Sufi Women Saints: A Paradigm For Discipleship?

By Karen Scott, PhD

You may wonder how Sufism, specifically women Sufi saints, might intersect with Christian discipleship. Indeed, you may not be familiar with women Sufi saints to begin with. Historically, Sufi women saints have been models of piety, who dedicated themselves to serving Allah. They have been teachers in religious colleges and authorities in religion; at the same time, their hearts have longed for intimacy with their Creator. Might learning more about women such as Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya and Fatima bint al-‘Abbas encourage women believers from a Muslim background to set aside stereotypical roles and move into responsibilities in the Jamaat/jamaat¹ that they would never have dreamed possible? Could knowing more about Sufi women saints assist me as a Christian to deepen my own spiritual walk? I expect it to be an encouragement to people in discipleship programs, should it not also be to me? I suggest that this conversation will help those from a western worldview, men and women, discover biblical stories that will be meaningful for the life in Christ to believers from a Muslim background (BMB).

Introduction

‘Where and how’ discipleship happens is what most discussions of discipleship are about. This article will enter the conversation from an anthropological direction, with the premise that any discipleship program must take into consideration the worldview and socio-religious milieu and context (that is, the country or specific region/location). Accordingly, first I will describe the background of Sufism in South Asia, the country of Bangladesh in particular. Second, because of the close relationship between Sufism and popular Islam (also termed folk Islam) in religious practice, popular Islam will be addressed as an important part of the socio-religious context of women; examples of folk Islamic practices that influence the daily life of women will be related. Third, and most importantly, I will show how knowing about Sufi women saints and current belief and practices in popular Islam, can converge to be vital aids in the discipleship of BMB women. I firmly believe that there is important relevance to the study of historical Sufism that could be an encouragement to women believers coming from Islam to follow Isa. Deborah, the woman described in Proverbs 31, and other examples from early Hebrew history, offer me encouragement to challenge what is oftentimes typical - limitation of roles of women in the church, especially in the area of spiritual leadership positions such as not allowing them to become elders or pastors. In the same way, the example of women Sufi saints can offer this encouragement and inspiration to women believers coming from a Muslim background—it is not against culture for women to have their own strong devotional life, or have an independent quest for a relationship with God! Women Sufi saints offer role models that give hope and provide incentive for the deep spiritual life that can be theirs, a life ordained by Holy Spirit-inspired Old Testament accounts, profitable for nurturing the spiritual

¹ Church/congregation
life of God’s people, including women, and which Jesus and others demonstrate in the New Testament. Their hearts and imagination will be stirred to new activities and possibilities beyond what they had previously imagined. My hope is that through the following discussion we will be moved to deeper research on this topic.  

The Context

The long pluralistic history of South Asia, particularly the country of Bangladesh, has resulted in assimilation of many religious practices. This stems from the close association of animistic and Hindu beliefs and rituals. In combination with the Sufi-inspired Islam to be explained below, a Bangladeshi Muslim sub-culture has been birthed. Sufism, along with folk or popular Islam (I will use these two terms interchangeably) plays an important role in current Muslim religious expression in Bangladesh, something the Arab nations sought to impact following independence. Understanding the historical, religious, and cultural context of women in Bangladesh is strategic for purposes of discipleship. Though much applies to rural women, this topic crosses class and educational boundaries; women in more highly educated centers are not untouched by these issues. I contend that the information in this article will also apply to other countries and cultures where Sufism and popular or folk Islam are present.

Introduction to Sufism

“O my God, I invoke Thee in public as lords are invoked, but in private as loved ones are invoked. Publicly I say, ‘O my God! But privately I say, ‘O my Beloved!’”

As human beings cannot seem to exist without religion, so they cannot make do with only rituals, they must seek an inner meaning of life in religion. This has taken the form of Sufism in Islam. Similarly, women believers from a Muslim background are seeking this inner life with the Beloved. They also desire to participate fully in the spiritual and religious life of the community. This article will set out the precedent for acknowledging this longing publicly and will encourage men and women to advocate for women in the emerging Muslim background Jamaat. It will also show the variety of essential roles women could and should be contributing— functions that will serve to strengthen and expand this growing Jamaat.

The tradition of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism appeared very early in Islam and became a popular movement emphasizing love of God rather than fear of God. Sufism stresses an unstructured, personal devotion to God rather than a rigid, ritualistic, and outward observance of the faith. Esposito reports that Sufism began in the hearts of pious Muslims for several reasons: (1) reaction to the pursuit of conquest and wealth, (2) the transformation of the caliphate into a dynastic monarchy with its trappings of imperial court life, (3) and the

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2 Although I am not familiar with the subject enough to include it in this paper, I have been alerted to the idea that the Sufi qualities I endorse in this paper, likely come from Christian ascetic traditions. Research in this area could deepen our understanding of the spiritual ‘full-circle’ for the woman coming from a Muslim background and offer her further inclusion and rootedness in the family of God.


doubtful character of some of the caliphs.\(^5\) Devout Muslims believed that the Umayyad Dynasty’s goals of power and wealth were in contrast to the early example of Muhammad and distracted from Allah, the true center and goal of Muslim life.\(^6\)

William Stoddart describes Sufi Islam as having two domains, the outward and inward. These two domains stay distinct but have a definite relationship to one another. Representing this as two concentric circles the outward circle would be the Shari’a, or religion itself, and at the center lies the inner Truth, the heart of the religion. The line from circumference to center would represent the Sufi “path” that leads from outward observance to inner conviction, from belief to vision and from potency to act.\(^7\)

One who practices Sufism is called a Sufi, a dervish, or a fakir. There are several Sufi brotherhoods or Sufi “orders”, called tariqas, each led by a spiritual shaikh. Sufism swept across the Islamic world as Sufis became the great missionaries and popular preachers of Islam in Asia and Africa.\(^8\)

In his treatise on Sufism, Shaykh Haeri points out, “Whatever its origin, the term Sufism has come to mean those who are interested in inner knowledge, those who are interested in finding a way or practice towards inner awakening and enlightenment.”\(^9\) He also asserts that Sufism began in the first century of Islam despite distortions and misrepresentations of its teachings by Muslim leaders of the day. Sufis believe themselves to be completely orthodox, claiming that the shari’a is the doorway that opens to freedom, the “straight path that leads to life.” Therefore, Sufism while outwardly conforming, is inwardly freeing.\(^10\)

**Women in Sufism**

Giuseppe Scattolin paints a historical picture of women Sufis. As with women in mainstream Islam, he states that there is little official record of Sufi women in the common manuals of Sufism. However, historical sources have preserved a number of names of ascetic and Sufi women who are witnesses of the feminine side of Islamic mysticism. In fact, he reports that Ibn al-Jawzl (d. 1200) has recorded more than two hundred of them. He declares that most of these women lived during the first and second generation of Islam. Names of later Sufi women are rarer. Scattolin questions if this is a sign of the decreasing status of Muslim women over time.\(^11\)

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\(^5\) A Caliph (leader) was appointed following Muhammad’s death. There were four caliphates. The first four caliphs were all companions of the Prophet. The period of Muhammad and their rule became known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs and is regarded in Sunni Islam as the normative period. It has provided the idealized past to which Muslims look back for inspiration and guidance. The next caliph was selected from the Umayyad clan and thus began the Umayyad dynasty. The caliphate became an absolute monarchy.


\(^8\) Esposito, *Islam*, 101.


The story of Rabi’a al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801), the most outstanding and celebrated of Sufi women, is mentioned frequently in historical writings. Rabi’a was a model of piety and love of God. She came from a poor family and was sold as a slave, however, her master freed her when he witnessed the signs of her extraordinary piety and sainthood. Scattolin further reports that she became a perfect ascetic woman, living in extreme poverty and seclusion, completely dedicated to the service of her Lord. “One of her basic thoughts was that God must be worshiped and loved for his own sake, not out of fear of Hell or desire of Paradise.”

During her lifetime, her dwelling became a meeting place for learned scholars.

Not all Sufi women were celibate, though even when in the married state, each devoted themselves to prayer and love of God. Scattolin also mentions that most were endowed with supernatural powers and miracles by which they gained respect and veneration among their own people.

Fatima bint al-ʿAbbas (d. 1324), is another woman deserving special mention. Her biographers refer to her with titles such as shaykha (authority in religion), mudarrisā (teacher in the religious colleges), and faqīhīyya (doctor in Islamic law). Scattolin also mentions that a noted male contemporary was against her preaching and teaching saying it was un-Islamic until Muhammad appeared to him and warned him saying, “Fatima is one of the virtuous women.”

Scattolin offers several general traits that illustrate the roles and experience of these Sufi women saints: extreme asceticism, moving about freely in society, meeting people openly, mystical or pure love of God, and mystical union with a Beloved that was absent, or distant. Celibacy even though not usually praised in Islam, was another characteristic of women saints, one which gave them more freedom than marriage.

According to Leila Ahmed, Sufi views on women, and their rules and practices pertaining to them, differed in important ways from those of the Islamic establishment. Ahmed claims that Sufism implicitly challenged the way establishment Islam conceptualized gender by permitting women to give a central place in their lives to their spiritual vocation. By doing this they affirmed the importance of the spiritual over the biological. Sadly enough, she goes on to relate, “Throughout history it has not been those who have emphasized the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the religion who have held power.”

Although establishment Islam continues to ascribe complementary roles to Muslim men and women rather than an egalitarian status in all areas of life, Leila Ahmed and Giuseppe Scattolin offer renewed encouragement to Muslim women living in this generation. Their writings can serve as a reminder to women to express themselves more fully, especially in a spiritual sense, from the historical example of Sufism.

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12 Ibid. 198/11.
13 Ibid. 198/11.
14 Ibid. 198/12.
15 Leila Ahmed offers a comprehensive description on how the political, religious, and legal authorities in the Abbasid period, heard only the androcentric voice of Islam. They interpreted the religion as intending to institute androcentric laws and an androcentric vision in all Muslim societies over time. She has topics of interest in this area throughout her book (1992).
**Sufism in Bangladesh**

From earlier times Sufism has played, as it does today, an important role in Bangladeshi Islam. David Abecassis contends that the role of the Sufi messengers of Islam—the *pirs*, provides a clue to understanding why Islam appealed to the indigenous peoples of Bengal. The *pirs* came from North India, probably around the eleventh century, into the area that is now Bangladesh, bringing with them Islamic beliefs that had originated in places like Baghdad, Persia, Afghanistan, and North India. Abecassis asserts that these beliefs were more than likely a far cry from what the Prophet Mohammad had intended. “Sufi-saints” were people of considerable personal aura and power. They settled among the people, eventually spreading over all of Bengal. Sufis practiced their power among Hindus and Muslims alike, issuing charms, healing sickness and ever exuding the aura of holy men with direct communication to the All-powerful”.¹⁷

Abdul Karim asserts that the chief contribution of the *Shaikhs*, a term which he uses interchangeably with *pir*, lay in their missionary activities. “They exercised great influence on many different people groupings through their spiritual and moral force.”¹⁸ Because of the harshness of life, the average Bangladeshi is focused primarily on survival. It is not surprising that many turned to the Sufi saints for intervention in the supernatural.

The shrines of Sufis and *pirs* have traditionally been centers for the preaching of Islam. There are hundreds of these shrines in Bangladesh today and people, including university professors, students, civil servants, army officials, journalists and even politicians, visit them to receive the blessing of the saints. The Biswa Zaker Monjil (International Mediation Centre) of Atrashi, Faridpur, is presently the largest Sufi shrine in Bangladesh.

**Popular Islam**

Islam is a religion known for its ability to adapt and assimilate local customs and traditions. Although basic tenets of the faith are adhered to wherever Islam has spread, this has resulted in a local expression of Islam that veers away from a rigid observance of the faith. “Popular Islam” or “folk Islam” as it is also termed, is seen negatively by strict *ulamas* (learned people) as well as modern intellectuals who condemn the practice which they see as a use of magical practices and superstitions.¹⁹

John Voll suggests that one dimension of popular faith is the role of specially respected local holy men. He argues that as communities converted to Islam the functions of the local religious leader were taken over by Muslim guides. He also states that as the immanent aspects of God were stressed, not surprisingly, the explanations tended to take Sufi forms. He also contends that the coming of a “rightly guided leader,” the *Mahdi*, is a major theme in

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popular Islam. The more oppressed a people, the more fervent has been their longing for this restorer of Islam.²⁰

At a practical level, and I rely heavily on his description, Bill Musk offers clear reasons for people turning to popular Islamic practices. He explains that in every monotheistic faith a gap has developed between faith as defined theologically and faith as it finds expressions in the lives of people. He continues by saying that this distancing appears to happen more easily where monotheistic faith is presented in deistic—as opposed to theistic—terms. He reports that the deist tends to see God as responsible for creation but far removed from it (Islam). On the other hand, the theist tends to see God as responsible for creation, and continuing to be involved with it (Christianity). Thus, a deist would think of God as far off and would fill the gap with alternative “beings” to whom they can appeal for help.²¹

Musk also contends that official religion provides a moral and ethical motive for its followers in which clear commands and expectations are expressed by God. These guidelines are codified and protected by the religious community. In contrast, popular religion tends to deal with the problems of everyday life. Disease, flood, barrenness, drought, war and accident will claim its attention, though there are few authoritative texts that relate to these problems. Continuity of tradition is maintained by heritage, whereby a grandmother or grandfather passes on to a younger relative the secrets of her or his expertise.²²

In addition, Musk states that popular religion is not highly institutionalized. The religious masses tend to manifest elements of popular religion in their allegiances according to their needs and customary rites of passage. This contrasts starkly with the relatively small community of official hierarchal specialists, who remain the protectors of the status quo. Authority within the world of folk religion depends on each practitioner’s proven power. “Popular religion is as a result informally organised, localised and closely linked to places or persons possessing intrinsic power.”²³

Musk maintains that those within any faith who live more in the popular expression, and who are normally denounced by the upholders of the orthodox religion, rarely see themselves as deviating from what is seen as substantial by the official faith. Therefore, those following popular Islamic practices would still see themselves as genuine Muslims.²⁴ Contrary to missionaries’ early belief, popular religion is not dying out as Christianity spreads. Tragically, popular beliefs remain hidden from public view—Christianity being merely an overlay to deeply held folk religious practices. “People affirm orthodox theologies, but go to witch doctors, shamans, diviners, and healers during the week, often in secret for fear of the condemnation of church leaders. They are baptized in the church and initiated in traditional rites in the forest.”²⁵

**Popular Islam in Bangladesh**

²⁰ Ibid. p. 20.
²² Ibid. p. 199.
²⁴ Ibid. p. 201.
Having done extensive survey research on the topic, Razia Banu suggests three different types of Islamic belief in Bangladesh; modern, orthodox, and popular. Banu offers that, in Bangladesh, modernist Islam tries to give a rational interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith. Modernists emphasize the dynamic, scientific and progressive nature of Islam. “Modernist Islam envisages a narrowly personal and specific role of religion in life, and stresses self-determination rather than divine will in the affairs of man.”

The orthodox belief, promoting a more literal Islam, requires a more complete, rigid acceptance and adherence to the Qur’an and the Hadith. Unlike a modernist Muslim, an orthodox Muslim would accept Islam as a complete code of life and believe in determination of all events by God’s will. Neither modernists nor orthodox Muslims would compromise on monotheism, a core ideal of Islam, and each belief system would continue to interpret literally the Islamic Confession of Faith, “There is no god but God and Mohammad is His Prophet.” In contrast, according to Banu’s definition, popular, folk, or syncretistic Islam has polytheistic and animistic dimensions. Though a follower of popular Islam would subscribe to the confessional statement about the unity of God and the finality of Mohammad’s prophethood, he/she would in practice acknowledge the sharing of supernatural power of God by the pirs, sacred places, Hindu gods, local deities and spirits by observing rituals and practices meant for cajoling or gratifying these near-godly forces. Banu reports that popular Islam seems to command the allegiance of nearly half of the Muslims in present-day Bangladesh.

**Bangladeshi Women and Popular Islam**

Although Bangladeshis from all walks of life may subscribe to a form of popular Islam, it is especially enticing to women. Since, as Rippin recounts, women have generally been excluded from the outward expressions of Islam, this separation has not resulted in the establishment of rival female institutions in which women perform rituals separately. Rather, in many places in the world, popular or folk Islamic practices often associated with mysticism and saint worship, have emerged. These activities would be outside the male dominated institutionalized forms of Islam. As the story of rural Muslim women in Bangladesh unfolds, a picture of their involvement with folk Islamic practices will emerge.

**Muslim Women: Status and Role within Islam**

During the discussion on rural women in Bangladesh, one must keep in mind that lines between religious and social status and role are fuzzy and overlapping. This is especially true in a country that views life from a holistic perspective.

For the most part, women in Bangladesh are not allowed to participate fully in the

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27 Ibid. p. 54.
28 Ibid. p. 54.
29 Ibid. p. 55.
Muslim *Ummah* (brotherhood, community) in public festivals or prayer in the mosque. Although the literacy rate is rising dramatically, presently fifty-nine percent of the population are literate. There is gender disparity as the literacy rate for men is about sixty-three percent while it is fifty-six percent for females.\(^{31}\) Most rural women are still not functionally able to read. As Islam is a religion of the “Book,” this means they are not privy to the discussions of the men. If they have memorized portions of the Qur’an, it would be done using Arabic, a language most do not understand.

Jitka Kotolova, after doing anthropological research in a rural area of Bangladesh, points out that since many village women are illiterate they remain unaware of the Hindu-Muslim syncretism that has been pervasive in the past and which is still a part of daily practice. She found that only a few women could recite the five pillars of Islam. The fatalistic belief of the villagers became evident in her research. “Allah’s will is inescapable—each person’s destiny is inscribed on the forehead at the time of birth. Salvation is attained by gaining merit through the practice of the five pillars (to outweigh the penalty of sin)”.\(^{32}\) She also maintains that religious faith is interpreted by the men from the local madrassa and nearby mosque. Kotalova reports that women have no access to these places.

Most women will know little about the theology of the Qur’an, however, they are well informed on the subject of judgement. They know their deeds will be recorded and weighed and they understand the consequences of a heavy accumulation of evil works—banishment to hell. They are also aware that a narrow bridge suspended over hell must be crossed, a bridge “sharper than a sword and finer than a hair.” As evidenced by this *gazal*\(^{33}\) sung for me by Nesa, a rural village informant, these beliefs are close to the hearts of Bangladeshi women.

Oh! Muslims please listen to a story
When the Prophet Hazat Muhammad was in his mother’s womb he was crying for his community.
Bibi Fatema cried in her *sezda* prayer having bowed and kept her forehead on the ground. She said, “Oh! Allah, please forgive your follower’s sin. Having cried and cried, and making his hands and feet red, the Prophet will go to the doomsday meeting by running.
The road of Pul Cherat (a bridge’s name—the bridge separating earth from hell) will be 30,000 miles long.
Oh! Allah, the road is narrower than hair and sharper than a sword.
Sinner servants would cross this shrine into hell.
The Prophet died on 12\(^{th}\) Rabi-ul-awal month, please listen to that date. When he was put into a burial cloth after his death, the cloth on his mouth trembled.
Companions of the Prophet, please open your ears and listen.
The Prophet cried for his followers.
Alas! How my followers are behaving.
The Prophet died but he did not forget his followers.

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\(^{33}\) A religious song or lyric sung usually by Sufis.
All brothers and sisters, all together having raised our hands we pray to the court of God.

When asked what this song means to her and why she sings it to her grandchildren, Nesa replied that when she thinks about Allah’s instructions and how we should follow his commands to live in this world, then she sings the *gazal* to her children.34

While Muslim women have an amazing amount of influence over many areas of family life, especially as they grow older, they are still in a subservient role in a strongly male dominated society. This is particularly true of village women. Men’s opinion of women’s value and abilities remains low. I have heard it said more than once, “She is too stupid to cook rice, how can she understand anything else?” Words such as “liberalism” or “fundamentalism” would be meaningless to these women—they would not be aware of the vigorous debate over the status and role of women taking place today.35 This does not mean they regard their spiritual lives as unimportant, on the contrary, one study suggests that in Bangladesh around half of all women claim to pray five times a day.36

**Rural Muslim Women and Popular Islam**

Like their city counterparts, though on a lesser scale, rural Muslim women have been touched by modernism. Their children are becoming more educated—some of them going back and forth to the city for jobs and education. Conveniences such as electricity, medical care, and transportation services are improving. However, in the religious expression of their daily lives, especially in childbirth and the rites associated with it, according to Therese Blanchet, little has changed. Many of the *jinn* and *pori* (good or evil spirits) are related to fertility rites and therefore are in the domain of women. “These songs and rituals are not Islamic but since we cannot stop women who attach meaning and importance to these things, we just pretend to ignore them and stay a little distance away, explained a madrassa-educated informant.”37

I was personally exposed to these same folk Islamic beliefs while doing research in southern Bangladesh.38 Women reported to me that diarrhea was often caused by *bhut, jinn* or *pori*. When that was the case, according to them, medical help was not considered. Rather,

34 Tahurunnesa Begum, Personal Interview with author, April 10, 2000.
35 Leila Ahmed, (1992); Bodman, Herbert L and Tohidi (1998); Hijab (1998); Islam (2000); Mernissi (1991, 1993); Monsoor (1999); and Stowasser (1994), have introduced me to the Muslim feminist debate. While highly informative, this discussion is not pertinent to research on rural Muslim women in Bangladesh. This conversation carries on currently in heated debate.
they would consult with a fakir.39 He might have them dust the child with leaves from a particular plant and will also usually give a tabij40 (amulet) for the child to wear.

I was informed that there are certain times of day it is inauspicious to go outside alone: in early morning, at noon, dusk and at midnight. This includes all people but especially women. In addition, there are places that are not safe to be during these times of day: the edge of a pond, under the eve of the house, or in the doorway of the house. According to the women, spirits are particularly active at these times and in these places.

Nesa told of an incident where two of the jinn or pori studied in a madrassa (Islamic school). As per her story, these were very beautiful young girls. When the teacher asked them their father’s name they did not reply. One day the teacher followed them and saw them fly away. Once they knew they had been recognized, they did not come back to school again. With the enthusiasm they related these incidents, it was clearly apparent that women believe in these spirits even though, in the beginning, they wanted me to believe they were too sophisticated to do so. This information was corroborated by many women through other interviews and in focus groups.

Tragically, my husband and I had a personal experience with this popular belief system while working in a health and development project. On one occasion, a young woman came to the clinic for a pre-natal check-up. It was discovered that she was going to have twins and for that reason she was strongly advised to come to the hospital at the time of delivery. A few months later we heard that this young mother-to-be had died in childbirth although the twins had survived. We learned that she was not brought to the hospital because it was believed that the complications were caused by evil spirits. For that reason, the family knew there was nothing that could have been done for her in the hospital.

Because of their exclusion from public expression of religious faith, women are forced to look elsewhere to express their spirituality—the ready availability of the ancient traditions is close at hand. Kotalova offers an interesting observation. She alleges that while men provide the family with material, moral, and spiritual needs from outside the parameters of the home, women’s role is to feed and protect the weak and to heal the sick. This the wives carry out in the home.

However, it is by a woman’s association with the supernatural realm that an increase of what has been provided by the householder, can be attained. The nature of a married woman’s contacts with the supernatural vary from that of men. Because the mosque is regarded as a male precinct from which mature women are strictly excluded, the point from which housewives communicate with Allah is quite circumscribed. On the other hand, the array of supernatural powers the wives invoke and elaborate on is much wider.” 41

Integration

39 A fakir is a Muslim man that uses various religious rituals to heal, however, he is not a Muslim cleric.
40 A tabij or amulet is a small led cylinder with Qur’anic verses inside and affixed to the person with a black string (which may have been placed in “holy” water and breathed on by the fakir).
41 Kotolova, Belonging to Others, 199.
Godly women have held a variety of official positions throughout history. Early Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic records reveal that women, though in lesser numbers than men, have had significant roles within these two respective religious traditions. Historically, as in many traditional societies today, the male was the head of the extended family and the family line was carried on through the male. A female was under her father’s authority until she married at which time she became subject to the male head of her husband’s family. Legally, women were considered property. A woman had few rights regarding her children and tended to exert influence through her husband or oftentimes through trickery or subterfuge. Laws of ritual purity stigmatized women especially during periods of menstruation or childbirth. Nevertheless, despite her second-class status, from time to time women acted with considerable initiative. There is record of many women stepping outside their domestic roles to play a part in Israelite society. The wise woman of Tekoa persuades David of his sin, and Miriam, Deborah, and Hulda were prophetesses with considerable political power. In addition, Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that women did not have to choose between marriage and being a prophetess for Hulda and Deborah were clearly married. It would seem that when God called a woman with special gifts or character, even during this early time, Israelite society allowed her to function in an atypical role.

Socially and religiously, Muslim women in South Asia find themselves in similar situations to the women mentioned above—having limited status and role in comparison to men. Nevertheless, though there is an overall impression of the submission of women in the Qur’an, there is precedent within Islamic history of a variety of roles for women. Khadija bint Khuwaylid, many years older than Muhammad and a business partner, was his first wife. She was a woman full of initiative in public and private life and strongly supported Muhammad as he began to receive his revelations from God. The Qur’an basically enjoins mutual respect and value of humankind regardless of gender or social situation. Within Sufism, this more essential Qur’anic attitude has prevailed.

Women in the New Testament and in the early Christian church also had high status and significant roles. Jesus reveals this in his “upside down kingdom” attitude toward women. Contesting the cultural norms of his day, he permitted Mary to sit at his feet—a concept in biblical times that connotes being a disciple. He also acknowledged women’s ability to understand spiritual truth, exemplified in Martha recognizing him as Isa Mashi. Other verses show women as being prophets, apostles, businesswomen, teachers, witnesses and leaders of house churches.

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42 Sarah, Genesis 16:5; 21:10.
43 Rebekah, Genesis 27; Rachel, Genesis 31.
44 Shunnamite woman, II Kings 4:8-17; Abigail, I Samuel 25.
Conclusion

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”

Islam in South Asia has been highly shaped by Sufism. Presently, there is a fast-growing Sufi-influenced Jamaat from a Muslim background in this area. Within the Jamaat are many women with hearts that are longing to follow God, to call him “Beloved.” They are eager to serve him in a variety of capacities. Therefore, the precedence of significant public roles for women within Sufism and historical Christianity—including Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching in the New Testament—has great implication for women in the global church in general and the church in South Asia in particular. In addition, Sufism models relationship, intimacy, and an inner life of piety and relationship, unknown for the most part, in orthodox Islam. This is a natural bridge/link to understanding how close and intimate a relationship the Savior longs to have with them. Unlike in Sufism, women will discover the path for a true and meaningful relationship with their Heavenly Father. Additionally, the role models mentioned above serve as a reminder that now, as in the past, women are called and appointed by God to take up public spiritual and religious vocations.

I believe the journey towards a deep relationship with Isa Mashi, begins at birth. All of life formation contributes to how the discipleship process goes forward. In years of experience working in health and development projects, I witnessed firsthand, women growing in confidence and inner strength as they participated in community activities. As discipleship is approached in a holistic manner: life experience; secular and religious education; socio-religious context; including encouragement from the historical past – a maturing worldview will prepare her for stepping with confidence into the future. Learning of the expanded roles of women Sufi saints, leading them to God-inspired stories of women in the Old and New Testaments, opens vistas of possibilities for her as she walks in personal relationship with Isa. I contend that the physical and spiritual growth of the Muslim background Jamaat, depends on giving women believers from a Muslim background appropriate recognition, teaching and authority. We have seen the importance of the woman’s involvement in the supernatural. Without her full participation, gaps between the formal and informal expression of everyday faith will be rife. The precedent has been set for involving women in all areas of participation in the church. However, they need advocates within the believing community that will work to release them from cultural and religious stereotypes that have limited their spiritual role. Will you be one of those advocates?

50 Psalm 42:1
Bibliography


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