

# Editorial

**In this edition of the When Women Speak webzine we will explore women's everyday experience of Islam.**

In popular presentations of Islam, especially in the media, Islam is usually portrayed as a homogeneous monolith. Women's experience of Islam is not differentiated from the monolith. Women are doubly hidden by the stereotype of being covered in long, black robes. In fact, not only is Islam diverse, but women's experience is different to that of men because Islam is a gendered religion. This means that the experience of women is a story not often heard and their everyday practice of their religion is largely invisible outside their homes and communities. In this webzine we open the doors a little so that you can see the world of Muslim women's lives more clearly.

Largely due to scholars' bias towards written texts and formal study, it is generally argued that "true" religion is that which follows the rules, doctrines, and practices defined by the scholars of the religion. These scholars of religion are almost always male and have the luxury of being able to dedicate years of their lives to the study of texts and traditions. Such scholarship also gives the scholar status and authority. This authority is often used to proclaim everyday practices as "not true" or "folk". The denigration of the practice of popular religion by calling it "folk" or syncretistic creates an unhelpful dichotomy between true and false, and theory and practice. In reality, the beliefs and practices that have been described as being part of "folk Islam" are actually the grounded experience of Muslims as they live out their faith in day-to-day life.

The vast majority of Muslim women are concerned to live out their faith with integrity and want God to intervene in their lives for the well-being of their families and communities. While they desire to follow the teachings of Islam, they are also very concerned with the health of family members and material needs. They look to God to provide for these needs but are often also concerned about malevolent powers which seek to do harm. The ways they attempt to acquire God's blessing or protect themselves from evil powers are outlined in detail in the articles in this webzine, especially in the reflections of Joy Loewen, Inneke Riddell, Louise Simon, Vivienne Stacey and Miriam Williams. These combined reflections provide an overview of the everyday practices of Muslim women based on the experiences of women working across the world.

It can be difficult for the highly educated, especially people from the West, to accept the everyday experiences of the spiritual world in Muslim women's lives. The modern, Western worldview focuses on the material world that can be explained and manipulated by science. As the world of spirits and spiritual forces cannot be seen or measured, the spiritual realm has been largely rejected. This has created a vacuum in the Western worldview. This vacuum has caused major problems for all Westerners working with majority world people. "Folk" religious practices have been rejected as superstitious and, therefore, the problems these practices seek to address have been considered imaginary and unimportant. Paul Hiebert first wrote about this problem in 1982. Ruth Adam explains its implications in more depth in her article on understanding and dealing with the spirit world. While Western Christians may be open to accepting the existence of spiritual beings, impersonal forces such as the evil eye can be difficult to engage with. Moyra Dale explores the relationship between the impersonal positive and negative powers of blessing and the evil eye, and how Christians can respond appropriately.

The impact of the spiritual realm in everyday life is felt keenly by Muslim women.

Christians working with Muslims need to appreciate the extent of the effects of spiritual beings and forces on everyday life. They also need to prepare relevant biblical responses which address the concerns and fears of the people they work with and which offer practical responses to replace the everyday Islamic practices. Words without the conviction brought by experience will quickly be sensed as being empty. Getting people to throw away their charms and forbidding their rituals without offering satisfying alternatives can result in a vacuum that leads people to return to their original practices. The authors of the articles in this webzine each offer recommendations based on their own experiences. May their experience guide you as you listen to Muslim women, learn from them and endeavour to introduce them to Jesus' power to protect and bless them with all the riches of his heavenly realm.

*Evelyn Hibbert*