

## **European Muslim Women: Spirituality and Responsibility Discussed at WISE Conference**

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WISE Conference Faith panel: Challenges to Religious Leadership — Barriers and Enablers

The theme of women's spirituality is arousing increasing interest and not only in the Islamic world, where, for example, the great Muslim women saints of the past still today provide us with valuable food for reflection. At the same time, in a more general sense, we should consider the responsibilities that the spiritual life involves, now as always.

True spirituality is, in fact, hard to find in a period in which secularization has relegated religion to the private sphere, confusing exterior witness with ostentation and proselytism. It is first and foremost a responsibility linked to the custody of a sacred store and the capacity for the transmission of traditional knowledge that has been preserved over the centuries, since the very beginning of the Islamic revelation. A Hadith (a saying of the Prophet Muhammad) states that "Islam was born a stranger; it will finish as it started, a stranger" and that "the sun, which rises in the east, will, at the end of time, rise in the west," indicating, also from a geographical point of view, the space to which men and women will be called, in the course of the eschatological events, to bear renewed witness to their faith. It is, in fact, natural that spirituality should be renewed thanks to the effort necessary to adapt oneself to situations and conditions that had never occurred in the past, avoiding the sterile and nostalgic repetition of forms.

In this sense, Europe now plays a special role in the mediation between East and West: it is, in fact, not only the land that gave birth to modernity and is the seat of Catholic Christianity and the principal patriarchates of Orthodox Christianity but is also affected by a growing presence of Islam, which cannot only be associated with the East. For some time a number of European Muslims have been engaged in seriously investigating the theme of Islamic spirituality and the role of Muslim women.

There are many challenges, or rather trials, that a religious woman must face in order to live a spiritual life in the modern world. Some of these obstacles depend on the internal difficulties of the Islamic community, which is experiencing a period of great intellectual decadence, with the fundamentalist tendencies exploiting the formal aspects of the religion and emptying it of its spiritual content. Thus the woman's role is also diminished together with its symbols and values, which end up by acquiring a purely ideological significance. This is the case of the Islamic veil and female virtues such as discretion and modesty, which are wrongly associated with passivity and segregation.

Other difficulties depend on forces external to the Islamic community that have already been working to distort the nature of woman. These induce idolatry of one's own body, or that of

others, and the defiantly original use of intelligence for a dialectic competition in order to excel independently in all the aspects of life. These are tendencies that exalt individuality, with men and women confronting each other to establish who dominates who and who is the most attractive or has the greatest power over the other. In the case of women, a sort of female gut instinct seems to have prevailed: depending on the individual's character, this stresses just one of the ontological components of the human being to the detriment of the balance of the whole. Thus there are women who feel they have a spiritual mission, or else they are advocates of equal opportunities, or new goddesses of an artificial Olympus.

This is, therefore, one of the responsibilities of Muslim women: that is, finding a harmonious balance between spirit, soul, and body in order to recognize the unity of the creation and have access to true spirituality. In fact, the quest for and realization of this balance cannot be delegated to others, be they parent, husbands, children, or religious authorities: it constitutes a personal responsibility for men and women, whom God has endowed with the power of free will.

Nowadays many Muslim women demand the legitimation of their independence and authority, separately from the traditional context of the Islamic community, by virtue of a supposed individual appropriation of religious doctrine and practice. They believe they can measure their inner vocation in proportion to the achievement of an exterior position, confusing the principal of authority with the exercise of personal power. The problem is not so much that of the relationship between men and women, but rather between the male and female nature that every living being contains within itself. Thus, the fact that today men have generally become weak and incapable of orienting themselves and the others with rectitude seems to confirm the demands of these women. It is, however, dangerous to adapt religion to one's own schemata, favoring certain prophetic traditions over others and distancing oneself from the traditional context that regulates the life of every Muslim.

Tradition, if one believes in it, is a living thing that must necessarily communicate with realities that go beyond the limits of human individuality. In this sense, it is not a case of wasting time on useless questions regarding the superiority of men over women or some individuals over others, but rather of acquiring a renewed sensibility for the traditional context, which is the only way of ensuring this communication with the spiritual realities. The sages state that we cannot be masters of ourselves: fortunately Islam still preserves the means of contemplation that take place through initiatory association with living masters.

To the question that is automatically asked as to why these masters are necessarily men, as were all the prophets from Adam to Muhammad, I would like to reply with the question as to why some women, with the complicity of some men, wish to add a female element to the doctrine. One begins to think that woman as such can compensate for the shortcomings of men or, worse still, that the magisterial function of some authorities requires a complement, an inspiring muse in addition to God who is the only source from which the authority flows. While no one can deny the importance of the female intuition that has historically and traditionally supported saints and prophets, it is essential that female spirituality should not be transformed into a matriarchy. The example of the lives of the Muslim saints may help us to find the correct discernment.

The best-known book on this theme — it deals with the lives and teachings of a number of great women who lived in the period from the seventh to the tenth centuries in different parts of the Islamic world — is the work by Aby ‘Abd ar-Rahman as-Sulami entitled *Early Sufi Women*, translated by Rkia Elaroui Cornell. From these accounts emerges a profound picture of faith and piety embodied by exceptional women, all characterized by great spiritual servitude. It is, in fact, servitude that expresses the profound sense of the word “Islam,” interpreted as submission to God and entering into peace. The book stresses how these women were experts on religious doctrine and acts of worship, which they themselves practiced, engaging in exchanges and reflections with the masters of the period. In this role of public teaching they were called by a masculine name, *ustadh*, teachers, thus overcoming the social restrictions of the period that dissuaded women from traveling or expressing themselves in public.

In addition to the masculine term *ustadh*, as-Salumi attributes the feminine one of *mu’addiba* (well-behaved teacher) to other women, especially Rabia al-Adawiya. This was not intended to indicate a hierarchical distinction, but rather the different ways in which these women had acquired knowledge and imparted it to others. *Adab*, traditional behavior, is, in fact, the elucidation of a number of doctrinal teachings and represents a synthesis of theoretical knowledge and its application to everyday life. It is, at the same time, form and substance, never just a label, because traditional behavior does not concern itself with what men think, but rather it finds correspondence with the essence of God and his Prophet in every gesture. In this sense, *adab* is both the guardian and the propagator of knowledge, and can thus constitute an effective means of teaching and traditional education. In the case of the women mentioned by as-Sulami, they revealed the spiritual heritage manifested through their teaching not only with great humility but also with great strength.

Among the various stories, it is recounted that one day one of these pious women, Fatima of Nishapur, sent a present to Dhu an-Nun al-Misri, who sent it back to her saying: “It is a sign of humiliation and weakness to accept a gift from a Sufi woman.” Fatima replied: “There is no weaker Sufi in the world than he who doubts the intentions of another.” Subsequently, when someone asked Dhu an-Nun al-Misri who was the most excellent person he had ever seen, the reply was: “A woman I met in Mecca, Fatima of Nishapur, who was able to converse marvelously about themes linked to the meaning of the Holy Koran.”

The contents of the teachings propagated by these very wise women regarded devotion, the proximity to God, his knowledge, the hereafter, and holiness. These themes are those that have been dearest to the masters and saints over the centuries. It was not, therefore, a discourse on women or for them, but rather an expression of those metaphysical principles of religion that are neither masculine nor feminine, but that necessarily, in order to be realized, must be experienced by either men or women.

The spirit is, in fact, that of the natural distinction between masculine and feminine, just as knowledge is over and above form. However, those who have achieved this sublime level of knowledge cannot break the law and disregard form only because they are aware of their relativity with regard to the Absolute, but, more than anyone else, they are expected to comply with them and vivify them through the spirit. For a woman, the achievement of holiness is not characterized in a feminine sense, but, at the same time, she cannot ignore the feminine nature

and form that God has endowed her with. In order to “elevate the spirit above oneself,” in the words of a Muslim saint of the last century, it is necessary, first of all, to start to be oneself so as to leave space, finally, only for God. Otherwise there is the risk of confusing one’s relative function with the ultimate aim, aspiring to become someone rather than renouncing one’s own individuality. The paradoxical result of this incomprehension is reflected in the quest for a personal relationship with the sages or the masters, where the individuals are confused with the divine presence that permeates the human vessels.

The examples of the Muslim saints that I have mentioned can and must still be relevant in order to demonstrate how, in the religious sphere, only God chooses his servants, men and women alike. Islam, in particular, insists on the fact that the only difference between believers lies in their learning and spiritual piety. It is not, therefore, surprising that the great masters and saints of the past have received “lessons” from other women saints who had reached the station that in Islamic esotericism is called *al-insan al-kamil* (Universal Man). This spiritual station, which is the ultimate level of perfection for men and women, has its most complete and sublime model in the Prophet Muhammad.

God has offered men and women the same opportunities for salvation, knowledge, and holiness. Only God can resolve the differences between men and women, who instead constitute one aspect of divine mercy in this world. The Koran confirms the equality of men and women before God, insofar as they created from a single soul. The doctrine of unity (*tawhid*) is of primary importance in the Islamic perspective of life and should also inform relationships between the sexes. It is unity rather than equality that satisfies the soul and gives order to all the levels of existence.

The realization of divine unity, in the beginning and in everyday life, is a fundamental issue for Islam, which, in virtue of this, gives great importance to marriage. Marriage is the symbol of the reunion of the single soul created by God initially, and is regarded, according to a prophetic saying, as “half of Islam.” In fact, monasticism does not exist in the Islamic religion and marriage is one of the principal spiritual supports: it is a means of refinement for one’s soul in which the sacred union between two human beings allows their individual limits to be overcome and where the contrapositions and complementarity are raised to a higher synergy. Moreover, the qualities and virtues of each person will be turned to account by the desire to make the most not only of his or her own talents but also to favor the fulfillment of those of the beloved. Thus there are no marriages that are more spiritual than others, except for the level of holiness attained by the husband and wife, who are expected, however, to live all the aspects of married life to the full.

In view of this profound recognition of the sacred value of the institution of Islamic marriage — which merits a separate study, given the complexity and the richness of the traditions regarding it — it is no longer possible to relegate the role of Muslim women to that of wife and mother without restoring the correct value to these words. Perhaps it will be the duty of European Muslim women — with their example far from the schizophrenia of the modern world — to express how being wives and mothers constitutes the synthesis of a unique path of knowledge of oneself and the world. To be intellectually honest, it must be stressed that the woman’s spiritual function does not always coincide exclusively with the roles of wife and mother, even though it

finds effective support in them. A woman's life can also consist of a plurality of forms and roles that must, however, be safeguarded within a more ample balance between the exterior function, the spiritual level and the intrinsic value of the person. The spiritual responsibility that Muslim women must discover today does not regard so much the choice of becoming a public figure as the rediscovery of clarity in their intentions with regard to their function. If the intention coincides with the awareness of our richness, then the essence of the divine presence will, inshallah, be revealed in us.

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