

Editorial

Weddings, birthday parties, baby showers, graduation ceremonies, funerals, holidays and holy days... The moments of commemoration, celebration, ritual and remembrance, are the memorable moments of life. We value them not only for the special occasions that they mark, but also for the wider life developments which they symbolise. Weddings are beautiful events, but they are a symbol of a marriage and the beginning of a life between two people. Graduation ceremonies are proud events, but they represent the years of hard work and intensive learning which led to that moment. Funerals are often painful, but they are about remembering the entirety of a person's life and an expression of how they will be missed.

Women across the world often play a particularly central role in creating and maintaining rites and rituals, especially within their families. We can see examples across many cultures and many communities of women's leadership in rites and rituals. They may do the inviting, the cooking, or the decorating for a special affair. They often are the ones who make sure the family is together at the special occasions.

In my doctoral research, studying Arabs of a Muslim background who chose to follow a Christian faith, it often seemed that the most significant moment in their faith journey was not that in which they made a decision to follow Christ or become Christian, but rather the moment they made a declaration of that decision. For many people, baptism may not have been the moment their heart changed but it was the moment in which it was solidified, confirmed and became a point of no return. For others, it was the difficult day on which they "came out" to their families and embraced the risk of rejection this would entail.

Baptism is a particularly poignant example of a Christian rite of passage, and there have been centuries of debate as to what it means, how it should be done, and even whether a person could truly be "saved" if they passed on before being baptised. In Christianity, most of us take this embodiment of faith in the physical seriously, which is why most churches which encourage infant baptism also ask that young community members take a vow on their day of first communion or otherwise profess their faith publicly.

This tells us something about Christianity, and the way in which Christians understand faith. The importance of profession of faith, or confession, is often linked to verses like Philippians 2:10-11: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." One cannot just somehow automatically become a Christian: confession matters. Even if in a church where infant baptism is considered enough, that ritual still exists and reminds the Christian community that the declaration of faith matters.

But it also tells us something about culture, both denominational culture and ethno-geographic culture. Different church traditions offer different guidelines for how one is to profess faith, with expectations about questions such as ideal age of profession, how much water should be used, and who should stand in solidarity with the new congregant. The ritual also plays out

differently in different cultures. While in some Latin American countries, a young teenage woman saying first communion may wear a white dress, in England I recently attended a baptism event where the new congregants, most of whom were in their twenties and thirties, were wearing T-shirts with the church's motto printed on it.

This webzine explores how women in the Muslim world engage in rituals and rites of passage from a few different angles. The first two articles explore rituals in Muslim communities which may have a religious feel, but in fact express an interwoven thread of faith, history, health concerns and culture. Linda Kay's article, "Rites and Rituals: A Window into the Worldview of Women" explores the Folk Islamic rituals in a Sundanese Indonesian community related to birthing and care for young mothers. These practices, which bring together traditional medicine and spiritual beliefs, are deeply imbued with faith, are shaped around the pregnancy cycle and women's health needs, and are a means by which families express the various emotions surrounding the emerging life of a new child. Elizabeth Lee and Nur Han's article, "An Exploration of the Spiritual Roles of a Woman in the Central Asian Family: The 'Emitting the Fragrance' Rite", similarly explores the link between culture and faith through a weekly ritual led by many Central Asian women. The 'emitting the fragrance' rite is practiced by many Muslim women and is an expression of respect for ancestors as well as a part of the weekly routine of their families, but the authors suggest that it can be an expression of Christian faith as well. Emitting the fragrance is deeply interwoven into Central Asian culture, and is a means by which many women are able to support their families.

Other rites and rituals are shaped more distinctly around religion and beliefs. Brooklyn Qiao's reflection, "Lily: One Hui Woman's Journey to New Life" considers the various considerations that a Hui woman from China has taken in the process of deciding how to integrate the rites and rituals of her family and community with a process of exploring the Bible and growing community with Christians. Similar to Elizabeth and Nur's article, the story of Lily illustrates the complexity of making decisions about rituals and traditions while trying to remain true to her faith. Finally, Louise Simon's piece provides a thoughtful consideration of arguably the most visible and distinctly religious rite of passage undertaken by many Muslim women: that of taking on the hijab, or veiling. She considers the reasons why women choose to veil, the interplay of cultural, religious and personal motivations for veiling, and in so doing suggests that this ritual, known to be distinctly religious, is also a reflection of faith, orthodoxy, culture and personal identity.

Together, these articles create a compelling pictures of both commonality and diversity among Muslim women around the world when it comes to rites and rituals. We see commonality in the experience of womanhood, in the way women see themselves as keeping their families together, maintaining honour and dignity, and ensuring that, through the practice of a range of rites and traditions, meaningful messages are passed from generation to generation. But we see diversity in Islam itself, because the variety of rituals practiced and described, and the various ways in which they are practiced and described, present an array of cultural expression which illustrates the importance of both honouring tradition and investing in understanding the traditions we are honouring.

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