

*Religions/Adyan* is an annual and bi-lingual (English and Arabic) publication in interfaith studies published by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue with an emphasis on interreligious dialogue and the relations between Islam and other faiths.

In a world of religious misunderstandings, violence, and hijacking of religious faiths by political ideologies, *Religions/Adyan* intends to provide a welcome space of encounter and reflection upon the commonalities and shared goals of the great religions of the world. The title of the journal suggests religious diversity while suggesting the need to explore this diversity in order to develop keys to both a deepening of one's own faith and a meaningful opening to other creeds. The Qur'ân suggests a commonality of faith and a striving for the Truth within the context of religious diversity:

“To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.” (The Table Spread 5:48, version of Yusuf Ali)

As a refereed international publication published the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, *Religions/Adyan* finds its inspiration in the universal message of monotheism broadly understood, while engaging the various religious faiths that share common principles and values within this broadly defined context.

*Religions/Adyan* encourages comparative studies and interreligious exchanges in a spirit of dialogue and mutual enrichment. Its aim is to promote understanding between religious faithful of various traditions by exploring and studying the rich field of their theological and spiritual common grounds, their mutual and constructive relationships, past, present and potentially future, a better understanding of the causes of their conflicts, and the current challenges of their encounter with atheism, agnosticism and secular societies.

In addition, *Religions/Adyan* wishes to highlight and revive the universal horizon of Islam by fostering studies in the relationships between Islam and other religions and civilizations in history, the arts, and religious studies. This is also a way to revitalize intellectual discourse in Islam, within the context of an interactive and cross-fertilizing engagement with other faiths.

The essays published in *Religions/Adyan* exclusively engage the intellectual responsibility of their authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the DICID. They are published as part of an ongoing dialogue on religions, and should not be construed as the expression of the positions of any sponsoring organization.



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# Editorial

The themes and issues pertaining to women and matters of gender have probably never received as much attention as they have in the last decades. The contemporary concerns for equality and freedom are obviously not foreign to this keen interest. There is a sense, quasi-inherent to the modern *ethos*, that women and feminine contributions have been all-too often ignored, that their voices have been oppressed or confined within restrictive areas of social and cultural activities. The religious domain, especially in its institutional dimensions — in which leadership has been for the most part a masculine affair, has been particularly scrutinized in this respect. It has been the locus of passionate debates on the role of women and the feminine. In this regard, two questions have often emerged. The first is that of the “gender” of God, or that of the masculine and feminine as attributes or dimensions of the Ultimate. The second question has pertained to the role of women in religious universes. The two questions have often been connected as testified by most trends in feminist theology.

A monotheist belief, or religious heritage, leads one to affirm that God is “masculine” since He is the Creator of heaven and earth. The

Bible and the Quran unambiguously refer to “Him.” And still, classical theology, in all three monotheistic faiths, did not fail to take account of the fact that there is no perfection in creation the principle and seed of which is not to be found eminently in God. If the feminine or femininity must be considered as perfections — and how would not they be so?, one must admit that they are to be found in God. The metaphysical reality of God must therefore include the feminine, even though it is obviously so in a way that cannot be fully fathomed in human terms, nor be taken down to the level of purely human concerns.

The second issue relates to the modern, and post-modern, question of identity. In this regard, it appears that religions tend to affirm both identity and difference, or identity in difference, and difference in identity. There is clearly both a universal dimension and a differentialist bent in the discourse of religions, as also interestingly, but differently, in most feminist discourses. Should universality, and the equality between women and men that it implies, be incompatible with identity and difference? On the one hand, it would seem that there is no identity that does not entail difference, and no difference that does not im-

ply a relative superiority: one being is superior from a certain point of view, another from a different point of view. This means also, and most importantly, that no human superiority is absolute, and must remain therefore open to its complement or its corrective. For instance, there is no woman who is not “masculine” in some way and no man who is not “feminine” in some ways. This is what is symbolized by the Chinese *yin-yang*.

The connection of the two questions of the “gender” of the Divine and the identity and status of women is far from being one-dimensional and unidirectional, however. Some have demonstrated, for example, that a recognition of the feminine dimension of the Divine does not necessarily translate, far from that, into a socio-cultural promotion of women. It is actually sometimes the contrary that holds true, as appears for example in some religious sectors of South Asia. Others have suggested that one must distinguish between the metaphysical dimension, the spiritual realm and the socio-cultural realities. In this perspective, what can be highlighted is the complexity and, oftentimes, reversed analogy between inner values and outer phenomena, spiritual ranks and social hierarchies. For instance, Mary illustrates an inner supereminence that cannot be unrelat-

ed —nor limited— to some feminine “values” or symbols, but she was not outwardly a priest or a preacher. Finally, others have argued, especially among feminists hailing from the Abrahamic world, that one must take care of distinguishing the normativity that has emerged from historical crystallizations from the scriptural sources and their intrinsic principles.

Be that as it may, religions are keen to point to a transcendence of all differences, whether they are thought to be natural or socially constructed. In monotheistic religions, they do so by affirming the equality of all human beings before God. In Chinese, Indian and other wisdom traditions they tend to open the highest Way to all humans independently from gender differences, or from other differences that may differentiate them from one another. No human difference, whether of sex, race or gender can be absolutized since there is nothing relative that can limit or bind the Absolute. There is much evidence to suggest that the great religions teach that while one is born a woman or a man one is re-born beyond the limitations and boundaries that those identities involve or imply.

Patrick Laude, Editor-in-Chief



## Interview with Her Highness Sheikhha Moza bint Nasser

*Adyan: Let's start Your Highness with your being an inspiring Arab woman, both in your leadership roles and your entrepreneurial projects. Can you tell us about your view of the state of Arab women?*

*Her Highness Sheikhha Moza bint Nasser:* It needs to be said from the outset that the condition of Arab women, as well as that of Arab men, is not unrelated to the condition of the society as a whole in its relationship of mutual influence.

It is quite well-known that for decades the Arab world has lived in a state of torpor, at times even economic and cultural decline which has reflected negatively on the condition of members of the society. Recent history however has witnessed

attempts pregnant with endeavours leading to a resurgence and apparently to several libertarian movements which were not destined to reach fruition. In any case, in these attempts to create movement in stagnant waters women have always been around affecting and being affected by their environment.

I firmly believe that liberation starts in the mind and the way to it is education. It is reassuring that Arab countries have begun to realize that and have started paying particular attention to education and its development. This interest carries with it a true recognition for political reform as the relationship between education and political reform is not mutually exclusive. In fact one simply cannot reform without the other.





In all that, I am encouraged to say that the future of Arab women, God willing, promises to be for their good as we have already begun setting our feet on the right path to reform the nation.

*Adyan: In recent years, the Arab world has witnessed stormy changes manifesting themselves in the Arab Spring; on the other hand, however, there were equally strong currents to counter this movement of change. How, Your Highness, do you perceive the post-revolutionary period and what are its most significant challenges?*

*Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser: For several decades now, the Arab world in general has been witnessing a political, intellectual and developmental stagnation hindering prospects of development and thus worsening our social and economic problems which resulted from the absence of development pro-*

*grammes and monopolizing of power, and ignoring the 'other's' opinion. This caused the Arab revolutions. But there were forces countering this revolution on various fronts: the first was internal; represented by social groups being affected by the change as well as the absence of a culture of democracy and experience of governance. The second is a regional one; as regional powers sway with the winds in accordance with their interests; they worked in alliance with those quarters who wished to abort the Arab revolutions or at least cause it to digress from its path so it would make the whole idea of a revolution dubious. The third challenge was international and it is by the way quite a familiar one; major world powers unfortunately do not hesitate to militarily intervene when their interests are at stake, whereas they are rarely enthusiastic about supporting the right of peoples to build their own future. In spite of all the challenges, the rev-*



olution continues because the Arab youth will not retreat from its right to freedom, justice and a decent life.

*Adyan: Earlier, Your Highness addressed the stereotyping of the image of women and Muslims in general in the Western media. What in your view needs to be done to correct this image?*

*Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser:* Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular, have suffered as a result of this racial profiling in the Western media. This stereotyping stretches back to historical and cultural reasons much as it is a product of Orientalism. However, besides the various efforts being devoted to correct this situation, the informational awareness and openness that the world is witnessing has also helped in this regard. Perhaps it is important that we first and foremost reassess ourselves which is to say that we turn our attention to the causes of this stereotyping of our image and we will realize that we are partially responsible, and therefore we have to begin by addressing what is within the scope of our responsibility before we demand of others to initiate a change in what they believe. This change undoubtedly requires tremendous intellectual struggle on the part of our scholars and thinkers much as it requires efforts by our media. I also think that Muslims in the Diaspora can play an important role in this regard.

*Adyan: In 2008, the Secretary-General of the United Nations appointed Your Highness as the Ambassador for the Alliance of Civilizations and in 2011 the UN Alliance of Civilizations held its Fourth Global Forum in Doha. Is there someone or something in your personal life or in the history of Qatar that inspired your commitment to the dialogue of cultures and religions?*

*Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser:* There is much in our own fundamental beliefs that motivates us to proceed toward our goals with a clear conscience. We have been brought up both religiously and culturally upon the belief that there is no difference between human beings, and what unites them far exceeds what divides them. And that joint action and solidarity is the best way to serve humanity. In spite of these sublime and universal values, we sometimes exaggerate our differences which adversely affects our relations. I am a strong believer in that religion can be the most effective means to achieve this solidarity as it is one of the strongest motivational forces driving our civilizational and cultural pursuits. In fact much of my attention towards global dialogue at all levels is inspired by my Islamic identity. We need to remember that we live in a world in which isolation is no longer possible much as unilateral action is no longer possible; it is an era of joint action and per-

petual dialogue. Muslims should not remain oblivious to this dialogue, rather they must be actively regulating it. Dialogue is the only civilizational choice available to all for a world which we all share.

*Adyan: Your Highness has always insisted "that modernization of our world should not be achieved at the expense of one's commitment to one's religious and cultural heritage." Many however, struggle in maintaining a balance between the requirements of modernization on the one hand, and their beliefs, family traditions and social values on the other. How do you assess this struggle with these kinds of transformations?*

*Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser:* It needs to be mentioned that this is an ancient struggle between two mentalities; one seeks change and modernization, while the other

adheres to what it possesses. It is perhaps not right to perceive that modernization encroaches upon religion because it is from religious texts themselves that one seeks inspiration for change and modernization. We should however be cautious that our perceptions of balance and a sense of satisfaction and success are largely shaped by political, economic, cultural and social factors which can be domestic, regional or international. This means that at times we find ourselves restricted and thus need to take into account our temporal and spatial conditions. The inability to achieve this balance comes from our ignorance of the teachings of religion, lack of self-confidence, and a blurred civilizational vision. Perhaps one of the most dangerous propositions for our future is that religion is opposed to change.



Photo courtesy of Qatar Foundation

# Foreword

Gender studies has become very fashionable in academia. At the same time, writing about the topic has become more and more perilous. In some circles, it is deemed unacceptable to write about women's experience in general. Worst, any statement about the feminine runs the risk of being stigmatized as essentialist (the cardinal sin of our post-modern age).

To understand the present situation, we may want to turn to the analysis of the French metaphysician René Guénon, who wrote little about women but was a lucid critique of our age. In his *opus magnum*, *The Reign of Quantity*, Guénon was distinguishing between two stages in the development of secular modernity. The first stage was characterized by a process of materialization and the second stage by a process of dissolution.

It cannot be denied that the first stage seemed to correspond to the strengthening of the masculine values. It was the age of the industrial revolution, nationalism and the rise of modern bureaucratic States. The second stage that we have now arguably reached is characterized by a process of collapse of all the intellectual landmarks and a dissolution of all normative hierarchies. Every-

thing in the world we live in become more fluid and hybrid.

At some level, it may seem that this second phase is characterized by a reassertion, at least in western countries, of feminine values. The masculine and power-oriented conception of rationality would be replaced by a more welcoming and inclusive attitude toward reality and toward the other. This impression, sometimes reinforced by a loud celebration of diversity (regardless of what it means), is however gravely misleading. In the clash of ideologies that dominates the international scene, namely the clash between religious fundamentalism and post-modern neoliberalism, women are often the first casualties.

It seems also very doubtful that the only way to free women from masculine domination is to refrain from searching for some universal common ground and withdraw into relativism and subjectivism (the logical conclusion of a certain form of post-modern deconstructionism for whom any truth-claim is alienating, a mask for an unspeakable "will to power"). In rejecting the very idea of truth, one only radicalizes the anti-essentialist bend that Guénon diagnoses at the root of modernity and that is largely responsible for the



contemporary spiritual crisis. One also finds himself or herself empty-handed when faced with the most revolting forms of violence perpetrated by men against women. As Plato was already reminding us, one cannot at the same time claim that there is no truth and protest against injustice.

Fortunately, it is not the path followed by the contributors of this issue. By interrogating the religious myths about women and the feminine, by looking into the experience of saints or simple believers, they are not seeking to subvert religion but on the contrary to (re-)awaken certain spiritual possibilities buried in the divine revelations or in our collective spiritual unconscious. They are thus inviting to us a form of *anamnesis*, a rediscovery of the deeper meaning of the polarity between the masculine and the feminine.

It was the religious philoso-

pher Eric Voegelin, who was arguing that symbols represent the trace left of certain founding experiences, when human consciousness opens itself to the Sacred. It is through these symbols that human beings can find their place into a meaningful cosmic order. On the contrary, when these symbols are cut from their experiential roots, they tend to turn into (empty) dogmas and even into a source of alienation and disorder. One may argue that it is what happened with the symbols of the feminine. Symbols originally created to express a mystery located in the human soul, and maybe more enigmatically in God, became a means to control women and perpetuate power-structures responsible for the suffering of women, as well as men.

A feminist hermeneutics of symbols and myths is certainly not an invitation to return to some illusory Golden Age, in which tradition-

al religious communities would have treated women more fairly. (On the topic, the historical record of all religions is nothing less than appalling.) The feminist hermeneuticist will not claim either to have decided whether God is less inadequately designated as a “He” or a “She” or should be treated as simply beyond gender (although, remembering the lessons of Feuerbach, he or she will certainly see a correlation between the alienation of women and the tendency of classical theologians to depict God with mostly masculine attributes).

A feminist hermeneutics is possibly best interpreted as a form of utopian thinking. Symbols such as the *Anima Mundi*, Androgyny or the Great Indian Goddess (*Mahadevi*) belong to an alternative imaginary

that has been frequently marginalized or repressed but can become emblems of resistance against old and new ideologies that subdue and very often kill women. In a world in which political and socio-economical disorders are frequently a reflection of a deeper spiritual crisis, a feminist hermeneutics may finally contribute to a kind of collective therapy by restoring a balance between the masculine and feminine in the world, in our soul and, more importantly, in our vision of God.

Renaud Fabbri, Managing Editor





## Feminine Wisdom and the World-Soul

*Florence Quentin*

**The exacerbation of the masculine at the sake of the Feminine may be the root-cause of the contemporary “disenchantment of the world.” Might it be that the only “way out” of this dead-end is for the feminine energy to be allowed once again to flow freely in our societies?**

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Translated from the French by Patricia Reynaud (SFS-Qatar). The article was originally published in *Ultreia!* 5, autumn 2015, p.65-69.

But where are people? You, man, should not seek the feminine in women, but seek and recognize it in yourself as you possess it from the beginning.

You, woman, you should not seek the masculine in man, but assume the masculine in yourself, since you possess it from the beginning.

But humankind is masculine and feminine, not just man or woman. You can hardly say of your soul what sex it is. But if you pay close attention, you will see that the most masculine man has a feminine soul, and the most feminine woman a masculine soul.

C.G. Jung, *The Red Book*<sup>1</sup>

“Feminine: referring to all the dominant and permanent features considered to belong to women.” The definition given by the dictionary of this substantive contains the seeds of a rather common confusion, reflecting the difficulty of understanding masculine and feminine as names designating genders rather than sexes. These differences are real however and they do not overlap. “We are often split between two essential and definite classes, on the one hand ‘men’ and on the other ‘women’, as if each of us belonged only to one half of humanity,” denounced the sociologist Irene Théry. She argues that the gender, either masculine or feminine, is not part of the identity of the person, but a modality of acting and relating to others, a way of acting.

## Two complementary polarities

In each individual, to various degrees, are combined in an equal manner these polarities, this “*yin-yang*”, which, in us, should go hand in hand harmoniously. In Taoist thought, the *yin-yang* is a creative opposition from which all perspectives emerge, two polar opposite but not a final duality, only two complementary forces necessary in order for Unity to arise. The world lives by the tension between two ways of acting, *yang* (as concentration or attack) and *yin* (dilution or defense). These two forces mix ceaselessly in the universe and in human being, whatever his/her sex is. Without one ever prevailing over the other.

According to depth psychology, and according to its founder C.G. Jung, there is a feminine in man, or anima, and a masculine in woman, or animus, the goal being the inner wedding between these two opposite and complementary forces, as a step toward the achievement of the process of individuation.<sup>2</sup> The figure of the Self can thus be revealed only through the alliance between the masculine and the feminine, between two differentiated opposite, and this without gender confusion but through an intimate union of the two polarities.

But then, if one admits that they might show us the “way out” – barring “saving the world” – how to define, without caricaturing them,



the “virtues” of the feminine?

One generally holds that the masculine – it goes without saying from a psychical, inner standpoint – pertains to the realm of the assertion, the intellect, the *Logos* (word), motion, action and power. The ideal of masculinity would revolve around values of objectivity and lucidity.

To the feminine, one commonly associates values such as compassion, the affective order, the ability to welcome the other, to relate to the other, to receive from the other, interiority and the dimension of *Eros* – which ensures a mediating function between divine and human love.

The feminine would be associated with nature – which does not mean, of course, that “women” as such are only destined to reproduce or are incapable of logical reasoning, as a certain form of feminist essentialism would like us to believe (according to it, there would be no reason to distinguish between sex and gender, since the sex of a person determines his/her gender).

One cannot ignore that since Antiquity, the Western world has excessively valorized the rational, mathematical and syllogistic logic as well as the sensory-experience. The Hellenist Jean-Pierre Vernant shows convincingly (in *Les Origines de la Pensée Grecque*) the divorce – and then the transition – that took place in the 5th century BCE between *mythos* (word and explanatory narrative) on the one hand, thus defined

as a tale, and therefore devalued, and the *logos*, the word based on the work of reason and a demonstrative approach. As the sociologist Michel Maffesoli rightly reminds us of the dominant values of modernity: “Imagination, which Descartes and Malebranches call ‘the chatter of the house’ (*la folle du logis*) is an obstacle to the proper working of the Goddess Reason.” In the footsteps of patriarchal values, our societies have, at the same time, relegated everything that pertains to the heart and to the experience of receptivity into the area of the archaic and the irrational. To quote the psychoanalyst Lily Jattiot, “in doing so [they] have granted the highest position to the intelligence of the masculine type, aiming at results to the expense of the intelligence of the feminine type

« *The anima mundi permeates all of creation like salt in water.* »

Marsilio Ficino

which looks for linkages and connections.”

Cut from its nourishing roots, the logical and technological reasoning that prevails today – it is not of course a question of abolishing it here but rather of enriching it and opening it though the integration of new notions such as the imaginary and the emotional – has led the world to harbor illusions of unlimited power: the myth of a promethean

science that would provide us with the keys to fully understand the universe while dominating nature. This myth proves to be, more than ever in the history of mankind, a mere vanity. Isn't "the disenchantment of the world" prophesized by Max Weber, who was announcing the advent of an order reducing everything to the material, to the rational and to the technical, one of its most depressing consequence? This evolution took and still is taking place at the expense of the Sacred and of Nature, which finds themselves disqualified, as well as the expense of an understanding and a wisdom of the relation, eminently feminine, more receptive and more aware of what binds man to the universe, to his environment, to others and ... to himself. An essential dimension that eco-spirituality now seeks to recapture. In this spirit, Michel Maffesoli (in *Matrimonium*) calls into question the image of the autonomous man, the man of progress, the dominating and controlling man and link this man to the despise for the earth than follows. By calling for a "sensorial reason" (*raison sensible*) against a morbid rationalism, he is pleading in favor of an "ecosophy," thus revivifying the figure of Wisdom. A disciple of Gilbert Durant holds that the postmodern man can retrieve his roots by taking a renewed care in "Mother-Earth" as "the ground of all experience of living together." It is worth mentioning that he uses expressions such as "invagination" ("to

withdraw into one's self") or "gestation" in order to prepare us for a new era characterized by "a new feminization of the world." To these notions, he associates those of kindness, common sense and motherly clemency toward the other and toward nature, thus creating the basis of a viable universe.

As for Pierre Rabhi, he also makes the connection between the societal crisis we are going through and the urgent necessity to reclaim feminine values as well as to give again their rightful place to women, the true salt of the earth: "I believe it is necessary to bring this exaltation of the masculine to an end, meaning the will to power, aggressiveness and domination. I feel deeply hurt by the universal subordination of women. How many men would be able to take care of themselves without those they deem inferior to them? How many girls have no access to education and how many spouses are still oppressed and beaten up? I am abashed by the fact that so many lives are born from this violent encounter between the masculine and the feminine. The families, the societies that result from it, can only experience a deep imbalance. In Nature, the two sexes are indispensable to the process of creation. And the feminine possibly even more so."

An idea lies at the heart of the eco-feminist movement and connects together the two forms of domination: that of men over women and that of human beings over

nature. By introducing the question of women within environmental ethics, this movement aligns itself as

**Our societies “have granted the highest position to the intelligence of the masculine type, aiming at results to the expense of the intelligence of the feminine type which looks for linkages and connections.”**

**Lily Jattiot**

well with an ethics of care – attention, care, responsibility, thoughtfulness, mutual care<sup>3</sup> – more social and political, seeing itself as a warning to the masculine, which in this world, always favors economic successes at the expense of other aspects, such as dependency or generosity ... Ecofeminism thus develops a new type of attention to environmental questions (connected to health and to vulnerability) and calls into question an alleged autonomy of economics, with its tendency to obscure its double dependency toward the household and toward the earthly environment.”<sup>4</sup>

If an ethics of care, consisting in bringing a concrete answer to the needs of others, reflects feminine values, it should not remain however the only moral concern of women, neither should it be seen as their essence. Care should become the

everyday experience of most of us, whatever our sex is, because it is not a new form of altruism, but rather a universal form of care for others. Moreover, it is important to “extract the concept of care from the context of medical institutions and to transfer it into a more relational environment, into a human ecology in which we are all dependent on each other. In fact, care, as a medical proposition, introduces a form of inequality whereas in itself the act of taking care reintroduces a form of equality between all human beings. Cure and care split into two different paths as Gilles Raymond summarizes.<sup>5</sup>

### **The rehabilitation of the world soul**

Our connection to “Mother Earth” in the face of the devastation of our world and the emergence of a renewed attention to our “common home” comes back as a leitmotiv in the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, published in 2015 by Pope Francis: in it, the Holy Father establishes a link between “the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity” and the relationship to the Earth and to wisdom ... of the Feminine, since the latter has always displayed the face of the *Sophia*, with the mystery of Love attached to Her. It is thus that Goethe, in his Second Faust, was writing that the Eternal Feminine “always attracts us and lifts us upward, toward the Highest”, only She can accomplish the salvation of the

world since She holds the keys of the enigma on which it is grounded. “World-soul” which “ordains and maintains the nature of all things” in the platonic thought – she is found in most cultural, spiritual and philosophical traditions of humanity, as in India where she takes the shape of the *Atman*, the universal soul of the world – about whom the philosopher Muhammad Taleb stresses “the feminine dimension, especially in Ibn Arabi, who identifies Her with the celestial Eve”.<sup>6</sup> Taleb adds that she is also our “innermost interiority”, the one that “opens to us the side paths of the great universe.”

The emergence of “the Sacred Feminine” adopts new forms nowadays, such as groups or circles of women, flourishing everywhere throughout the world, betraying sometimes the syncretic shortcomings of the New Age, are the sign of a mutation in our societies. These gatherings that for some of them are related to the worship of Mother Goddesses, tracing their lineage before the rise of monotheistic religions, by essence patriarchal as well as matrilineal societies – because matriarchy as such is a contemporary fantasy — are often related to a criticism of capitalism, which in its most savage forms destroys nature and dehumanizes. A sort of echo to Malraux’s call – “the task of the 21st century will be to reintroduce the gods in man – which among others could have as its epicenter the International Council of the 13 Great

Indigenous Mothers, created by women-healer and women-shaman coming from the US, Nepal, Tibet, Central and South America, the Arctic Circles, and Africa in order “to spread throughout the world the message of awakening of the Great Original Mothers according to the tradition of the North American Natives: this earth that carries us and nourishes is the sacred earth, our mother” According to them, the awakening of consciousness will take place only through the feminine through the transmission of ancestral and spiritual customs such as traditional medicine. “Salutary” role of these women, working for peace and healing, indispensable

**More than ever has the feminine a pivotal role to play in the collective psyche, in the manner of a “midwife” helping a renovated world to come into being.**

“fire-break” in order to prevent the “in flight crash” of our society possessed by hubris – immoderation— focused as it is only on technology to the point of neglecting the ethical, social and human dimension which constitute it: a hubris dreaming of abolishing death in the name of the new trans-humanist catechism.

Are cloning and “the increased man” (*l’homme augmenté*)

haunting our future? It has become urgent to unite the real and the eternal, the flesh and the spiritual, consciousness to action!

Rationality (*logos* in the sense of definition, proposition, science, creating word) and spirituality (*eros* in the larger sense or “incarnated participation to things”) should enter into dialogue and fertilize each other.

A return to the fundamentals of the soul is needed in order to provide her with a support, in order for her to accomplish herself in all the dimensions and places where she expresses herself – art, meditation, prayer, the exercise of the body, beauty in general. So many “welcoming places where the hidden face of the divine reveals itself.”<sup>7</sup>

More than ever has the feminine a pivotal role to play in the collective psyche, in the manner of a “midwife” helping a renovated world to come into being.

“By confusing the masculine with man and the feminine with woman, ours simplistic world mutilates both” concludes Lily Jattiot. “To restore to their full place the values and wisdom of the feminine, to rediscover play and joy without reason, may help us to find the way out of the dead-end.”

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## NOTES

- 1 C.G. Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus, a Reader's Edition*, edited with an introduction by Sonu Shamdasani, W. W. Norton & Company, p.227. [Note from the translator]
- 2 Individuation – from the Latin *individuum*, “that which cannot be divided” is a concept that we owe to Jung. It designs the path of growing through which an “individual” becomes one.
- 3 Care is used in the original French text because as Florence Quentin remarks “care in the French language does not have a precise translation.” [Note from the translator]
- 4 According the philosopher and feminist Elizabeth Badinter, the figure of the woman as mother implies the care of the weakest; for her, “care” may become a trap.
- 5 Gilles Raymond, “Qu’est-ce que le care? Souci des autres, sensibilité, responsabilité”, directed by Pascale Molinier, Sandra Laugier and Patricia Paperman, *Sociétés et jeunesses en difficulté*, hors-serie, 2010, URL: <http://sejed.revues.org/6658>
- 6 “L’âme universelle (*nafs al-kulliyaa*) de la philosophie visionnaire islamique” in *Eloges de l’Ame du Monde*, conversations with Nathalie Calme, Entrelacs, 2015.
- 7 Michel Cazeneuve, in *Eloges de l’Ame du Monde*, Entrelacs, 2015.



## **Faire de la place en soi pour l'autre: L'ouverture au féminin, une nécessité pour les religions du monde.**

*Eric Vinson*

**In this article, Eric Vinson revisits the symbolism of the Feminine, drawing from the teaching of the great spiritual traditions of the world and proposing a new definition of the feminine as “the capacity to make room in oneself for the other”. (Editor)**

### **Comment oser parler du « féminin » aujourd’hui ?**

Parler du « féminin » est fort difficile dans le monde post-moderne, notamment universitaire. Y tenant le haut du pavé, l'école de la déconstruction, les gender studies, la *Queer theory* rejettent en effet par principe une telle idée, en agitant contre elle le soupçon rédhibitoire d'« essentialisation » (peu ou prou complice de l'ordre sexiste en place)

et en disqualifiant toute autre approche que les leurs de la question des sexes/genres. A commencer par celle qui caractérise les principales religions et qui relève fondamentalement de la logique symbolique, où le féminin – et le masculin – constituent (souvent implicitement) des archétypes structurants.

A côté de cette difficulté, en quelque sorte conjoncturelle, il en existe trois autres obérant actuellement toute réflexion sur le religieux



et le féminin. La première est liée à la diversité des religions en la matière ; la seconde à l'impossibilité de parler du féminin sans évoquer le masculin, et réciproquement, car les deux notions sont intrinsèquement liées et (cor-)relatives, comme le sont « chaud/froid », « droite/gauche », etc. Dernière difficulté, enfin : ce couple notionnel est dissymétrique dans la plupart des cultures/religions du monde. Et ce du fait de leur commune infériorisation<sup>1</sup> du féminin à l'égard du masculin, qui fait de la domination virile et de ses corollaires (misogynie, phallocratie...) un fait pratiquement universel. Du moins jusqu'à ce que la modernité tardive cherche à rompre avec ce millénaire ordre des choses. Examiner la question du féminin dans les religions est donc impossible sans interroger cette hiérarchie/inégalité structurelle. Pour autant, « Le » masculin et « Le » féminin n'y sont pas toujours caractérisés de la même façon. Ce qui bien sûr affaiblit tout discours prétendant à l'objectivité, voire à l'universalité, dans son effort pour déterminer ce qu'il faut entendre par l'un et l'autre de ces termes.

Deux exemples suffiront : dans les religions/cultures monothéistes, le masculin est globalement connoté par les idées d'activité, de puissance, de mobilité, d'extériorité, dureté... ; et le féminin par les notions inverses et/ou complémentaires : passivité, faiblesse, immobilité, intériorité, douceur ... Or, on trouve dans l'hindouisme certaines



traditions qui exaltent le féminin à partir des idées/valeurs justement attribuées en Occident au masculin ; qu'on pense à la *Prakṛti* du *Sāṃkhya*, à la *Shakti* du tantrisme, toutes deux « actives », « mobiles », « puissantes » (la seconde prenant même le premier rôle dans la religiosité des dévots de « La Déesse »). Et dans le taoïsme chinois, si le « féminin » (*Yin*) reçoit quelques déterminations comparables à celles mises en avant par l'approche monothéiste du féminin (l'intériorité, en particulier), ces dernières y sont parfois interprétées/valorisées de façon opposée ; le *Yin* (sombre, hu-



mide, mou, lent...) étant dans ce cas présenté comme plus « fort » que le *Yang* masculin (lumineux, sec, dur, rapide...), de même que l'eau – archétype symbolique du *Yin* – finit à long terme par triompher de tout rocher, en l'érodant. Sachant, en outre, que c'est la complémentarité harmonieuse et l'équilibre non-hiérarchique du *Yin* et du *Yang* qui sont fondamentalement affirmés/recherchés par cette tradition extrême-orientale. Ce qui nous conduit, au vu de la condition féminine en Chine<sup>2</sup> pendant de nombreux siècles, à ne pas mésestimer la distance potentiellement à l'œuvre entre les représentations, notamment socio-religieuses, et les pratiques socio-politiques effectives. A tenir compte, en un mot, de l'écart entre les discours et images représentant « le féminin », d'une part ; et d'autre part, la condition effective des femmes au quotidien, dans la société en général, et dans le champ religieux en particulier, puisque un panthéon mettant à l'honneur le féminin et/ou des figures féminines ne garantit (presque) rien au sujet de la place concrète des femmes dans la société considérée.

### **Une caractéristique incontestable du « féminin »**

Malgré ces difficultés, nous pensons qu'un caractère incontestable du « féminin » peut malgré tout être retenu, et utilisé pour instruire la question « du masculin et du féminin dans les religions du

monde ». A savoir la différence objective entre les deux sexes – organiquement constituée et empiriquement évidente – en matière de reproduction sexuée. En effet, faut-il le rappeler : l'individu humain de sexe féminin procréé son petit à l'intérieur de son propre organisme, alors que l'individu humain de sexe masculin le fait, lui, à l'extérieur de son corps. Du mâle et de la femelle humains, seule celle-ci (la femme) se reproduit en faisant place en elle-même à sa progéniture, du moins le temps de la gestation ; et son corps, si ce n'est son rapport au monde<sup>3</sup> sont configurés – au moins pour une part – par ce trait spécifique : accueil potentiel pendant neuf mois du bébé à naître, et accueil préalable (du moins dans l'immense majorité des cas) du géniteur de ce dernier. C'est pourquoi nous définirons « le féminin » comme la capacité à faire de la place en soi pour l'autre<sup>4</sup>. Comme le pouvoir non seulement de donner la vie (le mâle humain le possède aussi, en tant que fécondateur), mais celui de porter la vie, au sens d'accueillir une autre vie<sup>5</sup> au plus intime de la sienne propre. Un pouvoir spécifique qui constitue bien sûr une possibilité, et qui n'a pas forcément vocation à se concrétiser pour tous les individus de sexe féminin.

### **L'irréductible uni-dualité du genre humain**

Deuxième idée clé à nos yeux : celle du caractère paradoxal



de la différence des sexes/genres, que l'on peut exprimer cursivement comme suit. Il n'y a rien de plus différent d'un homme qu'une femme, en tant qu'ils sont de genres/sexes différents ; et il n'y a rien de plus semblable à un homme qu'une femme, en tant qu'ils sont tous deux des humains ; ou plutôt, que l'humanité existe – et existe seulement – à tra-

vers cette « uni-dualité » genrée/sexuée. Contradictoires, ces deux propositions sont simultanément vraies, et nous mettent en présence de l'ambivalence fondamentale qui caractérise le genre humain (et sans doute, toute réalité). En présence du mystère de l'inséparabilité/complémentarité des opposés, dont les tensions entre « le masculin » et « le

féminin » dans l'humain, de même qu'entre le singulier et l'universel, constituent des marques éclatantes. Le fait que chaque être humain, homme ou femme, soit le fruit de l'union d'un père et d'une mère en témoigne assez. Sous le rapport des sexes, le même et l'autre ont ainsi vocation à s'unir, et à engendrer le même de l'un, et l'autre de l'autre, et ainsi de suite. Chaque personne humaine portant de ce fait en elle-même, à la propre racine de son être, la trace de la différence/complémentarité des sexes/genres. Plus : chacun(e) portant dans son corps et son psychisme, pour une part, l'autre genre/sexe.

### **Faire de la place en soi pour l'autre : une quadruple nécessité pour les religions**

C'est donc à la lumière de ce mystère de « l'uni-diversité » humaine et de l'ouverture intime à l'autre proprement féminine, auparavant évoquée, que nous traiterons notre question ; et ce selon les quatre axes interdépendants suivants.

#### *a) faire de la place au spirituel*

Tout d'abord, un axe spirituel, c'est-à-dire métaphysique, renvoyant à l'économie interne de chacune des religions.

Si l'on définit la spiritualité comme la capacité à faire place à l'Autre (au Divin) dans sa propre vie ; à se relier à l'Absolu, à l'Infini au plus intime de son existence quotidi-

enne (y compris psycho-corporelle, cf. le symbole du cœur, lieu de cette rencontre), la domination masculine et l'infériorisation du féminin à l'œuvre dans la plupart des religions n'ont-elles pas quelque rapport avec un certain déséquilibre spirituel de ces dernières ? Et leur potentielle redécouverte du féminin, comme celle du spirituel, ne reviennent-elles pas à une seule et même dynamique ? A une même opportunité de rééquilibrer les relations entre miséricorde et rigueur, entre mystique et légalisme, entre symbolisme et rationalité conceptuelle, entre ésotérisme et exotérisme ? A une même chance de mieux connaître le Principe spirituel suprême, en étant attentif à ses aspects « féminins »<sup>6</sup> aussi bien que « masculins », et à leurs reflets en nous et hors de nous ? Sans oublier que les uns et les autres sont (seulement) des symboles, impropres à cerner adéquatement la Réalité divine, mais indispensables aux êtres humains limités (c'est-à-dire, en l'occurrence, sexués/genrés) pour rentrer en relation avec Elle. Prenons un exemple de cette dialectique du « féminin » et du « masculin » dans la vie spirituelle : l'être humain spirituel qui tourne sa conscience vers son Principe (Dieu pour les monothéistes, le Soi pour les hindous, le *Tao* ou le Ciel pour les Chinois, l'Eveil ou la nature de Bouddha pour les bouddhistes, le Grand Esprit pour les Amérindiens, etc.) se trouve en quelque sorte « féminin » par rapport à cet Autre, dans la mesure où

le fidèle accueille passivement Son influence et se laisse pénétrer, transformer par elle. Simultanément, l'orant ou le méditant se trouve actif, c'est-à-dire en quelque sorte « masculin », par rapport à l'ensemble de la manifestation universelle, dans la mesure où sa focalisation spirituelle le configure justement au Principe de cette manifestation. Mais que se passe-t-il quand un tel équilibre, une telle « respiration » entre le fini et l'infini, entre le masculin et le féminin se trouvent perturbés pour une raison ou une autre ? Une disharmonie qualitative aux multiples conséquences néfastes, qui appelle justement un ré-équilibre, notamment entre le masculin et le féminin.

*b) faire de la place à la complexité et sortir du manichéisme*

La perspective d'un tel ré-équilibre nous conduit à notre second axe, qu'on pourrait dire épistémologique, gnoséologique, méthodologique, ou encore globalement philosophique, au sens de relatif à la connaissance et à la compréhension de la réalité. Regarder en face et interroger l'inégalité traditionnelle des sexes/genres permet en effet d'envisager un autre rapport possible au monde, valorisant cette fois la complémentarité dans la différence : l'unité dans la dualité, autrement dit, ce que l'Occident appelle la « coïncidence des opposés » et l'Orient la « non-dualité ». Ce qui revient à sortir des a priori dichotomiques, des approches univoques

et manichéennes ; à échapper au monisme, au dualisme et au relativisme par une approche ternaire, qualitative, relationniste. A passer de la logique du tiers exclu à celle du tiers inclus, en faisant place à l'autre de la science et de la raison (à savoir la sensibilité et le poétique, par exemple) dans la science et la raison elles-mêmes, pour les rendre plus fortes et véridiques. Le tout au profit d'une synthèse plus englobante, plus complète, relevant d'une « pensée complexe », d'une épistémologie et d'une anthropologie « complémentaristes »<sup>7</sup>. Dans le cas de l'étude du fait religieux, cela implique par exemple de combiner les points de vues internes – ceux des différentes théologies et écoles relevant de la religion considérée – et les regards externes (ceux des autres religions, mais aussi des différentes disciplines académiques et des philosophies non-religieuses) à chaque confession ; cette variété d'angles d'approche permettant de mieux rendre compte scientifiquement de la réalité étudiée.

*c) faire de la place à la diversité religieuse et convictionnelle*

Cet exemple nous conduit à notre troisième axe de réflexion, que l'on pourrait dire éthique et dialogique. A la fois intra- et inter-religieux, il renvoie à l'économie des rapports entre les différentes religions, et au sein de celles-ci, entre la majorité et les minorités (entre les différents courants, sensibilités,

écoles...). Pour les religions, faire place au féminin revient ainsi à renoncer à l'exclusivisme et au sentiment de sa propre supériorité pour faire place en soi à l'autre conviction comme à l'autre croyant, proche ou lointain ; à reconnaître tout ce qui rapproche les uns et les autres sans nier ce qui les distingue ; à accepter, plus, à authentiquement valoriser la diversité religieuse interne et externe. A accueillir les richesses, les questions venues d'ailleurs, et surtout les frères et sœurs autrement croyants (ou non-croyants), par une nouvelle hospitalité, synonyme d'une nouvelle fécondité mutuelle. Ce qui revient, notamment, à connaître et à (re-)valoriser l'apport spécifique des femmes dans chaque tradition considérée, que cet apport soit effectif ou potentiel. Une telle évolution passe bien sûr par la non-violence, le dialogue et le « faire ensemble », qui procède de la célébration conjointe des singularités (les différences) et de leur dépassement (*Aufhebung*) dans l'universel humain, reflet de l'unité cosmique et de l'unité principielle. Cela va sans dire, cette hospitalité « féminine » n'implique pas de devenir ou d'absorber l'autre croyant, ce qui serait une dynamique de fusion et de confusion, faisant disparaître les pôles de la relation et conduisant à son auto-destruction. Bien au contraire, par la rencontre la plus intime, une telle hospitalité conforte chacun dans son identité propre comme dans son ouverture et son élan vers le nouveau, partagé ;

de même que les amants ne sont jamais autant homme et femme respectivement qu'au moment même où ils s'unissent, en goûtant à la fois à leur singularité d'êtres sexués/genrés, à leur unité d'espèce et à la fécondité que cette union des complémentaires peut impliquer. Ce qui conforte le caractère heuristique de l'analogie entre différence sexuelle et différence religieuse/culturelle, eu égard à l'universel humain concret (autrement dit, enraciné, singularisé). En effet, c'est en étant juif ou chrétien ou musulman ou hindou ou bouddhiste ou agnostique, etc. que je manifeste mon humanité propre, et notre humanité commune à tous, qui ne va pas sans ces singularités concrètes. Et ce de la même façon qu'en parlant, je manifeste à la fois mon appartenance à l'humanité (plan de l'universel) et à telle ou telle communauté linguistique particulière (plan du singulier). Dans son *Pèlerinage aux sources*,<sup>8</sup> Lanza del Vasto a l'intuition de ce que nous voulons dire : « L'Occidental qui n'a jamais quitté l'Occident ressemble à un garçon qui n'est jamais sorti du collège et qui n'a jamais connu que des garçons. Enfin il se réveille de l'enfance, rentre dans sa famille et dans le monde, et la femme lui est révélée. C'est une expérience du même ordre qui nous attend aux Indes. Nous y trouvons une humanité semblable à la nôtre autant qu'opposée : oui, quelque chose comme un autre sexe. »





*d) faire de la place aux femmes, dans une logique de complémentarité et non de rivalité, en affrontant la question hiérarchique, au cœur de la tension entre les religions et la postmodernité*

Socio-politique et culturel, notre dernier axe renvoie enfin à l'économie des rapports entre les religions et leur contexte actuel postmoderne (leurs organisation et positionnements ad intra et ad extra étant bien sûr interdépendants).

Faire de la place en soi pour l'autre, c'est bien sûr avant tout faire de la place au féminin, et aux femmes en chair et en os, au sein des religions, de leurs institutions et hiérarchies, de leurs démarches exégétiques et rituelles, etc. C'est se poser

la question de la place des femmes, et des injustices qui leur sont faites, non seulement dans l'ordre religieux lui-même, mais aussi dans l'ordre socio-politique au sens large (économique, culturel, etc.). Et c'est demander aux femmes – et tenir compte – de leurs avis à elles en la matière, non simplement de façon théorique mais aussi pratique, pour engager un changement collectif effectif quant à la question du rapport des genres/sexes.

Par ailleurs, assumer et questionner le déséquilibre marquant historiquement les rapports masculin/féminin dans la plupart des civilisations, c'est interroger à nouveaux frais la problématique égalité/hierarchie elle-même. Sachant que la modernité se caractérise par une « irrésistible » poussée vers « l'égalisation des conditions », reconnue par Tocqueville comme le ressort essentiel de la démocratie en tant que fait anthropologique majeur ; alors que les religions semblent (par nature ?) s'organiser autour d'un principe hiérarchique, dont témoigne l'étymologie même de ce terme. Dans ces conditions, viser une meilleure parité dans le vécu et le fonctionnement institutionnel des religions implique-t-il d'en finir avec ce modèle hiérarchique traditionnel ? Et quelles conséquences tirer d'une réponse positive ou négative à cette interrogation, sachant que le « sexisme » – réel ou supposé – reproché aux religions par leurs adversaires post-modernes (domi-

nants en Occident et dans la plupart des institutions internationales) constitue l'un des principaux et plus efficaces arguments contre elles, et pas seulement de manière rhétorique ? Pour le dire autrement, une meilleure (au sens de « plus égalitaire », plus « complémentariste ») appréciation de la différence des sexes/genres paraît une lame de fond civilisationnelle fort difficile à endiguer... Les religions peuvent-elles s'y adapter sans se dénaturer, c'est-à-dire à partir de leurs propres ressources traditionnelles, de leur propre logique symbolique (pour une part hiérarchique) et répertoire scripturaire ? Sont-elles en mesure d'échapper à l'antique hiérarchisation du masculin et du féminin, à la séculaire domination des femmes par les hommes, sans se dissoudre dans une globalisation hostile à toute différenciation héritée et à toute hiérarchisation qualitative ? Autant de questions épineuses, que nous ne pouvons que poser pour l'instant.

### **Faire place au féminin pour retrouver l'équilibre cosmo-socio-théandrique, ou l'urgence d'une écologie intégrale**

Dans le contexte actuel du « règne de la quantité » et de l'indifférenciation-uniformisation matérialiste qu'il implique, avec la crise anthropologique et civilisationnelle globale (à la fois environnementale, économique, intellectuelle, géopolitique, etc.), les

violences et conflits divers ainsi que les paniques morales et identitaires afférentes, le principal enjeu pour les religions du monde s'énonce ainsi : résister aux poussées post-humanistes qui s'affirment de plus en plus. Or l'un des principaux verrous anthropologiques que ces dernières s'attachent à faire sauter est bien sûr la différence de sexes/genres, différence qualitative par excellence, et ses implications quant à la reproduction (véritablement) humaine... Dans le contexte actuel, travaillé en profondeur par le féminisme, défendre cette différence comme l'un des marqueurs clés de l'humanité elle-même n'est possible qu'à condition de la désidentifier avec le machisme et la domination masculine. Reconnaître et apprécier la dualité sexuée fondamentale de la nature humaine est ainsi inséparable d'une réconciliation avec celle-ci, en l'Homme, mais aussi avec l'idée de nature hors de lui. En cela, l'ouverture des religions au féminin ne va pas sans une certaine prise de conscience écologique, au sens d'une écologie globale et intégrale. Une écologie humaine elle-même inséparable d'un humanisme intégral, qui reconnecte l'alliance non-dualiste des sexes humains et l'alliance de cet Homme-couple primordial avec son Principe spirituel (cf. l'analogie universelle entre le couple hétérosexuel et le couple humain/Divin). Une écologie humaine qui reconnaît dans ce couple humain primordial, intrinsèquement relationnel, la véritable image<sup>9</sup>

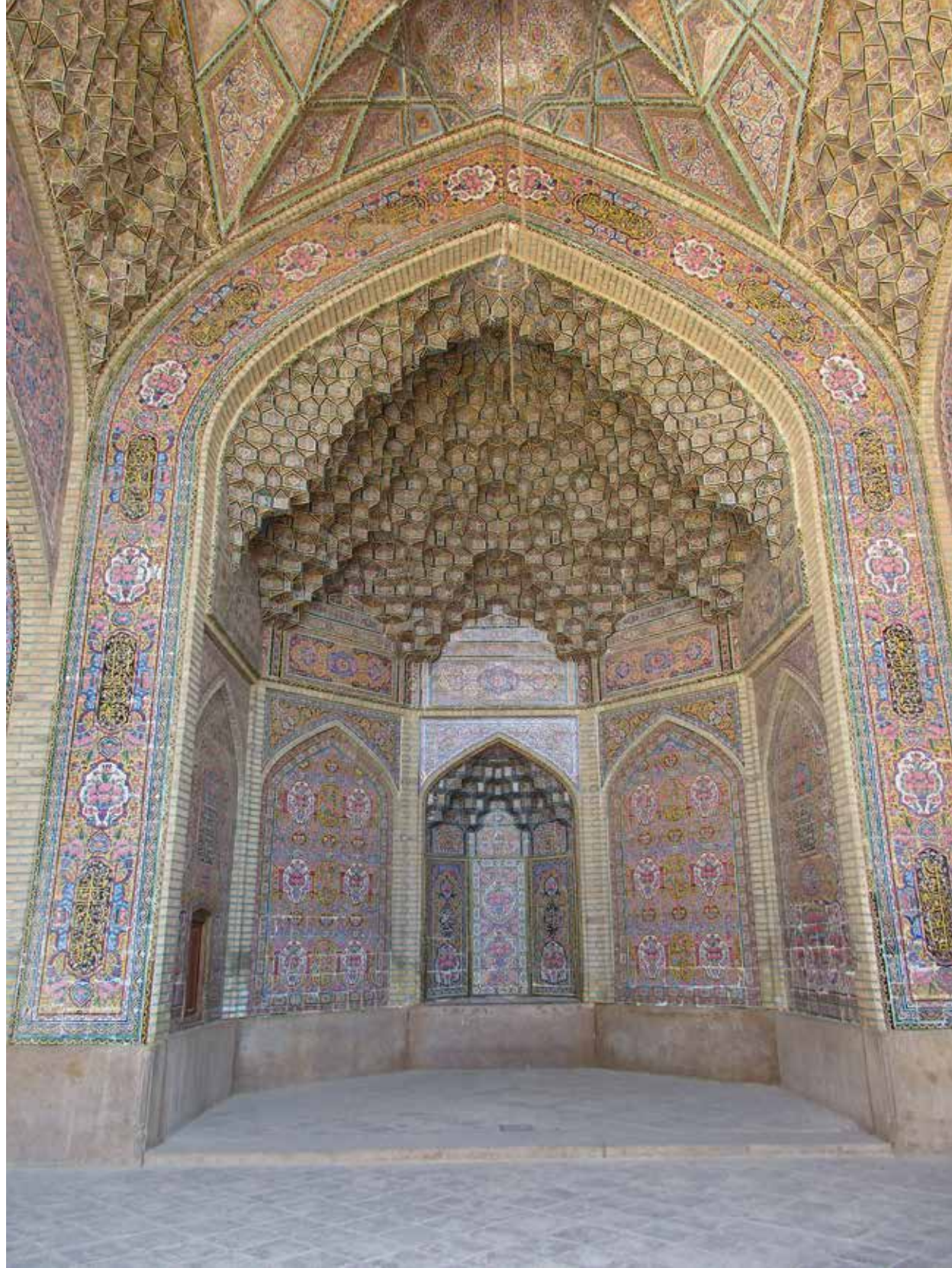


de ce Principe.

## **Féminisme et souci du féminin (authentique)**

En tant que problématique globale, pour une part métaphysique, la question du féminin dépasse ainsi de beaucoup celle de la seule condition féminine, même si cet aspect du sujet est certes le plus visible, l'un des plus urgents mais aussi sans doute l'un des moins difficiles à régler, pour peu qu'on le veuille vraiment. Prenons un exemple trivial mais parlant : tendre vers une réelle égalité salariale entre hommes et femmes n'est pas rien ... mais demeure bien peu par rapport au souci de ré-équilibrer la civilisation postmoderne sous les rapports que nous avons soulignés. Cette distinction entre « féminisme » et « souci du féminin » conduit à la remarque suivante : une civilisation ou une religion faisant plus de place aux femmes n'en feront pas plus au féminin si, pour accéder à la reconnaissance et au pouvoir, les femmes doivent se « viriliser » et/ou les hommes se « féminiser » de façon forcée, superficielle, volontariste, artificielle... Ou si la promotion des femmes se fait au détriment des hommes et celle du féminin au détriment du masculin, dans une logique de rivalité et de concurrence sans fin entre les genres, « guerre des sexes » sans issue et mutuellement désavantageuse pour les unes comme pour les autres. Reproduire (con-

sciemment ou non) « dans l'autre sens » les déséquilibres machistes pour corriger ces derniers serait contre-productif, pour ne pas dire absurde, notamment par les raidissements qu'un tel excès provoquerait à l'encontre des femmes chez certains hommes, et certaines traditions ou cultures se sentant à tort ou à raison menacés par un tel processus. Inverser les déséquilibres et les stéréotypes, mimer ou, pire, caricaturer l'autre sexe pour rivaliser avec lui – ou ce qu'on s'imagine de lui – n'est vraiment pas une solution face aux problèmes qui nous occupent ; et rappeler cette vérité inconfortable au monde est l'une des missions privilégiées des traditions religieuses dans le contexte actuel, ces dernières ayant de ce point de vue (de par leur « expertise en matière d'humanité ») des ressources spécifiques irremplaçables à verser au débat planétaire. En cela, les religions sont requises par cet enjeu global, pour éviter que l'inévitable – et nécessaire – remontée en puissance du féminin ne revienne à un déchaînement de la dialectique des contradictoires, montant inévitablement aux extrêmes ; le tout conduisant immanquablement à un accroissement de la violence et de la confusion générale, universellement nuisibles. Oui, le rééquilibrage global (pas seulement religieux) entre masculin et féminin ne doit pas se faire au détriment du masculin, mais bien à l'avantage des deux polarités, dans une logique de vraie complémen-



tarité différenciante et unifiante mutuellement bénéfique. Parce que l'un et l'autre ne sont que l'ombre d'eux-mêmes si l'un ou l'autre ne va pas bien ou se coupe de son partenaire. Parce que l'un et l'autre ne peuvent être véritablement eux-mêmes et se bien porter qu'ensemble, en se nourrissant et se renforçant l'un l'autre, dans une complémentarité qualitative semblable à celle du Yin et du Yang selon le taoïsme. C'est seulement comme cela que l'on évitera que le féminin authentique (à savoir : offrir activement sa capacité d'accueil) ne se mutile en copiant un masculin caricatural, et que le masculin véritable (à savoir : se lancer comme capacité de don) ne se déforme en féminin contrefait. Seulement comme cela que l'on se gardera en la matière des multiples « pathologies » post-modernes, individuelles et collectives, par nature hostiles aux traditions religieuses : troubles socio-psychiques, parodies, contrefaçons, inversions, radicalisations, etc.

### **Conclusion : promouvoir la complémentarité, ou l'apport irremplaçable des religions**

Dans une meilleure évaluation du féminin – en tant que capacité à faire de la place en soi pour l'autre – comme de ses rapports avec le masculin et de leur complémentarité intrinsèque, s'ouvre l'opportunité d'un nouveau rapport au monde et d'une nouvelle jeunesse pour les religions,

de toute façon sommées par les temps actuels (et futurs) d'échapper à une phallocratie séculaire, contraire à leur authentique génie et intenable à moyen terme. De quoi chercher et un jour proposer un nouveau modèle humain individuel et collectif, combinant modernité et tradition ; une nouvelle synthèse qui désarticulerait différence et inégalité, égalité et uniformité, pour conjuguer au contraire spécificité et égalité, singularité et complémentarité... Entre les excès jumeaux du dogmatisme et du relativisme, de l'exclusivisme et du confusionnisme, du hiérarchisme et de l'égalitarisme, d'un sexisme masculiniste ou féministe s'ouvre ainsi une perspective relationniste, paradoxale, se tenant sur le fil du rasoir entre les extrêmes. Celle d'une voie du milieu et d'une nouvelle alliance, centrée sur la relation et le dépassement des oppositions stériles en vue d'une fécondité partagée.

Elle était béante : par lui, elle est comblée

Il était trop-plein : par elle, il se vide et s'ouvre

Ensemble, ils ne font plus qu'Un

Et de l'Un naissent les dix-mille choses.



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## NOTES

- 1 Infériorisation où il faudrait distinguer ce qui relève du religieux en tant que tel, ou de logiques « profanes », d'abord socio-politiques, culturelles et psychologiques.
- 2 Une telle distance entre les représentations et les relations réelles des sexes/genres vaut bien sûr pour la plupart des contextes civilisationnels, pas seulement pour l'ex-empire du Milieu.
- 3 Cf. en particulier l'impact – physique, psychologique, socio-culturel... – du cycle menstruel, d'une grossesse éventuelle (à commencer par le risque de mourir en couches, si déterminant, à l'échelle historique) et de l'allaitement des bébés.
- 4 Cette idée provient d'une interview de Delphine Horvilleur (troisième femme rabbin en France) par Vincent Remy, Téléràma.fr. 26/07/2014 <http://www.telerama.fr/idees/le-rabbin-delphine-horvilleur-le-judaisme-liberal-est-minoritaire-en-france,115169.php>. Voir aussi "De la place en soi pour l'autre". Emmanuelle Gilloots. Gestalt 2015/1 (n° 46) *Société française de Gestalt* (S.F.G.) ed.
- 5 Nous parlons de la vie de l'enfant à naître, bien sûr ; mais l'on ne doit pas oublier que ce dernier peut se faire place dans sa mère seulement dans la mesure où son père y a été aussi, préalablement, « accueilli » pour une part.
- 6 En contexte chrétien, l'on qualifie de « Père » la première Personne de la Trinité ; mais, absolument illimité, n'est-« Il » pas aussi « Mère » ? Ou bien serait-ce là une qualification adaptée à la spécificité de l'Esprit Saint ?
- 7 C'est-à-dire, ici, une pensée attentive aux complémentarités plus qu'aux oppositions, Cf. Les travaux de George Devereux, ethnologue et psychanalyste franco-hongrois qui passe souvent pour le fondateur de l'ethnopsychiatrie.
- 8 Paris : Denoël, (1943) 1962. 407 p., p. 118.
- 9 Car, comme le dit le premier récit de création de l'Homme dans *la Genèse* (1, 27) : « Dieu créa l'Homme à son image; c'est à l'image de Dieu qu'il le créa. Mâle et femelle furent créés à la fois » ; autrement dit, l'humanité, c'est bien l'union du mâle et de la femelle humains, et c'est bien ce couple qui constitue l'image du Créateur, non le mâle seul. Certes, le deuxième récit biblique de création de l'Homme (*Gn 2, 18-25*) est nettement plus ambigu du point de vue qui nous occupe (femme créée non seulement après l'homme, mais surtout après les animaux, comme « une aide » (*Gn 2, 18*) pour Adam, et à partir d'une « côte » de ce dernier ; ce qui peut être interprété diversement eu égard à l'égalité homme/femme...).





## The Celestial Virgin

*Franklin Merrell-Wolff*

Traditional woman has been the custodian of pleasure, and the dispensing of pleasure has been a large part of her glory and power. Too often, in these later days, woman-kind has been disposed to discredit her own natural glories and powers by becoming an imitator of man. This is really giving to man-power and man-function a greater tribute than

they deserve. That essence the outer embodiment of which is woman in a peculiar sense constitutes a need of this world today that is especially poignant. There is too great an over-balance of harsh willfulness abroad in the world. Consequently, there is a need for the counter-balancing forces, and these woman, alone, is really competent to exercise. Among

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Excerpt from Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Pathways Through To Space*, Julian Press, 1973, pp.46-7.



these essentially feminine qualities the following stand out: Beauty, Mercy, Tenderness, Charm, Ecstasy, preservation of proven values, etc. It is a grave mistake to regard these powers as inferior to the Creative Will, the Will to Power, the Daring of the Unknown, and the Judgment that peculiarly mark the masculine principle. The latter powers are unquestionably indispensable both in the world-field and for Inward Penetration, but by themselves they are unbalanced and can easily drop from a constructive to a destructive level. The isolated masculine principle cannot check this tendency and, so, right here is where the feminine quality is grievously needed. The feminine powers are just as strong as the masculine, although they function in a more subtle way. We greatly need more women who justly appreciate the ancient and natural feminine powers and arts.

Man is *Siva*, the formless Light; woman is *Shakti*, the Current which opposes and embodies the Light. Without embodiment, the

Light of Consciousness remains void of self-consciousness. Since self-consciousness is the one great achieved value, it is easy to see how vitally important the *Shakti* principle is.

In Her highest aspect, Woman is the Celestial Virgin, and this is none other than the Current of Bliss. The Current is a Virgin, because of the quality of ever-becoming-new. Though impregnated by the Fire of Wisdom, yet She remains a Virgin because She is ever-changing within Her own Self-identity. The union of Wisdom and the Virgin gives birth to the Christ, and this is the real Immaculate Conception. This union is the untellable Joy of which all lesser ecstasies are but faint shadows. So, deep and lasting Joy is the true sign of the genuine and noble religiosity. Austere gloom in the name of religion is a sacrilege and sign of failure. Only false religion is dreary. The Holy is Free and Joyful.



## **Feminism, Muslim Theology and Religious Pluralism**

*Interview with Nayla Tabbara and Jerusha Lamptey*

*Renaud Fabbri: Since at least the Islamic Revolution in Iran and other more recent political developments in the Sunni world, the question of the status of women has become a central and increasingly polarizing topic*

*in world affairs in general and in the relation between Islam and the Western world in particular. Rightly or wrongly, there is also a growing perception that the situation of women has worsened rather than improved*

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*in the Muslim world over the last decades, at least in some countries. Would you agree with this assessment and if so, why has it been so and why has the status of women become such a contentious issue?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* To begin, I would say that the question of the status of women extends back much further than the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Speaking only of Islamic contexts and traditions, we see questions about women, their status and roles discussed in the *Qur'an* and *ahadith*. In relation to the “Western” world, there is also a longer history that is evident in multiple discourses, especially in the genre of writing known as traveler’s accounts and in artistic representations of Muslims, Muslim settings, and Muslim women. Mohja Kahf has written a book that traces some of these various and long-standing representations. In relation to the last few decades, the rise and spread of rigid and conservative ideologies and Islamic interpretations is certainly a concern in relation to women. This does not mean that the situation of every individual Muslim woman has worsened, but it does mean that in many contexts women do not have the same legal status and rights as men. This impacts the physical, economic, marital, educational and even spiritual opportunities of women. In terms of it being a contentious issue, it is also true that the topic of women has been utilized by various “Western” contingents AND

by various Islamic groups in order to highlight perceived fundamental distinctions between “Islam and the West”. I would argue that in both situations women have been used as propaganda, and that concern for women is not always the primary concern. Finally, I would say that if women are suffering, if women do not have equal rights, and if women need support, then it is a real issue. The fact that certain “Western” and certain Muslim groups exploit the topic of women for their purposes does not negate the fact that there are real issues and lives at stake.

*Nayla Tabbara:* It is true that since the 1980s there are two movements on the Islamic scene: one movement “on women”, and one movement “from women”.

By movements “on women” I mean the emergence and proliferation of Islamist extremist movements, of Islamist rule (whether of *Sunni* or *Shi'i*) and Islamist legislation that is against the other, the other without being the person from a different religion or sect, and the other within, mainly women.

Yet in parallel, since the 1980s Islamic feminism has been expanding, and this is what I call the movement “from women”. Women have not only been demanding rights and changing rules and laws and participating more in public life, which they have been doing in Muslim majority countries since the beginning of the 20th century, but they have

achieved since the 1980s big steps in (re)gaining their place in the religious sphere. Women have fought their back into the mosque to pray, as they had been over history moved away from it and in some cases prohibited access to the mosque. They have changed religious laws in many countries regarding personal status, and have in some cases breached the taboo of women being at the pulpit as an imam giving a Friday or *Eid* sermon. Finally they have regained their place in Islamic studies, not only in transmitting traditional studies but in producing new Islamic thought, new theories in the study of *Qur'an*, and new theologies.

### **Feminism(s) and Muslima Theology**

*Renaud Fabbri: Could you give us an overview of the emergence and evolution of the Feminist discourse in the Middle-East and the Muslim World?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* There are many good books written on the topic by specialists in these areas, including those written by Margot Badran, Leila Ahmed, and Lila Abu-Lughod. I would direct you to these and other sources, which provide detailed analyses of particular contexts. One comment I will add is that feminist discourse is not a single entity; there are many formulations of feminism. Therefore, in looking at this history you see multiple strands of discourse stemming from different sources

at different junctures. These range from a general concern for women's well being to particular colonial formulations of universal feminism to third world feminisms.

*Nayla Tabbara:* In a nutshell, the feminist discourse in the Middle East was not Islamic nor Christian nor Jew nor other, it was a feminist movement that started at the beginning of the 20th century and responded to the needs of women from the different religious backgrounds to break the limitations that were by law imposed on them and demand their rights in participation in political life.

Religious feminism came at a later stage. Some argue that the feminist movement worldwide was becoming too a-religious, if not anti-religious, and some believing women wanted to combine their feminist positions with their religious beliefs. This led to the development of Christian feminism, and Muslim feminism as of the 1980s. This faith-based feminism stems from within the religion to effect change in it regarding women. One important note is that the feminist movement in the Middle East and the faith-based feminist movements have also had men that championed them since the beginning of the 20th century, including Muslim religious leaders.

*Renaud Fabbri: For most Western secular feminists, religion is the root-cause of the historical alienation of*

women and the origin of patriarchal values. Why and how do you see the role of Islam as potentially more positive in terms of women's identity and women's lives?

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* Religion certainly has been a cause of historical and contemporary alienation for women and a zone of patriarchal values. This is true. What is not true is that this is all religion has been, has to be, or can be. Religions all have the potential to be egalitarian and the potential to be patriarchal. Islam is no different. There are aspects of the tradition, for example *tafsir* and law, that are dominated by patriarchal and androcentric assumptions. Can this be different? Of course, but it will take a lot of challenging self-reflection on behalf of the worldwide Muslim community. And there are aspects of Islamic sources and tradition that are phenomenology egalitarian and just. These will need to be prioritized.

While I find great beauty in Islamic traditions, I do not believe that they are necessarily or inherently more positive than other traditions—including other secular worldviews—when it comes to women's identity and women's lives.

*Nayla Tabbara:* Religion is what we

make of it. Our culture influences our interpretation of religious texts and we either rigidify interpretation and sanctify it so that no one dares to change it, or we allow interpretation to evolve according to the



Photo courtesy of Patrick Ringgenberg

core values of both our faith and our time. One of the root causes of patriarchalism and of extremism is thus, according to me, the rigidifying of medieval interpretations. Therefore, to promote human rights, women's rights, religious freedom, and other of our most important causes today,





I believe that we need to go back to the text and “un-read patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur’an*”, using an expression from Asma Barlas, providing new interpretations to verses that led to unjust rules and negative perception of women. But all this should be done based on a theological foundation, that of God’s love for all humankind equally and of God’s justice, with a holistic reading of the *Qur’an*, i.e. taking the whole of the *Qur’an*, not a selection of verses, and a contextual approach, i.e. reading verses about relations between men and women in the context of 7th century Arabia and taking from them the moral of the story, in this case the impressive advancement in regards to women’s rights at that time, instead of sticking to the letter of the verse. If we follow this meth-

odology, and if we base ourselves on the end note of the verses concerning women in terms of advancement at the time of the beginning of Islam, then we can see this as an opening for us to go towards more opening in explaining some verses that are still interpreted in a problematic and apologetic way.

*Renaud Fabbri: How do you see the role of Muslim-Woman theologians in promoting gender equality and social fairness toward women and fighting the various forms of violence against women in the Muslim World and elsewhere?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey: Muslima theologians and other Muslim women who critically yet committedly engage the tradition play an invaluable role*



in terms of promoting equality and fighting against structural and physical violence against Muslim women. They have knowledge of the tradition, its sources, and the diversity of interpretations that have been offered throughout the centuries. They are able to chart the manner in which authority has been constructed throughout the tradition and the manner in which diverse contexts shaped ideas of authority. They are capable of challenging patriarchal and androcentric interpretations that are frequently presented as the word of God, and thus as indisputable. This is why some other Muslims seek to delegitimize the work of *Muslima* theologians and Muslim women scholars. It is provocative because it is rooted in the tradition, knowledgeable of the tradition, critical of aspects of the tradition, and relentless in its pursuit of justice for all people.

*Nayla Tabbara:* The role of Muslim-Woman theologians is not only to promote gender equality and work for the rights of women, this being the role of Muslim feminists and activists for women's rights. The role of Muslim women theologians is like the role of Muslim men theologians, to promote new interpretations, new reflections, explanations on religious issues, concerning dogma and concerning the role of the believers and their relations to the world, i.e. to creation, to each other, to politics, to society...etc. Women's

causes come within this framework, and women theologians can assist Muslim feminists and activists by providing them with the theological foundations for what they do, and vice versa, activists and feminists can help theologians by giving them information from the ground that allows them to test their reflections. Thinking that women theologians only deal with issues concerning women is like saying women doctors are not only gynecologists. We need to get out of this mentality and see that women theologians deal with all matters of faith, otherwise, we would have feminine theologies for women and masculine theologies for men!

*Renaud Fabbri:* Prof. Tabbara, you present yourself as a Muslim-Woman theologian and Prof. Lamptey as a *Muslima* theologian. None of you claim to be Feminist Theologians. How would you position yourself vis-à-vis Western Secular Feminists? Do you see overlaps between their concerns and yours?

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* My usage of the label "*Muslima* Theologian" is designed to be particular yet not dismissive of feminism. In other words, I consider myself a feminist, yet I am a particular sort of feminist. In line with other forms of feminism, such as womanist theology, *mujerista* theology, *Latina* theology, African women's theology, and Asian women's theology, I started using this term-

nology in order to critique assumptions of universal female experience and assumptions of parity across religious and secular worldviews. In addition, I use this label to capture aspects of my personal, experiential and theoretical positionality. It indicates that my approach arises out of my identification as a believing and practicing Muslim. More importantly, it indicates that my work is rooted in the Islamic tradition, while simultaneously probing and testing the bounds of that tradition. The term *Muslima* also indicates an interconnection with my positioning as a woman. Part of this relates to my individual experiences as a woman. However, another aspect of it arises from a deliberate choice to align myself with—and draw pointed insights from—scholarly reflections on women’s experience, including those drawn from other feminisms and feminist theologies. In reference to “Western secular feminists,” I would respond by asking, who do you actually mean? What individuals? What groups? Rather than reify the myth of an inherent clash between Islam and “Western secular feminism”, we need to be specific and informed. There is indeed overlap in my work and the work of some feminists who are not religious, and in other cases I have concerns. In general, I would say that my concerns arise when feminism (of any kind) is used to override the agency and voice of people or to holistically demonize all religion. However, this

is not the position of all secular feminisms.

*Nayla Tabbara:* I present myself as a Muslim Woman theologian and not as a feminist theologian because I do not work on women or gender issues. My focus in theology is “Theology of the other” i.e. Islamic perception of diversity and other religions. Thus my work only overlaps with the work for western secular feminists around the fundamental values such as human dignity, equality, respect of individuality, respect of diversity...etc.

My work overlaps more with Muslim feminist exegetes (interpreters) in methodology, the holistic and contextual approach to the Qur’an and the unreading of patriarchal or exclusivist interpretations, i.e. interpretations that consider that other than Muslims do not achieve salvation.

*Renaud Fabbri:* *In your opinion, why is it that the concept of “feminism” has come to be considered by many women scholars of the Muslim world as intrinsically problematic?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* I don’t agree that it is always considered in this fashion. Yes, there is an ambivalent relationship with certain modern formulations of feminism, particularly those formulated and enacted as part of missionary, colonial and modern imperialism. These particular formulations have been used as

political capital and have promoted the notion that there is only one way for women to be free, equal and empowered. Underlying this has been the assumption—not based on fact or research—that women’s experience is universal and homogeneous. This is of course not true. But, these are not the only forms of feminism that exist. In fact, there exist a multitude of “second-wave” and “third-wave” feminisms that arose precisely to critique these notions of universal women’s experience that were largely based on the experience of white, Western and middle class women. Among these critiques is post-colonial feminism that seeks to expose the manner in which power, race, religion and sexuality converge in colonial and post-colonial contexts. There are those female voices that unequivocally reject feminism as “foreign” or “un-Islamic.” They are more than entitled to this opinion. In my view, however, this stance is connected to two important realities. First, it mimics the rhetoric of authoritarian (usually patriarchal) Islamic ideologies, as well as the rhetoric of colonial and imperialistic ideologies. Both of these try to emphasize an inherent disconnect between Islam and feminism. Second, I believe this opinion reveals a lack of knowledge of contemporary feminism, and especially feminist theologies, the diverse feminist approaches of women of faith in other traditions. Contemporary feminist theologians grapple with patriarchy

in their traditions, with secular and universalized feminisms, and with legacies of colonialism and imperialism. I believe deep knowledge of these diverse voices would make the unequivocal rejection of all feminism more difficult.

*Nayla Tabbara:* As mentioned above, Muslim women theologians deal with all issues related to Islam and Muslims, not only “women issues”. Feminism was and still is very important in the journey of de-patriarchalizing our traditions and regaining women’s voice and role, yet the role of women theologians and women religious scholars should not stop at issues of women, but should cover all issues in religion, otherwise feminism becomes a trap.

### **Religious knowledge and Qur’anic Hermeneutics**

*Renaud Fabbri:* Islam grants a very important place to women such as Maryam, Aisha or Fatimah. Can these women still represent a realistic model for women? Or do you think on the contrary that the emphasis on these ideal, paradigmatic figures tends to obscure more concrete contemporary challenges for women?

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* Exemplary women are by nature exemplary, meaning they have a particular and rare experience. In the case of Mary, for example, not many women can relate to the notion of being impregnated by

God's will through the angel Gabriel. This is not their experience. However, there are other aspects of Mary, such as her persistent trust in God, which can be emulated and valuable. However, one issue is that accounts of these women have been largely recorded and interpreted by men. This means that idealized figures can be used to enshrine patriarchal and androcentric conceptions of the ideal woman and to obscure contemporary challenges. I

would like to see two things in this area. First, women must re-interpret these examples in ways that actually relate to their contemporary experience. What can Mary teach us about our struggles, about being alone, about being slandered, about being in positive relation with God even when family or community rejects us? Second, why must women only look to women as exemplars? Women need to engage male examples and read them through their particular female experiences.



Photo courtesy of Shuang Wen

*Nayla Tabbara: Sayyida Maryam in the Qur'an is a model not only for women: she is a model for believers, men and women, as is Asia, in the verses 11-12 from Surat al Tahrīm (Sura 66): "And God has cited for the believers the example of the wife of Fir'aun (Pharaoh), when she said, "My Lord, build for me, near You, a house in the Paradise, and deliver me from Fir'aun and his deeds, and deliver me from the unjust people. And (God has also cited the example*

of) Maryam, daughter of 'Imrān who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her Our spirit, and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and His books, and she was one of the devout." Likewise, I believe that Aisha and Fatima as well as Khadija and Zaynab are also models for both men and women.

In the case of Aisha, Umm Salama and Fatima, we could highlight their role in the transmission and production of religious knowledge, as a model for women: Aisha alone is reported to have transmitted 1200 *hadith*, and Umm Salama and Fatima have a role in jurisprudence as Umm Salama spoke on the question of *Shura*, and Fatima provided analysis on the question of inheritance of prophets.

Yet models for men and women in general and for women in specific should not stop at the beginning of Islam. Islamic history and culture has shown us many models that we need to invest in highlighting, men or women who have spent their life defending, based on their Islamic deep rooted faith, the rights of the excluded and the marginalized, in peaceful ways and without expecting anything in return, on the lines of the prophets.

*Renaud Fabbri: Historically men have tended to monopolize religious knowledge. What was the role of women in the transmission of religious knowledge in early Islam and how has it evolved? In what fields of knowledge,*

*whether juridical, theological or spiritual, were they the most active?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* Once again, this is a huge topic that has been chronicled in many books. I will make two summary points. First, there is a tendency to glorify the early role of women in the transmission/recording of religious knowledge while overlooking the fact that they were later excluded. So Aisha did recount the bulk of *Sunni ahadith*, but *usul al-hadith* would come to be dominated by men. Women were there and this is notable, but they did not stay in the center of the structure of religious authority. Second, women did not dominate in any of these fields. There are notable and important women figures in all fields, but they did not dominate or have equal representation in any. The absence of women and lack of equal representation means in the worst-case scenario patriarchal and androcentric laws, practices and customs were enshrined. In the best case scenario, it means that the valuable perspectives and concerns of women were not heard first hand or considered in the formulation of what would become tradition.

*Nayla Tabbara:* An overview of the history of women in the transmission and production of religious knowledge during history may astonish us. It actually shows that women have been taking part in the religious studies scene from the be-



ginning. After the women companions that transmitted hadith, the following centuries show women learning *hadith* by heart and teaching it, and women engaging in *fiqh* (jurisprudence) at least in learning and teaching it, women learning *hadith* books and Qur'anic recitation as well as women sermonners (*wa'izat*), renowned sufi women and at a later stage women as *shaykhat ribat*. Many women gained notoriety in their knowledge and were sought out teachers. In the first 6 centuries of Islam, there were no Islamic studies institutes (*madrasa*). Religious knowledge was given in public and private locations and each student would pride him/herself on the teacher they had learned with, receiving from them a certificate (*ijaza*) and adding it to their CV (called *mashyakha*). It is very interesting to note that most of the classes were mixed for men and women, and the women were teachers as well as students. Ibn Hajar al Askalani for instance studied with 53 women. Al Khatib al Baghdadi, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Hanbal, all had women teachers. Likewise, women had female and male teachers. With the beginning of the institutionalization of religious knowledge through the madrasa that was a purely male environment, the non-formal religious education began slowly to be reduced and thus the number of women in the transmission of religious knowledge slowly degrades after the 7th century H/ 13th century, to regain a new

position in the 20th century. It is to be noted that women were mostly present in *hadith* sciences. They had a limited role in *fiqh*, for becoming a *faqih* *muftiya* gave authority that was considered as men's prerogative.

*Renaud Fabbri: A very significant development in contemporary Islamic theology has been the development of a feminist exegesis. Do you think there is a properly feminist perspective on the Qur'an and the ahadith, and what have been its main contributions?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* I am not sure what is meant by "properly" in this question. There are exegetical projects carried out from women's perspectives. Some of these scholars adopt the label "feminist" and others do not. I think that some of this work has been revolutionary and highly valuable, including the work of Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and Asma Barlas in English scholarship. This work has made many contributions. Some of the most significant are its challenge to the hegemony of all male and typically androcentric exegesis; its emphasis on the fact that all interpreters are human and thus all interpretations of the *Qur'an* are human—not divine—products; and its centering of egalitarian aspects of the *Qur'an* as the primary ethical norms of the text. Also, this work has made it clear that women can and should interpret, that this is a valid and valuable enterprise. The

*Qur'an* has been the primary focus of exegetical work. This is understandable in light of its authority and position in Islamic thought. There has not been as rigorous engagement with ahadith. Some new work is now being produced that seeks to interpret and assess *ahadith* without holistically embracing or holistically rejecting the content.

*Nayla Tabbara:* There are many lines of interpretation of the *Qur'an*, the traditional exegesis, the analytical exegesis, the theological one and what the *batini tafsir* that means interpretation of symbols (*shia, ismaili...*), the legal one, the mystical one... then there are the modern *tafsirs* with the liberal and the feminist *tafsirs* as well as ideological ones. Yet the *tafsirs* that are the most widespread are the *tafsirs* of the traditional line, done not only by men but by men who represented power. Yet the *Qur'an* cannot be understood from one side of the social stratum. It has to be understood through the eyes of the poor and the powerless to complete the picture because Islam is not the religion of the rich and the powerful. Feminist exegesis is one exegesis that fills such a gap in *Qur'anic* interpretation.

## Religious Pluralism

*Renaud Fabbri:* Some religious traditions worship the Divine under both Masculine and Female aspects. Neopagan feminists such as Marija Gimbu-

*tas* or Carol Christ have even argued that it is impossible to improve the status of women without acknowledging the feminine dimension of God. By comparison with Indic religions or modern neo-paganism, Islam seems to conceive God as beyond gender in terms of metaphysical incomparability or masculine (*Huwa*) as based on scripture. What is your theological position on these issues, and how do you see their contemporary relevance?

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* I would agree that there is a theological and metaphysical difference in the Islamic traditions in relation to the incomparability of God and the notion that God is beyond gender. Thus, in many cases, the question of what sort of human language (masculine, feminine, or neutral) should be used to denote God is not as central. It is however somewhat different when Arabic texts are translated into other languages, such as English, that are not grammatically gendered. In most English *Qur'ans*, God is "He." This has an impact on the reader and the theological understanding inculcated in the reader. While one could respond that this is the reason the *Qur'an* should be read in Arabic, it is not realistic that all Muslims will ever do this. Additionally, even though there is a theological distinction with regard to language, in the Islamic tradition we need to consider whether people see God as a male even if language and theological concepts are



Photo courtesy of Marco Guinter Alberton

beyond gender. More precisely, is God depicted as being on the “side” of or favoring males? Does God appear to address only males, or males primarily? What are the perhaps inadvertent theological implications of this? The point is that there may be a theological claim (with which I would agree) made about God being incomparable and beyond gender, but this claim may not filter into interpretation or practice. This is an important area of consideration in contemporary discourse. How do we make the connections between egalitarian theological claims and sometimes non-egalitarian realities on the ground?

*Nayla Tabbara:* I agree that a patriarchal image of God strengthens patriarchal mentalities and that a

“beyond gender” perception of God strengthens equality, just as the perception of the other as an infidel in the eyes of God promotes discrimination and double standards whereas the perception of the other as a “believer in a different path” promotes respect of the other and equality. The “beyond gender” perception of God is also important for the believer in his/her own personal relation to God. God’s most beautiful names are in effect divided into the names of Majesty and the names of Beauty. The former refer to the masculine side of God, dealing with solidity, strength, power etc, and the latter to the feminine side of God, dealing with mercy, nurturing, loving, forgiving etc. If someone were to focus on just one of these sets of names, one’s relation to God would

be lacking.

*Renaud Fabbri: Prof. Lamptey, I believe you are working on the connection between sexual and religious differences. Could you tell us more about the specific insights that Muslima Theology can provide on the question of religious pluralism?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey:* In my work on reinterpreting the Qur'anic discourse on religious others and religious diversity, I draw resources for rethinking the meaning and value of religious difference from Muslim women's interpretation of the *Qur'an*—primarily the hermeneutical and theoretical approaches of Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, and Asma Barlas—and feminist theology. While neither field is primarily concerned with religious difference, both fields offer pointed critiques of dominant paradigms of human difference (specifically, sexual difference). In doing so, they provide insights into and conceptual fodder for the articulation of alternative models of human difference. For example, Asma Barlas draws a distinction between difference that differentiates “laterally” and difference that differentiates “hierarchically”. Her main contention is that sexual difference (that is, biological difference) is one form of “lateral” human difference. It is divinely-intended and purposeful. It should be acknowledged. But it should never be used as the basis of assessment. She distin-

guishes this from “hierarchical” human difference, which is associated with *taqwā* (God consciousness, or piety) and is the basis of evaluation and judgment. Without going into too much detail, I seek to apply this distinction between lateral, divinely intended forms of human difference and *taqwā*-related, evaluated forms of human difference to the Qur'anic discourse on religious diversity. I argue that the *Qur'an* actually speaks of two genres of religious difference, and only one form is evaluated. I also argue that the recognition of two genres of religious difference in the *Qur'an* helps to explain the presence within the text of verses that appear contradictory and which have been the source of much exegetical debate throughout Islamic history.

*Renaud Fabbri: Prof. Tabbara, your own work is focusing on the Qur'anic approach to religious diversity. Could you explain to us what you see as the scriptural foundation in the Qur'an for dialogue with Christians and Jews? What are the main challenges in the content of the Qur'an itself and in the way it has been interpreted traditionally to interfaith engagement?*

*Nayla Tabbara:* In the book entitled “Divine Hospitality: the other in the dialogue of Islamic and Christian theologies” that I co-wrote with Fr. Fadi Daou (in French, Lit Verlag, Munster, 2014, in Arabic, Saint Paul Editions, Beirut, 2011), I went over all the Qur'anic verses that deal with

the other, especially the People of the Book and tried to resolve some apparent contradictions on the theological level.

For, on the one hand, we have verses showing diversity as a divine will, such as: *Al Baqara* 2:148 "To each is a direction towards which to turn; therefore compete in good deeds and towards the good. God will bring you all back to Him. For God hath power over all things", and *Hud* 11:118: "Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community." Added to that we have verses that promise salvation to the People of the book: *Al Baqara* 2:62 "Those who believe, and those who follow Judaism, and the Christians and the Sabians,- any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." And *Al Ma'ida* 5:69: "Those who believe, those who follow Judaism, the Sabians and the Christians,- any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness,- on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."

Yet on the other we have verses such as *Al Imran* 3: 19: "Religion before God is Islam" and *Al Imran* 3:85: "Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers."

The narrow understanding was to see in these verses an exclusivist stance, meaning that the only accepted religion is Islam in the nar-

row sense and that all other religions are not accepted, meaning that the followers of other religions will not receive salvation in the hereafter. Yet this contradicts the verses mentioned above and the following verses in *An-Nisa'* 4:123-124: "Not your desires, nor those of the People of the Book (can prevail): whoever works evil, will be requited accordingly. Nor will he find, besides God, any protector or helper. If any do deeds of righteousness,- be they male or female - and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them."

These two verses from *Surat an-Nisa'* stress on the fact that salvation is not a question of religious identity but a question of faith and good deeds. They are followed by a verse that allows to give a wider understanding of islam, i.e. islam in the wide sense: *An-Nisa'* 125: "The best religion is to submit to God (aslama) while doing the good, following Abraham's community, and God took Abraham for a well beloved". It is thus the faith of all those who believe in God, abandon themselves to Him in confidence and follow the steps of Abraham.

It is in this wide sense that the word Islam is to be understood in verse 3:85 (Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him ) especially since this verse is preceded by the verse 3:84 that says: "Say, 'We believe in God, and that which has been revealed to us, and that which has been revealed to Abraham and Ish-





Photo courtesy of Patrick Ringgenberg

mael, and Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes; and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord; we make no division between any of them; and to Him we submit.”

As for verse 3:19 “Religion before God is Islam” it can be understood in this manner but can also be understood as such: according to Islam in the narrow sense, the best religion is Islam (in the narrow sense) yet this does not contradict that other religions (Islam in the large sense) have truth and guidance and that followers of those religions receive salvation too, especially that they believe in the same God: “And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner – unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing -and

say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves.” (*Al Ankabut* 29: 46)

It is important to note that the Qur’anic theological positions towards the other are the same throughout the entire *Qur’an*, i.e. throughout the 23 years of revelation. What affected the understanding of these verses and led to an exclusivist standpoint is interpretation and legal positions related to historical, political and economic reasons. Resolving these issues in the manner I just summarized above is not meant for the other, to improve dialogue with the other or our image in front of the other, it is first and fore-

most meant to improve our understanding as Muslims as to how God want us to perceive others and how to act with them.

*Renaud Fabbri: Prof. Tabbara, in your work, you also stress the importance of contextualizing verses, to understand the attitude of the Qur'an toward other faiths. Could you elaborate more on this topic?*

*Nayla Tabbara:* In the previous question I mentioned the verses that deal with theology and dogma. Another challenge is the verses that have an incidence on Muslims' behavior towards the People of the Book, for there are some verses that speak highly of the People of the Book and others that enjoin not to trust them or take them as allies, and others that talk about wars with the People of the Book.

What allowed me to get a clearer picture of this question was the re-arrangement of these verses chronologically. This led me to realize that the verses talking negatively of the people of the book and that mention violence with them belong to the warring period between Muslims and Jews during the Medinan phase, but that the final phase of revelation enjoins fraternal relations with the people of the book. In fact 3 phases are to be seen: a first phase (Mecca) where the talk about the people of the book is always positive, a second phase (Medina) where slowly we move from good relations to war-

ring relations with Jewish tribes in Medina, and finally an opening phase starting with the return to Mecca with verses enjoining opening up to all peoples and verses calling for conviviality with the people of the book such as: "O mankind! We have indeed created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may come to know one another. Truly the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing among you. Truly God is Knower, Aware." (*Al Hujurat* 49:13) and: "Today the good things are permitted to you, and the food of those who were given the Scripture is permitted to you, and permitted to them is your food. Likewise, the believing married women, and the married women of those who were given the Scripture before you, if you give them their wages in wedlock, and not illicitly, or taking them as lovers. (*Al Ma'ida* 5:5) and "To every one of you, We have appointed a divine law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one community, but that He may try you in what He has given to you. So vie with one another in good works; to God you shall all return, and He will then inform you of that in which you differed." (*Al Ma'ida* 5:48). The final call of the Qur'anic text is thus to open up to others, to go to them and get acquainted with cultural and religious others, to build fraternal and even familial relations with the people of the book and, instead of fighting on dogmatic differences or



prospect is new knowledge, and that is always a benefit. Knowledge does not mean direct cooperation of other beliefs, views or strategies but it means opportunities to think about what we are doing and what we could be doing differently. In terms of a role to play in dialogue, I believe the presence of *Muslima* theologians and Muslim women scholars is vital because it reveals some of the internal diversity of the Islamic tradition.

letting those build walls between us, work together for the common good.

*Renaud Fabbri: To conclude, as the Muslim world is going through a period of intense political and sectarian turmoil, what do you see as the concrete prospects and potential outcomes of interfaith dialogue for the Muslim community? Do you see Muslim-Woman theologians and Muslim women in general as having a specific role to play in this endeavor at a theoretical and a more grass-root level?*

*Jerusha T. Lamptey: One concrete*

Also, women are not typically seen as the primary religious authority or Imam, and thus their concerns and voices have been excluded in certain forms of dialogue. Inclusion therefore promises to change the nature of dialogue itself. One way it can do so is that *Muslima* theologians and Muslim women scholars are working against their own marginalization and thus may be sensitive to other forms of marginalization as well, including marginalization or negative characterizations of other religious traditions. They may also help to create

a space in dialogue where theoretical ideals and on the ground realities are discussed in tandem, rather than in isolation from one another. Finally, women in dialogue can be supporters and helpers of other women from other traditions. They can recognize some common struggles, embrace real differences, and channel the strength of their diversity into a pursuit of equality and justice.

*Nayla Tabbara:* I believe that the need today is to go beyond dialogue and work together in the framework of citizenship that is inclusive of religious and cultural diversity in our different countries and I work on actualizing this through Adyan foundation ([www.adyanvillage.net](http://www.adyanvillage.net)) and the Adyan Institute that I direct. This inclusive citizenship can assure that all religious and cultural groups, and that men and women, participate

equally in the public sphere. Based on the acceptance of diversity, it is a buffer against extremism that by definition refuses diversity within and without. In this inclusive citizenship and this call for participation of all in the public sphere as social change agents, all responsible individuals, be they male or female, be they Muslim or Christian or other, be they Arab or non-Arab, have a role to play. It is time to move from our clustered religious identities and fixed gender roles to work for the common good for all. Among our fundamental values at Adyan foundation, the first one is the acceptance of diversity as a value and the second is seeing individual itineraries as a richness: Each person, male or female, has something to add to society, to religion and to the human heritage.



## The Eternal Feminine in Sufism: readings of Ibn ‘Arabī and Emir Abd el- Kader

*Eric Geoffroy*

While Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) is known as the “greatest master” (al-shaykh al-akbar) of the spirituality and esotericism of Islam, the Emir Abd el-Kader (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, d. 1883) is better known for his uprising against the French oc-

cupation, between 1832 and 1847. Yet, he was brought up in a Sufi environment and always declared that his spiritual vocation came before all else. As testified by many episodes of his life and numerous visions, he was a disciple of Ibn ‘Arabī, across

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Translated from the French by Edin Q. Lohja.



the centuries. As we shall see, both are “Muḥammadan heirs” in the sense that all their formulations with respect to the Feminine and woman emanate from what is called “Muḥammadan Presence” in Sufism.

The Prophet Muḥammad loved the Feminine. His famous saying bears witness to this: “I have been made to love three things from your world: women, perfume, and prayer which is my supreme pleasure.” Women are thus linked with what is most subtle and spiritual. The grammatical shift used in Arabic clearly indicates that this love for women has a divine, metaphysical source; it therefore means: “God has made me love, from your world....” Ibn ‘Arabī explains that this love that the Prophet felt for women was due to the fact that they are the manifestation of God’s most actualized beauty on earth. Since the Divine Essence is utterly inaccessible and independent from the worlds, the contemplation of God requires spiritual supports, and woman is said to be the most perfect “locus of manifestation” (*mazhar*) of God.<sup>1</sup> Herein lies the justification for the usage of the formula ‘The Eternal feminine’ by the very pen of Ibn ‘Arabī: “By ‘women’ I mean the Femininity diffused into the world: it is manifested more in women, which is why they have been made dear to him they have been made dear to [that is, the Prophet].”<sup>2</sup>

A clarification must be made here about Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical

doctrine which was followed in particular by Abd el-Kader. Multiplicity unfolds gradually starting from divine Unity through an uninterrupted succession of divine self-disclosures (*tajalliyyāt*). These take on innumerable forms which never repeat themselves. All things or beings are therefore a “locus of self-disclosure”, a receptacle that receives this radiation in accordance with its predispositions. Divine Beauty is manifested in the sensory world, and the Prophet has said: “I saw God in the form of a beardless youth.” This self-disclosing possibility is contained in the following *ḥadīth qudsī*<sup>3</sup> : “I am according to My servant’s opinion of Me.” Woman being the actualization of this self-disclosure, it is only logical that, for the “Muḥammadan heir” or the gnostic, love of woman is a Sunna, a prophetic model to be followed: “Whoever values women by their true worth and knows their intimate secret,” writes Ibn ‘Arabī, “does not disdain to love them, unlike the ascetics. Rather, such love is an integral part of the gnostic’s perfection, for it is a prophetic heritage and a love from a divine source.”<sup>4</sup>

## The pre-excellence of the Feminine

What are then, broadly speaking, some of the elements and teachings of the two shaykhs on the “Eternal feminine”? They are based on a very audacious metaphysics of sex. All that is created is the fruit of the

union of the two poles: “activity” (*fi’l*, *fā’iliyya*) and “receptivity” (*infi’āl*, *qābiliyya*), impregnating (*nākih*) and impregnated (*mankūh*), masculine and feminine principle, man and woman, etc. Creation is therefore reproduced by an infinite procession of cosmic marriages: the First Intellect impregnates the Universal Soul; the *Qalam*, that is the divine pen, fertilizes the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-maḥfūz*) wherein is engraved all that is dictated to it<sup>5</sup>; the sky casts onto earth the command revealed by God<sup>6</sup>; Adam impregnates Eve; the spirit (*rūḥ*) impregnates the soul (*nafs*)<sup>7</sup>; night and day interpenetrate, as the Qur’an affirms in many places.<sup>8</sup> The motion of the spheres is thus identical to the movement made during coitus.<sup>9</sup> “Herein lies a classical explanation particular to the ancient and medieval worldview even though before Ibn ‘Arabī it was not always formulated in terms of sexual activity. It finds its equivalence with them in Qur’anic terms.”<sup>10</sup>

It follows that the active, masculine principle can only be realized if it is welcomed by the receptive, feminine principle. The Pen, for example, loses its essential identity, which is writing, if it does not find support (the Guarded Tablet) to express and accomplish this identity, i.e., passing from potentiality to action.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is man who needs woman, not vice versa. This is true first of all on the ontological level.

In fact, without woman’s function of “receptivity” (*infi’āl*, *qābiliyya*), man’s “activity” (*fi’l*) would remain “pure nothingness” (*‘adam mutlaq*).<sup>12</sup> Starting from the ḥadīth quoted earlier, “I have been made to love three things from your world: women, perfume, and prayer...”, Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that “The Prophet has mentioned first women because

**“Whoever values women by their true worth and knows their intimate secret does not disdain to love them, unlike the ascetics. Rather, such love is an integral part of the gnostic’s perfection, for it is a prophetic heritage and a love from a divine source.”**

they are the locus of receptivity, just as primordial nature (*al-tabī’a*) precedes all that is engendered from it. For primordial nature is none other than the “Breath of the Compassionate” (*nafas al-Raḥmān*), because it is in Him that the forms of the world are unfolded, from the highest to the lowest ones.”<sup>13</sup>

Emir Abd el-Kader gives an audacious pre-excellence to the Feminine, gifted as it is with receptivity: “Woman as such is the locus of manifestation (*maẓhar*) of the degree of receptivity, which is none other than the degree of possibilities. Yet, this degree possesses an eminent and excellent position. In

fact, were it not for femininity, that is, the degree of receptivity of the active Agent which is that of Divinity and of the divine Names, these Names would have not been actualized, thereby remaining unknown.”<sup>14</sup> One must remember here that, according to the doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī and therefore of his disciple Abd el-Kader, the divine Names are intermediary instances between the pure divine Essence and creation; therefore it is they who manage the world. The Divine, not in its Essence but in its manifestation, is somehow in need of the Feminine in order to reveal itself.

Given the lack of separation in Islam between the metaphysical and physical levels the situation of man’s need towards woman is equally embodied on the physical plane: in human sexuality, it is man, the “active” partner (*nākih*) who is the seeker (*tālib*), and therefore the indigent or lacking (*iftiqār*); whereas woman is sought (*matlūba*), desired: since “[masculine] desire is imperious” she is superior to man, for she is stronger.<sup>15</sup> Woman therefore has a greater capacity to contain her desires and to hide her love. Ibn ‘Arabī explains the foolhardiness of masculine desire for woman as due to the fact that Eve emerged from Adam, and he has ever since experienced an immense nostalgia caused by this void.<sup>16</sup>

Let us go further: woman is closer to God than man, more “divine”, for like God she is the seat of

engendering (*al-takwīn*), the indispensable place where human being is formed.<sup>17</sup> The Engenderer (*al-Mukawwin*) is not found in the canonical list of divine Names, but it is evidently one of the attributes of God who is He who engenders things, bringing them into existence. After God, on the level of creation, it is woman who stands at the origin of life.

### **The secret of feminine strength**

This secret is mentioned both by Ibn ‘Arabī and Abd el-Kader based on the surprising Qur’anic verse 66:4. Its revelation is curiously provoked by “alcove secrets” in one of the conflict episodes, tinged with jealousy, among the wives of the Prophet and himself. The verse involves two of his wives, ‘Āisha and Ḥafsa, who had joined against him. The verse commands: “If the two of you repent to Allah, for your hearts have swerved...”. It is the rest of the verse and more generally human logic that our two Sufis investigate: “...but if you back each other against him, then [know that] Allah is indeed his guardian, and Gabriel, the righteous among the faithful, and, thereafter, the angels are his supporters.” Why does God convoke Himself and His supreme angels and the righteous servants to provide their support against two women?

The exegetes of the *Qur’an* have generally avoided the interpretation of this verse. As for Ibn ‘Arabī,

he brings elements of explication which remain very allusive. After having discussed it with a gnostic friend, he asks God to make known to him the secret of this verse.<sup>18</sup> He then realizes that these two women possessed a science and a capacity for action which gave them a strength comparable to that held inadvertently by prophet Loth when he invoked God's succor against his people.<sup>19</sup> Later in the *Futūḥāt*, the Andalusian master underlines with regards to this verse that the angels who were created from breaths (*na-fas*, pl. *anfās*) of women are the most powerful of all.<sup>20</sup> The key resides in another passage which is centered on the notion of passivity/ receptivity (*infi'āl*). In brief, he writes that all those who are called scholars (*'ālim*) have first been "known" (*ma'lūm*) and have had to be receptive to knowledge before receiving it. And just as things pre-exist in the divine knowledge and later are engendered in accordance with what God knows about them, the masculine follows the feminine because the latter reveals to him his first femininity or receptivity. The receptivity of the feminine type is thus more encompassing, more complete (*jāmi'*).<sup>21</sup>

Abd el-Kader devotes two "stops" (*mawqif*) to the commentary of this verse:

- In *mawqif* 127, he affirms before expanding with his own experience the spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) he had received from Ibn 'Arabī, but which had not been really unveiled

by him. Then he develops his own exegesis of verse 66:4. The two women - 'Āisha and Ḥafsa - "are the perfect manifestations of active reality, due to their human perfection: in effect, they join in themselves the two presences of the active (*fi'l*) and the receptive (*infi'āl*)." He continues by saying that woman as the seat of procreation is closer to God, the Engenderer (*al-Mukawwin*).<sup>22</sup>

- In *mawqif* 249, Abd el-Kader reiterates his remark: Ibn 'Arabī did not unveil the secret of feminine strength. There he states, in slightly different terms from what he writes in the preceding *mawqif*, that "perfection lies in women - as attested to by the Messenger of God - and cannot be the privilege of men. The Real is too elevated to be qualified by receptivity (*infi'āl*) [...] As for Gabriel and the angels, they do not have this synthetic, totalizing capacity which belongs only to humankind. They cannot realize all the Names [...]; therefore they can neither manifest nor realize fully the degree of receptivity which belongs to women in their own right. It is this secret that explains the incredible strength of these two ladies, as mentioned in the Qur'anic verse."<sup>23</sup>

Let us attempt to summarize the position of these two shaykhs. The receptivity proper to the Feminine is first on the ontological and cosmological plane. The active can only produce its effect by starting from this receptivity and solely in its presence; otherwise it re-

mains in the order of potentialities (*mumkināt*), and can be pure nothingness permanently. The secret of feminine strength seems to reside in the conjunction of the active and receptive presences, at least when expressed in spiritually accomplished women like ‘Āisha and Ḥafsa. Having realized fullness in themselves, such women hold pre-excellence over man, who has forgotten his femininity, his original receptivity. In his commentary of the Divine Name *al-Qawwī* (“the Strong”), Ibn ‘Arabī therefore concludes that “in the created world there is none more powerful than woman, by virtue of a secret which is accessible only to him who knows in what has the world been engendered and through what movement has God engendered it.”<sup>24</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī reaches this audacious observation: he mentions woman’s nobility (*sharaf*) by comparing the most classical position of the sexual act (when the man is above the woman) to the prostrations (*sujūd*) of the human being before God during the Muslim ritual prayer: did not the Prophet say that it is in this stage of the prayers, while the servant’s is facing the earth, that he is closest to God? During the sexual act, man is therefore in prostration over woman ...<sup>25</sup> Here is Abd el-Kader, the valiant Arab knight who rose against the French army for seventeen years, confessing in his verses no doubt regarding his wife Khayra:

I submit to her out of humility – she is even more arrogant,

She abandons me, I see it, in the hardest way.<sup>26</sup>

### For a renewed reading of *Qur’an*, 4:1

Let us, however, not go from the above to secular, modern feminism. For the Prophet as for these shaykhs, it is a question of realizing in us the “perfect” or “fully accomplished” human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who unifies in himself / herself the two masculine and feminine poles. As mentioned by Ibn ‘Arabī in numerous instances, our sexual condition, male or female, is but adventitious, transient, and secondary. Once reintegrated to Unity (*tawḥīd*), the human being transcends these polarities which are as many aspects of the duality characterizing the embodiment.

The *Qur’an* states in a very clear manner the non-sexual origin of the human soul into which we are called to resorb: “O humankind! Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul (*nafs*), and created its mate (*zawj*) from it...”<sup>27</sup> Let us note first that this verse opens chapter The Women (*al-nisā’*), which cannot be considered as a coincidence. Moreover, the conventional, male chauvinistic interpretation (and translation) of this verse contradicts the very letter of the Qur’anic text. In fact, the first term, although feminine in gender (*nafs*) is most often



understood to refer to Adam, and the second, masculine in gender, as alluding to Eve! The conformist exegesis of the *Qur'an* is in fact marked by the Judeo-Christian reading of the primordial couple, as attested by the legend of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib.<sup>28</sup> Numerous thinkers and modern Muslim feminists – men and women – have not missed pointing out this misappropriation of meaning, and the verse is about to be re-read in accordance with its grammatical structure.

The awakened person, the gnostic, is therefore he who recognizes in himself the opposite sex. The transcending of oppositions, which he then realizes and which is a preliminary to all initiatic rise towards Unity, is therefore visible in the eyes of the other. It seems to characterize well Abd el-Kader, according to the testimonies of his contemporaries:

“A duality stems indeed from the majority of portraits of him [Abd el-Kader] that have been painted: “A shy *hajji* with calm eyes, the thoughtful emir, ferocious and gentle” in *Les Châtiments* by the pen of Victor Hugo; “strength covered by grace” by Eugène de Civry; “a beautiful ideal of morals and physical grandeur” in the biography by Churchill, who saw in him the result of a “perfect conjoining of feminine and masculine qualities.”<sup>29</sup>

How then, can one not end with these verses by the Moroccan shaykh Muḥammad al-Harrāq (d. 1845), in which Layla denotes, as

usually with Sufi poets, the divine Essence, both that which is more subtle and more ineffable?

Seekest though Layla when she is in thee manifest?

Thou holdest her for another, and yet she is none but thee!<sup>30</sup>

These verses which address a priori man, Arab man, enjoin him to recognize the divine Feminine in him, that is, his femininity.

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13 *Fusūs al-ḥikam*, op. cit., I, 219.

14 Abd El-Kader, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, ed. 'Abd al-Bāqī Miftāḥ, Alger, 2005, II, 3.

15 Ibn 'Arabî, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, op. cit., II, 466.

16 Ibid., I, 136.

17 Abd El-Kader, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, op. cit., I, 330.

18 Abd el-Kader mentions this episode in his *Mawāqif*, op. cit., I, 329.

19 Ibn 'Arabî, *Futūḥāt*, op. cit., I, 180. See *Qur'an*, 11:80.

20 *Futūḥāt*, op. cit., II, 466.

21 Ibid., IV, 84.

22 Abd El-Kader, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, op. cit., I, 329-330.

23 Ibid., II, 3-4.

24 *Futūḥāt*, op. cit., II, 466.

25 Ibid., III, 256.

26 Jazâ'irî 'Abd al Qādir [Abd el-Kader], *Dīwān*, critical edition by Mamdūh Ḥaqqī, Beirut, 1964, p. 59.

27 *Qur'an* 4:1.

28 See on the question Asma Lamrabet, *Le Coran et les femmes – Une lecture de libération*, Tawhid, Lyon, 2007, p. 26-27.

29 Ahmed Bouyerdene, Abd el-Kader – *L'harmonie des contraires*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 220. Emphasis added.

30 Excerpt from his *Dīwān*, or collection of poetry.



## Women Mystics in Medieval Islam: Practice and Transmission

*Jean-Jacques Thibon*

Islam is no exception to the commonplace that women seem to have played a minor role in the elaboration and transmission of spiritual doctrine in the three monotheistic religions. But as a result of widespread ignorance of the history of Islam, even amongst believers themselves, it is often somewhat hastily upheld that the position of Islam has

always been radically misogynist, as if women had never been given the slightest prominence in its history. And yet the role played by women, or the position they have often acquired with difficulty, has not followed a smooth course throughout nearly fifteen centuries of Islamic history.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to

study the position of women in a specific context: that of the spiritual masters and mystics of Islam who, for purposes of simplification, can be grouped under the generic term of Sufis.<sup>2</sup> This study will be limited chronologically to medieval times, and in particular to the pivotal period of the tenth century, even if there will be cause to mention women who lived earlier or later. Finally, focus will be placed on religious practices and teaching work, and consequently on the mission of spiritual transmission which these women undertook throughout their lives.

## Sources

First the sources on which this study is based. Of particular note is a book dating from the end of the tenth century entirely devoted to Sufi women, which proves that women played an important role in Sufi circles from very early on. At least, their role was important enough for an author, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021),<sup>3</sup> who recorded the teachings of Sufi spiritual masters, whether men or women, to write a book containing portraits of eighty-two women. Admittedly, the succinct biographical notices generally give incomplete information about their spirituality. Nonetheless, information can be gleaned from the text on how these women, who originally came from Ḥurāsān or Iraq, were perceived by their contemporaries. Subsequently, similar works

devoted entirely to women were few and far between but some do exist; the place occupied by women in hagiographic or historiographic literature is variable and often modest or very modest. In biographical dictionaries, some earlier authors did give a significant place to women as in the voluminous work entitled *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* d'Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) which includes five hundred women mostly from the prophetic period. Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1039), a contemporary of Sulamī, who was one of his masters, only included a few pages on women in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, his great encyclopaedia, despite the hundreds of notices throughout the ten volumes and even then the thirty or so women in question all lived in the days of the Prophet. In contrast, a work by Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 597/1200) entitled *Ṣifat al-safwa* lists figures who were considered worthy of serving as models of piety from the beginning of Islam and amongst them are to be found a large number of women, mostly Sufis, totalling approximately two hundred and fifty out of more than one thousand. Yet he was accused of misogyny in other works and he was extremely critical about Sufis in his book entitled *Talbīs Iblīs*. Furthermore, he did not omit to criticise the work of his predecessor, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, which he nonetheless used as a source of inspiration. However, a good many women remain anonymous and the truth is that despite the large number of entries only a mea-

gre amount of information is given about each woman. It is of interest to determine whether the attitudes of the men who wrote the history of Sufism and its saints changed in the course of time. Admittedly, towards the sixteenth century, Šā'rānī's (d. 973/1565) bibliographical compendium of saints entitled *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubra* devoted no more than a few scant pages to a total of fifteen or so women. Munāwī (m. 1031/1621), who was his disciple, did not follow his master's example and even if he did not give particular prominence to women as they only represent thirty-five entries,<sup>4</sup> he did at least treat them as men's equals. Later, the *Ġāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'* written by a contemporary author, Nabhānī (d. 1350 /1931), appears no more generous in his treatment of women.<sup>5</sup> All in all, authors in the tenth and eleventh centuries seem to have given greater visibility to women than later hagiographic writers did even if in numerical terms women remain marginal. This visibility certainly corresponded to a social reality which was to change gradually. But it is not only a question of the times. The case of Šā'rānī and Munāwī, who lived at the same time, cast a very different light on women and demonstrates that the emphasis placed on women in hagiographic literature is also a question of an author's individual sensitivity. A great many authors explicitly admit absolute equality between men and women in spiritual matters.<sup>6</sup>

But there is a certain gap between theory and reality, which is far from being peculiar to Islam.

### Exemplary figures

But to return to the Middle Ages. There are special cases, which include that of Rābi'a al-Adawiyya,<sup>7</sup> who lived in the eighth century and consequently during the period that gave rise to Sufi streams of thought and who is the very first mystical figure of Islam and one of the greatest. If the historical woman is difficult to pinpoint, she is in fact of little importance as this woman, who is at the origin of the passionate and exclusive love which can be shown for God, disappears behind 'the homage paid to feminine sanctity',<sup>8</sup> to quote P. Lory. It is to be noted that she is the only woman whose name was quoted and mentioned three times in one of the very first treatises on Sufism by Kalābādī (d. 380/990) even though he spares little space for women in his work. Yet the introductory chapter, which sets out to define the origin of the term Sufi, ends by relating a meeting during which the great Egyptian master Dhū l-Nūn is given a formal yet poetic lecture on Sufism by a woman who admittedly remains anonymous. This can nonetheless be taken as a sign that the author recognises the contribution made by women to constructing this spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

One particular woman illustrates the position occupied by



women and the role they played in Sufi circles during the eleventh century, namely Fāṭima bint Abī 'Alī al-Daqqāq (391–480/1001–1088). Her father Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Daqqāq was a well known Sufi in Nishapur and the master of a major figure in medieval Sufism, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Quṣayrī (376–465/986–1072), author of the *Risāla*, a handbook on Sufism which has remained to this day a key reference for the study of Sufism. Daqqāq gave his daughter in marriage to Quṣayrī who was to become head of the convent he had founded for Sufis. The couple had remarkable descendants, many of whom became renowned scholars and Sufis. Fatima was thus described as 'The daughter of the master, the wife of the master and the mother of masters'. Of particular note is the fact that Fatima comes from a mystic and learned background extending over several generations. Even if it is often the case, Fatima, who is described in our sources as 'the pride of the women of her time', owes her fame to more than her family background. She not only exists through lineage or marriage but also in her



own right through her personality, which is certainly exceptional. From her early years when she was still an only child, her father gave her his full attention, as much as he would have given to a boy. He set up sessions of mystical teaching for her; she learnt the *Koran* by heart and mastered the art of Koranic commentary. Contact with the great scholars who came through Nishapur or visited her father made a scholar of her and she was allowed to transmit had-

ith, which was no small privilege. Her longevity resulted in her hadith dictation sessions being highly valued towards the end of her life as she transmitted the teachings of the great figures of the past. She is consequently described as *ṣayḥa* in our sources as her authority particularly in the field of hadith and her radiant spirituality drew recognised scholars who came to listen to her alongside her children and grand-children.<sup>10</sup> Although she was a member of the city's aristocracy, she nonetheless completely detached herself from worldly goods and devoted her time to worship, spiritual exercises and teaching and, later on, to her children who inherited her radiant fervour. One might object that she was a special case. It seems that she was not, as several other examples are to be found in the city of Nishapur. One example is Faḥrawayh bint 'Alī (d. 313/925–6),<sup>11</sup> one of the wives of Abū 'Amr b. Nuḡayd (d. 366/976). The latter was a reputed Sufi and traditionalist; he was the grandfather of Sulamī, our main source on Sufi women at this time. He recognised her worth saying 'What I gained from my companionship with my wife Faḥrawayh was no less than what I gained from my companionship with Abū 'Uṭmān (al-Ḥīrī)'. As this master is one of the greatest spiritual figures in the city, this is no small compliment. He had a daughter 'Ā'iṣa<sup>12</sup> (d. 346/957), about whom Sulamī writes that her prayers were always answered,

thereby indicating her high degree of spirituality. But she in turn had a daughter; Sulamī tells us that she imposed on herself the constraint of not leaving her house for fifty years so as to give herself fully to God. These few examples are corroborated by numerous other examples which show that these women follow their own spiritual paths independently and that their teachings are perpetuated after their death in accounts which are to be found in hagiographic works. Our knowledge of Nishapur is well documented, but the same cannot be said for all cities in the Muslim East. It is consequently difficult to tell whether Nishapur is an exception or not as regards the position and role of Sufi women in the society of their time.

Fāṭima of Nishapur (d. 223/838) is another major figure of sanctity who lived in the province of Ḥurāsān in the ninth century.<sup>13</sup> Sulamī considers her to be a great Gnostic and far superior to all the other women of her time. It should be pointed out that she frequented some of the greatest names of Muslim mysticism and in particular Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 260/874). He often visited her and said of her 'I have never mentioned a mystic station to Fatima which was unknown to her'. There is also the Egyptian Dhū l-Nūn (d. 245/859); he recognised her as one of God's saints, the noblest woman he had ever met; he simply confessed 'Fatima is my master'– a

strange admission coming from a master with such a reputation and noted in our sources as being of great importance. Although little remains of the historical person, these two testimonies sufficed for her to be included amongst the great saints and earned her a place in a large number of hagiographic works. She died in Mecca where she lived but it would seem that Dhū l-Nūn met her on one of her occasional visits to Jerusalem, thereby proving that these women travelled in response to constraints unknown to lesser mortals.

Nowadays it would appear surprising that women could practice peregrination (*siyāḥa*), even if it was more marginal for women than for men. Peregrination is a sort of wandering aimed at acquiring knowledge, which certain masters saw as an essential step on the spiritual path.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, women did travel; they travelled alone for long periods of their lives regardless of the dangers on the roads. Thus we know from Sulamī that Umm al-Faḍl came to Nishapur in the second half of the tenth century and that all the great masters of the city came to listen to her, including prestigious scholars who occupied the highest positions in the city, such as Abū Sahl Ṣu'lūkī (d. 369/980). When Sulamī described her as 'unequaled in her times in eloquence, knowledge and spiritual states', he linked sanctity with knowledge. Umm al-Faḍl travelled widely from city to city to seek knowledge and transmit it, turning

her wanderings into a form of asceticism. Our sources relate something she said to a learned gathering, possibly the religious elite. This illustrates the lessons a woman could give her equals and her participation in the city's social life: 'Be careful not to use your occupations for the comfort of your souls when you think you are seeking knowledge'.<sup>15</sup>

Another woman is worth mentioning: Umm 'Alī, a woman of princely extraction, with a strong personality. She chose her own husband, Aḥmad b. Ḥiḍrawayh (d. 240/854–5), forcing him to ask her father for her hand.<sup>16</sup> Her father accepted as he hoped to benefit from the blessings of his future son-in-law who was a well-known spiritual master but who had acted reluctantly. She also forced him, by way of a dowry, to take her to Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī to ask him to marry them. When they were in his presence, she unveiled her face and started talking with him. But this free behaviour stopped the day he noticed that her hands were painted with henna. She informed him that since he had looked at her his spiritual companionship was henceforth unlawful. This shows the rigour of a woman who refused to overstep the law despite an appearance of freedom. When they were about to leave, her husband asked the master, Abū Yazīd, for some advice, as was customary. Abū Yazīd suggested he learn spiritual chivalry (*futuwwa*) from his wife, an attitude based on

altruism and sincerity. Here is another unusual and paradoxical situation as Ibn Ḥiḍrawayh was a master who was well-known for his futuwwa. Was it because he followed Abū Yazīd's advice to the letter? Whatever the explanation, this woman spent her fortune on the poor and on her husband's disciples, supporting him in his role of spiritual master. They were an exceptional couple, but they are not the only case in which husband and wife are reputed for their sanctity and their knowledge of the spiritual path.<sup>17</sup> When they settled in Nishapur, she met the great masters of the day and in particular Abū Ḥafṣ al-Ḥaddād, who might have been the founder of a particular stream of Muslim spirituality called 'People of Blame' (*Malāmatiyya*). He was so impressed that he admitted 'I had always detested women's conversation until I met Umm 'Ali. Then I knew that God's gnosis may be given to whoever He wishes'. This demonstrates that women participated in the learned discussions held in literary or spiritual circles. It might seem surprising that the entries on her husband in hagiographic works devote almost as much space to her as to her husband. It is all the more surprising when one knows that his biographers claimed he had one thousand disciples, all of whom had reached the end of their spiritual path. It is not difficult to image that his wife played a decisive role in this spiritual influence.

Rābi'a bint Ismā'il al-Šāmiyya,

who died in Jerusalem in 229/843–4, has some points in common with Fāṭima. She too was the wife of a great Syrian master Aḥmad b. Abī al-Hawārī (d. 230/845) who lived in the ninth century. She too was rich and spent all her wealth for her husband and his disciples with enthusiasm; she admitted to him 'I do not love you as a husband but as a brother'. Her life was completely turned towards acts of worship and she was accustomed to a rigorous form of asceticism; the duties of marriage weighed heavily on her, so much so in fact that she gave her husband money for him to take a second wife. She did not show the slightest jealousy and even went so far as to cook meat for him to give him strength before he went to join his other wife. Admittedly it was an unusual case; moreover, Rābi'a's spiritual master, who was a woman, severely criticised Aḥmad as she considered it was unfitting for a spiritual man to share his affections between several wives.<sup>18</sup>

It can be seen from these examples that a commitment to the spiritual path sometimes runs in the family. Lineages are formed and knowledge and sanctity are transmitted from one generation to the next like heirlooms which are to be conserved and made to fructify. But 'management of spiritual wealth' such as may be found at the time concerns first and foremost the transmission of knowledge: knowledge of Sufism but also of hadith or Koranic

exegesis, and possibly the bequest of a school as in the case of Quṣayrī's family. This knowledge goes hand in hand with certain personal qualities and education (*tarbiya*), a field in which women actively participate in addition to occupying a central place in the transmission of knowledge. When economic issues appear later, with the development of brotherhoods and *zawiya*, and above all with a saint founding a spiritual lineage, they are linked to the transmission not only of spiritual wealth but also of various material goods and property.<sup>19</sup>

Fāṭima bint 'Abbās al-Baġdādiyya, who died in Cairo in 714/1315, is worth mentioning even if she lived in a later period. She was devout, erudite and a Sufi, but that is not what makes her different. What is unusual is that she was a *Mufti* and as such she had the right to give her opinion on legal matters, an eminently masculine function. It is certainly the reason why the sources mention her school of law, the Hanbali school, reputed to be the strictest of all, which is quite exceptional in the case of a woman. But that is not all: from the pulpit in a mosque she harangued the women, and even the whole population according to one source. It is said that the scholars of the day were struck by the extent of her knowledge and even the great Ibn Taymiyya, a finicky critic of Sufi doctrines, praised her intelligence and the intensity of her meditation. She had an extraor-

dinary power of persuasion over a female audience. This explains why she had a large number of female disciples, both in Damascus and Cairo. She got them to learn the *Koran* by heart and she relentlessly urged them to come to God. Indeed, she believed that God's love could be found through subservience to the Law and by acting in the interest of one's fellow creatures.<sup>20</sup>

### Marginal women

Some women had exceptional spiritual experiences which led them to live on the fringe of their society. It was a man, a famous man in fact, who brought them out of their anonymity. One example is Fāṭima of Cordova, a saintly woman who had a great spiritual influence over Ibn 'Arabī to whom we are indebted for the meagre biographical information that is available. In his youth the great Andalusian master was in service to her when she was almost a hundred years old; at that time, her face was that of a young girl of fourteen and he did not dare to look at her. If ordinary mortals took her to be simple-minded, Ibn 'Arabī reports miracles which testify to the perfection of her spirituality.<sup>21</sup>

Rayḥāna al-Maġnūna is one of those mystics whose experience of divine love has drawn them into states of rapture or madness. She probably lived in the eighth century in the region of Bassora in Irak but there is very little historical in-





Photo courtesy of Sousan Khayam

formation about her. Hagiographic sources have singled out her sublime words. But it is possible to deduce from these short accounts that men from ascetic circles in Bassora spent whole nights in her presence benefiting from the teaching she may have given in the course of her nocturnal prayers, as she was renowned for the rigour of her vigils.<sup>22</sup> This is yet another unusual situation which demonstrates that the spiritual authority acquired by some women put them on an equal footing with men; their womanhood was no obstacle to their influence in contexts where social conventions were more flexible.

At the same time, and in the same region, another woman, known by the one enigmatic name of Ša'wāna, appears to have been at the

head of a maḡlis, a more or less regular gathering of disciples around a scholar or a master, either in the mosque or in houses. She had a very beautiful and particularly musical voice; she spoke in public, adorning her sermons with recitations possibly of the Koran. She had considerable impact on her audience, especially when she spoke of death in a throttled voice. Indeed, hers was a particular form of devotion, marked by attrition, a characteristic she shared with other ascetics, both men and women. Tears would stream down her face sometimes making her words totally incomprehensible to her disciples.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Islam consequently has no

lack of saintly female figures. Yet until very recently, oriental studies, a largely male-dominated field, followed in the steps of Muslim histori-

**Masculinity or femininity are accidents that make no difference to the essence of human nature which is one. All means to reach perfection are consequently open to women just as they are to men.**

ographers by showing little interest in the question. It is perhaps not by pure chance that their relative anonymity came to an end thanks to ... women. The pioneer works are those written by Margaret Smith, Anne-Marie Schimmel and Nelly Amri.

Numerically speaking, the women who are most frequently mentioned in our sources lived in the first two centuries of Islam. In the same way as men, women who lived in the days of the Prophet enjoyed a special and unparalleled status which stems from the privilege of having seen God's messenger. Then come the numerous women who played a role in the expansion of asceticism and the different forms of itinerant lifestyle: some participated in collecting hadith or in developing the legal sciences. When Sufism appeared and started expanding, women committed themselves to spiritual matters.

Around the tenth century,

the great metropolis of Nishapur offered an environment which enabled women to participate actively in the spiritual life of the city, at least

for those belonging to a certain elite: teaching, debates or studies, they undertake the same activities as men. But Bassora, Baghdad, Damascus or Cairo are not outdone, as the examples above have illustrated. Thus women are seen to travel so they can study and become recognised and re-

spected masters. On occasion they can lecture men; they have disciples, both male and female; they give financial support to the development of a Sufi group around a master. They devote themselves to serving the very poor and spend their fortunes to further the cause of God. Another noteworthy fact is that Sufi women come from all social classes, from princes to servants.

They have a place both inside and outside the home. They resist their husbands even if the latter are recognised spiritual masters and claim their right to lead a contemplative vocation.<sup>24</sup> In Sulamī one is struck by the fact that several women are presented in situations which give them the upper hand over their husbands. As a result their husbands who are nonetheless eminent masters appear in a less flattering light. The greatest masters may stand in awe of the learning of one woman, of the virtue of another, of the pow-

er of love that drives another, of the endurance another might show in exercises of mortification. Women as they are shown at the end of the tenth century have no reason to be jealous of men, but they nevertheless differ in at least one respect: the lack of information about them. Their spiritual teaching and practice have come down to posterity but their personality lacks historical depth as the subject is avoided. As a result very little bibliographical information is available.

'The Greatest Master' Ibn 'Arabī clearly stated: masculinity or femininity are accidents that make no difference to the essence of human nature which is one. All means to reach perfection are consequently open to women just as they are to men. From the point of view of the Andalusian master it is not a simple doctrinal statement. His biography shows the decisive role played by women on his spiritual path and in his writings. He thus stated that the most perfect contemplation of God which man may experience comes through a woman. But for the *ṣayḥ al-akbar*, the highest form of sanctity is that incarnated by the *Malāmatiyya*, anonymous spiritual figures who are unknown to men; their heart is sealed by God and He alone can penetrate it. According to M. Chodkiewicz 'the features of the malāmī are to be found in the figure of Mary as represented in Islamic literature based on the *Koran* but the terms used there are often similar to those

used by the Gospels or its Christian exegeticists: the figure of Mary is that of a '*ābida,—ancilla domini—* she is totally subjected to God's will and vowed to silent worship'.<sup>25</sup> The malāmī shares a common destiny with women: the former must hide his spiritual states from his fellow creatures, while the second must hide her femininity from men. With Mary as the prototype of sanctity, female sanctity gradually acquired a form of anonymity in Islam. In fact our sources contain a great many 'anonymous servants' who have lost everything including their name. This may well be the reason why an author such as Sulamī said so little about the women whose spiritual teachings and practices he recounted. Everything else was private and had to be concealed from his readers.

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## NOTES

- 1 See Annemarie Schimmel, 'The Feminine Element in Sufism', appendix II to *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1975.
- 2 On the question of Sufi women, see R. Cornel, *Early Sufi Women*, Louisville, 1999 and Arezou Azad, 'Female Mystics in Medieval Islam: The Quiet Legacy', in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 56, 2013: 53–88.
- 3 The title of the book is *Dīkr al-niswa*

- al-muta'abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*. See R. E. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1999 and the French translation of the text entitled, *Femmes soufies*, trad. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Andreucci, Paris, Entrelacs, 2011. For an analysis of the text, see J.-J. Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (325/937–412/1021) et la formation du soufisme*, Damas, Ifpo, 2009: 330–9.
- 4 It is nonetheless significant that twenty-eight lived in the second century of the Hegira. It would seem that sanctity was particularly common amongst female ascetics in the early days of Islam.
  - 5 For a more detailed history of hagiographic works and the position each attributed to women see, Nelly et Laroussi Amri, *Les femmes soufies ou la passion de Dieu, Saint-Jean-de-Braye*, Editions Dangles, 1992, ch. 2 and M. Chodkiewicz, 'La sainteté féminine dans l'hagiographie islamique', in *Saints orientaux*, D. Aigle éd., Paris, 1995: 99–115, in particular 101–2.
  - 6 Al-Ḥiṣnī (d. 830/1426) and his *Kitāb siyar al-sālikāt al-mu'mināt*, entirely devoted to women is a good example of this, as is al-Ḥurayfiš (d. 801/1398) author of *Al-rawḍ al-fā'iḳ*, quoted by Nelly and Laroussi Amri, op. cit., 57–8. In this work, the author states in the introduction to the section on women that God 'has associated pious women and pious men and that in women can be found the same spiritual states, renunciation, perfection and piety as in men', quoted by M. Chodkiewicz, op. cit., 102.
  - 7 For further details, see Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam*, Cambridge, 1928.
  - 8 'Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya' in *Les femmes mystiques*, éd. Audrey Fella, Paris, Lafont, 2013: 809.
  - 9 See *Doctrine of the Sūfis*, trans. A. J. Arberry, Cambridge, 1991, reprint of 1935 first edition, 11.
  - 10 For a list of her disciples and transmitters, see Francesco Chiabotti, *Entre soufisme et savoir islamique : 'Abd al-Karīm al-Quṣayrī (376–465 /986–1072)*, doctoral thesis, Université de Provence, 2014:104–6.
  - 11 See R. E. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 176–9.
  - 12 See R. E. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 184–5.
  - 13 For further details, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Fātima de Nichapour', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 369–70.
  - 14 But there are a great many examples of such women, such as Umm Hārūn al-Dimašqiyya, who was in the habit of travelling once a month on foot from Damascus to Jerusalem, see Nelly Amri, 'Umm Hārūn al-Dimashqiyya' in *Les femmes mystiques*, 928–9.
  - 15 For quotations and further details, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Umm al-Fadl al-Wahtiyya', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 925–26.
  - 16 It should be pointed out that late sources call her Fāṭima, which can give rise to a possible confusion with Fāṭima de Nishapur and some Western scholars consider that the two women were in fact only one, as for example R. Deladrière or A. Schimmel; for further details see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Umm 'Alī', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 364–6.
  - 17 Another famous case is that of Ḥakīm Tirmiḏī and his wife.
  - 18 For further details, see Jean-Jacques

Thibon, 'Rābi'a bint Ismā'īl al-Shāmiyya', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 926–28.

- 19 On this question see *Family Portraits with Saints, Hagiography, Sanctity and Family in the Muslim World*, ed. by Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen § Alexandre Papas, *Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Band 317*, Berlin, Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales § Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2014.
- 20 For further details, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Fâtima bint 'Abbās al-Bagh-dâdiyya', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 926–28.
- 21 For further details, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Fâtima bint Ibn al-Muthanna de Cordoue', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 368–9.
- 22 For further details, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Rayhâna al-Majnûna', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 826–8.
- 23 For further details, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, 'Sha'wana', in *Les femmes mystiques*, 866–8.
- 24 Rābi'a al-Azdiyya who chastised her future husband, a reputed ascetic from Bassora, when she allowed him to see her for the first time, after making him wait a certain length of time: 'Oh lustful one! What did you see in me that aroused your desire? Why don't you ask a lustful person like yourself to marry you?' see R. E. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 128.
- 25 See M. Chodkiewicz, op. cit., 113.





Photo courtesy of Shuang Wen

## Arab Women in 2015: Hope Amidst Chaos

*Mohammad Naciri*

My non Arab colleagues often tell me that they fear challenging certain norms, not because they do not dare to, but because there is very little one can counter with when the argument – “this is my culture, my religion, my country” is brought up. Indeed it is, but it is also my religion, my culture, and my country; and I am not in agreement with every-

thing that is done in it’s name.

My faith is deeply personal, I am humbled by it, it guides me; but my faith is also mine and mine alone. It influences how I engage with others only in the sense that I treat them with respect and kindness, for who am I to judge anyone else. It does not give me a sense of superiority. I am defined by my faith, but it does not

define me, and my identity is many things. I am a man. A Muslim. I work for gender equality. I am a feminist; and none of these are mutually exclusive. When it becomes problematic for others to reconcile my identities, is when freedom of choice is removed for my sisters in the name of the very faith I prescribe to. I will be examining where we stand in the region in terms of gender equality, how the larger regional issues are linked to discrimination, and how, despite the grim outlook, there is hope and inspiration spearheaded by some of the bravest women I have had the honor to meet.

The region in which I work is one that is rife with turmoil, currently home to 3 of the 4 level 3 humanitarian crisis in the world; Iraq, Yemen and Syria.<sup>1</sup> The discrepancies in poverty are stagnating from some of the world's wealthiest to some of the world's poorest nations. The needs are many, and in a region that is predominantly inhabited by believes of a faith that proclaims –“the taking of one innocent life is like taking all of Mankind, and the saving of one life is like saving all of Mankind.”<sup>2</sup> To the outside world, it is quick and easy to point fingers at religion as the cause of our wars – sectarian divides have long caused rifts in our societies and this is the easiest explanation. We do the same when it comes to women's rights, the region has closed only 60% of the gender gap according to the global gender gap index.<sup>3</sup> There is limited participation in the labor

force, -Labor force participation rates in the MENA region for men are 76% as opposed to 27% for women (versus 74 % and 56% respectively for the rest of the world); and women continue to be very absent from the political sphere. The regional review of the Beijing Platform of Action found that significant progress had been made in some areas, most notably in education – which incidentally is also a millennium development goal. Across the region, gender parity in primary education is almost reached, and in some countries exceeded for secondary and tertiary education.<sup>4</sup>

However, the review also found that this advance in education has not translated to further rights, and women continue to be marginalized in the public spheres. What we are looking at, therefore, is a region where more and more women receive higher education, but where they are then silenced or not given the space to use the education obtained. In many ways, the millennium development goals, which had education as a point to measure equality, were flawed – because the assumption that education alone would equal greater access to rights is not founded in reality. We need to look beyond the notion of education, and examine why if knowledge is power – it is not also equality; in particular in this region.

Khalil Gibran once wrote, “Faith is a knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof.”

Faith, therefore, is malleable, and doing something in the name of faith leaves no room for arguments – it becomes divine law without divine intervention. My good friend and scholar, Marwa Sharafeldin has written on the topic of Gender and Equality in the Muslim Family Law. She specifically examines the concept of “*qiwama*, - the meaning of which may range between the traditionalist understanding of it as the husband’s authority, superiority, financial obligation and guardianship towards the wife on one hand, or the more reformist understanding of it as responsibility for the care and financial maintenance of the family, which may be shared by both spouses, on another.”<sup>5</sup> She is further supported by prominent scholar Ziba Mir Hosseini, who argues “that Muslim family laws are the products of sociocultural assumptions and juristic reasoning about the nature of relations between men and women. In other words, they are ‘man-made’ juristic constructs, shaped by the social, cultural and political conditions within which Islam’s sacred texts are understood and turned into law.”<sup>6</sup> Sharafeldin and Mir Hosseini are both members of Musawah – the global movement for justice and equality in the Muslim family. This movement, made up of women and men, is a coming together of scholars, academics and activists challenging us to rethink the interpretation of the Qurán – without giving up our Muslim identity. It is this

cross section that is so important, not arguing for or against a practice, but rather finding equality among the sexes within our culture and religions.

With the exception of Sudan and Somalia, all Arab countries have signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>7</sup> However, all but Tunisia and Palestine have specific reservations pertaining to it – and most are that CEDAW cannot contradict *Sharia*.<sup>8</sup> Add to this that *Sharia* is adapted differently in each country, and we have a very broad understanding of women’s rights, from inheritance to marriage and divorce across the Arab region.

Lebanon may be the most extreme example of religion dictating personal status, and individual rights. As reported by Human Rights Watch (HRW), Lebanon has 15 different personal status laws, all with their own limitations, but across the confessions “women faced legal and other obstacles when terminating unhappy or abusive marriages; limitations on their pecuniary rights; and the risk of losing their children if they remarry or when the so-called maternal custody period (determined by the child’s age) ends.”<sup>9</sup> In Morocco, it was only last year, after tremendous public pressure, that penal code article 475 – which allowed a rapist to be freed of his charges if he married his victim – was repealed.<sup>10</sup>

It almost seems absurd that in 2015 these issues are still being debated, but they are, and they continue to be. Inequality, at the core, is the unequal distribution of something – wealth, power, resources. For equality to be achieved, someone will have to give up some of their resources – that is needed to balance the scale; and history has shown us that giving up privilege is not something that comes easy to most. It becomes more difficult when privilege is hidden under a cloak of culture and religion, and even more complicated when some of those who are less privileged agree with the imbalance – in the name of protecting their culture. The case in Morocco changed the penal code because the victim, who had been forced to marry her rapist – with the blessing of her parents – committed suicide. This is what it took to bring attention to the issue, and this out is the only one she saw as an option, without a support network including her own family. Women, therefore, are often also custodians of a patriarchal culture, which is something that we cannot and must not forget.



Photo courtesy of Shuang Wen

However, it is not all dark, there are glimmers of hope, individuals who are trailblazers, heroines and heroes supporting gender equality, often risking their own life in doing so.

I could list those who have died for the cause here, those who dared speak up and were silenced either because of their politics or because of their sex, most likely because of both. Recently, I met Libyan women who had come together – across the political divide – to dis-

cuss the future of their country. “A journalist, Naseeb Kerfana, was slain in May of 2014. A month later, a politician who co-founded the transitional body that governed Libya after the 2011 uprising, Salwa Bugaighis, was shot to death in her residence. In July, Fariha al-Barkawy, one of only 33 Congresswomen elected in 2012, was shot to death publicly in broad day light. Last February, a civil society activist, Intisar al-Hassairy, was found murdered in the trunk of her own car.”<sup>11</sup> Against this backdrop, women still come together to discuss and to push for their own future – and that is strength and determination that most of us do not have.

Also on the political arena, there have been hopeful changes, legislations to ensure equality in the workplace has been passed in some countries, moves to criminalize all violence against women – including in the domestic sphere have been made. There are small steps in the right direction, showing that the push for policy change is there and the follow up through can happen.

At the regional level, in addition to a record 21 countries submitting their reports on the status of the Beijing Platform for Action, there has been a large call for greater equality. The agenda is being pushed forward, and while still not a priority in many cases – there is a commitment to acknowledge it. One such example is the Cairo Declaration, which was endorsed by Arab League member

states in February 2014.<sup>12</sup> The Declaration is a strong document, calling for complete social, economic equality between men and women, including a life free of violence. The declaration was further adapted by the Arab league ministerial council, as was announced in New York during the global leaders summit.<sup>13</sup> So there is commitment, there is political will, the issue remains on pushing this through, on not only putting the agenda on paper but making it into action; and this cannot be done as long as the harmful cultural practices still exist. In particularly not when these are done in the name of the very same God I believe in.

As we are moving into a new era in global development, the focus an attention is on the sustainable development goals (SDGs), a more just planed by 2030. The 17 goals, thereunder a comprehensive stand alone goal on gender equality, pledges that “no one is left behind”, and focus on people, planet, prosperity and peace.<sup>14</sup> Where the millennium development goals didn’t quite measure up, the SDGs are meant to pick up the pieces. It is an opportunity for the world to come together and move forward as one, but what we forget is that the world is broken and talking about development in a region torn apart by violence seems almost farcical.

This is where resilience and hope comes in, and where faith and our values play an important role. While I advocate that rights are



universal, they are not at the cost of faith, at least not the faith I prescribe to. I mentioned the women in Libya, and their strength. I can tell you similar stories from Yemen and Syria – across the region Muslim women are finding a voice of peace amidst chaos. This voice is so encouraging, in fact, that in his briefing to the security Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the special envoy of the secretary general to Yemen, he said “despite the misery of the situation I also have share with you some factors which still inspire hope for the future of Yemen,”<sup>15</sup> he then spoke about the Yemeni women who, while “differed in the views of the origins of the current crisis, they came together in demanding that these political differences be addressed in peaceful dialogue.”<sup>16</sup> The issue is not that there is a lack of voice, but that the space will not allow the voice to be heard, and this is where I go back to privilege. Equality means balancing the scale, which in turn means that someone has to let go of some of their privilege, and fighting this is our natural state.

We have seen that there is a tidal shift in policies, a push from governments to open the space, so at least, on paper, women are equal to men. What we are yet to see is these policies translate into action – and the only way to do this is to address the root causes of why we are unequal to begin with. In doing so, we have to reconcile our culture, our faith, our values with a broader

rights movement. If, as Sharafeldin and other argue that the laws that guide us as Muslims are indeed man-made social constructs, then we need to change this. We owe that not only for an equality movement, but also to our communities and our nations. I am proud to be a Muslim Arab, and I do continue to see space for women’s right in this region, as I continue to be inspired by the women who fight for their rights every day. There is indeed hope in this chaos, and championing women’s rights does not mean negating our culture or religion, the two are not mutually exclusive, but rather can be reconciled in a peaceful and prosperous society – as has been envisioned for the 2030 agenda.

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## NOTES

- 1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <http://www.unocha.org/where-we-work/emergencies>
- 2 *Holy Qur’an*, 5:32.
- 3 *Global Gender Gap index, 2014*, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/report-highlights/>
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- 5 Marwa Sharafeldin, “Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law” (2015), <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/fam->

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- 6 Mir Hosseini, Ziba, "Towards Gender Equality: Muslim Family Laws and the Sha'riah", <http://www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Wanted-ZMH-EN.pdf>
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- 9 Human Rights Watch, 2015. *Unequal and Unprotected: Women's rights under Lebanese Personal Status Laws*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/19/unequal-and-unprotected/womens-rights-under-lebanese-personal-status-laws>
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# Antigone, Irony, and the Nation State: The Case of *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) and the Role of Militant Feminism in Pakistan

*Shaireen Rasheed*

## Introduction

In the absence of institutional state support from their home countries or support from Western feminists who are critical of a “feminist Muslim identity,” I hope in this paper to elucidate how certain grass roots women’s movements in Third World countries are forced to make alternative alliances. I will discuss the issue of the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) incidence in Pakistan to illustrate, how Muslim militant feminists have re-aligned themselves with the nation, state, and religion to justify their feminist identities. Through the case study of the Red Mosque in Pakistan and the militarization of the *Jamia Hafsa* feminists, I hope to discuss the problematic of engaging in a “radical Islamist” discourse when interpreting scenarios such as the *Lal Masjid*.

Faisal Devji’s article on the Red Mosque is the pivot on which I contend that although Muslim women in these situations are making a political and/or religious choice to

conform to Islamist norms (i.e., by their dress, their “moral policing” of values), they are also often publicly branding themselves in “stereotypical” performative roles at a time when such a label carries within it the potential fear of making themselves vulnerable to hostility. What I hope to elucidate via Devji’s article is the difficulty in engaging solely in ‘radical Islamist,’ ‘piety,’ ‘liberal’ or a ‘secular’ discourses when interpreting nuanced scenarios such as the *Lal Masjid*. As a way to extrapolate the events of the *Lal Masjid*, I find it useful to interject Hegel’s notion of irony in *the Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>1</sup> to the women in the nation state.

## Background of the *Lal Masjid*

In 2007 women students belonging to a religious school or madrasa called *Jamia Hafsa*, which is part of the *Lal Masjid* mosque in the capital city of Islamabad, illegally occupied the premises adjoining the mosque. They were protesting against the government’s threat to

demolish and reclaim the mosque as a potential venue for terrorist indoctrination. The *Jamia Hafsa* women students conducted a vigilante puritanical drive against “unislamic” practices, such as the sale of music, and demanded that video shops be shut down. They also kidnapped a woman from the neighborhood suspected of running a prostitution business and only let her go once she “repented.”

General Musharraf, the army chief instructed to dismantle the religious school and the mosque where the militant women of *Jamia Hafsa* were living. During this siege, government security forces alleged that the women and two other clerics in the mosque compound were armed with sophisticated weaponry and bombs, and suicide bombers were living among them. “Television pictures of a young woman carrying an AK-47 rifle inside the library shocked many Pakistanis.”<sup>2</sup> Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi, one of the two clerics, died in the attack by the security forces, while his brother, Maulana Abdul Aziz, was detained by the police after trying to escape the building in disguise—wearing a burqa—even before the security forces launched their attack.<sup>3</sup> Many women died in the attacks, although actual numbers have been withheld.

Openly empathetic to the Taliban and tribal militants fighting the Pakistan army, the two cleric brothers who headed *Lal Masjid*, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdul

Rashid Ghazi, had the support of the *Jamia Hafsa* women—or the “burqa brigade” as they are called in Pakistan, comprised of women wielding sticks and fully clad in a black burqa so their faces are not visible. Analysts have argued that the stick-wielding burqa-clad women who had illegally occupied the compound were being used as human shields by the clerics of the *Lal Masjid*, but the women had a different story to tell. To quote one “rescued” woman who was interviewed after the military operation, “we were here on our own free will and of the desire of martyrdom. We spent five years here and cannot leave our madrassa. We were ready to sacrifice the last drop of our blood for our teacher, Maulana Abdul Aziz Sahib.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Faisal Devji’s Red Mosque Interpretation**

According to Devji, what we see in the case of the *Lal Masjid* is an example of the gradual transformation or at least ‘flattening out’ of Islamic militancy, which has in many parts of the world been weaned off its dependence on highly organized or institutional forms to become yet another kind of voluntary association that individuals join for their own reasons, often as part-time members rather than full-time radicals. According to Devji, an interesting aspect of this flattening out of militancy as it spreads through society is that it does not change so much

into a popular or national movement as it does into a relatively open and undisciplined sort of activism within civil society.<sup>5</sup>

Devji's essay makes three important points. The first is that the presence and participation of women in large numbers in the Red Mosque controversy was highly unusual for any group of *Sunni* in Pakistan; such behavior is more familiar from *Shia* revolutionaries in Iran. In this sense, the Red Mosque event can be described, in Devji's word, as "co-ed."

Devji's second point is that the language used by the mosque's teachers and students during the controversy was strongly marked by the vocabulary of development, transparency, and accountability that is the stock-in-trade of NGOs and other civil society organizations. They made use of this common and also "secular" language during the controversy rather than the usual sectarian tirades. This language was matched in its "secularity" by the fact that the female students in the complex were taught English and science, thus departing from the usual stereotype of a radical mad-rassa; English and science were the very subjects that "secularists" insist upon when talking about madrasa reformation. When Al-Jazeera's reporter Rageh Omaar described the *Lal Masjid* as a "conservative" institution, Ghazi rejected this appellation precisely by pointing to the madrasa of the institution's women's,

which he claimed was not only the world's largest, but also included English and science as part of its curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

Devji's third point is that we might be able to account for these phenomena by seeing the Red Mosque crisis as a crisis of traditionally organized "fundamentalism" of the militant kind, by its gradual opening up to the forms and vocabulary of civil society actors like NGOs, especially in the part-time and extracurricular activism that differs so radically from the closed and cult-like character often said to mark radical groups. According to Devji, comparing these held up in the Red Mosque to the Taliban or al-Qaeda is also misplaced. For one, he noted that their kidnappings and their forcible closing of immoral businesses were attempts to court publicity that resulted not as much in the meting out of Islamic punishments as in the almost Maoist "re-education" and subsequent release of alleged prostitutes.<sup>7</sup>

In statements and interviews before its siege, the residents of the Red Mosque mentioned such civil society issues as the lack of security, transparency, and equal opportunity in Pakistan rather than any specifically religious subject. This suggests the mutation of *Sunni* militancy into the kind of mobilization that is neither nationalist nor, in fact, militant in any professional way but perhaps nongovernmental.

Devji implies in all of this that



the Red Mosque was linked more to the everyday and even secular practices of modern life in the region than to any religious or cult behavior. This is evident in the fact that it was the supposedly traditional Maulana Abdul Aziz who tried to escape the besieged institution, not his more modern brother, Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi, who had studied history at Pakistan's most prestigious university and had also worked for UNESCO.<sup>8</sup>

### **Militancy and the *Lal Masjid* Feminism**

It is not uncommon for women's religious groups from *Jamia Hafsa* taking up various causes to promote better living conditions for women, protection of their civic and legal rights and free education, and the establishment of Islamic universities. An important aspect of *Jamia Hafsa* has been the women's protests and activism against the perceived secularization of the state of Pakistan. The women of the *Jamia Hafsia* who were "rescued" by the state security forces expressed their anger at a state and government (then led by General Musharraf) that was moving away from Islamic principles and adopting a secular/pro-Western idiom. Of course, all of these activities by these women were conducted under a strict Islamic religious code of conduct.

The *Jamia Hafsa* women have been a mystery to feminists, argued

Amina Jamal. They have a feminist agenda when it comes to issues of rights in marriage and divorce as well as economic and social empowerment, but they often take on a conservative religious ideology to achieve these ends, advocating segregation of the sexes and a complete reliance on the Islamic way of life.<sup>9</sup>

The secular nature of the state is seen as a threat to the stability and security that can come to women only within the confines of religion and religious politics. These politically active women see religion as the lowest common denominator that can unite men and women, despite differences in their aspirations. An important aspect in the *Jamia Hafsa* activism has been the women's struggle against the perceived secularization of the state. The women of the *Jamia Hafsa*, who were rescued expressed their anger at a state and government, that was moving away from Islamic principles and adopting a secular/pro Western idiom.<sup>10</sup> The women argued that the secular status quo under Musharraf's military regime was problematic because it denied religious women their rights and opportunities to pursue their identity as articulated through the "ideal" or "divine" woman in an Islamic society.

### **Role of Women and Irony in Hegel**

At the end of the section on ethical life in *the Phenomenology of*



*the Spirit*,<sup>11</sup> Hegel wrote of womankind as being the eternal irony of the community. Hegel's Antigone is recognized within the context of the divine Man, who, in reenacting Spirit's externalization from and reconciliation with its essence, exemplifies the life of the self-realizing male individual. Providing the criteria for the fulfillment of Hegel's own social-ontological agenda: the ideal state in which man finds his full self-expression.<sup>12</sup>

Polyneices, unburied, lies at the mercy of being eaten by animals. Antigone acts above the law of Creon to bury her brother, returning him to the earth. According to Hegel, when a woman acts in accord with the divine law, she is acting ethically. While the ethical is decided by its universality, absolved of impurity, love and

desire are directed toward the particular and the contingent. Although desire had at an earlier stage in *the Phenomenology* mediated the struggle for self-consciousness,<sup>13</sup> at this juncture woman's desire, which is preeminently sexual, is incompatible with both self-consciousness and the ethical. Her desire hinders the performance of ethical duty, which is to fulfill the divine law.

Hegel gave ethical primacy to the sister and her platonic relationship to her brother. For his representations of both the ethical life of woman and the destruction of the Ethical Order, Hegel adapted Sophocles' Antigone, the ideal sister. Because Antigone is devoid of natural desire in her relationships, particularly with her brother, and because she has "the highest intuitive aware-

ness of what is ethical,"<sup>14</sup> she is fully able to take upon herself her duty, which "does not suffer any perversion of its content."<sup>15</sup>

Instead of acting out of animal passion, Antigone acts out of an all-consuming pathos that is her substance.<sup>16</sup> She is her "character,"<sup>17</sup> a pure embodiment of the ethical consciousness of women. Without self-awareness, Antigone actualizes the implicit truth of the divine law; she acts with "the simple certainty of immediate truth."<sup>18</sup> By asserting the divine law, Antigone confronts the human law whose validity she denies. Antigone commits a crime and concedes her guilt by acknowledging the only partial truth of both laws.<sup>19</sup> Since her acknowledgment simultaneously entails her death, this paragon of womankind's possibility cannot realize the truth of her endeavor by the consciousness of the unity of both laws in Spirit.<sup>20</sup> But, at this stage of Spirit's development, neither does the bearer of the male human law, the community, realize the truth; instead, it mistakenly believes its law universal and triumphant. Consequently, Antigone's crime and punishment destroy the equilibrium of the Ethical Order and initiate a process that leads, with the aid of woman as irony, to the supersession of the nation and the appearance of a universal world where legal status reigns.

The death of Antigone also has lessons to teach. There is no resurrection for woman. She does

not share in the communal actualization of self-consciousness that is coeval with the fatal fulfillment of her ethical duty. Although not a domestic angel per se—domesticity has no explicit representation in *the Phenomenology*—Antigone embodies the truth of the Family; by her actions, she articulates the truths of both spheres as well as their union in Spirit. These two figures, the divine Man and Antigone, substitute for other forms of individuality, in particular the ironic conscience and woman as "the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community," and become new paradigms for the life of the gendered individual in community.<sup>21</sup>

Syela Benhabib in a paper titled "Hegel Women and Irony"<sup>22</sup> expanded on this idea of irony. She noted that when Hegel talked about irony in the context of his discussion of "womankind," he used this term in *the Phenomenology* to refer to a certain double bind in Greek society: the absolute necessity of the existence of womankind to secure the physical existence and reproduction of the community and the equally strong necessity to suppress womankind. As he showed in the case of Antigone, this suppression turns her into an enemy of the community and even the state. Benhabib argued this point: Spirit may fall into irony for a brief historical moment, but eventually the serious transparency of reason will discipline women and eliminate irony from public life.

Benhabib maintained that what remains of the dialectic is what Hegel precisely thought he could dispense with: irony, tragedy, and contingency. As we saw in the case of womankind, irony involves the simultaneous necessity and unbearable nature of a certain phenomenon. Moreover, irony exists for a brief historical moment and then is overcome.

### **Irony and the *Lal Masjid* Women: Ethical Encounters in Alternate Spaces**

I suggest that within the context of the *Lal Masjid* women, the term irony only applies to a given phenomenon for as long as that phenomenon is intolerable and continues to cause problems. As soon as the suppression of the ironic is complete, the phenomenon no longer exists as ironic—as the necessity creates an internal enemy. Again, why does irony remain of the dialectic?

In commenting on the general movement of the dialectic—the positing by the subject of its opposite, the subject losing itself in the other, and the re-appropriation of the self through the recognition of the other is but an extension or exteriorization of oneself. Benhabib remarked that we—and in this particular case, the women in *Lal Masjid*—are no longer convinced by Spirit’s ability to re-appropriate the other; therefore, we must live with the otherness of the other. Such otherness in Hegelian

terms is that which must be recognized, but it is also that which cannot be allowed to exist on its own. It is the ironic that ought to be permanently disciplined. This is exactly what we saw in the production of the actors or the women in *Lal Masjid*.

This tendency of women to be the keepers of culture—men’s culture—has been documented in

**Where ethical embodiment denies the ideal of autonomy ... ethical irony reformulates autonomy.**

several feminist works. Women are the ones who have much to lose if they challenge the system, but they have much to gain if they support it. There is also a new social mobility that women have acquired through their religious politics. They use their status of “religious warriors” to negotiate on specific gender issues.<sup>23</sup> These violent women in religio-political movements impose normative femininity, but their own lives and lived experiences are not representative of model femininity. Scholars studying religious politics are now reworking ways of understanding religion and religious beliefs in a manner that moves away from liberal, rights-based discourse.

Saba Mahmood is one such scholar who called for greater scrutiny of notions of freedom, agency, and emancipation, which in liberal/

Western discourse have come to be “naturalized in the scholarship on gender.”<sup>24</sup> She further expressed concern that, despite the post-structuralist decentering of concepts, normative agency for women has always meant resistance to established norms.<sup>25</sup>

In South Asian societies, religion is the core of human existence and the foundational framework upon which social/familial relations are organized and political activism carried out. In such societies, it is unhelpful to understand agency “simply as a synonym for resistance of domination, but as capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable.”<sup>26</sup> In order to study the lives of these women and their socio-political impact, is it worthwhile, then, to avoid judgments on their activities or the political/social/cultural religious ends they seek to achieve?

Matt Waggoner discusses the role of “irony” when he engages Mahmood’s critique of universalistic ethics and post-structural feminism. He contrasts her “ethical embodiment” with a concept of “ethical irony,” offering examples of the latter from literature (Brecht, Baudelaire) and cultural theory (Carolyn Steedman, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault). His thesis is that ethical irony signifies modes of critical engagement that are not premised on notions of metaphysical subjectivity.<sup>27</sup> He engages the question of critique by contrasting two ethical orientations:

ethical irony and ethical embodiment. These orientations share the view that liberal constructions of universal ethical norms, or categorical imperatives (Immanuel Kant), do not hold, and that any ethics worth considering today must take seriously its relationship to historical specificity. But

where ethical embodiment denies the ideal of autonomy—the emergence of agency as a result of moral being, achieved when a subject chooses against its nature or circumstances to live according to higher, transcendental principles—ethical irony reformulates autonomy.<sup>28</sup>

According to Waggoner, ethical irony falls within an orientation to ethics and the political that offers a disoriented understanding of the right thing to do in light of the impossibility of doing right and escaping wrong. The idea it safeguards is that a strong model of agency is a misrepresentation because subjects are shaped by circumstances not of their doing; nonetheless, there is, more to subjectivity than those conditions and their consequences. Causal conditions are capable of giving rise to “undetermined moments of self-reflection, self-interrogation, and openness to the unforeseeable, or what Kant called spontaneity.”<sup>29</sup>

Mahmood in her book *The Politics of Piety*<sup>30</sup> argued in her analysis of the women’s mosques in Egypt that women participating in religious movements should lead us to reconceptualize constructions



of human agency in current feminist discourse. She asserted that existing notions of agency as comprehended in current feminist discourses are too limited for understanding the lives of devout Muslim women. She proposed that despite their inclusionary intentions, existing feminists accounts of agency of religiously defined women may obfuscate rather than clarify our understanding of these gendered subjects. Even as post-structuralist accounts disrupt the ungendered autonomous subject of liberal social and political thought, Mahmood argued, they tend to reinstate the secular subject of feminist thought in ways that erase the religious subjectivity and agency of the Islamic woman. They do so by continuing to rely on secular discursive frameworks built upon ideas of resistance, autonomy, and self-fulfillment to explain the agency of Muslim women, including Islamic feminists.

Mahmood's book is an anthropological study of a women's piety movement that is part of the larger Islamic movement in Egypt. She based her study on fieldwork conducted over two years, from 1995 to 1997, in three mosques in Cairo. Each of these sites, where the *da'iya* or female preacher adopts a distinctive pedagogical style, is deemed to represent a different socioeconomic section of the city. In this movement of piety, women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds take up lessons to one another on

the proper reading of the Quran, the Islamic scriptures. The sociological significance of this is that it marks the first time in Egyptian history that women in large numbers have taken on a historically appropriated task of men, thereby altering (according to Mahmood) the male character of the mosque and the Islamic pedagogic practices associated with it. However, she cautioned against a feminist interference that would understand these changes as modes of gendered resistance to patriarchal structures. Such a conception of a pious women's agency would reinstate the normative liberal discourse of politics based on freedom and rights. Instead, Mahmood argued that agency must be thought of not only in secular terms of self-fulfillment and empowerment, but also in terms of hope, fear, and religious virtue. This requires a different subjectivity from the secular liberal discourse of rights.

### **Conclusion: The Irony Surrounding a Politics of Piety**

Although we need to appreciate alternate ways of theorizing women's subjectivity in alternate spaces, it remains, very important to direct our attention as readers to the fundamental gap or silence that holds up this space of theorizing, which, in Foucaultian terms, may be called one "conditions of possibility" for the coherence of texts. I refer to the explicitly stated decision by cer-

tain postcolonial critics, including Mahmood, to construct an arbitrary divide between politics and *Politics*. They have refrained from exploring the relationship between social subjectivity, religious or otherwise, and the sphere of local and national political activities related to the nation state. Even though Mahmood implicitly accepted the involvement of symbolic processes of gendering and piety in social action aimed at promoting interests, she failed to examine what happens when or if the alternate subjects and agents she highlighted traverse the space from informal to formal politics as new types of citizens-subjects. According to Amina Jamal, this is disappointing because it is in the process of making entitlements and claims on the nation state that feminists—including women’s movements in Muslim majority societies such as Pakistan—must come face to face with those women and men who claim an authoritative relationship to scriptural interpretations and Islamic bodily practices.<sup>31</sup>

Muslim women’s negotiations (as seen in the Red Mosque incidence) of their subjectivities are, to a large extent, shaped by the discourse of the sacred to legitimize their authority. In reacting to the Western discourse on liberal rights, they tend to align themselves invoking increasing social and sexual control on the “symbolic and chaste woman” centered at the core of an identity politics.<sup>32</sup>

The current politicized view of Islamic identity presents one model for Muslim women, and the Western so-called emancipatory view presents another. These two contradictory poles of desire reinforcing a structured ambivalence within the notion of the ideal Muslim woman reduce her to the same symbols and icons.<sup>33</sup> Western stereotypical views offer descriptive and devalued essentialist imaginary of Islam through articles of faith, including the *hijab* as a vehicle of oppression. In addition, stereotypical views interpreted through political Islam, by contrast address contemporary women’s needs and present so-called “Islamically” inspired solutions though persuasion and, at times, coercion.<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, by grounding agency and morality in alterity Kantian ethics do not premise morality on the universality of the will and of the law. Rather Kantian ethics may proceed from the subject’s capacity to respond and remain open to an otherness on which it depends for its experience of a kind of subjectivity ungrounded in anything essential or substantive.<sup>35</sup>

Morality, then, becomes a condition of absolute vulnerability because, as Waggoner stated, in following the law, the moral agent is obligated to act against its self-interest by exposing itself to the disorienting effect of the other. But it is also through the response to the radical other that the agency articulates its irreducibility to empirical given-

ness, and thus agency is constituted as a critical endeavor. Kant's "what is enlightenment?" did not imply the privatization of religion, but rather ways of appropriating religious speech and thought and the conditions for expressing them freely in society.<sup>36</sup> When Kant described his historical moment as an age of enlightenment but not an enlightened age, he made an intentional distinction between what can be embodied and realized and what remains an unrealized futurity. Critique within this context relies on the ability to see within what exists presently, the universality of a silent other, otherness, or how it could be otherwise."<sup>37</sup>

Parashar in her essay "The Sacred and the Secular" asked: how do we understand agency and empowerment in the lives of these women? As she states, "if religion and religious politics are understood to be upholding patriarchal values that can very often deny women public presence and even visibility, how does the gendered religio-political space respond to women's activism and participation, including in violence and militancy?"<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary revivalist literature by academics like Mahmood, who have studied contemporary Islamic movements, advocate the viability of re-instituting alternative Islamic economics, legal, and political systems. They do not consider such projects to be simply reactions to Western colonialism and imperialism. Regarding the study of

women activists of such Islamic political movements in Pakistan, piety literature challenges the notion that right-wing women are pressured to join Islamic political parties.

The political experience in the Pakistani context, especially as elucidated by the *Lal Masjid* case, however, has shown that faith-based agency of women in religious parties is not just often used for feminist ends. It is also used increasingly to support a patriarchal and Islamic agenda. Women like those in *Jamia Hafsa*, embrace the idea of the modern while seeking to domesticate it within a religious discourse.<sup>39</sup> Yet ironically, at the same time, it also challenges the idea that Islam or an Islamic state is oppressive for women, as defined by orientalist literature, or that women's resistance, agency, and autonomy must be opposites of subordination.

Mahmood is correct when she criticizes Western and often secular definitions of agency which impose a concept of victimhood on these women. Said Khan's work on middle-class women of Pakistan has shown that 'modern' and 'religious' in all their heteronormativity are not mutually exclusive but are part of a more nuanced web for many Muslim women including those termed Islamists.<sup>40</sup>

The ultimate irony, therefore, is what remains of this dialectic: re-appropriation is no longer convincing, and we are left with witnessing the otherness of the other—whose

existence Hegel had to admit—rather than the actualization of Spirit. What women can do within this context is to restore irony to the dialectic. They can recognize that disciplinary measures were taken to eliminate irony and, in thus making that recognition, recover that which was put down.

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## The Indian Paradox

*Shumona Sinha*

**India may be the country of the woman but the spiritual veil that covers it should not hide the violence perpetrated against many women there.**

**For a long time venerated, women pay today a heavy tribute to the clash of modernity that splits the country into two worlds, one of which, feeling more and more alienated, is losing its references.**

King Rama, eponymous hero of the mythological Hindu epic *The Ramayana* exiled from his realm for fourteen years with his wife Sita and his younger brother Lakshman, found residence in the for-

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est in southern India. The people from South India, from Lanka (today called Sri Lanka), referred to as “demons” by the northern Hindus because of their non-aryan appearance (a dark skin and nappy hair among other characteristics) quickly noticed these young survivors in the forest. King Ravana kidnapped Sita, the ideal princess and wife and purity incarnate. After a series of adventures, Ram declared a great war against the « non-aryan » Ravana so that evil is destroyed and good triumphs. Thus, Sita was saved. But, upon the request of his kingdom’s people who deemed her dishonored and disgraced while in captivity, Rama repudiated Sita and exiled her forever in the forest.

The Indian people, at least a majority of them, have not forgotten the lessons of their mythology. Since the birth of myths and mystic lands, the Indian woman is venerated as a goddess, princess, queen, spouse and mother... On her pedestal her role is to remain chaste and pure. She is Durga, the goddess with ten arms to defeat Evil; she is Lakshmi the promise of wealth, Saraswati, the source of knowledge. As Mumtaz, wife of the Moghol king Shah Jahan, the Taj Mahal, sublime mausoleum made of white marble will be constructed when she dies. She does not belong to the real life, to the dirt, to the street where man lives and acts.

It seems that a happy compro-

mise between the pedestal and dust, between veneration and repudiation has not been found. Universal laws continue to apply up till today when invaders try to conquer new territories: men are assassinated, houses burnt with cattle and crops, women molested, dragged into mud before they are thrown in the dungeon of secrecy and disgrace. For it is still the woman who remains the first and only responsible for the violence and aggression committed by man of which she is the victim. It is also her whose voice is stifled even

**It is still the woman who remains the first and only responsible for the violence and oppression committed by man of which she is the victim ...**

before she is born in this patriarchal society. Rape, female fetus killing, acid-attacks by men who have been rejected by a woman, housewives murder because of unpaid dowries, illiteracy, childbirth deaths... the list of crimes is long and the victims, uncountable.

Lately the Indian economic boom has received the attention of the media. Liberalism in market economy, globalization, individual as well as partisan ambitions are being associated with the idea of a formerly glorious country, pre-colonial India, Ancient India, the India of the Hindu Empire. The country is revitalized with a new energy and



ambition to be liberated from its post-colonial corpse, miserable and moribund. Economic neoliberalism has liberated the social codes. With a gargantuan appetite, the middle class has started to devour the fruit so far inaccessible to it: house, car, travel to Europe, appliances, fash-

ion and imported beauty products, private schools, latest gadgets: nothing is forbidden any more. In front of brand-new high rises scrapping the low skies, the parade started below on the pavement, as broken and stinky as before, home of the beggars, daily laborers, the insanes and the prostitutes.

### **A sexual expression of the class struggle**

The country boasts of its economic progress, nuclear power, medical service, computer know-how, the vast potential of its young generation and its intelligentsia. However, the redistribution of wealth and social justice are no pre-occupation for the country's leaders. Those stagnating at the bottom of the social scale are not a worry to politicians. Illiteracy, demographic explosion, unemployment and the child-labor remain major obstacles, which tie together and are woven

into an iron chainmail, stifling the Indian society. In India, the pyramidal system of hierarchy reigns. The binary opposition strong/weak, executioner/victim imposes itself everywhere and always. In India, quasi-feudal scenes are being played.

In this chaotic India, shaken by socio-economic earthquakes, women are on the front line, they are the emancipated ones and the easy targets.

Rape is as old as the earth. In the slums, the construction sites and the fields, women of impoverished backgrounds have always paid a dear price for their fragile existence. However their cries were muffled. What characterize the recent rapes in India are the typical profiles of both the rapist and their victims. Poor men, quasi-illiterate, unemployed or homeless men who can only find comfort in cheap alcohol and cyber-sex, overwhelmed by the spectacular evolution of the Indian society, are losing their social and moral references. The economic boom has liberated women and has introduced massive changes in social moral codes and customs. The new codes are rejected massively by these impoverished men: they interpret in their own way the quite visible evolution of the Indian woman. This is a clash of two worlds, a fracture in the social continuum, which characterizes this frenetic and accelerated evolution, the somber revenge of the proletariat. To sum this up, the act of raping women in India

is the sexual expression of the class conflict!

But, this upheaval is also accompanied by another novelty: the will to speak up. So far, rape victims never dared to ask for justice, neither institutional or social, because they were accused of being themselves guilty. Today one talks about it, words are voiced, revolts are many and unflinching and determined. Women and men, male and female students, intellectuals, artists, social activists took the street and organized massive protests, demanding justice and the exemplary condemnation of criminals. On the other side are the politicians and the political leaders some of whom have publicly declared and warned young women and students that they should not cross the line, that they need to dress properly so as to discourage rape! They also published in newspapers the portrait of a woman wearing the ideal attire, indicating the exact measurement to be respected for shirts, tee-shirts and knee-length garments... Since the coming to power of the BJP, the fanatic and fundamentalist Hindu nationalists, the official discourse of politicians seem to bring India back to the Vedic era, to a pre-Muslim and pre-colonial India, to an archaic and patriarchal order which condemns women for being women. To be born a woman does not mean to be entitled to become one.



### **A very unbalanced Man/Woman ratio**

If rape remains the most visible and mediatized form of women oppression in India, the female infanticide is no less threatening. Indian demography is experiencing a brutal and disastrous change in the male-female ratio, one of the most unbalanced in the world: the proportion of girls aged 0-6 years old

dropped from 945 to 927 for 1000 boys since the last census. In deprived India, in developing India, in rural or urban underdeveloped zones, girls used to be born and used to be raised neglected and despised by their parents who continued to increase the size of the family until a son was born in the vain hope that prosperity would come from the masculine side. Progress achieved through science and technology, accessible to all today, enable the in-laws to force the young wives to go through an echography, and to force them to get an abortion if the fetus

happens to be that of a girl. Talking about his wonderful novel "Miette" the French author Pierre Bergounioux had said: "There are things and there are thoughts about things." The tool that man is using creates a thought connection if not an emotional connection between the two. In our civilization in constant transition and transformation, the instrument enables man and his thought



to evolve. But when a rupture between man and his instrument has taken place, when education has not been provided to guide our thinking process, dramas and disasters are looming ahead. The thousands of aborted girl fetuses in India are as many voices assassinated even before they are born. This crime of a patriarchal society is conceived and committed both by men and women, the father in law, the mother in law, even the husband who obviously all consider that being born as a woman is far from a blessing in India.

It is even less so when she is of an inferior caste, if her skin is dark and if she is of poor parents. The four pages of the Sunday newspapers dedicated to matrimonial advertisements still reflect the post-colonial influence, a veneration for the “superior race” unashamedly asking for the ideal fiancés, truly beautiful meaning girls endowed with a distinctly fair skin. In Hindi, *gori* means beautiful. It comes etymologically from *Gora* meaning “White” also designating the British. Bollywood songs, which strongly call out to *Goris* make people forget for a moment this postcolonial inferiority complex and this racist bend linked to skin color both rooted in the psyche of many Indians.

And, even when these beauty traits are fulfilled, is the young bride nonetheless safe? Many assassinations, often disguised as accidents are proving the opposite. The non-payment of the dowry is, most of

the time, the main motives for these crimes. In this new millennium the family-in-law have adapted to the frenzies of economic progress: in the advertisements it is now demanded that the fiancé, besides being a beauty of fair complexion, must be a working-girl with a regular salary. Before it was not proper that one’s daughter-in-law would be seen in the public place, but today it is accepted that, to face the numberless solicitations triggered by the consumer society, it is necessary to multiply the incomes in the family. Many Indian women are still fighting to have a bank account in their name so that their salary is no longer confiscated by their husband and/or their in-laws.

The portrait of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi represented as the Goddess Durga, a creation of the iconic painter Maqbool F. Hussain, is once more revelatory of the quasi-monarchical hierarchical system and the ultra-polarized contradictions of the Indian society, a society in which women in power are venerated as divine incarnations whereas popular class women seem to be of less value than a sacred cow.

### **The beginning of a massive rebellion**

Political leaders, local administrative women leaders, women writers, artists, women intellectuals, women clerks, women students, peasant women and blue collar

working women, now all women in India are waking up and rebel on a massive scale. But the obstacles are many: the diversity of languages (22 official languages not counting the many dialects), diversity of religions and their many practices according to the regions, the caste system, and the socio-cultural frontiers, these are as many factors preventing the Indian feminist movement to be united and to show solidarity.

In what ways these revolts will prove efficient when opposing men, women also who, often deprived, oppressed, illiterate are perpetuating the misogynist patriarchal

system? Tagore once wrote: "Those that you have left behind, below, oppressed, they will drag you down, you as well." Who will go down to the bottom of the ladder, to the dirt and mud of the lower world, to reach, to listen, to bring light? How to convince the poor people that the fight for the freedom of women is a necessary and a complementary component in the general existential fight? Woman needs to be given back what belongs to her by right: safety, health, education, equality, respect and honor, her very right to be a woman.



Photo courtesy of Ann Ling



## Saint and Sinner: Women in Christianity

*Peter C. Phan*

Within the overall theme of women and the feminine in world religions this essay focuses on the role of women in Christianity, with particular emphasis on Roman Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> The juxtaposition of “saint” and “sinner” in its title illustrates the complexity and equivocity of Christianity’s attitude towards women. Like most other religions, Christianity has a longstanding and ingrained ambivalence if not overt hostility toward women and the feminine. This ambiguity is enshrined in the

dominance of two symbols of femininity in Christian history: Eve the primordial sinner and Mary the paradigmatic saint. Christianity inherits the Hebrew myth of Eve as one who is “created second and sinned first” (*Gen* 2:22; 3:6) and develops it into an anthropology in which woman is doubly subjected to man, in two respects, by nature (“created second”) and by punishment (“sinned first”).<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Mary is exalted as the Mother of God, in whom the twin ideals of womanhood—virgin-

ity and motherhood---are perfectly realized. Consequently, one possible way to expound the Christian vision of womanhood and the feminine would be to examine the theology of womanhood underlying these two iconic figures. The disadvantage of this approach, however, is that it boxes itself within the patriarchal and hierarchical ideology which, though permeating the Christian tradition, would blind us to the monumental achievements of flesh-and-blood women, as individuals as well as collectives, to both church and society. A more helpful course is to look at Christian women as they live, move and have their being in history, and despite the enormous odds that would have crippled less hardy souls, have shaped the history of Christianity. Thus, I begin with a brief narrative of outstanding Christian women and the arenas in which they have made lasting contributions. Next I consider some key feminist theologies that have sought to break the stranglehold of patriarchy and androcentrism and to reconceive the church as a community of equal discipleship. Lastly, I examine women's ordination, still a neuralgic issue for some Christian churches, as an example of where women's struggle for equality is still ongoing.

**“The Church would look foolish without them.”**

Blessed John Henri Newman, a nineteenth-century convert from

Anglicanism to Catholicism, speaking of the role of the laity in the church, famously spoke the above words in reply to his bishop William B. Ullathorne's question: "Who is the laity?"<sup>3</sup> If Newman's statement is right about the laity as a whole, its truth is certainly more evident when applied to Christian women, as polls after polls have shown that women are far more active than men in everyday church life.<sup>4</sup> Already during Jesus' lifetime women played a key role, without whom Jesus' ministry would have been much diminished if not impossible. Leaving his mother Mary aside for the moment, many women, some named and many unnamed, were his disciples, accompanied him during his ministry, and financially supported him and his male followers (*Lk* 8:1-3). Women were the last to remain at the cross despite physical danger while his male disciples had fled to safety, were the first to come to the tomb, and were the first to witness the Resurrection, thus becoming, especially Mary Magdalene, "apostle to the apostles" (*Mk* 16:9-11; *Mt* 28:8-10; *Lk* 24:4-5; *Jn* 20:1-18).

The new reality which Jesus brought to social and religious relations between women and men and which is realized in the new ritual of baptism is eloquently expressed by Paul: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male

and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (*Gal* 3:27-28). Given this reality of discipleship of equals, women were not excluded from ministry in the early church but were engaged in various forms of leadership including itinerant evangelist, apostle, prophet, teacher, co-worker, house-church leader, community administrator, financial steward, and patron. Throughout *Acts* and Paul's letters we meet women working in various ecclesial positions such as Prisca/Priscilla, Mary the mother of John Mark, Chloe, Lydia, Nympha, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Phoebe, and Junia (the latter is said to be "prominent among the apostles" but is eventually changed into a male apostle with the name of Junias!).

However, not long after the Christian movement was consolidated into a stable institution, male church leaders attempted to exclude women from positions of power, which they now reserve to themselves. Paul himself, who affirms so eloquently the equality of all Christians on the basis of baptism, devotes all his energy to annul the Jew-Greek dichotomy but does little to abolish slavery ("slave or free") and patriarchy ("man and woman"). On the contrary, with regard to the subordination of women, he sanctions it with theological reasons: Just as God is the head of Christ, and Christ the head of the man, so is the husband the head of his wife (*1 Cor* 11:3). In the same letter, he forbids the Corinthian women to prophesy, for "it

is shameful for a women to speak in church" (*1 Cor* 14:35). This subordination of women is vigorously enjoined in the so-called "household code" (*Col* 3:18-4:1; *Eph* 5:22, *1 Pet* 3:7), where wives are told to submit to their husbands, and in the *Pastoral Letters*, in which the silencing and subordination of women reaches its climax. Indeed, it is in one of these Pastoral Letters that we have the first deliberate linking of women and Eve, the one who was created second and sinned first: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (*1 Tim* 2:11-14).

In spite of these biblical injunctions on female subordination to male authority, Christian women continue to hold positions of authority and influence in the early church, especially as deaconesses, widows, and virgins. However, of these three "orders," the first two were soon much weakened. The deaconesses' sacramental and administrative functions were severely curtailed, and the widows' function was reduced to praying for the church. Both the Order of Deaconesses and the Order of Widows were abolished by the Synod of Epaon in 517. Only the third form of life, that is, virginity and monasticism, proved a viable long-term option for women,



and it is almost exclusively through virginity (or post-marital celibacy), and not through marriage and family life, that women made their contributions to church life down the

## Women were not excluded from ministry in the early church but were engaged in various forms of leadership.

centuries until the sixteenth century when the Protestant Reformation abolished monasticism and revived the common priesthood of all the faithful as the foundation of Christian life.

The founding of hermit and communal forms of monasticism for men is commonly attributed to the Egyptian monks Anthony and Pachomius respectively, but indirect evidence from Palladius's *Lausiaca History* shows that there was also female monasticism in both the eremitic and coenobitic forms in the Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian deserts. This ascetic movement was practiced not only in the desert but also in urban centers such as Rome and Milan. In Rome, associated with the biblical scholar Jerome were powerful and wealthy women such as Marcella and Paula, who turned their homes into convents for women who sought to live the Gospel in a new, egalitarian way. In Bethle-

hem, Melania the Younger founded her own convent after dismissing her eighty thousand slaves. In Constantinople, Olympias invited all her slaves and servants to join her convent. Gregory of Nyssa's older sister Macrina, who was trained in philosophy and Scripture, persuaded her mother to turn her household, including servants and slaves, into a monastic community.

It is important to note that this early form of female monastic life in virginity was not initiated by male authorities known as bishops but by the women themselves. It was quickly realized by male leaders that women—by their choice of virginity—overcome their supposedly inborn inferiority (“created second” and “sinned first”) and make themselves equal to men by practicing “manly virtues” in their newfound egalitarian way of life. Prominent male church leaders of the fourth century such as Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine were caught in a terrible dilemma. On the one hand, they spare no effort in praising virginity as the perfect state of life and denigrating marriage with its sexual activities as tantamount to lust. On the other hand, they feel threatened by the possibility of female virgins usurping their authority and privileges, especially in the threefold office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, as well as by their bodies which their male gaze looks upon as a source of temptation (virgins still are sexual beings!). To counteract

this double danger the Fathers of the church devise a two-pronged strategy, which would be faithfully copied by their successors down the centuries: first, by confining the virgins in a convent, cut off from all contacts with the world and regulated by strict rules; second, by developing a new theology of womanhood. For the latter task, they, especially Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, fabricate an image of Mary, which has little to do with the biblical Mary, the wife of Joseph and the mother of Jesus and his “brothers and sisters,” to suit their goal of inculcating obedience and submission. They delight in drawing the Eve/Mary contrast, each embodying carnality and purity, sexuality and virginity, disobedience and obedience, sin and grace respectively, and in the process introduce the theological novelty of Mary as the ascetic ideal who preserves her physical virginity before, during, and after the birth of her son and whom the virgins must strive to imitate.

Again, ironically, being enclosed in a separate community, the women virgins from the sixth to the tenth century enjoyed the opportunity to govern their own monastic lives, except in sacramental matters, independently from episcopal supervision. Most of these women came from aristocratic families. Some were former married queens such as Clotilde of France, Bertha of Kent, Thelburga of Kent, and Rade-gund of France; others belonged to

royal families such as Hilda, the first abbess of the double monastery of Whitby, England. Abbesses in England, such as Ebba of Coldingham and Etheldreda of Ely, governed their monasteries quasi-episcopally and were called by the episcopal title of Sacerdos Maximus [high priest]. They wore episcopal insignia such as ring and mitre and carried the episcopal crozier. Other notable abbesses include Frideswide of Oxford, Walberga of Heidenheim in Bavaria, Leoba of Tauberbischofsheim in Frankonia. Unfortunately, with the Carolingian reform, which championed the clericalization of monastic life, the independence of nuns was drastically reduced, their participation in the ritual of the Liturgy at the altar was forbidden, and their life was rendered invisible behind the monastic enclosure.

As Christianity entered its second millennium, the Gregorian reform, which was initiated by Pope Leo IX by the middle of the eleventh century, implemented by Pope Gregory VII (hence its name), and culminated in the fourth Lateran Council of 1215, reduces women and nuns to total silence, symbolically as well as literally. Ostensibly the reform aims at abolishing lay control over the church (“lay investiture”) and establishing the law of clerical celibacy, but its implementation wrought devastation on the role of women in church and society. To reduce the autonomy of quasi-episcopal abbesses, women monasteries

were either closed or placed under the control of the local bishop. Nuns were made to live silent and invisible, under custody, in the cloister. To enforce priestly celibacy, existing marriages of priests were dissolved, their wives declared concubines and whores, and their children made illegitimate. Women are violently vilified as misogyny reaches its paroxysm. Pope Leo IX calls women *damnabiles feminae*, and his theological advisor Peter Damian heaps abuse upon them with epithets such as “castaway from paradise, poison of the minds, death of the souls, bitches, sows, screech-owls, night-owls, bloodsuckers, she-wolves, harlots, prostitutes.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas Mary the Ever-Virgin remains the model of virginity for nuns, a new model is now invented for married women in the figure of Mary Magdalen, whom Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) has transformed into a paradigmatic repentant whore and who represents the best thing Christian married can aspire to be.

In spite of all the canonical restrictions imposed upon them by the hierarchy and the vulgar vituperation heaped upon them, some medieval women distinguished themselves and their names are celebrated today, some for their learning, such as Héloïse, whose life is tragically intertwined with Abelard, others for involvements in public affairs, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen of France and Queen of England. In the twelfth century a

new phenomenon of immense importance occurred with the lives and writings of women mystics and visionaries such as Christina of Markyate, Hildegard of Bingen, and Elizabeth of Schönau. Of Hildegard, Mary Malone’s succinct description expresses well her extraordinary versatility and impact: “visionary, mystic, theologian, author, pharmacist, musician, artist, preacher and abbess.”<sup>6</sup> Another extremely influential women’s movement, which took place in Belgium, France, Germany and Northern Italy, is the Beguines, who undertook to live religious life in poverty, simplicity, and apostolic work outside of the canonical forms. The movement was fiercely persecuted by the male hierarchy. One Beguine, Marguerite Porete, whose book *The Mirror of Simple Souls* achieved instant popularity, was burned at the stake in Paris in 1310 for heresy, and by 1400, all Beguines were forced to live in convents. In the thirteenth century, two women convents became important centers of spirituality. The first is in Helfta, Germany, with celebrated abbesses Gertrude of Hackenborn, Mechtild of Hackenborn, Gertrude of Helfta, and Mechtild of Magdeburg. The second is in Assisi, Italy, with Saint Clare as foundress of a religious order committed to material poverty as a way of life. On another level, there is Joan of Arc, burned to death in 1431 on the charge of wearing male clothes, but later rehabilitated and canonized. Finally, the late Middle Ages



saw the rise of female recluses, especially in England, the two most famous figures of whom are Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.

The Renaissance, and especially the Protestant Reformation, shift the arena of women's influence from the convent back to the secular world. Though this change of location has been celebrated as an emancipation of women from clerical control, it must be admitted that the Reformers place them almost exclusively in the realm of marriage, motherhood, and childrearing. Following the biblical "household code," as described above, the Reformers stress the duty of wives to be submit-

ted to their husbands, thus exchanging one form of female submission for another. There emerged a new figure, that of the "pastor's wife." The Catholic response to the Reformation, variously called "Counter-Reformation" and "Catholic Reform," culminates in the Council of Trent (1545-63). The council set the stage for a permanent transformation of almost all the areas of the Catholic Church, but left no place for the contribution of women. Cloister was re-introduced in 1563 and religious life of women was under strict ecclesiastical control.

In spite of this total control, in the post-Tridentine church, some women succeeded in reforming the church on their own and in leaving behind extremely influential writings. Among these Teresa of Avila, who reforms the Carmelite Order and whose writings on spirituality earns her the title of "Doctor of the Church." (The other three women Doctors of the Church are Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, and Therese of Lisieux.) Another brilliant women is the Mexican nun Sor Juan Ines de la Cruz.

In the post-Tridentine era significant changes in the status

of women did not occur until new religious orders were established without the enclosure obligation, whose members can exercise public ministry, especially in religious instruction and various forms of social services. Four women are foundresses of such religious orders: Angela Merici in Italy (the Ursulines), Mary Ward in England (the English Ladies), Jane de Chantal, in collaboration with Francis de Sales in Switzerland (the Visitation), and Louise de Marillac, together with Vincent de Paul in France (the Daughters of Charity). Since the nineteenth century the number of female religious orders and congregations without enclosure exploded beyond all telling. A joke goes around that the one thing God does not know is the number of female religious societies and their names! Throughout the world millions of religious women are engaged in ministries of evangelization, education, health care, and social services. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) lay Catholic women have assumed positions of non-sacramental leadership at the parish, diocesan, and Roman levels. In the Protestant churches, women have been active in mission work, medical care, teaching, and social services. With very few exceptions, Protestant churches have ordained women to the diaconate, priesthood, and episcopacy---an issue we will consider with some detail below. This all-too-brief overview of the history of women in Christianity

serves as a reminder that women, in the midst of the violent misogyny of the male church leaders, have not only been victims of their oppressive measures but have used their courage, imagination and talents to shape a more just church. In light of this history it is perhaps necessary to amend Cardinal Newman's bon mot by saying that without women the church would not only look foolish but also is simply impossible.

### **Development of Feminist theologies**

From these experiences of women's personal agency to overcome dehumanizing patriarchy and androcentrism and to achieve equal dignity and access to power in both church and society there grows a movement dubbed Christian feminism which in turn gives rise to various kinds of feminist theologies. Of course, Christian feminism did not develop in a cultural vacuum. On the contrary, it owes much to the feminist movement, or women's liberation, which is inspired by the Enlightenment with its promotion of reason, autonomy, freedom, equality, and natural rights. Like the feminist movement, Christian feminism is originally a Western phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and follows the trajectory or waves of its secular counterpart. In broad strokes, Christian feminism is initiated by white Western women, first Protestant (for example, the



Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth), and then, much more recently, Catholic (chiefly, Mary Daly, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Kari Elisabeth Borresen, and Catharina Halkes). To reclaim their rightful positions and responsibilities in the church, Christian feminists adopt a three-pronged method of interpretation of both the Scripture and Tradition: the hermeneutics of “suspicion” to unmask their patriarchal and androcentric bias; the hermeneutics of “retrieval” to re-appropriate their “usable” texts and events that have enhanced the full flourishing of women; and the hermeneutics of “reconstruction” to articulate, on the basis of these liberative sources the whole gamut of Christian doctrines from the perspective of women’s personal and communal experience.

Of primary concern to feminist Christians/Christian feminists is the way in which human language and images are used to speak about God (theology), “woman” is defined (anthropology), ministry in the church is organized (ecclesiology), moral, in particular sexual issues are evaluated (ethics), and the Christian faith is lived (spirituality). The contributions of early feminists on these themes, while extraordinary, represent mainly the concerns and experiences of the white, educated, and privileged class. As feminism spreads globally, and the number of

feminist theologians is now legion, voices of women of color, sexual minority (LGBTQ), socially and economically marginalized groups, and geographical areas outside Europe and North America, have added their own agenda and resources. As a result, there is now a variety of feminisms (womanist, mujerista, African, Asian, Latin American, postcolonial, ecofeminist, etc.), forming a global symphony, at times a mindboggling cacophony, of theological voices. As a result, as the church without women is impossible, theology without feminism is blind.

### **An outstanding issue: women’s ordination**

“Outstanding” here is used in two senses: ‘excellent’ and ‘remaining to be dealt with.’ Women’s ordination to ministry in its threefold office of deacon, priest, and bishop is an excellent place to discuss the issue of women in Christianity and the various forms of institutional discrimination of women. On the other hand, while many churches have accepted the ordination of women to all the three ministerial ranks, it is still outlawed by some of the largest and most influential churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and many Evangelical Churches.

Opponents to women’s ordination, especially to the priesthood and the episcopacy, generally advance three arguments. First, Chris-



“The Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.” Automatic excommunication is incurred by the woman who is ordained and the bishop who ordains her.

The Orthodox Church also does not ordain women to the priesthood and the episcopacy, though historical arguments have been marshalled showing

tian tradition, the truth of which is vouchsafed by God, has consistently opposed it. Second, Jesus, whose attitude toward women is one of welcome and inclusion and who could have chosen women to be among his twelve apostles, did not do so. Third, there should be a “natural resemblance” between Jesus and the priest who represents him, and only a male meets this criterion. This teaching is authoritatively taught by Pope Paul VI in 1976 and reaffirmed in 1994 by Pope John Paul II who declares:

ing that women have been ordained to the diaconate (deacons) in the past and therefore this practice should be re-installed today.

Proponents of women’s ordination have rejected the three arguments mentioned above. First, even if tradition has been opposed to women’s ordination — an assertion that has been challenged by some historians — it does not follow that the church cannot change its posi-

tion in this matter since it has made changes in other, no less important matters. Second, even if Jesus did not choose women to be among his twelve apostles, this decision does not necessarily imply a doctrinal prohibition against women's ordination. The number 12 has a symbolic significance, referring to the twelve tribes of Israel, which the new community of Jesus's disciples, that is, church, as a whole, and not just the twelve men who were called "apostles." Also, during Jesus' ministry, many women were his most faithful disciples who remain with him under the cross and are the first witness to Jesus' resurrection, and faithful discipleship is the most important qualification for representing Jesus, both officially and unofficially. Thirdly, "natural resemblance" between the priest and Jesus should not be restricted to maleness, and more precisely, male genitalia, since it is not evident that maleness and genitalia are the means by which Jesus fulfilled his ministry. In fact, the Creed refers to the Word of God being made "human" or "flesh" and not "male" (the Latin *homo*, and not *vir*).

Given the plausibility of these counterarguments, and above all to respond to God's call to achieve justice and equality for all, almost all the churches — except the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church — have accepted the ordination of women, not only to the diaconate but also to the priesthood and episcopacy. However, given the different

policies of the churches regarding women's ordination, it remains one of the "outstanding," that is, still-to-be-resolved issues, especially in the effort to achieve the ecumenical unity of all the churches of Christ. A related issue, currently hotly debated, concerns the ordination of LGBTQ.

The journey of women in Christianity has been tortuous, painful, but at the end hopeful. Beginning as equal disciples of Jesus in the church, women are soon oppressed by a patriarchal, androcentric, and misogynistic male leaders. Monasticism, with virginity as a way of life, provides women with an opportunity to escape male control, and many of them take advantage of it to exercise leadership in their own community as quasi-bishops or in lay communities beyond the control of the clergy. Their independence is soon drastically curtailed by the enclosure system, especially after the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Mary the prototypical saint in her alleged submissiveness and obedience is proposed as the ideal for womanhood. Eve as the prototypical sinner, punished for being "created second and sinned first," serves as a precautionary tale for women who do not follow the example of Mary. Virginity and clerical celibacy are considered as far superior to marriage, and married sex is seen as a concession to human weakness and is tolerated only as a means for procreation. For married women Mary Magdalen is held up as the model of

a repentant whore. Fortunately, the foundation of countless religious orders and societies with apostolic life as their goal since the nineteenth century abolishes enclosure and unleashes the energy of millions of religious women for the ministry of education, health care, and social service throughout the globe. The feminist movement serves as a catalyst and a model for Christian women to develop theologies and undertake activities to promote the full flourishing of women as human beings and as Christians for whom ordination must be open. The women's journey toward full and complete womanhood is not yet completed, but without them the church would look foolish and is simply and utterly impossible.

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## NOTES

1 For surveys of women in religion, see Marianne Ferguson, *Women and Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995); Serinity Young, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* (New York: Macmillan Library Reference, 1998); Majella Franzmann, *Women and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Mary Pat Fisher, *Women in Religion* (New York: Pearson, 2006); Lucinda Joy Peach, *Women and World Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2012); and Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young, eds., *Women and Religious Traditions*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

- 2 See 1 *Tim* 2:11-14.
- 3 See John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, with an Introduction by John Coulson (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 18-19.
- 4 For surveys of women in Christianity, see the excellent trilogy of Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity: Volume 1: The First Thousand Years* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); *Women and Christianity: Volume II: From 1000 to The Reformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); *Women and Christianity: Volume III: From the Reformation to the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003); and Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (New York: HarperOne, 1996).
- 5 Quoted in Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity*, Volume II, 49.
- 6 Mary Malone, *ibid.*, 68.







# Sophia, Androgyny and the Feminine in Franz von Baader's Christian Theosophy

*J. Glenn Friesen*

## Introduction

Although he is not well known today, Franz von Baader (1765-1841) had a profound influence on philosophy. He introduced Hegel to the mystical ideas of Meister Eck-

hart, and he introduced Schelling to the theosophical ideas of Jakob Boehme. At least some of his ideas were used by Goethe, A.W. Schlegel, Kierkegaard, Nikolai Berdyaev, Clemens Brentano, Franz Brentano, and Max Scheler.

Baader was keenly interest-

ed in ecumenical dialogue among Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox branches of Christianity. Baader was a Catholic, but he was critical of some Catholic dogmas, including the idea of papal primacy. Some twentieth century Catholic theologians refer to him, and Pope Benedict XVI praised Baader for his rejection of Cartesian rationalism.<sup>1</sup> In Protestantism, Baader was an important influence on the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd. Baader was also interested in inter-faith dialogue, and he compared his ideas to those of other religions, including Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. In the 1920's, there was a resurgence of interest in Baader's ideas. Today there is again a renewed interest, especially in comparing his Christian theosophy to mystical traditions.

The ideas of *Sophia* (Wisdom) and androgyny, as expressed in Baader's Christian theosophy, were important influences in Romanticism, and helped to focus attention on the importance of the feminine in Western religious thought. What is remarkable is that Baader's ideas did not come from Enlightenment ideas of equality of the sexes, but rather from within the Christian religious tradition itself. This is important, since it is often incorrectly assumed that equality of the sexes cannot be achieved in religions that have not undergone a rationalist critique similar to the Enlightenment

Christian theosophy has

nothing to do with the occult theosophy popularized by Madame Blavatsky in the late 19th century. 'Theosophy' means "the Wisdom of God" (the Greek word for Wisdom is '*Sophia*'). Christian theosophers like Baader believe that God created the world by means of Wisdom. They rely on Biblical texts such as *Psalms* 137:5, *Proverbs* 3:19, as well as on extra-canonical literature such as "The Book of Wisdom." Christian theosophers look for the expression of God's Wisdom within creation. They also attempt to see where creation has fallen away from that Wisdom (which is its ideal), and how its relation to Wisdom can be restored. In its aim of restoration of the world and of humanity, Christian theosophy differs from those kinds of mysticism and Gnosticism<sup>2</sup> that seek to escape from the temporal world and from our body.

Baader's Christian theosophy has also been called a "Philosophy of Love" (Betanzos 1998).<sup>3</sup> It stresses the importance of love within the Godhead, of love from God to humans, of love of humans towards each other, and of love from humans towards temporal reality. "How a man is related to God determines how he is related to himself, to other men, to his own nature, and to the rest of nature" (15,469). With respect to relations between men and women, Baader aims at a true reciprocity between the two sexes, with the ultimate goal of restoring the original androgyny.

Anyone who reads Baader will be immediately struck by the complexity of his thought and the difficulty of his language. This article seeks to present his ideas in a simplified way. Page references are to volume and page numbers of Baader's *Collected Works* [*Werke*].

## Divine Androgyny

Androgyny is the idea that masculine and feminine were not initially separate from each other. Instead, these qualities were combined in a unity. There are feminine and masculine principles even within the Godhead (10,15). God should not be regarded as male, for that is a term resulting from division of the sexes (Favre 1994, 211).<sup>4</sup>

God's creation by Wisdom does not mean that a male god created with the help of a female goddess. To speak of male gods and female goddesses merely continues the separation of the sexes, instead of viewing them as a unity.

For Baader, each Person of the Trinity has both masculine and feminine qualities. The Father generates or 'begets' the Son ("the only begotten Son of the Father") and the Holy Spirit is the process or act of that begetting. The Father is divine will or thought (the inner Word), the Son is the expressed Word, and the Holy Spirit is the activity, the power of God.

But this 'begetting' or 'generation' is not to be understood in a sexually differentiated way, for such differentiation occurs only within the fallen creaturely world.<sup>5</sup> The Father has both a generating masculine potency and a feminine birth-giving potency. To understand this, we need to look at how Baader views the Trinity, or what he often refers to as the divine "Ternar" (triad).<sup>6</sup> There are three Persons within

**For Baader, each Person of the Trinity has both masculine and feminine qualities.**

the Trinity. But this does not mean that there are three individual gods or beings. There is only one divine being. Baader explains this by saying that the Trinity is really a Quaternitiy. The fourth element is not itself a Person. Nor is it on the same level as the Trinity, but is rather the common source, the center of all three Persons. He illustrates this by a triangle with a dot in the center (15,190).

Baader uses the term 'Ungrund' [*Ungrund*] for this center of the Trinity. He obtained this term, and most of his theosophical ideas, from Jakob Böhme (1575-1624). It is the most "inner" way of referring to God (7,303fn).

Baader compares the *Ungrund* to the Kabbalistic idea of original unity, *Ein Soph* which he says is also threefold [*Dreieinfaches*], and to be distinguished from the subse-

quent ten emanated powers or *Se-phirot* (3,384). The mystery of *Kabalah* turns on the relation between undivided androgynous generation and the divided generation of the two sexes. Just as the eye (as feminine receptivity) yearns for the fructifying ray of light, so this ray seeks this yearning, just as the bridegroom seeks the open arms of his bride (15,169).

With respect to Islam, he says that the *Ungrund* is not a numerical unity (as in the *Koran's* emphasis)<sup>7</sup>, but it is a unity in the sense that everything that exists finds its unity in the one God, and has its being only from out of, in and through God, in whom it participates.<sup>8</sup> The unity of God is not a number, but rather the invisible Factor or carrier of all numbers (3,384ff). It is an original unity [*Ureinheit*] at the basis of all diversity (Betanzos 1993, 59). The Trinity and its unified center is the model for all of reality.

The *Ungrund* has both a fiery active principle (God as a consuming fire) and a passive form-giving principle (God as merciful and loving). These are the original polar sexual differences.<sup>9</sup> But Baader does not use the word 'sexual' to describe these principles, since what is sexual is only what has become improperly separated in our temporal fallen world. Instead of 'sexual,' Baader therefore uses the alchemical word 'tincture' to describe these polarities (Faivre 1994, 204 fn12). There is both a masculine and a feminine

tincture. Baader also uses St. Martin's term 'generative powers' [*puissances génératrices*] (12,396).

There is an eternal generation of the Son by the Father. This generation or production requires an eternal outerness [*Äusseres*] in the Godhead in which this generation is revealed. This outerness in the Godhead is God's Heaven, Dwelling or Place; it is not separated from God and yet it is distinguished from God. It is a non-personal being in which God enters and in which he generates in an individuating way [*fassend zeugt*]. This is God's *Sophia* or Wisdom. How does *Sophia*, this external form of God, arise?

Baader uses what he calls 'speculative theology' to describe this generative production. He derives the word 'speculative' from 'specula' or mirror. Within the *Ungrund*, the feminine form-giving principle acts as a "mirror" to reflect the desire in the masculine principle. To desire is to imagine. This mirroring of one principle of the *Ungrund* in the other is what Böhme called the "virginal Matrix" [*jungfrauliche Matrix*],<sup>10</sup> the original congruence of virginity and motherhood, which Baader sees as androgynous (3,385 fn). The three Persons of the Trinity both arise from and return to this image, in an eternal dynamic process. The *Ungrund* is the esoteric "One" that by involution becomes the center in order to then differentiate again by evolution within and from out of itself (2,390; 4,214). The

being-One of the Trinity must be understood in this twofold direction, of unfolding itself from out of one being but then entering it again.

Baader relates the word magic [magie] to 'image' as well as the word 'imagination.' There is an in-magining by the Persons of the Trinity in the image, and a continual development of the image. The image is of the entire Trinity, and this image is the Wisdom of God, Sophia, also called the Heavenly Eye (1, 300; 3,392fn).<sup>11</sup>

Betanzos says

...the personal Godhead reveals itself through her. She is the "organ" of God and the formative idea in accordance with which he acts (2,288; 9,24. Sophia is "the mirror and the eye of God or the first idea of God" (15,447, the counterpart to Plato's Idea, the Hebrew Sophia, the Maja [*Maya*] of India, and Jacob Böhme's Magie (9,182; see also 9,219). Sophia is called "the matrix of all primitive patterns" (4, 200) and "heavenly Virgin" (8,91; 13,18); but she is not to be confused with Mary, Christ's mother (15,449). God's power is an instrument of his wisdom (*Sophia*) (2,247), which mediates all God's actions (Betanzos 1998, 154). Aristophanes interpreted this as man and woman glued together (Betanzos 1998, 154)

Baader's comparison to Plato's Ideas does not mean that he shares Plato's view that we need to escape from the temporal world. The Wisdom of God, the matrix of divine Ideas, is the basis for the creation of the world and humanity. So-

*phia* is the mirror of God, and in turn, the world is mirror of Sophia. *Sophia* contains the archetypes and ideals for all of creation, in a potential form that is to be realized. God's emanant production in creation is distinguished from the immanent production within the Godhead (10,7). It seems to me that this matrix of archetypes may be compared to the mundus imaginalis in Sufi thought as described by Henry Corbin (Corbin 1969).

Baader sees many similarities between Boehme and Hinduism, or what he calls 'Brahmanism' in order to distinguish it from later Hinduism. Original Brahmanism was not pantheistic but monotheistic (2,301 fn).<sup>12</sup> Brahmanism distinguished between an interior male solar power and an exterior lunar female power, united in one being. There is a marriage of the fructifying power of the Father and the generating power of the Mother. The interior power is the unspoken Word [Latin '*verbum*'; French '*verbe*'] and the external female power is the spoken, breathed out Word ['*vox*'; '*parole*'] (1,299).

Baader refers to the spoken Word, the "breathed out" Sophia as '*māyā*' (1,299; 12,483). He specifically relates the Hindu idea of *māyā* to imagination, our immediate 'magical' intuition [*Anschauung*]. He does not mean to suggest that divine Wisdom is an illusion. He distinguishes it from a deceiving kind of *māyā* (8,277; 14,94).<sup>13</sup> There may be some comparison with Kashmir Shaivism,



which refers to *māyā* as the power or *shakti* of *Brahman*. The world is illusion only when it is thought of apart from *Brahman* (Friesen 2015b).

Although Baader says that Wisdom is the archetype for creation, it is not itself a part of creation. There is no pantheism in Baader's theosophy. For God did not have to create in order to know himself. There was already a dynamic process of knowing, imagining and self-manifestation within the Godhead.<sup>14</sup>

With respect to this immanent production (within the Godhead), there is androgyny within each Person of the Trinity. The Producer lives within his product. So whoever sees the Son, sees the Father in him. But at the same time, this product also lives within its producer, so whoever sees him sees him in the mother. *Pater in Filio, filius in Matre* (10,10-11). The mother is *Sophia*, the place of reproduction, neither creator nor created.<sup>15</sup>

## **Sophia**

*Sophia* is therefore the mirroring or image of the entire Ternar. But *Sophia* is not a fourth Person within the Trinity. Nor is she a goddess, or God's "wife." *Sophia* is produced, but is not a producer (Person); she is contrasted with the Father, who is a producer, but not produced (2,530).

*Sophia* is neither male nor female, but contains the perfection of both sexes (3,303; 9,211-12). But in *Sophia's* dealings with humanity, So-

phia appears as a man to the woman, and as a woman to the man.<sup>16</sup>

Nor is *Sophia* the same as Mary, the mother of Jesus. But because Mary was receptive to Wisdom, she was able to give birth to Jesus without the help of a man. Mary is the converse of Adam, who was created androgynous with the ability to reproduce without sexual organs. Baader comments that this androgynous begetting is why art depicting the Madonna does not show Mary in a sexual way (3,385).

*Sophia* is the "helper" of Christ, the creative Word (10, 342-43). *Sophia* relates the Word to created nature. Betanzos says,

*Sophia* can stand above nature, or begin to penetrate it, or have actually penetrated it. He [Baader] calls these three moments magical, lively and bodily (4, 279ff; 9, 24ff) (Betanzos 1998 154 fn28).

Baader also opposes the Gnostic idea that *Sophia* is a fallen aeon or emanation from God. Rather, it is humanity that has fallen from *Sophia*.

## **Human Androgyny**

### *1. Wrong ideas about androgyny*

#### *a) Hermaphroditism*

Betanzos outlines the early history of the idea of androgyny in the early Christian Church, in patristic sources such as Gregory of Nyssa and John Scotus Eriugena, in Jewish midrashic texts, and then in the

Renaissance and later Romanticism (Betanzos 1998, 168-9). Baader obtained the idea of androgyny primarily through the *Kabbalah*, although he was also aware of Plato's myth (Betanzos 1998, 177). In the *Symposium*, Plato speaks of the primeval human as androgynous. Others caricatured this as a being with two sets of sexual organs, or as hermaphroditism. But that is not what is meant by 'androgyny'. In fact, Baader says it means the opposite (9,136; 14, 141).

#### *b) Asceticism*

Jesus was asked about a woman who had married again after other husbands had died. Who would be her husband in heaven? Jesus replied that in heaven we are like the angels, neither marrying nor being given in marriage (Luke 20:27-40). Some members of the early church took these words of Jesus to mean that we should attempt to become angels in this life; chastity became the model to emulate (DeConick, 49, 55-7) This ascetic viewpoint is anti-marriage.

But Baader opposed ascetic practices. He was married (twice), and wrote a considerable amount about love and marriage (see below). He said that any true spirituality requires our embodiment. A center always requires a nature in which to express itself, and even God has a nature.

#### *c) Female must become male*

A third incorrect way of re-

garding androgyny is anti-feminine: that the woman is an incomplete man, and must become male. Some in the early church believed this, as evidenced by the Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus is represented as saying that he will make Mary male so that she might enter the Kingdom of Heaven (DeConick, 78-83, Ruether, 217). But this is not Baader's view.

#### *d) "Marriage" with Christ or Sophia*

Our relation to *Sophia* is not to be viewed in a sexual sense, as some foolish mystics have supposed (3,303). To regain our original androgynous image does not mean a marriage or union with Christ in a sexual sense, but rather the suspension of our animal masculinity and animal femininity (10,247 fn).

## *2. Humans as Image of God*

#### *a) Participation in Sophia*

The first human was created as the image of God. This means that this person was created with the presence of *Sophia* in him, and that he was created androgynous (Betanzos 1998, 98). Humans were created as God's image, not in half an image as man or wife (9,210 fn).

As bearers of God, humans were to send this image into the world (Faivre 2000, 147). They were intended to be the mediators between God and the world. The presence of *Sophia* enables humans to be creative and fruitful for the whole

universe (2,418). There was an ability to procreate without two distinct sexes (9,212). But as a result of the fall into sin, humans were divided into two separate sexes, and given physical means of procreation.

Humans were intended to participate in *Sophia*, and apply her Wisdom to help redeem temporal reality. The incarnate Christ showed

***Sophia is therefore the mirroring or image of the entire Ternar. But Sophia is not a fourth Person within the Trinity. Nor is she a goddess, or God's "wife." ... Sophia is neither male nor female, but contains the perfection of both sexes.***

us the true, androgynous image of God. Baader interprets Gal. 3:28 in this way, "And there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (9, 212; 10, 247 fn).

#### *b) Love*

Baader wrote two essays on love: "Propositions taken from a Philosophy of Love"<sup>17</sup> and "Forty Propositions taken from a Religious Philosophy of Love." In these essays, Baader "embraces the feminine in everyday life" (Versluis 2000, 235). He relates religion and love. Love is not a mere emotional relation. The essence of love is union and harmonization, where two

people are subjected to a higher third, *Eros*, to whom they have subjected themselves (1,232; 7, 161; 9, 413). A Higher Being loves himself through the lovers (1,61).<sup>18</sup> Love of our neighbour is based on our love of God (5,230). We love each other only in and through a third (Betanzos 1998, 163).

Love requires humility, the mutual self-emptying [*Entselbigung*] of the lovers, in mutual subordination to the other (9,269). This is not something they can do by themselves. It is only when each gives himself entirely to God that God gives the other completely to each of them. This is related to Baader's idea of organicism: the relatedness of each of us to a center. The reason that we do not dominate another person is that we are both members of one organism (10,286-7).

Love is a task to be performed. There are stages of love. Where there is division, there needs to be reconciliation. He says that sin [*Sünde*] comes from "putting asunder" [*Sonderung*] (4,168).

Baader says that woman is superior to man in love. She is "the custodian of love" and "heavenly music sounds more exquisitely in the hearts of women than of men" (15,626). Betanzos says, "Baader's point here seems to be that a woman generally reacts more spontaneous-

ly to a man's personhood as a whole than he reacts to her personhood." Men tend to see things and others as a means to an end. A woman arouses lust in a man unconsciously, but gives love consciously and knowingly (Betanzos 1998, 226).

### *c) Marriage*

Baader believed in the institution of marriage. He had two children by his first wife. After she died, he married a second time to Marie Robel, who was 50 years younger. So there is in Baader no idea of celibacy or ascetic opposition to marriage. But although he was not opposed to marriage, he reimagined its purpose. He wrote to his young wife on Sept 16, 1839:

...I feel bound to you, not through earth-

herself from her womanliness (as incompleteness), and woman, in turn, should help man, so that in both of them the full primal image of man will inwardly emerge again" (3,306). When Adam fell, he lost the female part of the virginal image, just as Eve left behind the male part. When rebirth takes place, the same Virgin appears as female to the man and as male to the woman, although the Virgin is intrinsically neither male nor female" (3,308 fn)

### *d) Sexual desire*

Baader is ambivalent with respect to sexual desire. On the one hand, he rejects the Gnostic view that matter and marriage are themselves evil (7,229). On the other hand, Baader sometimes seems to depreciate the sexual act.

He says that sexual love is initially a blessing. Love produces ecstasy, a being-outside oneself (14,313). There is a self-emptying of oneself, and an existence in the beloved, a finding of oneself in the other (Betanzos 1998, 273). Lovers ought to consider such rapture or ecstasy as a summons to become inwardly what they imagined they were in the infatuation of early love, when they imagined the other as better than he or she is in reality. Our first love shows us the possibility of what we may become (androgynous wholeness) (4,168).

But there are other passages where Baader does not value sexual desire. He says other kinds of ecsta-

**The aim of marriage is to reintegrate both husband and wife into the original androgynous integrity of the image of God.**

ly desire, but rather through authentic love, which truly marries the lover to the beloved, and which for me is the true sacrament (cited Versluis 2000, 236).

The aim of marriage is to reintegrate both husband and wife into the original androgynous integrity of the image of God (7,234-8). This is a goal that transcends time. That is why marriage is a sacrament. "Man should help woman to free



sies of the heart can silence sexual desire (7,233). Copulation is the opposite of an act of union or love; it is the highest manifestation of egoism (Betanzos 1998, 191; Faivre 1994, 238). And an embrace shows more love than does the sexual act, since the embrace seeks to unite with the heart of the beloved (Faivre 1994, 238).

### Other uses of androgyny in Baader

Baader's first use of the idea of androgyny (March 1787) was not in a sexual sense, but in reference to the unity of the eternal and the temporal. Humans are composite beings, both temporal and eternal



(in the sense of a created eternity above time). Baader rejected both materialism and what he called “spiritualism.” Materialism reduces everything to the physical body; spiritualism rejected the physical body. But there can be no spirituality without a body. Even God is embodied (Betanzos 1998, 98).

There is also an androgyny in nature, since there is a polarity in all existing things. Opposite forces in nature are androgynous, as is the character of energy as both action and reaction (Betanzos 1998, 172-4).

### **Baader and Romanticism**

Romantic writers stressed the special contributions that both men and women make. Some women like Caroline Schlegel, Bettina von Arnim and Dorothea Schlegel provided examples of “the new female ideal” (Betanzos 1998, 170, 196).

The key to the entire Romantic worldview is the organic idea, the belief that reality is a living whole, all members of which—despite their diverse characteristics and functions—are immediately related to a common center and through that to each other. (Betanzos 1998, 32-3). Baader emphasized this organic view of reality, which relates a center to a periphery, a head to its limbs. “All things reach out toward the heart of God as toward their center”

(14,485).

Some other similarities to Romanticism are Baader’s stress on the uniqueness of the individual, the interest in alchemy, magnetism and other parapsychological phenomena (belief that spirit and nature are interdependent), and his emphasis on androgyny. (Betanzos 1998, 171).

But Baader also differed from Romanticism. He did not give the same importance to subjective feelings. Although one may not elevate reason over feeling, neither may one elevate feeling over reason. And in

**Rationalism is an absolutization of the masculine tincture. It lacks femininity in its refusal to be receptive in relation to God.**

place of Romanticism’s emphasis on the subjective, Baader emphasized the givenness of creation that precedes any subjective response to it. This givenness is given by God’s law (*Gesetz*) by which we are placed (*gesetzt*) in the world.

### **Baader and the Enlightenment**

The Enlightenment also empowered women, in emphasizing the equality of men and women. It differed from Romanticism in its emphasis on reason. Men and women are equal in that they both possess the faculty of reason (Betanzos 1998, 196).

But Baader opposed the ideas

of the Enlightenment. His organicism opposed the Enlightenment's mechanistic view of nature. He opposed the "autonomy" and "absolutization" of reason in Descartes and Kant.<sup>19</sup> Descartes is famous for his rationalistic starting point, "I think, therefore I am." Baader changes this to "I am thought (by God); therefore I am." Or better yet, "I am loved, therefore I am" (8,339 fn). And because we are aware of being loved by God, we also have the power not only to love God in return, but to love one's self, others, and the world (8, 230).

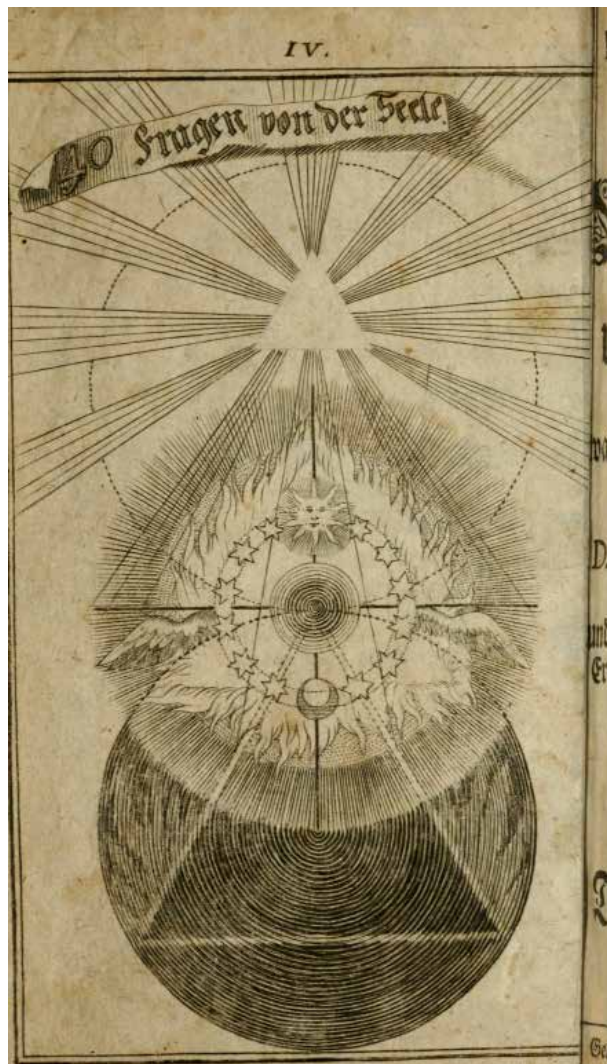
Rationalism is an absolutization of the masculine tincture. It lacks femininity in its refusal to be receptive in relation to God. For Baader, our knowledge is not based on reason alone. Instead, Baader regarded reason, feeling, emotions, sense perception, and physical bodily characteristics as peripheral functions that are all governed by the center of our existence, our "heart." He makes a parallel between the *Ungrund* as center of the divine Ternar, and the heart as the center of the human Ternar of spirit, soul and body. Our reason, although important, is not autonomous or elevated above our other functions.

### **Critique of Baader**

Are Baader's views still too male-oriented? Faivre says that there is no indication that a real female human being influenced these ideas (Faivre 1994, 273). There are

some instances where, despite his emphasis on androgyny and equivalence of the sexes, he seems to subordinate women. This argument is mainly based on one passage where he says that a woman has no name of her own, since she (considered as married to her husband) has no personality of her own (4,235 fn). And he says that a woman is superior to man in being the bearer of the image that inflames his desire. But she is only conscious of this image through the help of the awakening power of man and therefore inferior to man (2,256 fn).

Those passages are indeed problematic. To some extent, they can be accounted for by the social and historical context of his time. These ideas are inconsistent with his general emphasis on the importance of androgyny and equivalence of the sexes. But although Baader's orientation is male-dominated, his views on the role of imagination and love, and on actualizing God's image and androgynous integrity, revive insights that had been lost in the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Few Christian philosophers have written as much regarding mutual loving relationships within marriage. His ideas on androgyny and spiritual relationships have had a powerful impact on ideas of love, marriage and friendship both in German Romanticism and German Idealism (Betanzos 1998, 205).



## Summary

Unlike some forms of Gnostic thought, Baader does not view divine Wisdom or *Sophia* as a separate Person in addition to the Trinity. Nor is she a goddess.<sup>20</sup> The Godhead is not to be viewed as a combination of gods and goddesses. Sophia is the image of the entire Trinity. However, each member of the Trinity is androgynous, having both a male and

female aspect or tincture. Humanity, as the image of God, was created androgynous, but split into two sexes as a result of falling away from divine Wisdom. The purpose of marriage is for each partner to help the other to re-attain this original androgyny and to regain the lost connection to Wisdom or Sophia. Through Sophia, humans also have the responsibility of aiding the rest of creation to re-attain its original integrity.

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## NOTES

- 1 The Catholic theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac and Erich Przywara relied on Baader in overcoming scholastic dualism. And Pope Benedict specifically praised him: "... Baader, consciously and quite rightly, changed the Cartesian "*Cogito, ergo sum*" into "*Cogitor, ergo sum*": not "I think, there-

fore I am, but “I am thought, therefore I am.” Only from man’s being-known can his knowledge and he himself be understood (Ratzinger, 184-85).

- 2 Elaine Pagels cautions that the term ‘Gnosticism’ should be used carefully. But we need to distinguish Baader’s Christian theosophy from those historical sources that (1) seek to flee from temporal reality and (2) seek the origin of evil within God.
- 3 Betanzos 1998 is the best introduction to Baader’s work in English. I have used his translations for some of the quotations from Baader. My own translations can be found on my website: <http://www.members.shaw.ca/jgfriesen/>
- 4 English has no pronoun for the androgynous. Nor would it be proper to use the neuter pronoun ‘it.’ ‘He’ and ‘him’ should not be understood in a male sense.
- 5 Contrast this with the Greek stories of gods and goddesses, or the Hindu worship of *lingam* and *yonis* (3,211).
- 6 Baader finds other examples within humans (spirit, soul and body) and within nature, but the Trinity is the original Ternar.
- 7 But see discussion of the idea of ‘*mundus imaginalis*’ in Sufi thought, discussed below. It is possible to give a more than merely numerical meaning to Islam’s idea of one God.
- 8 This participation [*Teilnahme*] in God does not in any way mean becoming part [*Teil*] of God in any pantheistic way (12,205; 2,399).
- 9 In Boehme, there is no such dualism in the *Ungrund*; the differentiation occurs only in its manifestation (Faivre
- 1994, 207, 210). Faivre also refers to L.P. Xella, who says that even within each of the two tinctures, there is a feminine and a masculine aspect. There is therefore a ‘quadrapolarity’ within the *Ungrund* (Faivre 1994, 204).
- 10 *Sophia* is called ‘Virgin’ because she does not give birth to anything corporeal (9,26; Betanzos 1998, 159). Or because virginity is integrity (androgyny) (12,281).
- 11 See the discussion of the Sophianic mirror in Boehme (Faivre 2000, 138).
- 12 Baader interprets the Vedic saying “That art thou” not in a pantheistic sense, but rather in the sense that all phenomena of nature express something human. Some neo-Hindus and Western commentators also see a distinction between the oldest Hindu traditions and later over-conceptualization of these ideas (Friesen 2015b).
- 13 As an example of deceptive maya, he refers to the Orphics, who identified *Sophia* with the Serpent (2,278 fn).
- 14 We may contrast this with Schelling, who had no doctrine of *Sophia*, and who held that God’s center was within the world, and that God had to create out of necessity (Betanzos 1998, 43).
- 15 See discussion in Faivre 1994, 209-11.
- 16 There are similarities to C.G. Jung’s idea of the image of the *anima* within men and the *animus* within women. But we know that Jung had read Baader.
- 17 1,163-200. English translation in Betanzos 1998, 209-288.
- 18 This is similar to neo-Hinduism’s idea of *tat tvam asi* [That art thou]. Vivekananda introduced the idea to



neo-Hinduism, but he was influenced by Paul Deussen, who gave a lecture in Bombay on February 25 1893 on *tat tvam asi* as the foundation of ethics. Deussen was in turn influenced by Boehme, whom he described as “a religious and philosophical genius.” He gave a lecture on Boehme in Kiel on May 8, 1897 and wrote about him Jakob Böhme: *Über sein Leben und seine Philosophie* (Kiel 1923).

19 He turned Kant’s transcendental critique against Kant’s own ideas (Friesen 2015a).

20 *Sophia* only takes on characteristics of personality when it acts on objects outside the Godhead (Betanzos 1998 92, citing 7, 34fn).



## The Indescribable *Sophia* and the Semiotics of Gender: A Brief Excursion

*Elizabeth Zelensky*

The mysterious figure of *Sophia* the Wisdom of God has long been the subject of speculation, lapsing occasionally into heterodoxy, in the Eastern Orthodox world. As late as 1935 Father Sergius Bulgakov, one of the leading Russian theologians of the twentieth century was accused of heresy for his writings on Divine Wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Down to the present it remains a source of inspiration for new ideas and images, carrying a special attraction for those with an antipathy towards binary ontologies.<sup>2</sup>

Who or what is the Fiery Faced Angel, sitting crowned and enthroned between the *Theotokos* and St. John the Precursor, as depicted above in this fifteenth-century *Sophia* fresco located in the Novgorod Kremlin? And what can this figure tell us about the semiotics of power and gender?

The scriptural foundation for the image of *Sophia* the Wisdom of God rests predominantly on two texts: St. Paul's definition of Christ crucified as "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks...

but ...unto them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the Wisdom of God" (I *Corinthians* 1:23-24), and, on *Proverbs* 8 and 9 where Wisdom is presented as an allegorical female figure, carrying implications of God's Providence.

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was...When he prepared the heavens I was there, when he set a compass upon the face of the depth...When he gave to the sea his decree that the waters should not pass his commandment, when he appointed the foundations of the earth. Then I was by him...and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him, rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delight was with the sons of men. (*Proverbs* 8:22-13 ).

And in *Proverbs* 9:1:

Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out seven pillars. She hath killed her beasts, she hath mingled her wine, she hath furnished her table...

The "house" metaphor in *Proverbs* 9 further develops the theme of *oikonomi* or orderly household management writ large, on a cosmic scale, in *Proverbs* 8.

Wisdom- as the foolishness of the wise and the wisdom of the foolish in St. Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians* - is a challenge to

established hierarchies. Simultaneously, Wisdom is portrayed as the joyous source of creativity, of the patterning of reality arising outside man-made categories. As the eternal companion of God, Wisdom accompanies him as he decrees the limits of earth, sea and sky. Ambiguities of gender - Christ was Incarnated and crucified as a male, while God's companion in *Proverbs* is of a feminine gender in the Greek Old Testament - shadow Wisdom with an androgynous persona, blurring outlines and categories, creating an image of great semiotic flexibility, and potency. Emperor Justinian chose to embody this concept in the main church of Byzantium, the *Hagia Sophia/Holy Wisdom*, built in 564 CE. The presence of Wisdom cathedrals modeled on the Byzantine prototype in widely-scattered cities of the Eastern Christian world, such as Novgorod, Polotsk, Kiev, Vologda, Nish, and Trebizond, gave concrete form to the link between Wisdom and political sovereignty. This connection between sovereignty and androgyny is also foregrounded in several Orthodox liturgical texts; among the most well-known of which is the canon of Cosmos Maima, sung at matins on Holy Thursday, which uses the premise of androgyny as its anchoring metaphor:

The inscrutable Wisdom of God/ Built her house out of a pure and ever-Virgin-Mother/ For Christ our Lord having assumed a fleshly temple, was glorified.<sup>3</sup>



Below is presented a brief analysis of how this image was used by a female ruler- Princess Sofia Alekseevna of Russia, half-sister to Peter I and regent from 1682-1689<sup>4</sup> - to bolster her claims to political legitimacy. Two texts from her reign will clarify the chief aspects of this praxis of sophic androgyny.

Oh how divine wisdom shines in the royal visage

Oh how honor does sparkle in her eyes and lips

It is she, oh Russia, who has been promised to you of old,

...

She is the strong wall of your defense

Though she is incapable of leading troops in the field

Her mind is virile and victorious,

And through its many gifts truly miraculous.

Through her generosity marble edifices arise,

With an open hand she has glorified shrines.

Thus Semiramis dwelt on the banks of the Euphrates

The works she created remain memorable through the ages.

Elizabeth of Britain also bore the scepter.

Pulcheria was also blessed with a great

mind,

Oh Russia, revered by many kingdoms,

You stand preserved through this pious  
one's prayers.

As a single woman wielding the highest power in patriarchal Russia Sofia Alekseevna was an unprecedented phenomenon and could neither be represented nor acknowledged within the traditional discourse of Russian monarchic imagery which was centered on the analogy of Christ- in- heaven echoed by tsar- on- earth. Thus one of the regent's first tasks was to establish a representational paradigm within which her rule could be expressed. And Sophia, or Divine Wisdom became the radical metaphor at the heart of this project.

The panegyric inscription quoted above marked a revolution in Russian court life. Through this and other court poems Princess Sofia Alekseevna became the first female ruler in Russia to be to be publicly acknowledged as such. The poem was published as a commentary on what was to have been the coronation portrait of the regent, to be distributed as a broadsheet among her subjects. After the initial invocation of Divine Wisdom, three prototypes for female rule are presented - the legendary architect of the hanging gardens of Babylon, Semiramis , a near-contemporary queen regnant, Elizabeth I of Britain, and the fifth- century Byzantine empress, Pulcheria. Each of the three

rulers separately referenced an actual accomplishment of the Russian regent; her building activities, chief among them Moscow's New Maidens Convent - thus Semiramis, her wish to be crowned in her own right- thus Elizabeth I, and her prowess in theological debate with the Old Believer schismatics- thus Pulcheria. Together all three embodied the paradox of a virile mind in a female body. Elizabeth I famously declared, on the eve of the Spanish Armada invasion, that though she had the frail body of a woman, encased in it were 'the heart and stomach of a man, and a King of England at that,' while Semiramis was known not only as a builder of cities, but as a warrior-queen and the usurper of her son's throne. Besides her theological defense of Orthodoxy, Pulcheria was the embodiment of the Byzantine cult of royal virginity - thus of rectitude and sovereignty - both male characteristics. An altar in *Hagia Sofia* was dedicated by Pulcheria to her own virginal status, as a metonymic expression of the security of the realm.<sup>5</sup>

Sofia Alekseevna was not alone in her semiotic difficulties. As the discourse of absolute monarchy evolved and matured the necessity for creating a system of symbols capable of expressing female rule and - by metonymic analogy - female sovereignty became increasingly apparent. The physical presence on the political stage of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe of Marga-





Photo courtesy of Kim Lin Lim

ret of Parma, Anne of Austria and the two Medici queens in France, Mary of Scotland, Christina of Sweden, Britain's Elizabeth I and Mary II as well as Princess Sofia necessitated a shift in monarchic imagery.<sup>6</sup> The paradigm of absolutism always had an essential male at its core, through which the female ruler, whether she was a married or unmarried daughter, a widowed regent or a consort had to present herself. Thus she was forced to identify herself with intertextual and interstitial spaces – androgynous and undefined- within the patriarchal paradigm. This pragmatic necessity, conveniently overlapped with the theoretical heart of absolutism; the "mysterium" or "zone of silence" which contained its sacred essence, as pointed out by the great medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz

using this citation from James I of Britain : "That which concerns the mysteries of the Kings Power it is not lawful to be disputed,"<sup>7</sup> or, since the king's power comes from God it is unquestionable because it is indefinable, and vice versa. Female rulers only strengthened the government's claim to be a sacred mystery.

The dynamic of gender reinforced absolutist monarchy's urge towards exclusiveness and exemplarity; the monarch's claim to be different from his subjects, to be extraordinary and excessive in beauty, intellect, fairness, courage, and potential reached the ultimate heights of heterogeneity and therefore, totality, when expressed through the form of a female body. While the access of women to the realm of sovereignty was haphazard and un-

systematic within the discourse of early modern absolutism, the unusual nature of their achievement once they had gained the throne fit the early modern monarchic paradigm of exceptionalism very well. Sovereignty, clothed in all too frail feminine flesh created an irresistible rhetorical paradox, and thus became doubly compelling as an image for the paradox-prone panegyrics of the late Renaissance and the Baroque. The female ruler intrinsically had to lay claim to an androgynous identity, to define herself through symbols which could bridge the gap between her uniquely individual capacities and the traditionally patriarchal discourse of early modern monarchic legitimacy. Divine Wisdom was one such a symbol.

Question: "What is the hidden mystery which represents the kingdom of Russia?"

Answer: "The hidden, sacred mystery concerning the Russian Muscovite kingdom is directly revealed through the image of the holy indescribable *Sophia* the Divine Wisdom of God's Word."

These lines are taken from a court sermon cum panegyric written for Princess Sofia by Abbot Ignatii Rimsky-Korsakov of Novospasskii Monastery, in 1689, to celebrate the occasion of the Dormition of the Virgin, August 15, the feast day which marks the earthly demise of the *Theotokos*, and the official day upon which *Sophia* the Wisdom

of God was honored in Russia from the late fifteenth-century onwards.<sup>8</sup> This sermon was never delivered, however, because political events in Moscow had outpaced Rimskii-Korsakov's imagery. On August 7, 1689, the young Peter I fled from the Moscow Kremlin to the Trinity Monastery, where he raised the banner of revolt. Within a few days the wholesale defection of the gentry militia and foreign regiments to his side marked his victory over the regent. Sofia Alekseevna's regency had fallen and a sermon in which the regent, by way of Divine Wisdom imagery, was identified with that sovereignty which legitimized the rule of her two co-rulers, brothers, Peter I and Ivan V, and was tactless, at best, and consequently shelved by the abbot. Though never pronounced in public, we may use it to further elucidate the connection between Divine Wisdom imagery and the discourse of early modern absolutist monarchy, both in Russia and in the West.

Rimsky-Korsakov introduces the sermon by citing *I Corinthians* 2:9-15, "But he that is spiritual judges all things, yet himself is judged by none." These words, according to Kanterowicz, form the basis for the concept of sovereignty in the West.<sup>9</sup> The sermon then continues:

"The hidden sacred mystery concerning the Russian kingdom is directly revealed through the icon of the sign, which is the holy, indescribable *Sophia* the Divine Wisdom of God's Word - the

guardian angel of the great sovereign lady, our tsarevna and princess Sofia Alekseevna, along with her brothers the great sovereigns tsars and grand dukes, Ioann Alekseevich and Peter Alekseevich, the autocrats of all Russia”.

A major shift in Russian monarchic imagery appears in this passage. First, the regent's saint's day was not August 15, as stated by Rimsky-Korsakov- it was September 17, the feast of the martyr Saint Sofia and her daughters, Vera, Nadezhda and Liubov (Faith, Hope and Charity). The abbot had consciously elided the difference

between Divine Wisdom (*Sophia*) and the Roman martyr and Christian saint Sofia in order to emphasize the regent's uniqueness and thus,

sovereignty; while there were other women bearing the name "Sofia" at this time in Russia, certainly none of them could claim Wisdom as their patron saint. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this sermon reveals the fact that the mimetic, metonymic dependence of the Russian monarchy on the anthropomorphic image of Christ has been replaced by another image- by Divine Wisdom - a sexually androgynous, ambiguous, and abstract metaphor. We can assume that Sofia Alekseevna actively identified herself with this image from the fact that Purity as a maiden wearing the eight-turreted Sophic

crown was one of two figures flanking the doors to the regent's audience hall, painted there at her specific request in 1686.

The regency of Sofia Alekseevna was a turning point in the development of Russian state imagery. It was during these years that the government sponsored a transformation within the officially sanctioned poetic discourse used to express and justify the principle of legitimate monarchy in Russia. The figure of Christ was de-emphasized, its position as key trope within the system of monarchic imagery supplanted by representations of So-

**"The hidden, sacred mystery concerning the Russian Muscovite kingdom is directly revealed through the image of the holy indescribable *Sophia* the Divine Wisdom of God's Word."**

phia the Wisdom of God. The clue to the function of Wisdom imagery within the changing political discourse of late seventeenth-century Russia lies in the contrast between the uncircumscribed and interstitial quality of Wisdom, which, as God's Providence, imbues and permeates all creation, and the defined and limited nature of the anthropomorphic Christ as trope, anchored through corporeality of Incarnation to a specific time, place and sex. The "mystery of Muscovy" which Rimskii- Korsakov praised in his panegyric for Sofia Alekseevna seems to be a variation on the same "mystery

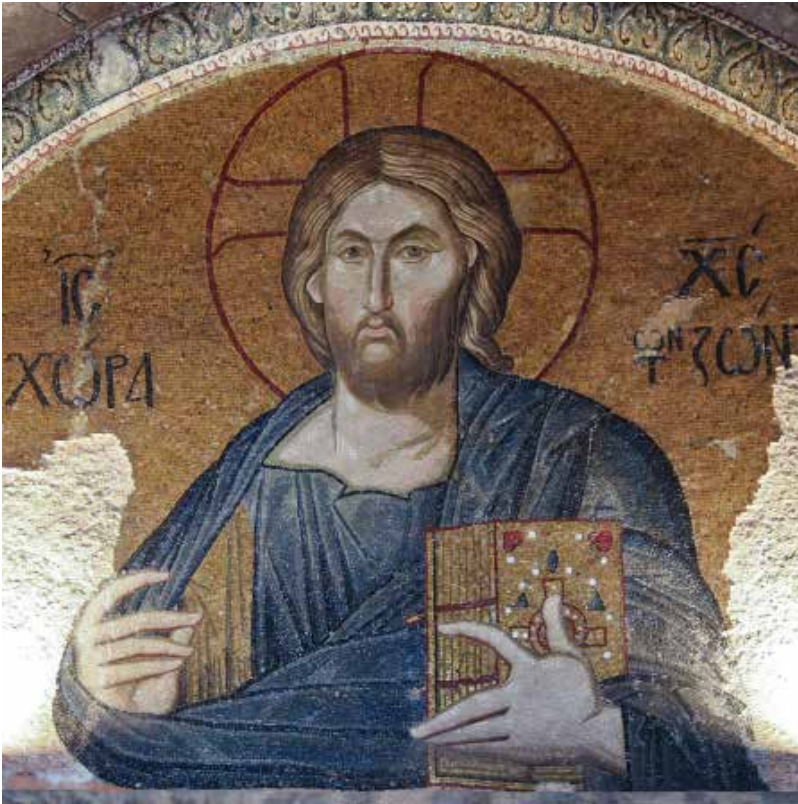


Photo courtesy of Guillaume Piolle

of sovereignty" theme, advocated by King James in London. Peter I's adoption of his sister's Wisdom imagery as an attribute of his Westernizing Enlightener persona, through an elision of the classical Western wisdom imagery of Minerva with Orthodox *Sophia*, which in turn was caught up and expanded by Catherine II assured the continuation of the Wisdom motif as an aspect of Imperial Russian monarchic imagery right up to the twentieth-century.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, this foregrounding of enlightenment and education was the one aspect of the Imperial Russian discourse which the Soviet regime, in its turn, appropriated for its own version of empire. Thus, the

shift to a higher level of figurative abstraction and de-personalization, expressed through the interstitial paradoxes of androgynous *Sophia*, echoed the ever-expanding powers of the modern state, both in Russia and in the West.

In conclusion, to widen the parameters of my brief excursion into the topic of *Sophia* the Wisdom of God from political applications in late-seventeenth century Moscow to its broader implications for religious discourse in general, I should like to turn the reader's attention to a mosaic composition located in the modern city of Istanbul, in what had once been an outer suburb of



the old city of Constantinople. The Church of Christ Savior -as- *Khora* (*Kariye Djami*) contains some of the most beautiful mosaics from the Paleologue Renaissance of the mid-fourteenth-century.<sup>11</sup> Two of these- a *Theotokos* and a Christ *Pantocrator* are referred to as “*Khora*” in their mosaic inscriptions – thus the eponymy of the church. The Virgin is addressed as “The Container/ Space/*Khora* of the Uncontainable” (*He Khora tou Akhoretou*) and Christ is named “The Land/ Space/ *Khora* of the Living” (*He Khora ton Zonton*). Like *Sophia* the Wisdom of God, and like the Platonic *Khora* (see Footnote ii below) the *Theotokos* is the bridge between Becoming and Being, while Christ is the literal space where Being and Becoming meet. “Could Christ- as - *Khora* be an alternative to Christ *Logos*”<sup>12</sup> and how would such a depiction affect the gendered semiotic structures of our modern theological discourse? Is Divine *Sophia* another aspect of the *Khora* and could this suggest a way out of the binary conundrum underlying all conceptualizations of monotheism in general, based as they are on the fundamental premise that God is NOT creation and creation is Not God. Once again, *Sophia* has opened a portal into an alternative way of thinking, one worth exploring as an aspect of the general theme of “Religion, Women and the Feminine”.

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## NOTES

- 1 For a general overview of the Sophic topic in Christianity see Leo D. Lefebure, “The Wisdom of God. Pts. 1 and 2,” *The Christian Century*, Nos. 10/19 and 10/26(1994); for Western Medieval and Renaissance conceptions of Holy Wisdom see Eugene Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, (Praeger Press, 1973); for the modern Russian Orthodox perspective see Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov*(Taylor and Firens, 2000); for a feminist critique see Brenda Meehan, “Wisdom/ Sophia, Russian Identity and Western Feminist Thought”, *Cross Currents*, No. 46, 2(Summer 1996).
- 2 The concept of the “*Khora*” which originated in Plato’s *Timaeus* as a description of the space or interval between being and non-being where the original ideas or eidos repose seems to emerge from the same metaphoric plane, semiotically speaking, as *Sophia* the Wisdom of God, since both function as bridges of a sort between Being and Becoming. For a brief summary of the current philosophical debate on “*Khora*” see John Manoussakis, “*Khora*: The Hermeneutics of Hyphenation” , *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, T.58 (Jan.-Mar.2002): 93-100.
- 3 The androgynous aspect of Wisdom imagery is discussed in J. Meyendorff, “Wisdom-Sophia: Contrasting Approaches to a Complex Theme,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*.41(1987):p.400. For an introduction into the Byzan-



- tine roots of absolutist androgyny see Dean Miller's "Royaute et ambiguite sexuelle". *Annales E.S. C.* 26(1971): 639-52, as well as his "Byzantine Sovereignty and Feminine Potencies" in *Women and Sovereignty* ed. Louise O. Fradenburg, (Edinburgh University Press, 1992): 250-263
- 4 All bibliographic and archival references to the material concerning Sofia Alekseevna and *Sophia* the Wisdom of God, unless otherwise footnoted, may be found in E. Zelensky, "Sophia the Wisdom of God": The Function of Religious Imagery during the Regency of Sofia Alekseevna of Muscovy", in *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise O. Fradenburg. (Edinburgh University Press, 1992): 192-211.
  - 5 Kenneth Hollum's, *Theodosian Empresses, Women and Imperial Domain in Late Antiquity*,(University of California Press, 1982), p. 93.
  - 6 Fradenburg's *Women and Sovereignty* is a collection of essays which addresses the imagery of female rule from various perspectives, and includes information on all of the queens and regents listed.
  - 7 E. Kantorowicz, "Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and Its Late Medieval Origins,"*Harvard Theological Review* ,48 (1955): 91.
  - 8 A.P. Bogdanov and V.I. Buganov, *Pamiatniki obshchestvenno-politicheskoi mysli v Rossii XVII veka. Literaturnye panegiriki*. (Moscow: Akad Nauk. Institut istorii, 1983),p.234.
  - 9 Kantorowicz, "Mysteries of State": 81.
  - 10 See Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in the Russian Monarchy*, Vol.1(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp.110-144.
  - 12 See A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, 3 vols. (N.Y. Bollinger Foundation, 1966)
  - 13 Manoussakis, "*Khora*":100.

# Book Review

Mary Nyangweso Wangila, *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), xv, 206pp.

In the midst of pauperization, persecution, and patriarchy, African women are providing new narratives for challenging normative paradigms in religion, culture, ethics, and health. In the parlance of liberation theology, they have engendered an irruption that seeks to valorize wholeness, abundance, and dignity. They seek to understand the African worldview from the underside of history and also reinterpret tradition. This is an approach that challenges subordination in its various forms and manifestations. African women are confronted with the “triple bind” of race, class, and gender. Yet they provide fresh interpretations that shed light on these three categories. Our global landscape demands new moral discourse that challenges oppressive models and practices. This is a radical hermeneutic that challenges oppressive cultural norms and practices. By utilizing the power of naming, African women identify, categorize, and label cultural practices that subject people, especially women to dehumanizing and oppressive conditions.

Wangila’s book examines the cogent arguments for and against the contentious practice of female circumcision. This is a practice that Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf has described as “virtuous cuts.” Based on comprehensive interviews with fifty Kenyan women within Christianity, Islam, African Independent Churches, and traditional religion, Wangila emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexity of the gender dynamics, cultural practices, and religious norms that undergird this practice. She locates the discussion on circumcision at the very heart of human rights concerns and calls for a new discourse that support for the eradication of the practice through massive education and a nuanced understanding of religious and cultural beliefs. She maintains that “any terminology adopted to label female circumcision must acknowledge the sociocultural and religious values that inform the practice, even while critiquing it” (p.viii).

The book opens with a powerful preface by Amba Mercy Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian who is widely regarded as the matriarch of African theology. Her book, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* continues to provide the intellectual framework for understanding the fundamentals of African theology. She challenges the circum-

cising community to develop a more robust analysis of the issues involved in the practice. She passionately grapples with some of the relevant issues for both insider and outsider participants in the discourse concerning circumcision. She maintains that the religious and cultural justifications for this “cutting” practice are ostensibly shallow at best. Thus, there is a need to provide a more nuanced engagement with the subject matter.

The book’s preface lays out its methodological framework and *modus operandi*. Wangila maintains that she is both a Kenyan and a feminist who is primarily concerned with the need to provide the voice for the voiceless. The purpose is not simply academic or cerebral. Rather, it is a modest way to provide much-needed awareness on the issue of female circumcision and speak out on behalf of marginalized people in the society. She claims that “my goal is not purely academic; instead, it is to engage in social discourse to transform lives” (p. xi).

The book calls for a critical understanding of the role of religion in the practice of female circumcision in Kenya. For all intents and purposes, religion has been used to justify and reinforce this practice. However, as a sociologist and a Christian theologian, Wangila believes that religion can contribute to a new attitude about female circumcision. She asserts that “religion can play a role in transforming attitudes regarding female circumcision without summarily condemning all the rituals associated with it” (p. xii). The book is a lucid appeal to recover the transformative power of religion in the midst of violence against African women.

This is an important book. The six chapters are well written and it is a fitting volume in the series on *Women from the Margins* with Orbis Books. Wangila’s voice is both passionate and prophetic. It provides a much-needed candid analysis of the religious and cultural issues surrounding female circumcision. She grapples with tendentious issues with deep commitment and authority. However, I believe that its contents can be enlarged by relevant insights from anthropology, cultural studies, and more ethnographic research.

Akintunde E. Akinade

# Movie Review

## The Frailest Thing in the World; On Faith, Suffering and Cinema in Our Time

*Elizabeth Zelensky*

Between us and heaven or hell is only life, which is the frailest thing in the world.

Blaise Pascal (B.P.), *Pensée* # 213

While laid up at home nursing a painful and infectious eye condition – quarantined, unable to read or write – I watched many films, both old and new. One of the former, the French director Eric Rohmer’s “My Night at Maud’s/ “Ma nuit chez Maud” (1969) affected me deeply; the physical pain I was suffering, compounded by loneliness and the seemingly random origins of my disease – the question of where did I catch it quickly morphed into “why” and what is the role of chance in life – all these thoughts were reiterated and amplified in Rohmer’s film; a romantic comedy in form, in substance a meditation on *Pensées* / *Thoughts*<sup>1</sup> of Blaise Pascal. I would like to share my impressions of “My

Night at Maud’s” with the readers of Religions as an introduction to the subject of faith and suffering in contemporary cinema.

The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.

B.P., *Pensée* # 277

At first glance, a double triangle drives the plot of “My Night at Maud’s”. The narrative follows the love story of Jean-Louis, (Jean-Louis Trintignant) who is torn between two women, one of whom – Maud (Francoise Fabian ) is an old flame of his friend Vidal (Antoine Vitez)-the other, a mysterious blonde girl (Marie-Christine Barrault), first glimpsed by Jean-Louis at a church service in the cathedral. The four young people meet, and fail to meet, at concerts, bookstores, cafes. The film was shot on location in Clermont-Ferrand, a gray city filmed in black and white through barely-per-

ceptible veils of snow. It is the Christmas season. The blonde flits through scene after scene on a motor scooter; is she an angel or a muse, does she hold the key to Jean-Louis' future? Jean-Louis' attempts to meet her are constantly thwarted as she disappears in a maze of narrow streets, or among the holiday crowds. Meanwhile, also by chance, he comes across an old friend, Vidal, the professor of philosophy unhappily in love with the eccentric and beautiful Maud. Vidal brings Jean-Louis to Maud's place for a midnight supper on Christmas Eve. Snubbed by Maud, Vidal leaves. The snowfall intensifies and Jean-Louis must spend the night at Maud's. Philosophical differences, however, trump physical desire. Maud's rationalism and Jean-Louis' blind faith in his unknown blonde, defuse the romance. Five years later Maud, Jean-Louis and Françoise (the mysterious blonde-now Jean-Louis' wife and the mother of their son) meet by chance on a sunny beach. Afterwards, Jean-Louis lies to his wife that he did have an affair with Maud, thereby freeing Françoise from guilt about her own pre-marital romantic



history. The final scene is analogous to his initial night at Maud's; the heart's reasoning is confirmed as the eternal source of meaning, freedom, transcendence, and thus elevated above mere chance, which is circumscribed by space and time.

Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature: but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the



advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this.

All our dignity consists then in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor then to think well; this is the principle of morality.

B.P., *Pensée* # 347 .

The film is complex; its powerful hold over the viewer's imagination comes from the contrast between its romantic comedy format and the dizzying metaphysical vistas glimpsed between and betwixt Rohmer's scenes of French provincial life. Is the world organized according to chance, what is the role of faith in bringing about seemingly random events, can one choose to believe, and is such a choice valid, either spiritually or ethically, and how can a world which contains so much suffering serve as an argument for God's existence? Such questions arise out of the lovelorn banter of the couples on the screen, pulling the audience along into the intellectual and moral universe of Rohmer's key referent - the seventeenth-century French philosopher and scientist, Blaise Pascal. Invisible yet ever-present, Pascal is directly invoked by the film's location in Clermont-Ferrand, the philosopher's birthplace, and through numerous allusions to his famous book, *Pensées*. Indirectly, Pascal's meditations on faith's role in life remain the overarching theme

of the film, though one which is carefully disguised by Rohmer, perhaps as a nod to modern sensibilities, by the conventions of chance.<sup>2</sup>

Shot in black and white, in winter, the film's visual ambience speaks to the starkness of the root metaphor behind the *Pensées* – the link between faith and chance. Rohmer himself underscored this connection when he admitted that budget constraints forced him to trust that the snow storm which forces Jean-Louis to spend the night at Maud's-the pivotal point in the plot – would occur sometime during their three week long filming schedule.<sup>3</sup> And it did.

A coin is tossed at the end of the universe- and you must wager.

B.P., *Pensée* # 233.

The film's protagonist, Jean-Louis, is an engineer interested in statistics and probability and also a lapsed Catholic seeking faith; thus uniting the two passions of Pascal. A mathematician of genius, the originator of modern probability theory and calculus, and the inventor of a prototype computer, Pascal was one of the scientific luminaries in late seventeenth-century Europe whose works formed the basis for the scientific method and thus the modern, secular worldview. Today, however, he is probably best known for his attempt to draw his contemporaries back to faith as expressed in the posthumous collection of his apho-

risms and philosophical insights known as *Pensees*, the most well-known of which, *Pensée* #233 has come down to us under the rubric of “Pascal’s Wager:

God is, or He is not. But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here... Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of the universe a coin is being tossed which will come down heads or tails. What will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either; reason cannot prove either wrong... but your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and loss in wagering that God is...If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.

While the argument for belief seems to be framed in a tongue-in-cheek defense of rational self-interest and calculated exchange – “what have you got to lose?” – this same aphorism paradoxically notes the impossibility of applying rationality to the problem of God’s existence:

Our soul is cast into a body where it finds number, time, dimension. Thereupon it reasons, and calls this nature necessity, and can believe nothing else... If there is a God He is infinitely incomprehensible, since having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is...if this discourse pleases you and seems impressive then know that it is made by a man who has knelt, both before and after, in prayer to

that Being, infinite and without parts...

Reason is finite and God is infinite and yet, somehow, capable of being apprehended. Pascal walls off his call for faith from the temptations of scientific proofs and at the same time opens up passage unto the uncharted waters of individual subjectivity and, thus, freedom. The will to believe lies at the heart of all experience, including faith.

...The will is one of the chief factors in belief, not that it creates belief, but because things are true or false according to the aspect in which we look at them.

B.P., *Pensée* #99.

This recognition of the subjective nature of humans’ apprehension of the world explains Pascal’s appeal to modern thinkers such Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, obsessed as they were with the question of freedom amidst the overriding determinism of late nineteenth-century thought. But what is the role of chance in all of this, why does the coin continue to be tossed at the end of the universe?

Jean-Louis leaves a bookstore, *Pensées* in hand, and walks across the street into a random café, where he bumps into Vidal, who in turn will lead him to Maud’s apartment, which encounter will crystallize his bond with Françoise, Jean-Louis’ future wife. Chance has hijacked the narrative of “My Night at Maud’s”, as circumstance becomes the apparent

driving force behind all subsequent action. This propensity for coincidence might be perceived as a weakness in plotting. In my opinion, however, this is the film's main strength. Rohmer uses chance to create space for freedom in a rationally determined world, and with freedom, inevitably, for suffering and then, perhaps ... for faith. Chance is the medium through which faith is tested and honed, while faith provides that inner vision which transforms the chaos of coincidence into the golden thread of individual destiny. Which is how Jean-Louis' love story comes to be writ large through Pascal. Two fateful meetings; Jean-Louis and Vidal at a café and the midnight supper at Maud's, clarify this strategy of Rohmer's.

It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This then is faith:

God felt by the heart, not by reason.

B.P., *Pensée*# 278.

One evening Jean-Louis literally bumps into Vidal, a friend whom he has not seen for fifteen years, as he is leaving a café, which neither of them usually frequents. The two friends decide to catch up on old times and go back in for a drink.

V: I never come here... and yet our paths crossed. How strange.

J- L: No, not strange at all. In normal life we would have never met. So we could

only meet here, outside our ordinary paths....

Next, the conversation turns to probability, and, inevitably, to Pascal.

J-L: I have been reading Pascal and I am disappointed. Too abstract...It all seems so empty.

V: Pascal is quite modern-both as a mathematician and a philosopher. Pascal's triangle is connected to his wager.

This is the first time Pascal's Wager is mentioned, and its connection to Pascal's Triangle might be viewed as a double entendre, referencing both a mathematical figure and the emotional complications to come between Jean-Louis, Vidal and Maud, and Maud, Françoise and Jean Louis.

J-L: And are you still a Marxist?

V: Absolutely, and for a Marxist Pascal is very relevant right now.

Vidal as a left-leaning philosopher in 1968-the year of the student riots and workers strikes in France which will lead to the fall of Charles De Gaulle's government in 1969 – is hoping that the forces of the historical dialectic will triumph over the capitalist system...

"I doubt that history has meaning " he continues. "There is an 80% chance that it has no mean-

ing, and a 10% chance that there is meaning, and yet I need to believe that it has meaning in order to go on living.” Vidal goes on to illustrate this voluntaristic theory of faith with an example from the Russian Revolution of 1917:

It was Gorky, or Lenin, or Mayakovsky who said that the situation in 1917 forced them to take one chance in 1,000 because hope became infinitely greater if they took that chance.

Whether Lenin ever actually said words to this effect is not clear, but they touch upon a deep strain of Christian thought: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.” *Hebrews* 11:1. Or in Pascal’s words, “This then is faith. God felt by the heart”. As a professor of philosophy Vidal is fully conversant with the tragedy of the human condition, depicted by Pascal in *Pensée* # 434:

Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition.

And yet he commits himself to taking a conscious leap of faith into that abyss of past human cruelties, suffering and vanities which we have labeled “history”, counting on

a 10% chance of survival. The fact that Vidal leaves 10% unaccounted for in his formula- 80% meaningless and 10% meaningful - creates space for mystery, and thus freedom, in his equation.

Rohmer underscores the importance of this mysterious space by labeling the scene where it becomes obvious to Jean-Louis and Françoise that they are going to spend the rest of their lives together - “10%”. This scene begins when Jean-Louis sees Françoise on the street with her scooter late at night. It is snowing and she has missed the last bus to her dormitory, which is out in the mountains above the town. Jean-Louis offers to drive her there, the car gets stuck in the snow, and once again, chastely, he spends the night with a beautiful girl. By morning, though they slept in separate rooms, they know that they are a couple. And, again, it is chance in the guise of weather which created the initial conditions for this new reality.

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened, and astonished at being here rather than there, for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?

B.P., *Pensée* # 205

The supper at Maud's reveals the trials of a life without faith. Maud is a physician and the descendent of a long line of secularist intelligentsia in Clermont, thus automatically anti-religious. She is divorced, her one great love has died in a car accident, she is in the process of moving away from Clermont and she is tired of Vidal. Jean-Louis piques her interest because he directly acknowledges his need for faith despite his moral lapses and because he briefly mentions a blonde whom he saw in the cathedral at midnight mass, thus stirring up Maud's sense of feminine rivalry.

M: I'm not lapsed anything. I am faithful...and I have no problems...

V: It is easy to be faithful to nothing.

Here, Vidal is speaking not only as a disappointed lover, but also as a philosopher. While he originally talks Jean-Louis into accompanying him to Maud's by venturing that "If you don't come we will probably end up making love just to pass the time", masking his own pain in a façade of indifference since it is Maud who has already moved on emotionally, he is genuinely perturbed at Maud's simplistic dismissal of faith.

V: I don't like people without problems.

He understands that the acknowledgement of problems, and

thus of suffering creates the possibility for growth. "I am an atheist but Christianity's inherent contradictions are fascinating". Contradictions, in turn, create space for ambiguity and therefore freedom from modeling and a chance for transcendence.

Maude puts an end to this train of thought.

M: Dialectic does nothing for me.

The only two passages from Pascal which she claims to remember are "the thinking reed" and "the two infinities". Both reflect her existential situation; "the thinking reed" passage is particularly poignant since the drop of water which can crush a man did crush her one great love, in the form of the icy road which brought his life to an end. "Why am I here and not there" resonates with her lack of purpose and anomie, her desire to move anywhere, meet with anyone - perhaps Jean-Louis - rather than stay in Clermont-Ferrand, surrounded by the same old faces. Vidal's commitment to an open ended belief in the possibility of meaning in history and thus to hope, and Jean-Louis conscious desire for faith is contrasted with Maud's sterile reliance on reason. Five years later when she meets Jean-Louis and his family at the beach, she has re-married and she is still beautiful, but, once again, suffering and unhappy.



At the beginning of the twentieth century a new muse was born - the muse of cinema.<sup>4</sup> Film as an art form and a technology became the *chora* or living space<sup>5</sup> at the heart of our civilization, akin to the cathedral in the Medieval West.<sup>6</sup> Proceeding from this premise, the fact that in 2015 out of five nominations in the Best Foreign Film category of the Academy Awards four films- “Tangerines”, “Timbuktu”, “Leviathon”, and “Ida”- dealt with the theme of suffering and faith seems to indicate a shift in our *zeitgeist*. The winner for 2015 was “Ida” a Polish film directed by Pawel Pawlowski which explored a young woman’s turn to faith as the only answer to an unfathomable tragedy - her discovery of the murder of her Jewish birth family and her subsequent adoption by Catholic nuns. Thus the human need for faith which Rohmer could only address obliquely as a theme in 1969, when “My Night at Maud’s “ was nominated but failed to win an Oscar, has now become a recognized subject in the world of cinema. Faith gives us hope, and thus time and inner space within which to work through and transfigure suffering into self-understanding. Watching a film can re-focus our attention on this space- as Rohmer so presciently demonstrated in “My Night at Maud’s”.

It is natural for the mind to believe and for the will to love; so that, for want of

true objects, they must attach themselves to false.

B.P., *Pensée*# 81.

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## NOTES

- 1 Blaise Pascal’s thoughts and aphorisms on faith were published posthumously in 1665 under the title, *Pensées de M.Pascal sur la Religion, et sur quelques autres sujets/The Thoughts of Monsieur Pascal on Religion and on Certain Other Subjects* and is known today under the abbreviated title of *Pensées*. All Pascal citation are taken from Blaise Pascal, *Pensées. The Provincial Letters*, The First Modern Library Edition, Random House :New York, 1941.
- 2 For Eric Rohmer’s religious beliefs see Keith Testor, 2008, *Eric Rohmer: Film as Theology*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 3 “We ran a big risk because we easily could have had a season without snow”, Eric Rohmer quoted from an interview by Jacob Leigh, 2012, *The Cinema of Eric Rohmer. Irony, Imagination and the Social World*, New York,NY: Continuum Int’l Publishing Group, p.269, Footnote 45.
- 4 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time. Reflections on the Cinema*, Austin: University of Texas Press, trans. Kitty Hunter Blair, p.82.
- 5 John Manoussakis “Khora: The Hermeneutics of Hyphenation”, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, T. 58(Jan-Mar2002), pp. 93-100.

6 “The cinema is the cathedral of the twentieth century” according to Rohmer. Guy Bedouelle, “Eric Rohmer on Nature and Grace,” *New Blackfriars*.74.872(June 1993):301-306 as cited by Marina Ludwigs in “Adventures in Sainthood: Pascal’s Wager in “My Night at Maud’s” [www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1702/1702](http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1702/1702). Accessed on August 20, 20015.



**Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser** plays a key role in supporting the country's National Vision – a far-reaching agenda to transform Qatar into a thriving, knowledge-based society by 2030. For more than 15 years, Sheikha Moza has been a driving force behind education and social reforms in her country. Sheikha Moza is also active on the international stage, spearheading projects to promote peace and human development throughout the world. Domestically, she serves as Chairperson of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF), a private non-profit organisation founded in 1995. Sheikha Moza plays an active role with the United Nations (UN) to support global education. In 2003, she was appointed as UNESCO's Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education; in 2008 she was appointed by the Secretary General of the UN as Alliance of Civilizations (AOC) Ambassador; and in 2010 she became a member of the UN Millennium Development Goals Advocacy Group with a special emphasis on Goal 2 – universal primary education. In 2012 she was appointed as a Steering Committee Member of the UN Secretary-General's Global Education First Initiative.

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published more than ten books and directed collective works as well. He is the author of numerous articles in magazines specialized in Islamology and has written more than twenty articles in *the Encyclopedia of Islam* 2nd and 3rd

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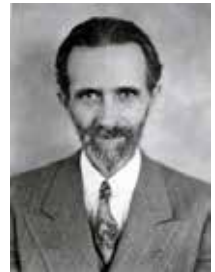


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**Patrick Laude** has been teaching at Georgetown since 1991. His scholarly interests lie in comparative spirituality, poetry, and Western interpretations of Islam and Asian contemplative and wisdom traditions. He has authored over ten books including: *Pathways to an Inner Islam* (SUNY, 2010), *Pray Without Ceasing* (World Wisdom, 2006), and *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter and Spiritual Understanding* (Palgrave, 2005).

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