considered religiously illiterate, as they had no access to the core Islamic texts, and their practice as “unorthodox”, as it was only superficially informed by Islamic texts. Although they were both educated to secondary level and literate in Russian and Kyrgyz, and the *moldo* had received some local religious training, the printed religious sources remained closed to them. This lack of access is in part due to historical circumstances, as the Soviet regime tried to strictly control people’s access to religious knowledge and Soviet Muslims were in effect cut off from the rest of the Muslim world (Ro’i, 2000). Yet, both the *moldo* and Ainura were considered religious “experts” by most fellow villagers. Their religious knowledge and

authority was based largely on oral transmission of memorized formulae and passages, and the skill to use them in appropriate moments.

At least in part due to the specific historical circumstances – I refer mainly to Soviet and nomadic legacies here – religious knowledge in Kyrgyzstan could not rely on the written word, and was instead passed on orally from generation to generation. The two main avenues of transmission have been in the family, on the one hand, or through “apprenticeships”, on the other. Soviet policies further encouraged the already existing practice of the (extended) household being the main hub for religious practices. The (male) head of the household presided over the execution of religious rituals (unless an imam was required, such as for wedding or funeral ceremonies), and passed this on to his son(s). My host-grandfather, for instance, was the one who conducted the name-giving ceremony for his newborn grandson, as well as the circumcision ceremony for another grandson, and freely recited formulae appropriate for the occasion. He had passed this on to his youngest son, who, on another occasion, took over the task of praying with the family, again completely without access to the written word. Women, on the other hand, were often knowledgeable in healing practices that combined religious, spiritual, and medical knowledge. One of the young women I met in the village told me how her grandmother had trained her in both finding appropriate herbs and the correct formulae and practices for healing, and one of our neighbours was well-known for her healing skills. That such healing procedures often bore resemblances to shamanistic practices was locally not considered a contradiction to their Muslimness.

This access to and application of religious knowledge was inextricably linked to bodily performance and the physical environment. In the Kyrgyzstani mountains, much of the environment carries spiritual significance for the people living there. Knowing which places are particularly beneficial – whether that is a saint’s shrine, a wellspring, a tree, or a cemetery – and controlling access to them is just as essential as the knowledge of “texts”. When I visited a spring in the mountains with two women neighbours and one of their young sons, who was suffering from eczema, he was not simply washed with the water, hoping for healing. The actual contact with the water was embedded in a whole set of physical rituals and prayers, which the older of the two women led. No written word was required; instead a thorough knowledge of the environment as well as the appropriate formulae ensured the procedure was conducted in the correct way.

One of the issues arising from this conceptualisation of religious expertise is, of course, the question of controllability. If there are no “texts”, against which authenticity and “orthodoxy” can be measured, can not just anyone declare themselves “experts”? Obviously, the *moldo*’s command of religious knowledge only appealed to a limited group of people. In the remote areas of Kyrgyzstan, the “orthodox” interpretation of Islam – institutionalized in mosques and scripture-based – did not enjoy much esteem.⁶ Thus, people were quite critical and selective in bestowing trust and authority on those they deemed spiritually knowledgeable. Checks and balances were in place, and just like Wolf’s (1990) woman who did not become a shaman, social control and local expertise ensures the reliability of religious knowledge. In other words, while both the project of modernity and the Islamic tradition of scripture-based scholarship privilege literacy over oral and performative culture, in some contexts, different systems

6. In urban centres and the south a more scripture-focused interpretation of Islam gained currency, yet, for most of the Kyrgyzstanis I spoke with, this practice seemed “alien” to their culture and self-perception and was therefore not particularly attractive.

of expertise have developed outside the written word. In such circumstances, it is particularly performativity and bodily practice that mark “religious literacy”.

Orality, Performance, and Authority

Access to knowledge is linked to power and authority. As I have outlined above, literacy and access to the written word have become essential pillars in the ascription of both religious and secular authority in many contexts. The proliferation of printed material and people’s ability to access it has meant that an increasing number of people could check claims of knowledge, authenticity, and authority. These developments can be celebrated as a success and as empowerment of the underprivileged, among them women. However, does this mean that religious practice and religious knowledge, which is not directly based on the written word, becomes *per definitionem* inauthentic and therefore non-authoritative? How are authority and authenticity constructed in the absence of the written word?

Following on from the discussion in the previous section, I now want to focus more closely on orality, performativity, and embodiment of religious knowledge, and how this is tied to authenticity and the ascription of authority. It is well established that “texts”, once they have left the author’s cognitive, unspoken realm and enter the public domain, take on a life of their own. Authors always, if at times unconsciously, engage with an imaginary or real audience and adjust texts – written, oral, or otherwise – accordingly. In other words, texts, written or spoken, are embedded in human relationships.

Abu-Lughod (1993) in her work on Egyptian Bedouins, for instance, describes her dissatisfaction with writing a “standard anthropological monograph”, as this often does not sufficiently convey “context”: “I felt, however, that there was so much more richness in people’s conversations and complexity to their lives than I had managed to convey in that [first] book that I had to try again” (p. 1). She is not alone in discovering that the “vividness and style with which women recounted stories of everyday life” were essential to understanding their production and use of “text” (Abu-Lughod 1993, p. 2). It is the performed and embodied character of their “texts” that told the stories, not the words alone. While Abu-Lughod’s “stories” were not explicitly religious in character, they dealt with issues that had both Islamic connotations and concerned women’s personal lives, such as polygyny, marriage, or reproduction. Thus, religious knowledge for these (largely illiterate) Bedouin women was conveyed and negotiated orally and bodily, it was essentially performed. The transcription of the words used was insufficient for understanding how both religious knowledge and social relationships were constructed and negotiated.

Another example of how codified words are insufficient for understanding the significance of the entire “text” and the authority of the performer can again be found in Kyrgyzstan, where there has been a centuries old tradition of narrating and performing the nation’s history, the epos of the hero Manas.⁷ This story could only be performed by specialists, the *manaschys* (i.e. reciters of the Manas epos), who, not unlike Siberian shamans (i.e. spiritual specialists), had undergone an experience of being chosen by the spirits for this calling. Their profession and reputation was purely based on orality and performativity. The authority of the *manaschys* was on the one

7. Longer than Homer’s *Iliads*, this epos tells the story of how the hero Manas first united the different Kyrgyz clans more than a thousand years ago, and thus formed a unified and prosperous nation.

hand grounded in their knowledge of and ability to perform the details of the epos. On the other hand, it was the experience of being called by the spirits that legitimized their position of authority. Given the divine calling and the spiritual content of the epos, the *manaschys*' role and their performances can be considered "religious".

When the Soviet regime took control over Central Asia, its mission was to "modernize" the regions' "backward" societies, and introducing literacy was an important propaganda tool. One such project was to collect and codify the Manas epos. Since that time, the significance of the *manaschys* has declined rapidly. With the existence of the story in its written form and increased levels of literacy, anyone could read or recite it. What was lost in the process was the experience of community that emerged between the *manaschys*, who would adapt the story to the mood of their audience, and the listeners who "lived" through the story. Codification meant the epos had become disenchanted, stripped of its spiritual significance, and it does make for sterile reading if taken out of the performative context.

While this situation is not directly linked to Islamic scripture, it highlights three aspects that are relevant for the current discussion. Firstly, it illustrates that the codification of narratives and an exclusive focus on the written word miss a crucial element in the role played by stories and texts: that negotiation of authenticity, ascription of authority, and manipulation of power relationships via "texts" are dynamic processes. Stories and texts are events that evolve between author, narrator, and audience. Secondly, this oral tradition might have an important influence on current Muslim practice in Kyrgyzstan, where religious authority is not commonly ascribed on the basis of access to and mastery of the written word. Thirdly, the authenticity of religious knowledge is measured against different benchmarks, largely tied to performativity and narrativity, and possibly to a notion of divine calling or at least special giftedness.

That authority is not necessarily ascribed through scriptural knowledge was brought home to me, when I was asked by my host family – knowing that I could read and speak Arabic – to "read the *Qur'an*" with them in a situation where blessing was sought for a sick newborn. When it turned out that I could do so only with the written word in front of me, they quickly dismissed my "expertise" as useless and asked another family member to perform the prayer instead. His Arabic was again non-discernible, but the entire extended family was raptured by his incantation.

Thus, it appears that in the context of rural Kyrgyzstan, the ascription of religious authority is less determined by access to the written word – although this may be changing with the growing impact of "scripturalist" Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia – as by performative criteria and notions of spiritual giftedness, even divine election. This authority is marked by age with elders being considered more knowledgeable and experienced. As my examples show, religious expertise is also gendered in a peculiar way: performative knowledge can be acquired by both men and women in almost equal measure. However, the scripturalist approach to Islam, as exemplified in the *moldo* and the male worshippers, appears to be an almost exclusively male domain. This distinction is not clear-cut, however. A useful way of approaching this question is by considering the significance of knowledge and "text" production for the experience of gendered selves.

Gender, Narrative Selves, and Knowledge Production

It has been widely assumed that the production, dissemination, and interpretation of religious texts, especially in their written form, was thoroughly embedded in a patriarchal social system, being dominated by males and elders. This ties in neatly with the view that women's religiosity is less "orthodox" and scripture-based than men's. Against this background, the "rediscovery" of women in religious history and women's increased access to religious scripture provides a welcome change. However, my experiences with more performative religious practices make me wonder if the recent scholarly focus on "scripture" does violence to the "unorthodox" religious experiences of marginalized groups. By privileging "scriptural" interpretations of religion, do we inadvertently reinforce gender inequalities and marginalize those groups who choose not to adhere to them? Or, if on the contrary we focus on the "unorthodox" religious practice of those at the periphery (women among them), do we further buttress gender stereotypes?

Deeb (2006), in her analysis of *shi'a* women's modern piety, has shown the struggles of her respondents to integrate their new, and more publicly visible understanding of piety, and the prevalent view that this practice has some "distinctly masculine" qualities (p. 213). Similarly, Mahmood (2005) points out that women *da'iyat* in Egypt "continue to evoke skepticism, if not outright condemnation, from the religious establishment" because they are female (p. 64). In Kyrgyzstan, the motivation of women to enrol in the capital's Islamic Institute, join Islamic study groups, and/or take to wearing *shar'i* dress (i.e. dress code according to *shari'a*), is often questioned.⁸ In other words, there is a widespread notion that women do indeed enter foreign territory – be that in gendered, class, or ethnic terms – when they engage with "scripturalist" interpretations and practices of Islam. But regardless of what kind of religious practice women choose and of how they engage with "scripture", it is essential that their own understanding of their behaviour guide our analysis. And here narrativity and the production of "texts" play an important role, as it is through narratives and "writing" that people make sense of their experiences, craft their selves, and (re-)produce knowledge.

In the light of my discussion above, writing and the production of "text" must be seen not only as the particular technique of inscribing words onto a material surface, but in much broader terms, including phrases, music, symbols, art, or physical behaviour. They could take place on all kinds of surfaces, be that bodies, spaces, or memories. In other words, religious experience is inextricably linked to performance and event beyond the written word. Writing in this sense is more than a technique of communication, it becomes a mode of cognition which makes experience meaningful (Rapport and Overing 2007). Despite modernity's emphasis on the ability to put pen to paper and to decipher the written word at the expense of all other kinds of literacy, the skill of inscribing and reading the human body, for instance, can make a person a highly effective communicator.

The performativity of "text" is vital for women's religious experience also in another sense: performance and narrative have been found to be essential for the construction of selves, here religious and gendered selves. In fact, it has been claimed that the ability to narrate experiences is the one criterium that makes us human, and neurobiological research suggests that the need to narrate and produce "text" has

⁸ It is often alleged that students enrolled at Islamic Institutions obtain material benefits, such as money, books, or clothes; furthermore, it is argued that women benefit from the Islamic ban on alcohol, which would limit domestic violence in families plagued by the ubiquitous consumption of vodka.

neurological bases in the human brain (Wapner, 2008). It seems therefore justified to focus on women's religious performances and narratives in our efforts to understand how they construct their religious and gendered selves, arguably in different ways from men, whose religious experiences may be tied more closely to the written word.

Epilogue

The lack of access to the written sacred word – be that because of an absence of books or the inability to read – and the existence of strong oral traditions, are a useful reminder of the need to understand “text” and “literacy” in their broadest possible sense. Widening the scope of what counts as “text” beyond the modern emphasis on ink-on-paper makes our analysis more inclusive of underprivileged social groups, women and Muslims “in the margins” among them. This inclusion of practices of performativity, “writing”, and narrating that are perhaps commonly considered “unorthodox” counteracts any claims of illiteracy and embeds both the production and the reception of “texts” in their appropriate socio-cultural contexts, without which they would be meaningless. As meaning and authority are created through the process of narrating, paying attention to this process, in its socio-cultural embeddedness, is the *sine qua non* of our analysis of “texts”, both sacred and profane. This focus on narrativity and performativity of religious knowledge becomes particularly salient given the significance of narration and stories in the crafting of (gendered) selves and the construction of relations of power. One area, where this performance of religious knowledge becomes especially manifest, is the human body as an inscriptive surface. As most religions consider the body an essential tool (or hindrance) for attaining spiritual goals, it is to be disciplined, tamed, and inscribed in the effort to lead a life that is pleasing to the gods or that is worthy of salvation (Mahmood, 2005). The emerging disciplined body becomes “legible” to others, including researchers, making piety an event beyond the written word.

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Is Mary Important for Herself or for Being the Mother of Christ in the Holy *Qur'an*?

Hosn Abboud

Christian interest in the exalted place of Mary in the Holy *Qur'an* derives from its resonance with discourse on women issues on the one hand and the centrality of Mary in the great encounter between Islam and Christianity on the other. Discourse on women issues – especially its feminist current – deals with the religious notion of women's liberation (Ahmad, 1992). It undertakes a re-reading of the central foundational texts (the Bible in its two testaments and the Holy *Qur'an*), especially those that valorize women and their human, social, and political roles. This feminist discourse criticizes evaluating women only by their relationship to men as wives, to children as mothers and to parents as daughters, that is, by their relationships to the family structure instead of by who they are in themselves. This feminist discourse also criticizes those who exclude women from the realm of the Holy and its symbols and rituals in order to prevent women from delving into issues that, in the view of some, are the special domain of religious scholars who are men. Today, a considerable number of Christian and Muslim women are undertaking this re-reading and criticism from a gender perspective that distinguishes between what is male and masculine and between what is natural and cultural. So, the natural differences between the male and the female are not being confused with the historical, social, and cultural differences between the two, that is, between what is eternal and what is temporal. In this regard, we quote the late scholar and teacher of *Qur'anic* studies A'isha 'Abdul Rahman (Bint al-Shati', d. 1998), who said that the Holy *Qur'an* never says, "Man and woman are not equal". It only says: "The crux of equality is what everyone bears of the trust of being human and its attendant responsibilities and what each is able to realize and acquire in the way of the perfection. The bad is not equal to the good, the immoral to the pious, the wayward to the guided, nor the miserly to the generous. Likewise, someone who knows is not equal to someone who is ignorant, nor is the darkness equal to the light" ('Abdul Rahman, 1967, p. 11).

Because the inclination today is one of more openness towards diverse religious traditions and because Mary today opens the door to dialogue not only between Muslims and Christians but also among Christians themselves – among Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, despite their ecclesial differences – the academic and theological disciplines have begun to give the feminist and gender perspectives

serious consideration. Hence, this school of thought has shown interest in becoming acquainted with the *Qur'anic* Mary. She is the central figure whom God – Glory be to Him, Exalted is He – elected above the women of all creation. This is the God whom we cannot delimit by defining His sex (male or female): “Nothing is like unto Him” (42:11).

Before delving into the subject of whether Mary appears in the Holy *Qur'an* for herself or just for her motherhood, I will present the principle verses that call Mary to mind (Peace be upon her – pbuh) – that is, those verses that appear in the different Meccan and Medinan stages.¹ The community of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) either received his teachings, or quizzed him in creedal and mundane matters. These matters came to light as the mission developed toward the doctrine of God's unity and toward incorporating his people into the scriptural heritage of the history of salvation. I will read the verses on Mary in the *Qur'an* chronologically, that is, in the order in which they were revealed in time. This is to show us the ongoing attention to the figure of Mary in the Meccan and Medinan stages of early Islam. I will analyze the position of the story of Mary in the *sura* of Mary (or *sura* 19 of the *Qur'an*), from the annunciation and the journey to the desert to give birth, then the defense of her virginity against those who accused her of being unchaste, and up to the time when she returned to her people carrying the infant in her hands. Then I will discuss the verses on Mary in the *sura* of Al 'Imran (*sura* 3). The *sura* of Al 'Imran occurs in the context of a bitter debate on the religious or theological role of women. These verses are dedicated to Mary's merits and her election, before her own birth and up to her youth, and then her devotional preparation to receive revelation from God through an angel speaking to her. Mary is also mentioned in other verses in the Meccan and Medinan *suras*, and I will refer to them along the way. The story of Mary (pbuh) is found mainly in the Meccan *sura* of Mary (*sura* 19) and the Medinan *sura* of Al 'Imran (*sura* 3).

Mary is unique among the female figures in the *Qur'an*. She was also unique among the women who were contemporary to the Messenger and participated in the emergence of early Islamic society. This uniqueness lies in her being mentioned multiple times in the *Qur'an*, as were preceding prophets such as Adam, Abraham, and Moses (Peace be upon them). This means that the Marian verses do not appear only once as in the cases of other exemplary female figures such as the Queen of Sheba or the wife of 'Aziz. Attention to them is limited to one place or a single occasion. This is something of the utmost importance. This means that the revelation calling to mind Mary for herself, for her motherhood, and for theological reasons is something that continues on as the mission develops. We will see in the course of this study that it is not just a matter of the revelation recalling Mary because of the annunciation and the birth narrative, or for arguing with those who challenge Muhammad on the issue of the Word of God that He imparted to Mary. It is also because of the ability of the feminine to make contact with the Holy and to receive revelation through the angel who was sent only to the elected ones among the prophets and the righteous.

The *Sura* of Mary (*Sura* 19, Meccan)

Mary, mother of Jesus (pbuh) is mentioned in the *sura* of Mary in many motifs. This includes the annunciation and birth of Christ (pbuh), Mary's journey to the desert, giving birth by the palm tree and the stream, and the defense of Mary against those

1. Verses are classified as Meccan or Medinan depending on where the verses were revealed. The Meccan *suras* are the earlier *suras* of the *Qur'an* that were revealed in Mecca whereas the Medinan *suras* are those which were later revealed in Medina.

who accuse her of evil. She is mentioned immediately after Zachariah (Zachariah is mentioned in verses 2-15) and the narrative announcing his son John. Together these two stories constitute the first part of the *sura* of Mary. Mention of Zachariah and the story of the birth of his son John from “a barren woman” and a father who “had reached an advanced age” and mention of Mary and the story of the birth of her son from a mother “whom no man had touched and who had not been unchaste” both occur in the context of God’s power to create: “Glory be to Him! When He decrees something, He only says to it, ‘Be!’, and it is” (19:35). Mention of these two stories is from the Heavenly Book, as we hear the revelation repeat: “[this is] a mention of the mercy of your Lord to His servant Zachariah” (19:2), which is followed by the divine injunction to “Mention Mary in the Book” (19:16), then, “Mention Abraham in the Book” (19:41), “Mention Moses in the Book” (19:51), “Mention Ishmael in the Book” (19:45), and “Mention Idris in the Book”. If this points to anything, it points to the revelation’s attention to preparing a genealogy for the biblical prophets: Zachariah, John, Mary and Jesus, then Abraham and his two sons, Moses and his brother, etc.

The purpose of this is not chronological listing. The sequence does not seem to be limited to the temporal order of these messengers and prophets, each of whom is lauded. The purpose of this is only to mention their struggles with their peoples, which resemble the struggle of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) with his people while he was revitalizing his call to monotheism and his hope that God would intervene on his behalf to defend him. When Zachariah addresses his Lord, he complains, fearful for his posterity: “My Lord, my bones have weakened; my hair has grayed; and I have not been unblessed in my supplications. Now, I fear my kinsfolk after I am gone, as my wife is barren. So, grant me a successor from You” (19:4-5). Mary complains similarly, despairing with her people who accuse her so much that she wants to die: “Oh that I had died before this, that I were nothing, forgotten!” (19:23). Likewise, Abraham confronted his father, admonishing him to repudiate worshipping other than God. In affectionate and tender speech, he expresses the gentleness of the prophets toward their fathers. He repeats his call to his father. Perhaps the repetition might influence him. He says, “O my father! Why do you worship what does not hear or see or is of no help to you? O my father! Knowledge has come to me that has not come to you. Follow me, and I will guide you to a straight path. O my father! Do not worship Satan. Satan was indeed a rebel against the Compassionate. O my father! I fear that a chastisement from the Compassionate will afflict you and that you will be a friend of Satan” (19:42-45). Mention of the prophets’ struggles with their peoples and calling to mind the righteous ones is not limited to intergenerational struggle. Indeed, it surpasses that. It extends to lauding the prophets generally after each of them has been lauded specifically. Hearing these religious figures mentioned at this early stage of the Messenger’s mission² must have had an impact on the illiterate Meccans and “those to whom the Book has been given” among the Christians because these subjects were linked to their heritage and their religious sentiments toward Mary and Jesus.

2. The *sura* of Mary was revealed between the emigration to Abyssinia (in the seventh year of the mission) and the event of the Heavenly Journey. According to the study of Nöldeke on the temporal or chronological order of the *Qur’an*, the *sura* of Mary is considered to be from the middle Meccan period.

The annunciations and births of John and Jesus (Peace be upon them) and their corresponding stories are first and foremost matters of Christian interest. We see it particularly at the beginnings of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the *Qur’an*, however, we have the story of the angel’s annunciation to Mary, Mary’s journey into the desert to give birth, and her return to her people in serenity. What is new here is

this celebratory narrative dedicated to the main figure of Mary (Mary is mentioned from verses 16 to 33) and to the ongoing dialogue with her to confirm and highlight her feminine experience in her relationship with her self and her body (through natural childbirth). This perhaps aims to humanize the picture of Mary, which the revelation intends to be an exemplar. All of this expresses the sentiments of every woman who learns that she will have a child, carries the child through pregnancy, and endures the pain of child-birth and the accusations of people against her. This until that misery and anguish is dispelled by God intervening to stand beside her and honor her. So also, the misery and anguish that the Messenger (pbuh) suffered at the hands of his people does not differ from the misery and anguish that Mary (pbuh) suffered at the hands of her people. The motif of the tree and the stream that shifts the scene of Jesus' amazing birth from the desert to an oasis is but an old motif that creates a parallel between female fertility and the fertility of the earth. In the background to the picture of Mary as the mother of Jesus (Peace be upon them) is the female celebrated as an ideal type.

The Sura of the Believers (Sura 23, Meccan)

The Sura of the Believers belongs to the Meccan period and is near in milieu to the revelation of the story of Mary in the *sura* named after her (i.e. *sura* 19). In the course of presenting God's verses about messengers whom their peoples belied and treated arrogantly, the messengers Noah, Hud, Moses, and his brother Aaron are mentioned. Then come the turns of Jesus and Mary, who are mentioned as follows: "We made the Son of Mary and his mother a sign, and we gave them shelter on a high ground (*rabwa*) having a meadow (*qarar*) and a spring (*ma'in*)" (23:50). The *Qur'an* takes every occasion to declare that Jesus is named "Son of Mary". This is to emphasize Jesus' maternal lineage and the absence of paternal lineage. In the *sura* of the Believers Mary and Jesus are noted only in one verse (23:50). This indicates that their story had already appeared earlier in the *Sura* of Mary. The *rabwa* where God sheltered the two of them means "high place", *qarar* means "level earth", and *ma'in* means "running water". The mention of earth and water points to the oasis in the wasteland in which Mary found provision, the stream, and serenity. This verse is important because it expresses very clearly that Jesus and his mother Mary are a single sign in which they share together, that is, the pregnancy of Mary who knew no man and the birth of Jesus without a father. Their relationship lacked a paternal element. The Messiah was brought to perfection through his mother who bore the Word so that the two of them might represent the perfection of humanity (in one soul) regardless of gender. The unity between Mary and the Messiah – as 'Adnan al-Maqrani indicates – "appears through the permanent inseparability of their two names in the *Qur'an*. It is as though the umbilical cord that ties them together has never been cut" (Al-Maqrani, 2001).

The issue of the divine paternity of Jesus gave rise to a controversial theological disagreement in Christianity. The Holy *Qur'an* cites this disagreement: "Such was Jesus, Son of Mary; a statement of truth about which they dispute" (19:34). This disagreement was settled by relating the son to the mother without hesitation. This goes back to the maternal ties in the relationship of 'Imran's wife to her daughter Mary, that is, the relationship of a mother to her daughter to form together the maternal lineage of Jesus (pbuh). It is not enough that Jesus be related to Mary so as to be addressed according to his relation with his mother: Jesus, Son of Mary. He acquires his origin in a religious family through his maternal descent from the family of 'Imran, which has the same

status as the Abrahamic descent from the family of Abraham. Therefore, narratives of the infancies of Mary, John, and Jesus appear together in the *sura* of Al 'Imran with God's election of this progeny: "God elected Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of 'Imran over all creation as a progeny, descending one from the other. God is all-hearing, all-knowing. Remember when the wife of 'Imran said ... Thereupon Zachariah invoked ... Remember when the angels said, 'O Mary'" (3:33-35, 38, 42).

The *Sura* of Al 'Imran (*Sura* 3, Medinan)

The Marian verses in the *sura* of Al 'Imran are not revealed to address the journey of the female toward motherhood, with female fertility compared to the fertility of the earth. On the contrary, the Marian verses are revealed to address the religious and social role of the woman, which is set forth in a panoramic presentation of Mary's infancy, youth, and election to receive the good news of a child. All of this is addressed in the context of preparing this exemplar elected from among women, which the revelation desired to be focused on Mary. In the genealogy of the family of 'Imran, the Marian verses are the fine thread that links together the miraculous births to 'Imran's wife, Zachariah, and Mary. This first thread links the maternal lineage, which the revelation desires to highlight for the first time, with the Abrahamic lineage.

To prepare this maternal lineage, we hear the story of 'Imran's wife who makes a vow to her Lord when she becomes pregnant. Added to it is the story of Zachariah's invocation of his Lord asking for a boy to succeed him. Then comes the annunciation of Jesus (pbuh) to Mary. Thus, there are three interrelated annunciations: the annunciation of Mary, the annunciation of John, and the annunciation of Jesus. We will limit ourselves to discussion of the first and last annunciations only, that is, the annunciation of Mary, the annunciation of Jesus, and the narrative and the dialogue that accompany them. In the story of Mary's infancy, her mother devotes her to service in the temple before her birth. Her invocation is the humble invocation to her Lord that her Lord accept her vow:

"My Lord! I have vowed to You, in dedication, what is in my womb. Accept this from me. Indeed, You are all-hearing, all-knowing". When she gave birth to her, she said, "My Lord! I have given birth to a female" And God knew well what she had given birth to. "The male is not like the female. I have named her Mary. I seek refuge for her in You and for her progeny from the accursed Satan". (3:35-36)

How often is the statement of 'Imran's wife, "The male is not like the female", taken out of the context of this story and the argument at hand to justify separation between the two sexes. This statement expresses the mother's disappointment that the child she had vowed to dedicate was a female with whom she could not fulfill the vow. Therefore, she placed the male and the female in a relationship of binary opposition to express forthrightly the problematic idea of having a female serve in the temple. According to societal custom at that time, the female could not do what the male could do in the Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies). However, the revelation answered 'Imran's wife: God had accepted Mary graciously and would make her grow up well. It even uses the all-inclusive temporal expression 'whenever' – "Whenever Zachariah went in to her in the Sanctuary" (3:37) – to indicate Mary's strength in devotion, spiritual discipline, and prolonged prayer in the Sanctuary, which is known as the most honorable and exalted

of councils. After learning that she had given birth to a female, 'Imran's wife announced that she had named her: "I have named her Mary. I seek refuge for her in You" (3:36). This announcement indicates that 'Imran's wife held the prerogative to name. In a patriarchal system, it is usually the fathers rather than the mothers who name the children because naming follows on from the legitimacy of the one who names and the one who knows the names: "He taught Adam all of the names. Then, He presented them to the angels. He said, 'Tell Me the names of these if you are truthful" (2:31).

According to the *Qur'an*, at her birth and after naming her, Mary's mother asked God to protect her child and her progeny from the accursed Satan (this will be referred to as the refuge-seeking verse in this article 3:35-36). This has caught the attention of both Muslims and Christians. Muslim commentators have been concerned with the issue of Mary and her son's protection from Satan's touch at birth. This is narrated in the *hadith* of Abu Hurayra: "Satan touches every child at birth, and he begins to cry at his touch, except Mary and Jesus". Al-Tabari interprets this refuge-seeking as God "responding to her. God gives her and her progeny refuge from the accursed Satan, and He does not give him any access to her" (Al-Tabari, 1969, p. 336). However, al-Tabari does not link this refuge seeking to the story of Adam, Eve, the fall from the Garden, and the notion of sin transmitted through the progeny of Adam. In any case, classical and modern commentators such as al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1210), al-Qurtubi (d. 1273), and Muhammad Abdu (d. 1905) criticize the *hadith* of Abu Hurayra. As al-Razi asks, "Why does God – Exalted is He – protect Mary and Jesus and not the rest of the prophets – Peace be upon them?" (al-Razi, 1938). Abu Hurayra's *hadith*, which seems to have been narrated to interpret the refuge seeking verse, is discredited because the notion of original sin transmitted through human progeny is absent in Islam. In the Islamic concept, human nature cannot be stamped with a permanent sin. This notion is not in keeping with the humanity of the prophets in Islam and their ability to commit sins. Hence they are forgiven when they seek forgiveness: "Adam disobeyed his Lord and went astray" (20:121). Then, "Adam received words from his Lord, and He forgave him. Indeed, He is the all-Forgiving" (2:37). Then, Moses killed someone, and he said to His Lord, "My Lord! I have wronged myself. So, forgive me! So, He forgave him. He is indeed the all-forgiving, the all-merciful" (28:15). It is also not in keeping with legal obligation, which puts women and men on the same level in spiritual and ethical matters. The place of Mary is independent of her son in this respect. The Dominican Father George Anawati (1958) made a necessary contribution in clarifying the Islamic position on Mary's mother's seeking refuge "for her and for her progeny from the accursed Satan" and on the *hadith* of Abu Hurayra. He came to a conclusion similar to ours, namely, that the notion of "protection from original sin at birth" is absent from the teachings of Islam, which fundamentally does not believe in the transmission of original sin. For my part, I will add that linking the transmission of original sin to the virgin birth or the inferiority of the woman stained with original sin has absolutely no basis in the *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* does not in any way tie women to a permanent sin that stained Eve forever.

The apocryphal infancy gospels linked to the heritage of popular piety preserve the story of Mary's infancy for us, and the *Qur'an* has preserved this story showing the role of the female in the history of salvation, that is, the extent to which the woman participates in the Holy or is permitted to enter the temple and reside in

the Sanctuary for worship and devotion. It is as if the revelation here discusses a theology of the Muslim woman through Mary. For no sooner do we hear that Zachariah saw something extraordinary in the marvelous provision (of food) for Mary that he longs for a child, even though he had despaired of having a child because of his old age and that of his wife: “Her Lord accepted [Mary] graciously, made her grow up well and entrusted her to Zachariah. Whenever Zachariah went in to her in the Sanctuary, he found that she had provision. He said, ‘O Mary! From where did you get this?’ She said, ‘It is from God, and God provides for whomever He wills without measure’. Then Zachariah invoked his Lord, saying, ‘Lord, grant me from before You a fair progeny. You are all-hearing of invocation’” (3:37-38). Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, in his usual style of presenting issues and proofs, discussed wonders of the saints that occurred because extraordinary phenomena appeared at the hand of Mary in this provision. He claimed that these extraordinary phenomena were not a miracle for Zachariah (pbuh). Rather they were a wonder for Jesus (pbuh) or they were a wonder for Mary (pbuh). In this context of accepting Mary graciously at the highest level, we mention the verse of election:

When the angels said, “O Mary! Truly, God has elected you, cleansed you and elected you over the women of all creation. O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord. Prostrate yourself and bow down with those who bow”. This is part of the tidings from the Unseen which We reveal to you. You were not in their midst when they cast their pens to see who would take charge of Mary, and you were not in their midst when they were disputing. (3:42-44)

The two elections in the verse which narrates Mary’s first election, her cleansing, and her second election over the women of all creation have been discussed from more than one angle. From the meanings of the first and second elections to the issue of cleansing and its meanings, I will give an example of commentary that consistently reflects the culture of the commentator who plays the role of mediator between us and the text. This *Qur’anic* text, as we will see, is distinguished by a spirit of development and openness to the woman. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi interprets the first election as follows:

First, He – Exalted is He – accepted her being dedicated even though she was a female. Second, when her mother gave birth to her, she did not nourish her for a moment but turned her over immediately to Zachariah, and her provision came from heaven. Third, He – Exalted is He – freed her to worship Him and favored her in this with all kinds of grace, guidance and protection. Fourth, her livelihood sufficed for her. Her provision came from God – Exalted is He – according to what He – Exalted is He – said, “From where did you get this?” She said, ‘It is from God.’” Fifth, He – Exalted is He – made her hear the speech of the angels orally, and that was not given to any other female. As for the cleansing, first, God – Exalted is He – cleansed her from unbelief and disobedience. Second, He cleansed her from contact with men; third, from menstruation; and fourth, from blameworthy deeds and shameful habits. Fifth, He cleansed you (sic) from what the Jews say and their accusations and lies. What is meant by the second election is that He – Exalted is He – gave her Jesus – (pbuh) – without a father; He made Jesus speak after she had delivered him so that he bore witness to her innocence; and He made her and her son a sign to all creation (Al-Razi, n.d., p. 46).

The election of Mary over the women of all creation puts Mary in the running for

the best of women in Islam. As al-Tabari narrates, “It suffices for you that Mary bint ‘Imran, the Pharaoh’s wife, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, and Fatima bint Muhammad (daughter of the Prophet) are among the women of all creation” (Al-Tabari, pp. 395-397). Mary used to sit – in texts surrounding the basic text, that is, in the classical *Sunni* and *Shi‘i* commentaries – on the highest summit, even though the introduction of Fatima into this competition sometimes pushed the latter to the forefront at the expense of Mary. However, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who combined theological and philosophical knowledge and developed *Qur’an* commentary into a comprehensive science, does not link Mary’s first and second elections with God’s election of Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of ‘Imran over all of creation as a progeny, descending one from the other. That is, he does not link the verse of Mary’s election with the election of the family of ‘Imran, which was prior in genealogical order to the family of Jesus.

Mary stands alone among all the women of the *Qur’an* due to her first and second elections and her purification, and her intensive rites of worship through prostration and reverence. Mention of these special distinctive devotional acts of Mary come as if to prepare Mary for the great role of receiving the wonderful news that she was pregnant with the Word, whose name was Jesus Son of Mary. By this she laid the foundation for a maternal lineage from ‘Imran’s family, which constituted Mary and her son’s family: “When the angels said, ‘O Mary! God gives you good news of a Word from him. His name will be the Messiah, Jesus Son of Mary. He will be greatly honored in this world and in the hereafter, and he will be one of those near to God’ ... She said, ‘My Lord! How can I have a child when no man has touched me?’ He said, ‘Even so, God creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it: Be! and it is’” (3:45, 47). The annunciation emphasizes the power of God in creating Jesus without a father and from a virgin mother. God accepted a female to receive revelation through the angel’s appearance. This had never happened to any woman. This raises the question of whether Mary’s reception of revelation from God in the same way as the Messenger Muhammad falls under the rubric of prophethood. Ibn Hazm (d. 1046), the Andalusian Zahiri³ philosopher tries in one chapter in his book *Al-Fasl fi al-milal wa al-ahwa’ wa al-nihal* to establish prophethood for women generally and the prophethood of Mary specifically. In this he relies on the literal sense of the *Qur’anic* text. Ibn Hazm says:

It is absolutely impossible in any respect that this address from an angel be given to anyone but a prophet. We find that He – Exalted is He – has sent Gabriel to Mary, mother of Jesus – (Peace be upon them both). He addresses her to give her a pure boy. This is authentic prophethood and a message to her from God – Exalted is He. (Ibn Hazm, 1938, p. 12)

Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273), the Andalusian jurist who died 200 years after Ibn Hazm, agrees with Ibn Hazm concerning prophethood for women, and he defends especially the prophethood of Mary, mother of Jesus. He invokes the verse of election and reinforces the *Qur’anic* witness with Prophetic witness in the *hadith*: “Among men many were perfected. Among women only Mary bint ‘Imran and Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh, were perfected...” He continues, “Absolute perfection belongs exclusively only to God – Exalted is He. There is no doubt that the most perfect kind of human is the prophets. Following them are the saints among the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous. If that

³. *Al-Zahiriya* is a school of Islamic law based on deriving the law from the literal text of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunna*.

is confirmed, then it is said: prophethood is meant by the aforementioned perfection in the *hadith*, and it follows necessarily from that that Mary is a prophet because God revealed to her by means of the angel as He has revealed to the rest of the prophets. It is correct that Mary (pbuh) and Asiya are prophets” (Al-Qurtubi, 1958, p. 83).

However, al-Tabari, al-Zamakhshari, and al-Razi, that is, the great majority of eastern classical commentators, reject the prophethood of Mary. This is despite the fact that the Andalusians have another view, as we have just shown with the two jurists Ibn Hazm, the Zahiri, and al-Qurtubi, the Maliki⁴ author of the commentary *Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*. The revelation's focus on the humanity of Jesus and his mother and criticism of whoever makes them “two gods apart from God” (5:116) does not prevent discussing the prophethood of women. It would not appear that this prophethood should be considered differently from texts that placed women and men on the same level in respect to entrustment. If it were otherwise, why would reputable and oft-quoted commentators discuss this? Opening this door raises questions about the historical and the human circumstances of those commentators who do not try to relate Mary's spiritual experience to the experience of the rest of the prophets in receiving revelation, even though the signification of the Marian verses in the *sura* of Al 'Imran gives all religious rights to the Muslim woman. Acceptance of her worthiness of entrustment and responsibility appeared from the time Mary was told to shake the tree (an indicator of personal effort) to the time when she was accepted in the Sanctuary for spiritual preparation at the highest level to receive revelation through the speech of the angel. This may be considered the spiritual equality between male and female to which the Holy *Qur'an* calls without any ambiguity or embellishment.

Conclusion

This article has examined the *Qur'anic* verses on Mary from her arduous journey into the desert and her confrontation with her people upon returning carrying the infant in her hands on to her training in prayer and worship in the Sanctuary in order to receive direct revelation from God. From this, we are perhaps in a position to form a picture of the relation between Mary's self and motherhood in the Holy *Qur'an*.

On the one hand, the Marian verses and mention of her in the Heavenly Book occur only in the course of infancy narratives, which are also celebrated in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The narrative of Mary's childhood is similar to that of Jesus, from the story of her mother's pregnancy to her growth in worship and her election for the annunciation. In her endurance at the personal level (the pains of childbirth and the confrontation with her people while carrying the infant) and at the socio-religious level (her acceptance into the Sanctuary), Mary was transformed into the ideal type of the firm, believing, and devoted female. Mary certainly was designated to be the mother of Jesus. However, the matter is not limited to that. We have also Mary's conversation with the angel, Mary's serenity in delivering in a wasteland, the conversation of her people with her and their defamation of her chastity, and the Messiah's words in the cradle defending his mother. We also have the end of the text in which the Messiah Jesus Son of Mary announces God's decree of prayer and alms for him, the righteousness of his mother, and compassion and loyalty to her. In all of this the *Qur'anic* text stands with the female declaring the importance of fertility, and it stands with the female in the pain of childbearing, showing her suffering the pain alone. Then it

4. The *Maliki* school of law is based on the work of *Imam* Malik. He introduced the recognition of *'amal*, i.e., the effective and unanimous practise of Medina, which he established as an organized judicial system.

stands with the female against slander and easy defamation of her chastity. Even though all of these matters might be subsumed under a theology against despairing of God's mercy, they nonetheless also involve a defense of Mary in her very femininity. Hence, the *Qur'an* shows special concern for Mary beyond the narratives of Jesus' infancy because of its fundamental awareness of the essence of the human female and because exclusion of the female from the Holy and its symbols does not exist at all. The female does not undertake this journey alone only to connect with the Spirit of God. Rather, she enters the Sanctuary in the Holy of Holies to worship and grow and prepare for the annunciation coming from God through the direct appearance of the angel.

Even though Mary's story in the *sura* of Mary is about childbirth, it is primarily her story. The events revolve around her, and the characters converse with her because of who she is in herself. The name of Jesus (pbuh) is absent in the conversations, even when he introduces himself at the end of the narrative in the first person: "I am the servant of God, Who gave me the Book and made me a prophet and made me blessed... Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I will die and the day I will be raised alive" (19:30-31). His name appears only in the commentary on the theological controversy that existed among the Christians themselves: "Such was Jesus Son of Mary; a statement of truth about which they dispute. It is not for God to take a son. Glory be to Him! When He decrees something, He only says to it, 'Be!', and it is" (19:34-35). Even though the story is about the annunciation, the childbirth, the introduction of the child and welcoming him, Mary is transformed at the narrative level from the mother of Jesus to the ideal female. This is on account of the revelation's concern to show the importance of the female at the level of fertility and giving birth and the importance of the mother at the level of emotion and intergenerational struggle.

Mary and her son constitute one sign. This is something that the text makes clear. Mary is referred to by her familial relationship as the daughter of 'Imran, the sister of Aaron, and by her name Mary when the angels call her. In stories about her, however, she is linked to the annunciation and the birth of the child whom God had given her, that is, to her motherhood of the Messiah. A prominent problematic in *Qur'anic* polemic is the divine paternity of Jesus, so it seems. Thus, focus is also given to the importance of Mary's motherhood: she was able to name her son and relate him to her elected family. This is among the things that made Mary's tie to him similar to the umbilical cord which ties a mother to her fetus. That is, God made the two of them one sign.

We conclude by saying that all this makes the distinction between Mary's self and her motherhood obvious. This is due to the importance of the annunciation of the Word to her (It was also announced to the preceding prophets). The Word was Jesus Son of Mary. Therefore, we cannot split the *Qur'anic* story of Mary from the story of her son's birth because her story is narrated along with the good tidings of the Lord Christ's infancy and with the controversy around his birth, the details of which the text recounts. This indicates that the importance of Mary's motherhood and her giving birth to the Messiah Jesus (Peace be upon them both) depends on the extent to which she is important in herself, which is highlighted in the Holy *Qur'an*.

The verses on Mary – the story of her journey to give birth to her son and the story of her infancy – are entirely from the recited *Qur'an*. The idea that is always tied to the term "*Qur'an*" is "recitation" (*tilawa*), which is considered to be one of the acts of worship:

“It is for us to gather it and recite (*Qur’an*) it. When we recite it, follow its recitation” (75:17-18). That is, the Holy *Qur’an* is fundamentally a text recited for audition and for prayer. This makes people aware of Mary so that the Arab aesthetic taste is informed by the humble Marian spirit that we perceive in our recitation of the *sura* of Al ‘Imran and the Gospel of Luke. The oral Christian heritage has preserved the story of Mary’s infancy, and there are traces of her in the liturgy and in eastern Christian iconography. So also, the Holy *Qur’an* preserved for us this oral Christian heritage to be recited in the spirit of mercy. We see this spirit in the gift of children to fathers and mothers and in the relationship of mercy between sons and fathers and sons and mothers, in the spirit of the Marian prayer exalting the Lord – the Magnificat – in the Gospel of Luke, and in the spirit of mercy and the All-Merciful, to which the revelation responded through the mouth of Muhammad. We conclude by mentioning part of Mary’s prayer from the Gospel of Luke and that which resembles it in the *sura* of Al ‘Imran:

For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is His name. His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:49-53)

Say, ‘O God, Master of Sovereignty! You give sovereignty to whomever You will, and You take sovereignty away from whomever You will. You exalt whomever You will and You abase whomever You will. In Your hand is the good, and You are powerful over all things’”. (3:26)

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The Islamic Conception of Women's Liberation

Aisha Abdul Rahman

This lecture, originally in Arabic, was given by Aisha Abdul Rahman better known as Bint al-Shati', at Um Derman Alumni Club, Um Derman Islamic University. It opened the lectures of the cultural season for the academic year 1966-1967, on Wednesday, February 1, 1967. This translation aims to shed light on early Arab Muslim feminist thought. Aisha Abdul Rahman was a leading Egyptian female Islamic writer and scholar. She was a pioneer in her use of her understanding of Islamic scripture to promote equality between men and women in the Arab Muslim world. She has written many books on the history and structure of Islamic scripture as well as literary criticism. Her writing and lectures in support of equality between the sexes enlightened many young Egyptian women in their struggle for gender equality.

"In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. (Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the *Qur'an*. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence)" (55:1-4).

My dear family,

I cannot but express thanks and deep gratitude to the Um Derman Islamic University which made this gathering possible. To me, the invitation to this honorable event at the start of its culture season is a tribute to the Arab woman. While lecturing on "The Islamic Conception of Women's Liberation", I genuinely hope to add something new to the outcry of earlier advocates of women's liberation. They were pioneers in calling for an awakening in the darkest of times, for our Arab East to free its daughters from the bondage of ignorance and exclusion so that they can set out to build a free life for this very East, and provide it with human ammunition.

What a difference between yesterday and today! All over the great Arab nation, from its Asian East in Iraq, along the coast of the Arab Gulf, to its remote Arab African West in Morocco, we witness a new generation of Arab women who are, and

unbelievably so, direct descendants of illiterate mothers belonging to the very generation of Turkish *hareem*. I have always said that the issue here is not about the fact that we have broken out of the *hareem* walls and participated in our people's public life. History has witnessed millions of rural and Bedouin women assuming their active role in society, centuries before we heard of the start of the public debate on removing or keeping the *hijab* (i.e. head scarf). Nor is the issue about the difference between our own taste and dress code and those of our mothers. This is basically the same difference we see in the taste, costumes, and mood of this generation of men, and those of their fathers. They, just like us, have been born in a time different than that of our fathers and mothers.

Again, the issue here is not about the fact that once in a while there rises a female ambassador, a professor, a minister, or artist, representing her people at a foreign country, or reaching a prominent position in college, or occupying a chair in the cabinet, or excelling in fine arts and literature. Since ancient times, our East has glorified its women, even in the brutal times of Paganism, and crowned these females as queens in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sheba, and Palmyra. Throughout the

dark age of *Jahiliya* (i.e. the pre-Islamic period) and our Islamic history, great grandmothers of ours took part in the political, scientific, and academic life on a most effective level. Some of them reached the rank of *sheikha* in mysticism, *fiqh* [i.e. Islamic jurisprudence], *hadith* [i.e. a record of the sayings and doings of Prophet Mohammed and his companions], and in Arab science and literature. One of those women even became a Muslim *khalifa*, ruling over Egypt and Syria, namely queen Esmat al-Din Shajarat al-Durr, who led a triumphant and decisive campaign in our conflict with the Crusaders.

I am not oblivious to the fact that the number of these female achievers in our history is low compared to their counterparts in this generation. Yet, in cases such as this, I tend to disregard number rates and their digital indications, while being content with reporting the principle and registering a precedent. Furthermore, the Arab woman has managed, during her darkest eras of bondage and psychological entombment, to impose her will and her existence, and be a key player in all major events in our history, even though she always remained in chains and behind the scenes.

No! To me, the issue is not about the difference between us and our mothers. It is rather far more lasting and profound. This new Arab female is fulfilling her existence, both genuinely and directly, without having to beg for this existence from her male: if he wills he gives, if he wills he forbids. Moreover, in practicing her right to exist she is not resorting to deviousness or trickery as did the *hareem* women. What I mean is that I realize today that my right in life is self-produced and authentic and equal to the man's right. I don't share the belief of my mother's generation that this right is borrowed and granted. I rather consider it independent of any man's will or of my ability to bear children or give birth to male offspring. If there is someone among you now who believes otherwise, I'm afraid it is because of the persisting residue of ancient ages. The lesson here is the awareness of the determined origin and the unwavering right rather than unwanted remains and residues.

This is the source of progress in our lives, and all essential differences we have with our mothers' generation are derived from it. We don't owe this progress to foreign concepts borrowed from the modernized West. It is an Islamic liberal concept determined fourteen centuries ago in the *Qur'an* which was the last message from heaven.

Those who think that this progress is foreign, accidental, and imported have either ignorance or misconception of the truth of the *Qur'an*. Therefore, they focus on the West, thinking that concepts of freedom and development came from that direction. This, my friends, is a deep delusion. Many generations and ages have come to pass and consolidated our mothers' thoughts that a woman is nothing but a marginal creature from Adam's rib. So she lived owing her right of life to the "Great Origin" from which she was created, and then she went on beseeching him [i.e. man] for every aspect of her human existence, all the while entertaining the illusion that he is distinguished from her in his mode of creation, him being the perfect creature, and she being a rib taken from his side.

Today we practice our self-produced and genuine right in life, not because of an accidental or borrowed foreign concept. In doing so we are living according to the Book of Islam that never mentioned nor hinted at the story of Eve being created from Adam's rib. It rather stipulates that we all come from one soul and one origin; a woman's humanity is similar to a man's humanity: "O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, 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" (4:1).

The freedom of the Muslim woman finds its source in this determined origin. In the Islamic view, this freedom is the perfection of the woman's humanity with all the rights and consequences related to this humanity. It is our recognition of this Islamic view of our freedom that separates us from the generation of *hareem*.

In the days of our mothers, if one female had the opportunity to get an education, she considered that to be a gift from her male sponsor. The new woman cannot be considered as having achieved progress until she believes that education is her lawful human right, earned by her birth into the human species. This right is outside anyone's will, for no creature can distort the woman's humanity and force her to live her life as a mute and dumb doll. It is but speech that distinguishes the human being from the dumb animal, and speech can be attained only through intellect and eloquence.

In relation to this fundamental difference, our view of education is totally in contrast to that of our uneducated mothers and sisters. They believed – or maybe it was society that believed on their behalf – that education is a form of opulence and luxury within rich families. In the era of slavery, female slaves were made to receive education, literature, and art, so as to raise their price in the market and prepare them to entertain their male masters and alleviate their boredom and depression. In the lower classes, educating girls was a means to earn a living. Today, we consider education an essential element of our humanity, in a sense that this humanity is not complete unless the conditions of speech and intellect are met. These conditions raise us above the level of beast.

How did we earn this right? Definitely not from the modernized West, but rather from a legitimately determined right for the woman by way of her humanity.

The first verse of the *Qur'an* calls attention to a person's association with education: "Proclaim! (or read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created – Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, – He Who taught (the use of) the pen, – Taught man that which he knew not" (96: 1-5). Also, the Rahman *sura* dealt with God's gift of speech to mankind: "(Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the *Qur'an*. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence)" (55:1-4). The *Qur'an* leads us to the conclusion that our humanity's commission is intellect, without which

humanity is deformed and man is no longer human, but deteriorates to the sublevel of dumb animals: "For the worst of beasts in the sight of *Allah* are the deaf and the dumb, – those who understand not". (8:22).

The free Muslim woman does not allow her humanity to be distorted as such, so that a veil of ignorance and unawareness blinds her mind and senses, rendering her misled and astray. God Almighty says: "Many are the *Jinns* and men we have made for Hell: They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, – nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning)" (7:179).

There is a huge difference between our conception, as newly liberated women, and that of the *hareem* society, concerning the meaning of women's liberation: Men used to believe that confining women in the *hareem* cage and watching over them, would safeguard their chastity and protect them from seduction and temptation. Even some Arab female writers who are stern advocates of progress are still influenced by this backward idea; they depict the new woman as owing her purity to the guardian of the cage: if he fails to watch for one second, she will sneak out of her prison and go wild and reckless, falling for the first male she meets. Our people think that this is the true image of the new woman.

I've said over and over again: No, this is not our picture. It is rather a copy of man's beliefs during the age of *hareem*. He used it to find excuses for keeping the woman in captivity, and making state-of-the-art walls and locks. But this picture was never a reflection of woman's reality, even in the eras of ignorance. Her chastity was always in her own hands and was never determined by any man.

The new Arab woman believes that she alone possesses her own virtue. She demanded her freedom only to correct this huge folly and to make known to society that she alone is responsible for protecting herself. Her dignity as a female emanates from herself and not from a cage guard or a chastity belt. This determination on the part of the new free woman to be responsible for her freedom and

virtue is in the essence of the Islamic conception of women's liberation, according to lawful qualifications for entrustment and responsibility. The guardianship of the father or husband over the woman in no way means that he carries on her behalf the burden of earning a living. The free mature Muslim woman shoulders this responsibility out of nobility, and she is rewarded or punished for faith or infidelity, for virtue or vice: "And no burdened soul will carry another soul's burden" (6:164). Furthermore, "Allah sets forth, for an example to the Unbelievers, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lut: they were (respectively) under two of our righteous servants, but they were false to their (husbands), and they profited nothing before Allah on their account, but were told: "Enter ye the Fire along with (others) that enter!" (66:10).

The society of *hareem* used to think that equality between men and women is obtained through drastically changing the situation, distorting sex, and disrupting standards and values. There are still women among us, wrongfully thought to be modern, who see equality from this backward angle and demand the elimination of all distinctions between men and women. They want the woman to be accountable for her manners and behavior only if the man is. These women have even demanded the omission of the grammar suffix that determines feminine gender in Arabic language. And here we cannot help but wonder whether this right of equality allows a woman to be a polygamist! Also, maybe among those females who are demanding the omission of the feminine gender suffix, there are some complaining of carrying alone the burden of pregnancy, childbearing, and breastfeeding. They might even suggest that the husband should share this burden and take turns with his wife in getting pregnant, giving birth, and consequently breastfeeding, according to this right of equality!

The truly new woman has been freed in her understanding of this equality. She can recognize the distortion that cancels natural differences between male and female and social differences between man and woman. To her, equality does not violate corresponding rights and duties, so that a

man stays man and a woman stays woman with no confusion created between the different sexes.

The new attentive Muslim woman does not conceive of her status with man as competition or controversy; for competition is between rivals, and controversy is between adversaries or foes.

We, as modern liberated women, believe that man and woman perfect each other and need each other to realize their full existence. Husband and wife are founding partners of one social cell, and companions in the journey of life. Their joint life is united in pulse, harmony, and conformity. It does not fall apart by a conflict over power and authority.

I've been frequently asked why many educated women have faltering marriages, and if their education was the cause for their marital problems. Every time my answer is this: True education can never be responsible for the breakdown of marriages, just as science is not accountable for the tragedy of Hiroshima and napalm bombs. The homes of some educated women are being broken because of the arrogance of incomplete learning and lack of maturity. In this case, both husband and wife are in a phase of psychological and mental adolescence, with all its complexities and problems. Thus, each assumes that the other is attacking his or her dignity just because this partner has an awareness of his or her own personality. They fail to realize that any equality remains strictly ruled by the logic of instincts and the law of nature that knows not absolute equality between one man and another, one woman and another, let alone one sex and another.

Our right of equality, based on this correct understanding, goes back to an Islamic origin determined by the candid texts of our accurate Book. The *Qur'an* never stated that "a woman is not equal to man", but rather it states: "Say: 'Not equal are things that are bad and things that are good, even though the abundance of the bad may dazzle thee; so fear Allah, O ye that understand; that (so) ye may prosper' " (5:100). "Not equal are the Companions of the Fire and the Companions of the Garden" (59:20).

“Not equal among you are those who spent (freely) and fought, before the Victory, (with those who did so later). Those are higher in rank than those who spent (freely) and fought afterwards.” (57:10). “Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and receive no hurt, and those who strive and fight in the cause of *Allah* with their goods and their persons” (4:95). “Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?” (39:9). “The blind and the seeing are not alike” (35:19).

So, the cardinal factor for equality or no equality in the *Qur'an* is about the Companions of the Fire [*al-Khabith*] and the Companions of the Garden [*at-tayyib*], fighting or sitting, knowing or not knowing. It is not about masculinity or femininity. Our understanding of this equality is freed through going back to the origin of Islam where a woman with proper instincts recognizes a man's legitimate and natural right in guardianship over her: “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And *Allah* is Exalted in Power, Wise” (2:228).

It is about time for men to understand that the object of guardianship in the *Qur'an* is not just mere male domination, as in the case of inheritance for example: “to the male, a portion equal to that of two females” (4:11). Guardianship, according to Islam, is a right for manhood, and we, as Muslim liberated women, would like nothing better than to willingly and gladly admit this guardianship to our men.

It is also about time for our men to understand that their legitimate right of guardianship over us is neither absolute nor is it for all men in general over all women. It is a conditional right “because *Allah* has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means” (4:34), and if a man could not meet this condition, he loses his right to guardianship. “Men have a degree over them”, decreeing that men and women are essentially equal: “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them” (2:228).

Men have the advantage of one degree only based on maleness, not masculinity. With this degree,

the natural rule becomes sound, and standards become harmonious without abolishing our legitimate right in equality; for there shouldn't be equality in commissions of adulthood and human responsibilities. There were degrees among the apostles themselves: “Those apostles We endowed with gifts, some above others: To one of them *Allah* spoke; others He raised to degrees (of honour)” (2:253). There are also degrees among believers and those given knowledge: “*Allah* will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted (mystic) Knowledge” (58:11). This degree then is not meant to degrade us or to bring us down below the level of men, for they and we were created by God from one soul.

So as you see, dear brothers, the new woman practices progress and aspires to fulfill her free existence. And in doing so she is founded on Islamic roots and principles that can neither be questioned nor doubted. You and I know that this Islamic view of women's emancipation is not general, technical, or obvious to all of us. There are some amongst us who are still at fault about the purpose of freedom and its consequences, and still confuse between liberation and disintegration, equality and distortion, letting go and letting loose.

Moreover, there are some women amongst us who, in their quest for freedom and progress, still resort to a foreign commodity that only serves to distort their nobility. They also resort to a backward understanding that retains outdated residues from the *hareem* society.

But time passes and is guaranteed to have an inevitable effect on correcting all misconceptions. I even look forward to see our daughters suffer less than we did in this conflict, for we, before them, have crossed the treacherous passage of transition by confronting a society that wasn't prepared to welcome the new woman. What an ordeal we had in facing men of our people who wanted to distort our humanity in the name of Islam. These men denied us the right to learn and work and broaden our minds. They wanted us to be content living like numb and dumb dolls, playing with necklaces,

bracelets, and anklets that were nothing but chains decorating our necks, arms, and legs.

This is not how God intended us to be, for He created us along with men from one soul. This is not how our history knew the Muslim woman in the times of the Prophet Mohammed and *Al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun* [i.e. rightly-guided Caliphs].

Moreover, we meet men of our people who, in the name of civilization and modernization, want the woman to get rid of all her *hijabs*, both material and moral. They see her liberation as nothing but a transition from the husband's private property to a public source of pleasure exhibited in the market and available to all.

Yes, I aspire to see our daughters free of the pressure we had to undergo. I want to see them reject any form of distortion, and I want to see an end to the age of numb, dumb dolls with closed hearts, eyes, and ears. I also would like to see an end to the other type of dolls that spend long hours applying make up and beautifying their faces, so they can later reveal themselves to people and become merchandise available for pleasure. They fail to realize that they have escaped the old slavery to a modern one that is uglier and graver by far.

It is true that pioneer women have successfully crossed the treacherous path from the walls of *hareem* and the labyrinth of blind illiteracy to the broad horizons of light and awareness. Nevertheless, today's woman, who faces the consequences of freedom and responsibilities of maturity, is surmounting an equally dangerous stage. It is the stage where concepts are confused, standards are lost, and measures are imbalanced in anything related to the cause of women and development. It is in the nature of this stage to increase the burden on the new woman and make her pay a huge price for every slip on the road and every misunderstanding, be it hers or the society's.

The only way to avoid more victims is through settling once and for all this imaginary and irregular antagonism between man and woman or between woman and society. This cannot be

achieved single-handedly by the woman. So walk with her on this path, for she is your daughter, your sister, and your partner for life. She is the mother of your children and maker of your future, so remember God's *aya* [i.e. verse] on her behalf: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect" (30:21).

Brothers and friends, I am aware that there are those among you who find it offending that a woman like myself might stand here and argue about situations imposed by the Islamic society on its women for ages in the name of Islam. Maybe some of you are wondering: how can a lady like me talk about the Islamic conception on woman's freedom, and since when were women allowed to discuss these religious issues that are the jurisdiction of male theologians?

In this respect, the prophet's words come to mind when he was giving advice to his companions, some of whom were knowledgeable experts in Islam: "learn half your religion from this woman" [his wife Aisha]. So who am I to compare with Aisha *Um al-Mu'minin* [mother of the believers]?

I also remind you of the incident when *Amir al-Mu'minin* [i.e. prince of the faithful], Omar Bin al-Khattab, was preaching at a mosque. A woman argued with him about his decision to ban an increase on women's *mahr* [i.e. bridal dowry], and to return any amount over twenty five dirhams to *Beit al-Mal* [i.e. treasury]. As Muslim historians reported: "a woman approached him and said: 'you have no right, Omar'. Now Omar was on his way out when he heard what she said, so he stopped and asked her: 'why?' She answered: 'because God far above says: "But if ye decide to take one wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, Take not the least bit of it back: Would ye take it by slander and manifest wrong?" (4:20). At that, the prince of the faithful returned to the pulpit to announce his famous words: "a woman was right and Omar was wrong".

Never mind then if someone like me speaks of Islamic conception of woman's freedom without any fear of breaking concrete conditions set by righteous ancestors, men of religion who thought that these conditions can neither be questioned nor debated. I don't believe I could stand here today had there not been in my family noble *sheikhs* [i.e. spiritual leaders]. God has honored me by sending teachers of *fiqh* who educated me and directed me towards a deep study of the Holy *Qur'an*. Then God Almighty honored me by giving me the chance to meet with you here in this prosperous place that holds splendid memories of the Muslim woman in our noble past before she was condemned with the *hijab* of ignorance and negligence. And I find myself saying in deep humility and contemplation: "(Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the *Qur'an*. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence)" (55:1-4).

Translated by Nazih Khater

All English translations of the suras are taken from Yusuf Ali's translation

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The Annunciation to Mary, Mother of Jesus, in Medieval Christian and Islamic Art of the Book

Mahmoud Zibawi

The *sura* of Maryam says: “Relate in the Book (the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent her our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects” (19: 16-17).

For his part, Al-Tabari quotes Wahb Bin Manbeh and explains that: “she found Gabriel at her side and God sent him in the form of a man” (Al-Tabari, 1978, p. 45).

There have been countless interpretations and versions of this annunciation, some of which were portrayed in miniature paintings depicting the events in lines and colors. The University of Edinburgh has an embellished copy of a book by Abi Rayhan al-Biruni titled *Al-Athar al-Baqiya ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliyyah* (The Chronology of Nations).¹ The copy, which came from the city of Tabriz and goes back to 1307, includes 24 miniatures, mostly religious. At the back of page 166, there is a drawing of Mary’s annunciation, along with a chapter titled ‘A Comment on What Christian Melkites use in Syriac Months’. We conclude here that this Islamic drawing adorns a church calendar pertinent to the Greek Orthodox denomination, passed on by al-Bayruni in the city of Khawrizm in Khurassan. It is a depiction of Annunciation Day that falls on the 25th of March. According to the manuscript, this occasion is known as:

‘The Entry Holiday’, which marks Gabriel’s coming to Mary with the good news of the birth



The annunciation of Mary fil Mehrab, miniature from Al-Biruni’s *Al-Athar al-Baqiya ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliyyah*, 1307, University of Edinburgh library.

of the Messiah in nine months, five days, and a little more, which is the natural period of the baby’s stay in the mother’s womb. And even though Jesus was without the fatherhood of a man but was supported by the Holy Spirit, he was to stay in the womb according to nature”.

The miniature has a predominantly Asian character with some influence by the Abbasid art of the book. It shows Gabriel raising his right arm towards Mary who is squatting beneath an arch that bears decorations similar to the Kufic writing. Mary is working on a spindle just like in Christian pictorial art, though we find no mention of this spindle in any of the four gospels. The story, however, is common and popular, its origin being an apocryphal gospel known as the *Protevangelium* or *The Book of*



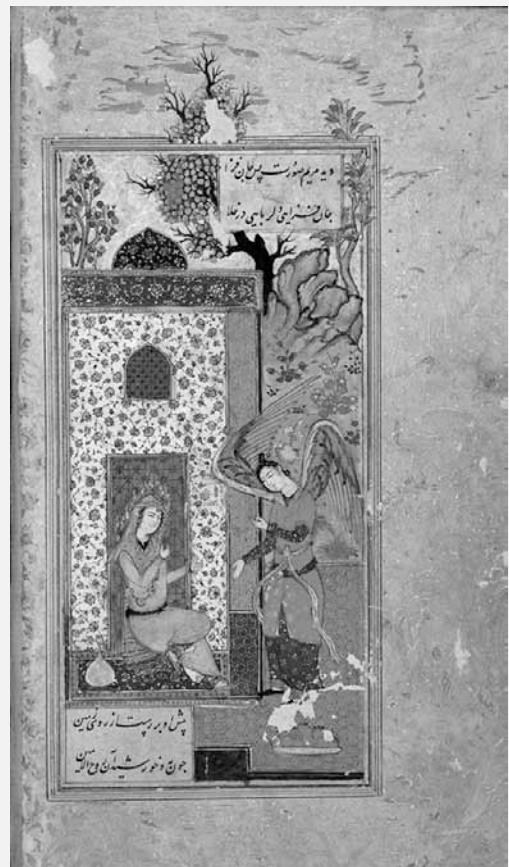
The annunciation of Mary in front of Gabriel, *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, 1314, University of Edinburgh library.

James. According to this version, Mary was brought to the temple as a child and stayed there until she was 12 years old. She was one of seven virgins commissioned by the priest to weave a curtain for the Temple. The story goes on to say that it was by lot-casting that Mary was given the true purple and the scarlet, "... but Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it" (The Apocryphal New Testament, 1924, p. 45). Artistically speaking, this miniature seems unique with its Chinese style, and we find nothing among Eastern Christian books similar to this style. The Syriacs reached China before Western missionaries and they brought the gospel to its remote areas in the medieval centuries. However, the art we received from this spiritual adventure was no more than a few miniatures. "Al-Athar al-Baqiya" miniature was most likely inspired by other extinct miniatures. The special attribute of this miniature stands out when compared to a Coptic miniature from the 13th century depicting Mary sitting on the floor holding a spindle. This ornament appears to have an Abbasid style, despite its overall Byzantine feature. By contrast, 'The Entry Holiday' miniature seems Asian in character, regardless of its Islamic identity which is linguistically Arabic and geographically Persian.

On the Fountain

We find an Arab miniature ornament of the Annunciation in an embellished copy of *Jami' al-Tawarikh* by Rashid al-Din Fadlallah al-Hamadani, in the archives of Edinburgh library. This copy also comes from Tabriz and is traced back to 1314. At the back of page 23, there is a picture of

a standing Mary carrying a big clay jar with her left hand and eyeing a bearded man. The man is blessing her with a gesture of his right hand from behind rocky mountains through which a fountain of water is flowing. The style here is completely different and the Chinese influence is nowhere to be seen except in some features of the outdoor scenery. "The Jami' al-Tawarikh" miniature is similar to Christian pictures of the 'Annunciation' scene next to the fountain, especially a Syriac drawing in a manuscript from the 13th century held in safe keeping at the Midyat Archbishopric in Turkey. According to the story told by Al-Tabari in his History, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (i.e. the history of apostles and kings), the Virgin was serving in the Beit al-Makdis (Jerusalem) offering water to visitors and worshippers, along with her cousin Yussuf Bin Ya'qub (Joseph son of Jacob) to whom she was betrothed. One hot day, she ran



The appearance of the Holy Spirit to Mary, Rumi's *Masnavi*, Golestan palace, Tehran.



The annunciation of Mary, a Coptic manuscript that dates back to mid 13th century, Library of the Catholic Institute, Paris.

out of water and rushed to a cavern where she was met by Gabriel, whom God sent “in the form of a man”. So he brought her the good news of a male offspring then “he blew in her pocket and his breath reached the womb and Jesus was conceived” (Al-Tabari, 1967, p. 593).

The story is known in Christianity, its origin being *The Book of James* with its numerous derivatives. According to this book, Gabriel called on Mary first when she was filling her jar, and said: “Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (1924, p. 43). Mary searched right and left for the source of the voice and returned home in fear. As she put the jar down and took the purple to spin, the angel of God appeared and said: “Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things” (1924, p. 43). The story is repeated in an apocryphal Latin gospel known as *The Alleged Gospel of Matthew*. Specialists say that it is a belated text based on an ancient Eastern manuscript. Chapter 9 says that the angel called on Mary while she was standing next to the fountain, and then came to her while she was spinning purple. He took the appearance of a young man with indescribable beauty. Mary reportedly quivered at his sight so the angel calmed her down and told her that she will give birth to a king whose kingdom will extend from earth to Heaven. This version is not far from the *Qur’anic sura* that says: “Relate in the Book

(the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent her our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects” (19: 16-17).

The True Morning

‘The Annunciation Scene’ takes on a pure Islamic character in a miniature ornament found in an embellished copy of *Masnavi* by Jalal al-Dinn al-Rumi in 1598 (unknown artist). It is preserved at the Golestan palace in Teheran. In his drawing, the artist faithfully follows the Safavid school which marks the peak of Persian art of the book in its last golden age. Again, the picture unifies the outdoor and indoor scenes balancing between the two, based on complete and equal structure. Inside, Mary is sitting on a rug, and there is a halo surrounding her head which represents the fire of prophecy according to the Islamic artistic tradition. Gabriel is speaking to Mary from the outside while raising his arms. Mary herself is in a decorated house with a



The annunciation of Mary in front of a spring, a Syriac manuscript that dates back to the 13th century, Midyat Archbishopric, Turkey.



The annunciation of Mary, a Syriac manuscript that dates back to the 13th century, Al-Zaafaran Monastery, Turkey.



The annunciation of Mary, a mosaic that dates back to the 13th century, the Syriac monastery, Al-Natrun valley, Egypt.

dark blue dome adorned with golden engravings. It is located inside an exceptionally beautiful garden where three leafy trees add to the “Eden” effect. Master Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (1997) relates the story of “the Holy Spirit appearing to Mary in a human form” and saying: “I am the messenger of truth to you. Don’t be afraid and do not hide from me for this is the command”. Al-Rumi (1997) continues the story in a most creative poetic manner:

The generous one told her: ‘Fear not for I am faithful. Do not resist those who take pride in honor, and do not conceal yourself from the righteous ones who were secretly informed.’ He spoke these words while a ray of pure light left his mouth towards Heaven. ‘Do you escape my presence to nothingness? Don’t you know I am king and master in the world of nothingness? All my counsel and acquisition are from nothingness, but only my image appears before the great lady.

Behold, Mary, I am in a confusing image. I am a crescent and a spirit in the heart. And as long as a spirit settles in the heart, it will accompany you wherever you run.

Except for this untrue and obstructive spirit which is like a false morning. But I am like a true morning from the light of the Lord, and no night can ever surround my daylight.

So go on, daughter of Imran, don’t escape my existence, for I have come here from the same place you take refuge in. ‘Taking refuge’ is one of my origins. It is nourishment to me and its light is within me before you uttered it. You escape me to truth and I am already created from that refuge. I am the refuge and sanctuary which safeguard you. You ask me for refuge, and I am the refuge. (Al-Rumi, 1997, pp. 323-324)

Translated by Nazih Khater

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Experiencing the Divine Word:

A Women's Spiritual Gathering in Beirut

Ines Weinrich

Fifteen-to-thirty women come together on a weekly basis in a Sunni neighbourhood in Beirut to practice the *dhikr*.¹ *Dhikr*, the remembrance of God, is a central rite of mystical Islam. Trimmingham (1998) describes the practitioner of mystical Islam as: "... anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this" (p. 1). Most mystics trace *dhikr* back to the *qur'anic* injunction "... remember God frequently and glorify Him morning and evening" (33: 41). The performance of *dhikr* varies according to the rules of the different mystical orders and local practices. It mostly includes the invocation of God by the repetition of his names, control of breath, bodily movements, often also chanting and the employment of musical instruments.²

Dhikr exhibits a special relationship between the believer and the Divine word. It may be described as the embodiment of the above quoted *qur'anic* injunction. On a particular level, a distinctive use of text is employed. *Dhikr* often features the performance of poems speaking about the love for God and the prophet and the perpetual yearning of the human for beauty and perfection. It always includes the articulation of the names of God in an elaborated manner. A texture set up by word, rhythm, sound, and body is used to induce a direct experience of God and his Divine power.

This communally constructed act is the focus of my paper. The analysis presented here is based on fieldwork conducted between April and July 2009 at a women's *dhikr* group. It involved participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations with the women. Descriptions of the course of events are based on notes taken during or shortly after

the meetings and on my fieldwork diary. I was also allowed to audio record parts of the sessions, and the women demonstrated some parts of the *dhikr* in a spontaneous supplementary meeting. What follows is the report from a work in progress and not a final reading addressing every aspect of the gathering.

This study is part of a broader research project about religious chanting and follows an ethnomusicological approach. Ethnomusicology is a fusion of musicology and cultural anthropology. It combines musicological analysis with the methodological framework of cultural anthropology. By studying music in its cultural context, ethnomusicology does not take "music" or "art" as a given but asks how they are defined by members of a given society. As a leading ethnomusicologist, Bruno Nettl (1983), put it in his classical study:

(...) one must (...) study each music in terms of the theoretical systems that its own culture provides for it, be this an explicitly articulated, written system or one that must be derived from interview and analysis; and (...) one must study musical behavior in terms of the underlying value structure of the culture from which it comes. (Bruno Nettl, 1983, p. 55)

Setting and Course of the Events

Dhikr is used in a general and a more specific sense. Whereas the term *dhikr* is usually used to label the gathering as such, the ritual practice of *dhikr* is often only part of the gathering.³ In the following, I will outline the course of the activities and highlight some features of it.

The meetings take place in the house of the group's *sheikha*. It is a modest house with only two rooms

and a small veranda. The main venue is the living room, but when there are many women, they also sit along the corridor and the veranda. Many of the participating women have to reconcile this activity with work, travels, or family duties. Therefore, their number constantly changes. Usually, around twenty women are present. Some of them arrive later or have to leave earlier. The group is quite mixed in terms of age, social background, and dress code. Most of the women wear a scarf. Those who do not will wear one in the later parts of the meeting. The atmosphere is marked by openness and concentration.

The *dhikr* depicted here follows the rites of the Tijaniyya order, founded in 1781/1782 by Ahmad al-Tijani in North Africa (Abun-Nasr, 2000). The *sheikha* was initiated into this order in the late 1960s, and after five years of studying she obtained the licence (i.e. *ijaza*) to teach. But it was not until 1982 that she built up her own group. Naturally, she is the religious authority and spiritual guide for the women. She leads the gathering, marking the beginning and end of each section, and she acts as a kind of lead vocalist.

The gathering consists of several sections. It starts with a short recitation from the *Qur'an* by the *sheikha*. After that, a kind of lesson or instructive reading starts, called by the *sheikha* *hadith*. The *sheikha* often reads from one or more books about the life of the prophet or about proper behaviour and ethics. She also comments and explains the texts in her own words. At some point she indicates that the time has come to start with the next part of the gathering, and she announces the *wazhifa* (i.e. task).

The *wazhifa* contains several recitations and prayers in the way they have been passed on by Ahmad al-Tijani to his followers (Abun-Nasr, 1965). Between parts of the *wazhifa*, the *sheikha* recites a prayer for all the prophets with a warm, deep voice. First, all women loudly recite the *istighfar* (i.e. asking for forgiveness) thirty times. It is followed by a prayer for the prophet, recited fifty times. The first part of the *shahada* or Muslim testimony (*La Ilaha Illa Allah* (i.e. there is no God but God), which comes next, is

the shortest text within the *wazhifa*. It is recited a hundred times. The last part is a long prayer for the prophet, repeated eighteen times.

The next section is generally referred to as *madh* (i.e. praise). It includes the chanting of poems and songs speaking about the love for the prophet Muhammad and for God. The single parts of it vary according to seasonal feasts or the personal demands of the women. In the season of the prophet's birthday a *mawlid*⁴ is done. A *mawlid* can also be performed at any time of the year when a woman asks for it and the *sheikha* agrees.

Mostly, but not always, two or more *daff* (i.e. frame drums) of different sizes are distributed in this part of the gathering. The number of drums depends on how many women are present. The *sheikha* has her own instrument, skilfully manufactured from wood and skin and ca. 50 cm in diameter. The rest are played by different women. Many women clap their hands during rhythmically intense passages. Some even rise up and perform some movements. Others stay rather calm; they keep the beat by tapping one hand on the back of the other and exhibit greater motion only towards the end of the session. At one point all women get up and stand with their face towards the *qibla* (i.e. the direction one faces, towards Mecca, in order to pray). They silently recite a greeting for the Prophet Muhammad.

This last section or the *dhikr* proper is also termed *hadra* (from h-d-r: to be present, i.e. the presence of God or Muhammad). The women form a circle, holding hands. The drums are put aside. The *sheikha*'s place is usually inside the circle. Only those who are physically not able to get up will stay seated. They do the same articulations and movements while seated. The *dhikr* generally starts with the first part of the *shahada* articulated with a loud voice and in rhythmically varied versions. The *sheikha* at one point will commence a solo chant, which forms a counterpoint to the singing of the women.

The complementary character of the *sheikha*'s and the women's chanting becomes even more apparent when the women move from the first part

of the testimony to the utterance of “*Allah*” and additive syllables. In fact, it is less an addition of syllables than a shortening of the name “*Allah*”, as the syllables heard are “ha”, “al”, and “ah”. The atmosphere becomes more intense, as the chanting gets faster and the rhythmic patterns of the syllables become shorter. Often, a shift in the pitch also occurs. The women move the upper part of their bodies either back and forth or side-to-side. When they fall into a trance, they shout “*Allah, Allah*” in a rapid manner or they groan in a high pitch.

After this climax, the circle is dissolved, the women sit and the *sheikha* recites a part of the *Qur’an*. The slow recitation forms a beautiful contrast to the multilayered climax before. After a prayer, many women start leaving. Some sit on the veranda and socialize, some stay for coffee. The length of the different sections may vary; altogether every gathering lasts approximately two hours.

Oral Tradition and Contextual Realization of Music

When it comes to the musical rendering of words during the gathering, one important distinction must be made. Most women do not use the term “singing” or “song” when referring to *madh* or any other chanting in the religious context. Rather, they speak of “chanting” (i.e. *inshad*) and “hymns” (i.e. *anashid*). Structurally, there is little difference between music as a secular art form and ritually employed sound. Both are organized sound, following the same musical rules – here, the rules of the Arab musical tradition – in terms of time and pitch organization. One can also find melodies that are sung in the Levant to accompany both religious and non-religious texts. Nevertheless, for the women this would not be the same song, as the religious text carries a different message and is realized for different purposes.

Although there is a trend in modern times to use a dichotomized terminology for sound in the religious and secular spheres, it is insufficient to reduce this phenomenon to a terminological issue. For the participating women, to distinguish between “singing” and “chanting” is not simply a matter of terminology. Many of them assured me that they

feel different when they chant. Such difference is shaped by their motivation and, above all, the orientation of the heart (i.e. *tawajjuh al-qalb*). It is therefore the inner attitude and the context that mark the distinction between “singing” and “chanting”.⁵

The composition of the repertory in the *madh* section changes every week. Some well-liked hymns appear frequently, but there is no fixed order of hymns. The *sheikha* chooses the musical pieces according to the ambience. When appropriate, individual wishes of the women can be integrated.

The women know the vast majority of the texts by heart. Aside from this, the *sheikha* has a collection of poems which serve as song texts that she sometimes uses as a memory aid. This is especially true for longer texts, like the famous *Burda* by al-Busiri (d. around 1295) which contains at least 160 verses. The *Burda* is a poem praising Muhammad and narrating events from his life. Its name refers to an older poem by a contemporary of the prophet, Ka’b ibn Zuhayr. He first mocked the prophet, later converted to Islam, and recited for Muhammad a poem so touching that the prophet gave the poet his *burda* (i.e. cloak). The *Burda* by al-Busiri has a similar story. According to tradition, the poet wrote it while ill and dreamt that the prophet heard him recite it, afterwards rewarding the poet with his cloak (Al-Azhari, 1966). It is one of the most famous poems in the Arab world, widely used for religious purposes and serving as a model for many other poets. During a session only extracts of the poem are performed.

The *sheikha’s* collection features only texts; the music is not written down but is expected to be known. The women have learned the repertory by listening to it week after week. Also the *sheikha* has learned a good part of her repertory from the sessions she attended during her education with her *sheikha* back in the 1960s. The women therefore memorize a huge musical repertory which either particularly belongs to the Tijaniyya order or is part of a common repertory of religious

chants. The repertory which is specific for the Tijaniyya has been for the most part transmitted orally from master to student. The more general repertory can also be adopted from different contexts, for instance during religious celebrations of other institutions or by listening to tapes.

Musically, the repertory is heterogeneous. It contains group songs, responsorial⁶ forms and solo pieces. Group songs are almost always strophic.⁷ Strophic songs with a refrain frequently appear as responsorial forms in which the *sheikha* performs the stanza and the group performs the chorus. The solo forms are entirely performed by the *sheikha*. Whereas the group singing is rhythmic, the solo singing tends to be metrically free. Group singing is also mainly syllabic whereas solo performances include elaborated melismatic⁸ passages.

In most Oriental musical cultures, it was until recently unusual to write down musical processes in any form of notation. Written sources about music mainly discussed musical theory. The rules of performance practice and concrete compositions were transmitted orally. This corresponds to the nature of the musical process. Complex musical processes are created during a performance in accordance with the context and ambiance. Many performers in the *dhikr* context will study the rules of performance and the framework of a single rendering of a poem.⁹ A skillful and talented musician is then allowed and expected to further explore a poem's performative possibilities individually.

Clarity of text, proper articulation, and correct distribution of syllables are the criteria for a solid performance. To this are added the artistic devices of musical realization that distinguish the individual performer. These include voice, timbre, and techniques of ornamentation. Passages with important content often feature a high pitch and melismatic elaborations on key words. Skilled performers create great suspense by playing with pauses and employing retard elements like repetitions, additional syllables, and other means to stretch the text. This is especially the case in solo vocalization of poetic texts. The rhythmically free solo passages are performed

without drums. Far from being a solo performance in the strict sense of the term, these passages feature a fair amount of vocal interaction. The structure is built up as follows: musical phrase – pause – musical phrase etc. Between the phrases, women would respond with sighs like “ah” or acclamations in form of shouting “*Allah* [God]” or “ya *habibi* [oh Beloved]”. Sometimes the utterances are even longer, like “God bless Muhammad” or “oh Messenger of God”. These responses exhibit a religious as well as a musical function. They are signs of devotion, resulting from the emotionally overwhelming status the women find themselves in. Moreover, they signal to the *sheikha* that her endeavours are effective and encourage her to move on in that way.

The performance thus follows the structure of the Arab musical culture where interaction between the performer and his/her audience (Arab.: *tajawub*, *tafa'ul*) is an integral part of the musical process.¹⁰ We find other elements of mutuality employed occasionally: Some of the women produce a continual tone in a low pitch, which serves as a drone for the solo elaboration. Sometimes, a few women would accompany passages of the *sheikha's* chanting by following some phrases of the melodic line in a higher octave. These audience reactions not only underline the participatory character of the musical process but are also a necessary tool for the performer as they acknowledge and guide his/her elaborations.

Many of the above described elements can be heard in this part of the *sheikha's* solo passage about Muhammad: “All hearts bend towards the Beloved/ Therefore I have a witness and a guide”. The *sheikha* extensively elaborates on some syllables of the text. If we take a closer look at these, we will see that she hereby marks the words *qulub* (i.e. hearts) and *habibi* (i.e. beloved). These are keywords within the text. The *sheikha* also takes great liberty in time organization and phrasing. All these devices are employed to underline the text's meaning and induce emotional reaction. The women shout “*Allah*” and “ah” when the first phrase ends. Some of them sing “*Allah*” on the tonic that provides a drone for the following line. These techniques

demonstrate the communally constructed character of the process.

Genres and Performance Practice

Some of the songs belong to a widely shared religious heritage and can also be heard in different contexts by other groups, like the famous *Tala'a al-badru alayna* (i.e. the full moon [Muhammad] has appeared) which is said to be one of the oldest songs praising Muhammad. It is especially performed in the *mawlid* season. These songs share some common features: they have strophic forms, and their texts consist of short modules which might be combined with flexibility.

As it is the case with an orally transmitted repertory, modifications in text and music are an integral part of the performance. Sometimes single words are exchanged without altering the meaning of the text. Poetically creative persons add new verses or use them as a substitute for neglected passages. Melodic variations are developed, and an individual variant may be taken over by many and become a standard form. Therefore, more than one manifestation of one song exists, and the rare collections of songs in book form represent only one possible version. This clearly indicates a lived tradition, not a distortion.

Sometimes, the repertory features *muwashahat*¹¹ which do not necessarily stem from a religious context but indicate a well-liked and highly acknowledged musical tradition. However, many texts of *muwashahat* can be easily provided with a religious meaning. On the other hand, religious texts are sung to the same melody as secular songs. *Tabat al-hadra* [The *hadra* has been delightful] has the same melody as a well-known folksong named *Al-Bint al-shalabiya* or *al-'Adhuba* [The Sweet Girl]. *Talama ashku gharami* (i.e. I permanently complain about my love) is sung to a melody also known under the title *Ya banat Iskandariyya* (i.e. oh girls from Alexandria). It is a common phenomenon to find different texts with the same melody. In Aleppo, a special phrase – the “Aleppine *qudud*” – refers to a body of melodies whose texts are used interchangeably.

A different part of the repertory is marked by the

performance of long poetic texts from the Arab-Islamic literary heritage. These include extracts of single poems or from the literary genre of the *mawlid*, like the *Mawlid al-'arus* (known as the *mawlid* of al-Jawzi from the 12th century). These texts are often performed in a responsorial form, changing between the solo performance of the *sheikha* and the chorus of the women. A very well known example of praise for the prophet from this part of the repertory follows.

The phrase “*Mawlaya salla wa-sallim da'iman abadan/ala habibika khairi l-khalqi kullihimi*” (i.e. Oh Master, pray for and bless always and forever Your Beloved Muhammad, the best of the creation) can be heard often and in different contexts of Islamic worship. It is originally performed in close relationship with the already mentioned *Burda* of al-Busiri (1955). The tradition places this verse as part of the *Burda*, which should be recited after each verse of the poem (Mubarak, 1971). In my recording, the above quoted phrase actually serves as a chorus between the different verses of the *Burda*. It is performed by all women whereas the lines from the *Burda* are mainly performed by the *sheikha* alone.

The recording presents only a small part of that long poem. It starts and ends with the chorus, and in between five verses of the poem are performed alternately with the chorus. It is obvious that the poetic text is known very well by the women. Some of them not only accompany the solo singing of the *sheikha* with a quiet voice but respond to certain beautiful passages of the text with exclamations. This knowledge cannot be taken for granted, for the 13th-century poem not only refers aesthetically to an older poetic model but also uses religious terms and vocabulary that in modern editions need to be explained in footnotes. For instance, verse 13 starts with “*fa-inna ammarati bi-s-su*”. “*Al-ammara bi-s-su*” is a powerful expression of the soul (i.e. *al-nafs*) in the mystic context. The *sheikha* emphasizes this part of the text by abandoning the usual melodic model. Spontaneous musical modifications, especially the highlighting of textual passages, give the performance a fresh character and provide a

balance between the litany character of the melodic repetitions and intense passages.

For the *dhikr*, the *sheikha* selects poems which suit the nature of a *dhikr*. This choice is from a vast repertory she has accumulated over the years from teachers and studies. During the *dhikr*, the *sheikha* spontaneously chooses a poem which would suit the ambiance. There is no fixed course with a pre-arranged selection of poems. In the first part of the *dhikr*, the women recite the first part of the *shahada* (*La ilaha illa llah*), stressing every second syllable. After a while, the *sheikha* starts a rhythmically fluid solo chant above this recitation. In the later part of the *dhikr*, the women change to an abbreviated version of the first formula, articulating only “*Allah*”. Interestingly, the musical formula is not shorter in the beginning, as “*Allah*” is repeated and both formulae cover eight beats. Only later does the rhythmic pattern become shorter, with single syllables like “ah” and “ha” being used.

Now, the solo chant of the *sheikha* is also rhythmic. The utterances of the women form a rhythmic accompaniment to the *sheikha*'s chanting, which in musical terms is known as a rhythmic ostinato. A multilayered climax is created by shifts in tempo and rhythm: As the *sheikha* accelerates the tempo, the rhythmic patterns become shorter, the beat becomes faster. Simultaneously, there is a shift to a higher pitch. The intensity is further dramatized by the shortening of the text: the poetic verses gradually become shorter, and the text ends with the invocation of God by His names.

Lived Word – Word Alive

The weekly gatherings illustrate different relationships to scriptures and words. The *qur'anic* injunction of remembering God is celebrated

during the *dhikr*. *Qur'anic* recitation marks the beginning and the end of the gathering. During the meeting, a large variety of texts are employed. For this paper, I focused on the musical rendering of poetic texts. These texts are performed in an effort to seek spiritual experience. Listening to the *sheikha*, reciting the *wazhifa*, and chanting during the *madh* grant a preparatory character to the *dhikr* proper. There, a web of poetic texts, vocal art, multilayered rhythmic structures, and bodily movements is employed in creating a carefully constructed climax. Technically speaking, the *dhikr* in its poetic and musical structure represents a highly elaborated art form.

Memory and body play an important role. The women not only memorize a huge repertory – great parts of it nowhere documented – they also master musically complex processes and sophisticated literary texts. Bodily techniques like movements and rhythmic breathing are used to facilitate the process of inducing and remembering an emotional state and experience. At the same time, *madh* and *dhikr* are far from perfectly rehearsed processes. Rather, a flexible structure is possible which allows them to correspond to the needs of the women and to reflect the ambiance of a given gathering. The *sheikha* has the role of a conductor, but equally important is the interactive process she creates with the other women.

The women master a sophisticated repertory, both musically and literally. They know and internalize a poetic heritage which for average readers would provide more than some difficulties. Moreover, they do not venerate texts as part of a religious and cultural heritage disconnected from contemporary realities and daily lives. They perform the texts and live the Word.

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ENDNOTES

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Hosn Abboud who introduced me to the group and inspired me to write about it. I am likewise grateful to the *sheikha* of the group for her hospitality and the women who welcomed me warmly and made this research possible.
2. There is also a silent *dhikr* which I will not discuss here.
3. See also Pinto 2002: 198; Shannon 2006: 113.
4. Place or date of birth. Here, it denotes the birthday of the prophet and the literary genre that emerged from the celebrations of it, i.e. the poems about the birth and life of Muhammad which are performed.
5. For stylistic reasons, I sometimes use the word "singing" as a technical term (i.e. something musically happens), being aware of the fact that most women would differentiate.
6. Responsorial is the singing in dialogue between a solo singer and a group.
7. Strophic song: a song with several verses or stanzas, sung to the same melody.
8. Melismatic singing: In syllabic singing, each syllable corresponds to one tone or musical note. In melismatic singing, various tones or musical notes are used to articulate one syllable. Melismatic singing is often employed as an ornamentation to highlight important words of a text.
9. Today, different kinds of learning can be found: using staff notation is as common as learning by audition.
10. For a concise exploration of this concept see Racy 2003, especially pp. 64-66; 129-133.
11. Muwashaha: a strophic poetic and vocal genre which originated in Andalusia at the end of the 9th century and subsequently traveled to the Arab East and North Africa.

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Sacred Women in Coptic Cinema: Between Faith and Resistance

Lise Paulsen Galal

The present religious revival in the Arab world has not only initiated new politics or individual devotedness and piety, but has also resulted in a rise of mediated religious memories. Hence, as a promoter of a community revival, the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church has disseminated narratives about the Coptic saints to the members of the church. During my fieldwork among the Copts in Egypt in the nineties, I was continuously presented with these saint stories without really taking notice. But, as the storytellers seemed to insist on being heard, I started listening. Meanwhile, I had become aware of the Coptic cinema which since 1987 till today has produced and distributed more than thirty screen versions (in Arabic) about the life stories of sacred figures of the Coptic Church.

In the following, I will argue that the screen versions of two sacred female figures' life stories, Ana Simone and Marina, through the politics of storytelling, are addressing the needs and anxieties of the Copts today. Besides raising questions and giving answers about how to live one's life as a young modern Copt in accordance with Christian morals, the movies seem to offer the Copts not only a possibility to express their minority identity but also to reject, mediate, and negotiate their position as a marginalized 'Other'.

The Coptic Cinema

Behind the Coptic cinema is the Coptic Orthodox Church which produces and distributes the historical representations of the saints' and martyrs' life stories. The film production is professional with well-known directors and actors from the commercial Egyptian TV and film industry (Shafik, 2007). The films about Ana Simone and Marina are directed by Magid Taufiq. The portrayed saints in the movies are from the Church's early history and

are characterized by their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their belief, exposed as they are to the persecution and torture of the Roman rulers.¹ Ana Simone and Marina represent two different types of Coptic martyrdom: 'martyrdom of conscience' and 'martyrdom of violent death' (cf. Thorbjørnsrud, 1999, p. 87-88). In the film *Al-Qidisah Ana Simone* (i.e. the saint Ana Simone), Ana Simone gives up her status and wealth to follow God, and in the film *Shahida Marina* (i.e. the martyr Marina), Marina dies a violent death because of her Christian belief.

The movie about Ana Simone pictures a princess living at a time where Egypt was Christian.² She is represented as very devoted to God and is practicing fasting and praying in contrast to her parents. The parents want to marry her to a young prominent man, but she leaves the palace and sets out for the desert. During her stay in the desert, where she lives with wild animals, she becomes mentally and physically exhausted and she ends up staying in a convent.

Marina is the daughter of a pagan priest during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian.³ Her mother dies and she is raised by a Christian nanny and becomes herself a devoted Christian. In her teens, the local governor desires her but she rejects him telling him that she has given her life to God. He tries to persuade her and even promises to marry her but she stands firm. Despite imprisonment and severe torture she stays a strong believer until the day of her martyrdom.

Simultaneity of Past and Present

The movies about Marina and Ana Simone tell a story about a historical past where persecution, brutality, and temptation were overcome by the strength of faith. It is, however, a time characterized

by neither idyll nor harmony. Thus, instead of projecting a longing for communal unity and peace to a nostalgic historical past, as many revival movements have done, the movies rather direct the audience towards a universal Coptic Orthodox faith. By presenting the saints and martyrs within a narrative which transgresses time and space, the Coptic movies illustrate how violence and oppression in one era can be transformed into memories in another. Narratives about violence do, according to the anthropologists Das and Kleinman (2001), often have mythical qualities. As the narratives are being lifted out of historical time and space and inscribed in a universal story, they obtain a religious, ontological, or mythical status. In the Coptic movies studied, the narratives about violence are inscribed in a universal story about Orthodox Coptic Christianity. At the same time, the universalism is supported by the construction of simultaneity of time by the use of different narrative and visual techniques.

Firstly, the frame of interpretation is placed in the present. The references to the historical past are reduced to caricatured figures, dresses, and buildings using narrative conventions from Arab historical feature films. The visual appeal is much more important than historical accuracy (Shafik, 1998). In the same way as the movies' moral message holds an allegory about modern life and temptations, especially as experienced by the youth, the historical narratives about persecution and suppression may be analyzed as an allegory of the present.

Secondly, the simultaneity of historical past and spiritual present is constructed through a mixture of the rational and irrational. The key figures are historical persons. However, Ana Simone is presented as communicating with wild animals which never existed in Egypt, and Marina is enduring severe torture. In one of the torture scenes, Marina is cut into two by the executioner with a huge saw, but her body heals miraculously after the cutting up. Afterwards, she is seen in her prison cell in the company of a real and gigantic snake moving around her neck without harming her. The scene is followed by a scene with a far from realistic fire-breathing dragon and a devil-like feature. Even burning and drowning she survives. At last, when

the executioner takes her to the desert to kill her, Jesus appears in the sky making the executioner believe in him. One miracle succeeds the other, and the real and the magical are intertwined.

The movies seem to use what has been named magical realism. The genre is often ascribed a specific critical perspective not least due to its narrative conventions with "transgressive and subversive qualities" (Bower, 2004, p. 66). It challenges the dominant power's construction of 'the Other'. 'The Other' is defined by not only being denied political power and power of definition but also by being exposed to the dominant power's construction of 'the Other' as an object of regulation and intervention (p. 68). Hence, the magical realism seems to offer a possibility to express a minority identity because it is a genre that explores and transgresses borders. With the help of magical realism it becomes possible to narrate and visualize the complexity and the silenced aspects of a minority identity.

The potential to express the experiences of the minority by the help of simultaneity is further supported by the use of visual and sound effects addressing the senses and placing the audience in the position of the main characters. The audience is watching Ana Simone in the desert while a meditative music is heard. Nothing is said for a very long time. The audience needs to feel or sense how it is to walk alone in the desert sand and to be lonely in one's otherness. In the film about Marina, the senses and belief of the audience are tested as well. The violent, dramatic, and long-drawn-out torture scenes, displaying the torture in details, expose the audience to the anxiety and pain of Marina. It is the deep anxiety of the oppressed and powerless minority which is only overcome due to a strong faith illustrated by Marina's continuous emotional prayers. Both examples present minority experiences of extreme loneliness in the moment of suffering, but at the same time the option to transgress the loneliness and otherness through the belief in God. The experience of otherness can not be fully shared with the majority. It is the experience which the majority can not sense (Cohen, 2000) and which the official memory can not hold (Das og Kleinman,

2001). It is the story about othering which is closely related to shame and silence. However, the Coptic movies offer a narrative which turns this shame into strength of faith by sharing the experience of otherness with the audience. By replacing the experience of otherness with spiritual strength, the movies offer the Coptic audience a position as acting subjects. It is important to keep in mind that the Coptic cinema is produced by Copts for Copts. The films are distributed within the Church and not to an Egyptian public.

Memory Politics

The movies about Ana Simone and Marina are used to maintain, to mediate, and to perform a collective memory of Coptic identity, where past, present, and future are interrelated. The stories are not only an intellectual expression of the Church's official history; they are also stories about the present and the future of the Copts perceived by the senses and stimulated by the narrative and visual techniques of the movies and the encounter with the sacred and the spiritual power of the miraculous. Sensing the spiritual meaning reflects the direct connection between the past (the deceased saints and martyrs), the present (the Coptic pilgrims visiting the saints'

and martyrs' tombs), and the future (the potential healing and recovery from suffering).

It is precisely due to the sensuous and magical narrative that the saint narratives are no longer stories about the suppressed, inferior, and passive Copt. They are rather stories about the religious superior, invincible, and active Copt. By presenting transgressive identities, the mediated stories offer the Coptic audience a position as subjects with agency instead of a position as submissive objects of the majority's oppression. Hence, the mediated stories "[...] subtly alter the balance between actor and acted upon" (Jackson, 2002, p. 16). The stories are constructing the believer as practicing resistance against inhumanity, an act by which the victims become human. To take on the position of the martyr is on the one the hand to be passive because one does not avoid the violence, but on the other hand it is to be acting because one insists on maintaining one's identity (as a human being). The martyr let the inevitable happen by choosing to let it happen thereby affirming her agency within the framework of legitimate religious narrative.

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ENDNOTES

1. To venerate the many martyrs dying for their belief, the Copts introduced a new calendar starting with the year where the Roman emperor Diocletian (284-305) took power. By then the era of the martyr (Anno Martyrum) was institutionalized and the Coptic calendar came to function as a memory of the life of the martyrs (the Synaxarion) (Meinardus, 2004, p. 285).
2. In the year 389, Coptic Orthodox Christianity became the official religion in Egypt with the Roman emperor's permission. Egypt was Christian until the Arab conquest in 641 which introduced Islam.
3. Marina is also a well-known and sanctified martyr in the other orthodox churches under the name of Marina of Antioch.

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Women's Marian Devotions in a Melkite Greek Catholic Village in Lebanon

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This article will focus on two important devotions, May (which is dedicated to Mary),¹ and Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ) (which locally includes substantial devotion to Mary) in a village in Lebanon's Biqa' Valley. Both of these devotions came from Western Europe, but the Corpus Christi celebration appears to be exclusive to the Zahleh area where the village is located. Women are deeply involved in both of these devotions, thus creating a spiritual space for themselves in an otherwise patriarchal church.

Christianity evidently came to 'Ain al-Qasis (pseudonym) during the fourth century CE or earlier. According to the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon² it was established as an episcopal see during that century. The Christianity established there eventually became what we would know today as Byzantine Orthodox. The first church built there, probably early on, was called Our Lady of the Dormition.³ Until about 1940, when Our Lady of the Annunciation was constructed in the village's upper quarter, this was the village's only church. To this day, the Feast of the Dormition on August 15 is the village patronal feast and a major local celebration.

Following the seventeenth century creation of the Vatican missionary office Propaganda Fidei and the Capitulations agreements between the Ottoman government and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, members of numerous European religious orders, such as the Carmelites, Franciscans, and Jesuits, were active in the Biqa' and other areas in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. They influenced the election of the Patriarch of Antioch in 1724, with the result that the church split into an Orthodox part and a Catholic part.

'Ain al-Qasis became part of the Catholic faction. One of the aims of the missionaries was to create an individual piety based on emphasizing the suffering of Christ and cults of Mary and other saints. They concentrated on women in their efforts.

Mary's life is detailed in several passages from the Christian New Testament, notably in Luke's Gospel. Church tradition in both the Western church based in Rome and the Eastern church based in Constantinople and other cities has added to the basic scriptural accounts. One of these traditions is that Mary did not die, but rather was assumed into Heaven (the Roman version, called the Assumption) or fell asleep and went to Heaven (the Eastern version, called the Dormition).⁴ Another tradition is that after Jesus was born Mary remained a virgin, bearing no more children. Yet another tradition is that people can pray to Mary, who will intercede for them with her son or herself enact miracles. As the mother of God, she is the most powerful of the saints. Eastern icons frequently portray Mary as a Byzantine empress.

Western iconography tends to be sentimental, picturing Mary with Jesus after he was taken from the Cross, holding and nursing the baby Jesus, or stories from other parts of her life. Just the same, in Western tradition, Mary is still the most powerful of the saints. Western Marian devotional cults are the most recent. For example, devotions at Lourdes, France, began following a young woman's visions in 1858; devotions at Fatima, Portugal, began in 1917, and the Mystical Rose devotions developed near Brescia, Italy, after 1947.⁵ These are the bare bones, then, out of which Catholics and Orthodox Christians have constructed a body of beliefs and practices about Mary.

I obtained an account of the 2009 May devotions from an informant who, as president of one of the ladies' sisterhoods (Saint Rita, the other being Our Lady of Perpetual Help), was deeply involved in the observance. She told me that on the last day of April each sisterhood sets up a *samdi* (i.e. a table covered in white and decorated with flowers and religious pictures) for Mary in the church in its quarter. Then, every day at 6:00 pm the church bells would ring, and the sisterhood members, as well as the nuns and other ladies, would assemble in the church. They would pray one part of the Rosary, sing hymns, and recite a litany.

On the last day of May, members of the two sisterhoods, members of the Sacred Heart of Jesus organization, the nuns, the priest, and a lot of people, women and men, assembled in the Annunciation church, the one in the upper quarter. Then they processed down to the main street, carrying a big picture of Mary. Before them went a car with a sound system broadcasting Fairouz (a famous Lebanese singer) singing religious songs. People along the way threw flower petals and wafted incense their way.

Those processing turned and went up the hill to the lower quarter church, the Dormition. The priest and the people entered, whereupon the priest blessed the picture and the people. Then the crowd went out of the church and farther up the hill to the Mystical Rose chapel. There the priest blessed the picture and the people again, the people prayed, threw flower petals, and wafted incense. Then it was over, and people greeted each other.

Since 1973, when I actually was able to observe May devotions, they have grown from a small celebration among neighbors to a major observance involving the priest, the nuns, and many villagers, women and men. Today, too, they hold a lengthy procession throughout the town. Nevertheless, the devotions are still organized and dominated by women, namely the members of the two sisterhoods and the members of the Sacred Heart organization.

Corpus Christi, *Khamis al-Jasad* (Thursday of the Body, that is, the body of Christ celebrated in the

Mass) as it is locally called, takes place in June.⁶ Like May devotions, it has no counterpart in Byzantine tradition.

I first observed the celebration of Corpus Christi in 1973, and then returned to observe it in 2004 and 2009; the following account is from the 2009. In the morning the village priest celebrated the Mass for the holiday, accompanied by pious villagers whose work did not keep them from attending. In the afternoon women in the house where I was staying collected flowers for the *samdi*. They tore apart many of the roses for their petals. Next we assembled the *samdi* outside the front door, decorating it with flowers, petals, and a picture of Jesus. Then some neighbors and relatives came and waited.

At 5:30 the prayers for the observance, led by the priest, started in the Dormition church. The bells rang, and people started going up to the church. Then the procession started down the road. Those processing sang a hymn special to Corpus Christi, and also the Lourdes hymn to Mary. In 2004 I asked one woman why they sang the Lourdes hymn if the holiday was devoted to the body of Christ. She said that they include Mary, the mother, with the Trinity. She shares with them, she is a partner.

The priest, carrying a monstrance,⁷ was accompanied by women, men, and children. They came up to the house where I waited with the others, and entered the car park. In front of the *samdi* the priest blessed the people with the monstrance. The lady of the house burned incense and family members threw petals. Then the procession left to continue its path to the Annunciation church, past Saint George's shrine, and back into the Dormition church.

There the priest went to the altar and blessed the people with the monstrance. Then the celebration was over.

In sum, I have described two celebrations which, while not commanded in Christian scripture, are also not incompatible with it. They have enabled women to carve out a spiritual place for themselves in a patriarchal church. It is not that women don't

attend Mass and other liturgies conducted by men; they do, and happily. But the May devotions were developed entirely by women, and only bit by bit have men become involved. Even now women dominate them. Corpus Christi appears to have been developed by men, but in the village it is

women who prepare the *samdis*, wait at the houses, and constitute the majority of those processing. Significantly, they sing the same hymn to Mary that they do in the May procession, namely the Lourdes hymn. Mary is celebrated even on an occasion devoted to her son.

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ENDNOTES

1. Devotion to Mary appeared during the early centuries of Christianity in both the Eastern and Western Churches. However, the dedication of May to Mary is Western in origin. Orthodox Christians do not dedicate May to Mary.
2. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Lebanon, retrieved on June 19, 2009, from <www.pgc-lb.org/english/Church3.shtml#Zahle>.
3. The church is located on the northeastern edge of the village. History has not recorded the date of its construction.
4. Traditions about the dormition and the assumption developed in the early centuries of Christianity in both the East and West. They differ slightly. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared that the assumption was official Church dogma.
5. A couple from the village built a shrine to the Mystical Rose (Mary) on a hill above the Dormition church in about 2000.
6. The familiar story is that *khamis al-Jasad* has been the patronal feast of nearby Zahleh since 1825, when the then Melkite Bishop arranged a procession to stop an epidemic that was raging in the town. The oldest picture I can find dates to the turn of the 20th century. See Al-Ma'luf, 1977.
7. A monstrance is a stand for displaying the bread consecrated during the Mass. Usually gold in color, it consists of a round base, with a short upright and a sunburst on top. In the center of the sunburst is a round glass door through which one can see the consecrated bread.

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Book Reviews

Off the Straight Path: Illicit Sex, Law and Community in Ottoman Aleppo, by Elyse Semerdjian, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008, 247 pages.

REVIEWED BY MARY ANN FAY

Elyse Semerdjian's *Off the Straight Path: Illicit Sex, Law and Community in Ottoman Aleppo* is a pioneering study of sexual crime and punishment during the Ottoman period based on records in the archives of the Islamic courts of Aleppo, Syria. Her work straddles several disciplines including women's history, social history, and Islamic legal studies and makes significant contributions to each. Her subject of research is *zina*, which has multiple meanings including adultery, prostitution, procurement, sodomy, bestiality, and rape. Each of these are serious crimes under Islamic law that could result in draconian punishments including stoning. However, Semerdjian discovered in her research that, during the Ottoman period, offenses that appeared to be *zina* were punished by fines that were imposed according to the class and income of the defendants. Based on her examination of the criminal cases brought before the *qadis* (i.e. judges in the Islamic courts) in Aleppo, she also found that most of the time, offenses were not defined in the court records as *zina*, allowing the *qadi* to avoid imposing the harshest sentences on the defendants. Semerdjian examined one *sijill* (i.e. a volume of court records) for every decade between 1507 and 1877 when the Ottoman Empire codified Hanafi law and synthesized it with Swiss law, creating a secular code of law called the *Mecelle* in an effort to emulate Western-style law.

The historical context for Semerdjian's study is the law and policies of the Ottoman Empire, particularly the sultanic decrees known as *kanunnames*, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and *fatwas* (i.e. legal rulings) issued by various *muftis*. Theoretically, she is part of the revisionist approach to Islamic law developed over the past 20 years by such scholars as Brinkley Messick and Wael Hallack, among others. These scholars have argued against the claim that *ijtihad* or legal reasoning disappeared from the practice of the law centuries before the Ottoman Empire arose leaving the *shari'a* courts ossified and judges inflexible and unresponsive to the communities and neighborhoods they served. However, in the past two decades, scholars have shown that jurists continued to refer to the process of *ijtihad* in their writings and that legal reasoning was converted by individual judges to living law in Islamic communities. Semerdjian concurs with the revisionists and advances the argument about living law by showing how in the Aleppo courts, local actors shaped the practice of law and even the outcomes in the courts in their communities.

Semerdjian acknowledges the methodological problems associated with the use of court records in the writing of social history but states that she is not prepared to abandon them or dismiss all of the invaluable information they provide on taxation, marriage, dowries, divorces, business transactions, religious endowments, crime, and state-society relations that she argues are "precious for the construction of social histories" (p.63). She is also not inclined to take a post-modern approach to court cases as almost purely literary texts the way historians like Beshara Doumani in his work on Ottoman Nablus do. Instead, Semerdjian has chosen to do a legal reading of the court records focused on the adjudication process and concentrated on the case, the witnesses, and the judge's verdict. This seems appropriate for a study that investigates the outcomes of court cases that involve apparent *zina* crimes that were not called *zina* and were not punished as *zina* with stoning or other physical punishments.

Jurists and legal scholars considered *zina a hadd* crime, meaning a crime which has a fixed punishment, although stoning the offenders as punishment is not mentioned in the *Qur'an*. The author contends that

the practice of stoning is justified by two *hadiths* in particular that describe the actions of the Prophet Muhammad who pronounced judgment in two cases of *zina* that apparently set the legal precedents for the prosecution of these cases and for stoning as punishment. However, Semerdjian discovered in her research into *zina* crimes during the Ottoman period that there was a discrepancy between doctrine – the theoretical prescriptions found in legal manuals – and the practice of law in the courts. One of the reasons Semerdjian offers for this discrepancy is the role the community played in the judicial process and how this shaped the law and its outcomes. This is clearest in chapters four and five where she examines actual cases from the Aleppo courts. Semerdjian argues that one of the ways that the community shaped the law was by the use of euphemisms rather than direct accusations of *zina*. For example, Aleppo residents confronted with prostitution and procurement in their neighborhood would go to the local court and accuse the perpetrators of “gathering” or “mixing” with strange men and women in their homes and ask the judge to banish them from the neighborhood. According to Semerdjian, by avoiding the use of the legal term *zina*, the court could avoid imposing draconian punishments such as death by stoning. Semerdjian notes that “The creation of a criminal category of ‘evildoer’ allows the legal authorities to deviate from standard prescriptions of punishment advocated in the juridical writings. Therefore, a crime such as *zina*, warranting one of the worst punishments in Islamic law, stoning to death, can be completely avoided by not calling it *zina* at all” (pp. 97-98). According to the author, the term *zina* was used in only ten cases to describe crimes and in only three of them was there consensual sex. In total, Semerdjian found only 121 definitive *zina*-related cases, and for the entire Ottoman period she found that there were no cases of stoning or flogging for *zina* in Aleppo. Her findings indicate that corporal punishments were rare for all cases of sexual indiscretion.

Semerdjian provides some explanations for the Ottoman approach to sexual crimes and punishment. One is legal pluralism deriving from the Empire’s tradition of accommodating local religious and legal traditions among tribesmen and villagers as well as among Jews and Christians. The method by which Islamic law was effectively transformed into and codified as Ottoman criminal law was through the *kanunnames* or imperial decrees of the sultans. The imperial decrees were a recognition by the Ottomans that *shari’a* was not always practical for day-to-day issues confronting the empire. Thus, the *kanunnames* emerged to cover such areas as taxation, land regulations, the responsibilities of government officials, and criminal offenses. Besides cases involving sexual crimes, Semerdjian also found cases involving spousal abuse and rape. In general, she argues, the courts sought to protect women from physically abusive husbands although this could conflict with the *Qur’an* verse that allows a man to punish a disobedient wife with beating (*Surat al-Nisa’* 4:34). Semerdjian argues that the judicial literature was consistently on the side of wives in spousal abuse cases. She found several cases in Aleppo in which the court granted women divorces from their physically abusive husbands and placed them with their families for their protection.

In cases involving illicit sex between men or between men and young boys, the term *zina* was not used in the few cases of homosexuality she discovered in the archives. Instead the term *al-louti* was used to describe the offender as a sodomizer in three cases, two of which resulted in punishment, which was not recorded. The author argues that there were few prosecutions for homosexuality for two reasons: First, there was no consensus among jurists that homosexuality constituted *zina*, and second, according to Abdul Karim Rafeq, the practice of sexual relations between men and young boys was widespread and socially acceptable. The courts as well as legal scholars appeared to be disinterested in sexual relations between women.

There is much to recommend in Semerdjian’s study, and a short review such as this one cannot do justice to the complexity of the topic she has undertaken to research or the various dimensions of the work. Reading Semerdjian’s book as an historian, one cannot escape comparing the flexibility and accessibility of the Ottoman-era Islamic courts and the role of the community in shaping legal outcomes with the narrow, rigid, and apparently a-historical interpretations of the law pronounced by some modern Islamists. Semerdjian

writes concerning *zina* that, “Violent punishments for this crime, such as death by stoning, have been advocated by contemporary Islamic movements and incorporated into the legal codes of some Muslim countries as punishment for breaches of sexual morality in the name of a return to a more ‘authentic’ Islamic law”. Arguing that this is a misuse of history to justify an authoritarian political agenda concerning women and morality, Semerdjian writes: “Therefore, exploring the ‘actual’ historical position of women, gender and morality becomes even more pressing as it stakes out the ground upon which the battle over morality in Islamic law will be fought” (p. XX1).

Semerdjian’s book will be of interest to specialists in the field of Islamic law, women and gender, the social history of Syria during the Ottoman period, and Ottoman studies. The book can be used by undergraduate students with some background in the history of the region and by graduate students.

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Living Palestine. Family Survival, Resistance, and Mobility under Occupation,
edited by Lisa Taraki, Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press.

REVIEWED BY ANNELIES MOORS

Whereas much academic work on Palestine focuses on the political, the central theme of this book, in contrast, is the social reproduction of Palestinian society. Zeroing in on the everyday lived experiences of Palestinians under occupation, it analyses the strategies of households and families, and their individual members, to improve their chances for survival and social mobility. This book does not only highlight how families and households cope with ongoing processes of dispossession and repression, but also points to the limits of such endurance. More specifically, it underlines that certain households – the urban and rural poor and the refugees living in the camps, and certain family members – the young, the female, bear the brunt.

This book is first of all based on the findings of a survey conducted in the summer of 1999 of over two thousand households in nineteen communities in the West Bank and Gaza. Designed by the Institute of Women’s Studies at Birzeit University, where most of the contributors work, it aimed at going beyond conventional national surveys. Focusing on the household as a site of conflict and cooperation, the survey was designed to investigate the relations between household members, addressing such topics as the division of labour, marriage arrangements, living arrangements, wider kin networks, and educational levels, with specific attention paid to gender and generation. In order to capture the post-2000 (second *intifada*) period, characterized by separation of communities, re-invasions and wide-spread assaults on neighbourhoods, and far greater uncertainty and vulnerability, some of the contributions also make use of more recent sources, both quantitative (statistical information), and qualitative (oral narratives).

With most articles based on the household survey, this book can be read as a strong example of what can be done with such quantitative material. An in-depth analysis of such data can raise issues that have not yet been widely recognized. One example is the contribution of Lisa Taraki and Rita Giacaman which points to the significance of regional differences (that is between the north, the south and the center parts of the West Bank, represented by Nablus, Ramallah, and Hebron), rather than the more conventional division of the population of Palestine into camp, village and city

dweller. They point not only to differences in terms of political economy, linked to the relationship of each city with its region, the character of its hegemonic groups and the diversity of the population, but also to differences in the social and moral order. The contributions of Penny Johnson and Jamil Hilal locate individual households within the wider world of kinship, and point to its ongoing importance in the lives of Palestinians under occupation. Whereas Johnson analyses the continuing importance of kin marriage and its multiple meanings, Hilal underlines how migration may lead to increased conservatism.

Two of the contributions deal more extensively with the war-like conditions of the second *intifada* as yet another phase in the ongoing colonization of Palestine. Eileen Kuttab's contribution on women's work argues for the use of the concept of a 'resistance economy', with economic strategies responding to highly volatile political conditions. Lamis Abu Nahla's contribution (written together with students) constructs six family histories. The original intention of this contribution was to supplement the 1999 household survey, yet in the course of collecting these family histories, everyday realities forced the researchers to focus on the impact of the post-2000 Israeli aggression. This contribution then provides major insights into how individual families and their members cope with these second *intifada* conditions. As these cases indicate, households are highly volatile and unstable, with families continuously trying to accommodate migration, imprisonment, and, more generally, the Israeli assaults on neighbourhoods, destruction of homes, and displacement of families as part of everyday life. One issue that stands out is the effects of the crisis on the male breadwinner, both in terms of economic loss, due to rampant unemployment, and in terms of inability to protect the family. The various cases highlight the diverse effects of such conditions on gender relations and those between generations, varying from greater rigidity to partial inversions of existing hierarchies.

These contributions point to the insights one can gain from household surveys when gender-sensitive questions on labour, education, marriage, and so on are included. Unexpected results come up and can in turn function as a source of inspiration for developing new research projects. Yet, survey material has its limitations, as it does not allow for a dialogical production of knowledge, and inevitably works with averages. With surveys, it is possible to point to particular correlations. However, to understand what particular contexts and developments mean for the people concerned and how these affect their everyday lives, we need to turn to more qualitative methods, such as a narrative analysis.

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