God and Women:

Believing and belonging in a relationally connective world

Abstract

Cultural modes of knowing inform women's connection with God. Whereas individualistic cultures, mostly attributed to western nations, valorise the individual over the community, in collectivist cultures the individual is always a set of relationships. The individual is socialised into social systems that value linkage, embedded in relational matrices. They need the other to complete self. Using the work of Suad Joseph[81] on relational connectivity, this paper suggests that for Christian women who share friendships or acquaintance with women living under Islam there are alternative understandings of relationship through which to consider Muslim women's connection with God. It examines how relational connectivity can give fresh insights in the ways Muslim women search for and respond to God.

Collective relationships are based on love and nurture, and paradoxically power and violence. Connectivity internalises demands of compliance. How do these lived realities inform an understanding of women's view of and connection to God?

How do women living under Islam relate to God? As a Christian woman who views and understands her religious texts through her own modes of knowing, some would say

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[81] Suad Joseph is an anthropologist whose research has focussed on relationships, including those between religion and politics, family and the state, gender, and citizenship. She has done extensive work on culturally specific notions of selfhood. Her research focus is the Middle East with specific work in Lebanon.

(individualistic) cultural and worldview windows, it is easy to read the Qur'an and try to understand the ways women living under Islam view, experience and relate to God from that perspective. Orthodox Islamic theologies of God, man, and their relationship, when viewed through my worldview lens, seem to lack a personal relationship, be focussed on behaviours, be ritualistic and formulaic, and based on a God who is distant and unknowable.

In my conversations, and in conversations reported by other women, our women friends from within Islam often speak in relational terms. But, those who consider Islam through the lens of orthodoxy, based on the written rational word, deny that our friends can be speaking a language of relationality when they talk about God. The lived reality of an individualistic way of knowing and social organisation valorises the individual. I, the individual, am a complete unit, establishing relationships, making connections, taking decisions independently. There are rights and responsibilities associated with being an individual, but my personal identity tends to be based on me, my personal story, accomplishments, relationships, and the way I choose to manage them.

The core of the issue is that in individualist cultures ties between individuals are loose. In practice this means that everyone is expected to look after her/himself and her/his immediate family. In collectivist ways of organising, people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts, and grandparents) that continue to provide for and protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. They form their in-group as an opposition to the other (Hoefstede, 2011, p. 11).

Cultural ways of organising shape roles and responsibilities in relationships. Exploring women's understanding, experience, knowledge of, and relational connection

with God through these ways of knowing that inform their daily lives may provide insights into their religious life and experience of God.

On the basis that social realities and religious ideas are linked in a 'mutually affective relationship' (Stowasser, 1994, p. 4), it is widely accepted that cultural beliefs and practices influence religious interpretation in Islam (Barlas, 2002; Duderija, 2011; Hidayatullah, 2014; Lamptey, 2018; Wadud, 2006). Thus it has been observed that between the 9th-14th centuries "Islamic law and traditions had formulated a theological/legal paradigm that enshrined cultural assumptions about gender, women and institutionalised structures governing male-female relations which mirrored the social reality and practices of the post-conquest, acculturated Islamic world (Stowasser, 1994, p. 7)". So even if "a culture's idea of divinity is central not only to that culture's religious life but also to its social, political, familial institutions and relationships, (quoting Anne McGrew Bennet, Barlas, 2002, p. 94)", we need to also consider the way the culture's religious, social, political and familial institutions and relationships shape the community's ideas of divinity.

Over the last two or more decades, Muslim women's desire to live as true Muslims has become more visible, providing the basis for a wide range of research (Buergener, n.d.; Dale, 2016; Mahmood, 2012). This research has demonstrated that pious women give expression to their lived faith in visible ways; that through the embodiment of their religious traditions they transmit and reproduce faith, contextualising its normative practices as part of their daily social reality.

This article builds from that excellent work, asking how social contexts shape women's ways of knowing God, inform their identity in relation to God, and create their sense of belonging. It draws on the outstanding work of Suad Joseph who has helped me take fresh view of life, as I have observed it, through the lens of relationships,

what she calls 'relational connectivity'. She has called me to see something more profound in the ways women negotiate their daily lives. She talks of how forms of relationality are highly valued and often institutionally supported (Joseph, 1999c, p. 10). The individual is socialised into familial and social systems that value linkage. They are embedded into relational matrices, needing the other to complete self.

Using this work on relational connectivity, and how it informs identity and belonging for many women who live under Islam, this paper seeks to offer a fresh alternative to the way we explore Muslim women's connection with God. How might their searching for and responding to God be understood when examined through relational connectivity?

According to Joseph, collective relationships are based on love and nurture and, paradoxically, power and violence (Joseph, 1994). While connectivity is an expression of love, it is also intimately and intrinsically linked to the reproduction of power within those relationships. How might this way of viewing the connection of relationships help us consider the way Muslim women conceptualise and practice their connection with God. In light of their desire to live as true Muslims, can we apply learning from Joseph's work on relational connectivity for insight into this area of religious life and experience?

In the first section we will explore relational connectivity, building a foundational understanding of self, identity and belonging. We will go on to examine conceptualisations of God within this paradigm, seeking to see how this social structuring might inform understanding of the nature and being of God. Where does God fit into a relationally connected world? What roles within such a world might inform the way women believe in and connect to God? We move on to consider religious practice, that is the behaviours of belonging when women give faithful expression to a

relationally connective engagement with God. We ask how this becomes part of women's understanding of self, and the forming of belonging and identity. What are the practices of connecting that inform negotiations with religious identity and practices and inform women's everyday lives? How should or could we interpret these as we think of how women relate to God? We will conclude by asking what some possible implications for our journeying with and among our Muslim friends might be.

Living in a relationally connective world

> *"...One never is just a single person. One always is already a set of relationships, multiple intersections of connectivity. It is the relationships that position a person for access, rights, privileges, resources. It is the relationships that shape selfhood and identity. (Joseph, 1999b, p. 73)."*

Brenda[82] was a student where I was working in South Asia. Her parents lived several hours drive from the city where she was in college so her uncle, her father's brother, was her local guardian. Brenda pushed the rules often, and on occasions found herself in trouble with the college and hostel authorities. At one time she was asked to leave the hostels after a particular breach of rules. It was then that I learned this was not just about Brenda. I found myself navigating the impact of this decision to expel her because of all those connected to her: its impact for her sister's marriage, her brother's study and future marriage options, her mother's reputation as a doctor, and much more. Brenda's behaviour, and the consequences applied to her, an individual,

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[82] Name has been changed.

were not about her alone. I had not understood that there were networked connections that impacted a network of relationships.

When I was living in a large city in the Middle East, my friendship with one woman drew me into her broader connections. That friendship connected me relationally with family: I often ate with them, attended events with them, became part of their extended family network. Suddenly who I was became attached to those relationships in connected parts of the community. I learned in both this situation, as well as in South Asia, that belonging opened doors of protection and provision. It gave me responsibilities that were about more than me as an individual, that there were choices that were no longer mine to make alone.

> *Connectivity is about seeing self as part of the other. It joins lives in ways that make separation destructive because it blends autonomy and control. Connectivity can be thought of as the "...psychodymanic processes by which one person comes to see himself or herself as part of another. Boundaries between persons are relatively fluid so that each needs the other to complete the sense of selfhood. One's sense of self is intimately linked with the self of another so that the security, identity, integrity, dignity, and self-worth of one is tied to the actions of the other... They are open to and require the involvement of others in shaping their emotions, desires, attitudes, and identities ... (Joseph, 1999a, p. 122)."*

Connectivity is dynamic. It is an active process, not a static state of being. It helps explain the dynamic in cultures where family and community is esteemed over and above the individual.

Relationally connective social organisation means the individual is not separated or autonomous. Selfhood is formed in the connectivity of relationships in family and the community. "Personhood is understood in terms of relationship woven into one's sense of self, identity, and place in the world. One is never without family, without relationships, outside the social body. The self is not sealed within boundaries separating self from others. To be whole is to be part of, related, connected… Relationships may change, break, mend. The boundaries and sense of self change, break and mend. One's self is always 'in relationship to' (Joseph, 1999b, p. 54)."
With this deep relational connectivity comes belonging, the being part of, with both its privileges and responsibilities. Belonging through connectivity means provision and protection is provided as part of the whole, through claims on the other and claims from the other on the individual. Relationships, with family and friends, with the community, are the boundaries that hedge in and protect negotiations around belonging. The individual belongs, not because they are an unrelated individual who has earned their place; they belong because self is linked to others, dependent on others, finds its wholeness in the networks of relational connectivity.

As one expression of the social structures of the community, belonging situates each person according to their social and economic location on 'grids of power relations in society'; it situates the self positionally along the axis of power (Yuval Davis, 2006, p. 199). The individual does not exist outside of relationship. They are embedded in relational matrices, complex interconnected relationships that include not simply their direct relationships but also the relationships of others in their family and community.

These relationships are asymmetrical. They rely on a strong hierarchical structure where roles are known, learned, and practiced. They are also patriarchal,

relying on the way women and men have been socialised into their different roles to reproduce traditional social structures. Joseph explains this with the example of how sibling relationships provide the space where males and females are trained to understand society's view of masculinity and femininity, dominance and submission (Joseph, 1999a, p. 123).

Those defined roles carry within them understandings and practical expressions of love, and violence. Certain roles carry responsibilities in relational connectivity to enact control, at times through violence, although such violence is seen as an expression of love. Love and violence can be two sides of the same coin in enacting connective relationships. Running through these expressions of love and violence are honour and shame. When one's own sense of self and belonging is deeply connected to the other, controlling behaviour for family or community honour is considered an act of love. In this light, domination, knowing how to control and be controlled, becomes an outworking of patriarchal connectivity in society. Love/nurturance and power/violence are, therefore, part of patriarchal connectivity dynamics expressed at multiple levels of connection.

With asymmetry comes vulnerabilities, vulnerabilities that most often have the greatest impact on women. These structural vulnerabilities are seen in the constant interplay between the dynamics of love and power in relational connectivity. Joseph argues that love and power, including violence are understood expressions of the accepted roles forged in relationally connective social organisation.

At the same time, rights and responsibilities are structured within a framework of patronage. Roles make demands on all. Those with power, who exert control, carry responsibility to provide for and protect, to respond to the claims made upon them. Power and control, love, and nurture, are linked in the roles of patronage. Not only

must those with power and control fulfil their responsibilities for the welfare of their family or community, but their actions must be reciprocated with submission and honour. Patronage gives a language for understanding the tension in these apparent opposites of love and violence, so often at play in relationally connective structures.

How could understanding this social structuring help us explore how Muslim women experience the nature and being of God? Where does God fit into a relationally connected world? What roles within such a world might inform the way women foster belief in/knowing God?

Ways of 'knowing' God in a relationally connective world

Knowable or unknowable? This question about God is often the debated starting point for many conversations with our Muslim friends, and yet it seems that many times we speak at cross-purposes. For Jesus followers, from individualistic cultures in particular, the ideal of knowing and being known by God is fundamentally about the individual relationship and those experiences of a faith walk that demonstrate individual personal intimacy with God. In short, we (usually) imagine knowing God through the lens of individuality.

Orthodox Islam has been understood to explain God in terms of otherness, and the human connection with him through the language of submission and faithful practices. A relationship with God is unfathomable. It finds expression in belonging and living honourably as part of the *ummah*, the community of God's people. At the same time, Muslim friends speak of knowing God, of connecting and communicating with him. Their use of relational words gives the appearance of a clash between religious experience and orthodox teaching. How could applying the lens of relational connectivity begin to shed some light on this paradox?

> *'And to Allah belong the best names, so invoke Him by them..'* (<u>Qur'an</u> *7:180*).

> *'He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the best names.'* (<u>Qur'an</u> *59:24*).

A number of *ahadith* then speak of there being ninety-nine names of God. Within those names there appears to be polarities in the nature of God. *Al-mu'izz*, the honourer/bestower and *al-muzil*, the dishonourer/humiliator are just one example. As with love and violence together being part of relational expressions of connectivity, as noted above, the juxtaposition of these apparent polarities in the nature of God articulates an inherent tension. This is a tension that does not cancel the other out, rather it is negotiated in the performance of defined role as an expression of connective relationships. God enacts his divine role, unquestioned by his followers, because this is his defined responsibility in the relationship.

God is expected to protect and provide in response to the honourable submission of his followers. Many of our Muslim sisters find it incongruous to conceive of God excluding them as deficient, as suggested by some interpretations in Islam, for this very reason: He must act in accordance with his revealed role (Barlas, 2002; Lamptey, 2018; Lamrabet, 2018; Wadud, 2006). That God is utterly just, *al-'adl*, means he is always just and fair, he does not oppress. It is this understanding of the nature of God that is core to the new generation of women interpreters of the *Qur'an* opposing interpretations that treat women unequally. Jerusha Tanner Lamptey puts it this way:

> *"In early Islamic egalitarian interpretations of the Qur'an... [t]he essential core of the Qur'an is assessed to be egalitarian and even "antipatriarchal." Nonegalitarian interpretations, practices, and laws are*

> *therefore illegitimate divergences from or corruptions of this*
> *authoritative and divine core (Lamptey, 2018, p. 44)."*

Women within the Sufi tradition characterise their connection with God "by intimacy, closeness, love, and mutuality, all of which contribute toward a nourishing theology, a theology which provides the ontological soil to nurture and develop a Muslim feminist ethics of relationality and radical interdependence (Shaikh, 2019)." Relational connectivity is at the heart of Sufi expressions, as stated here:

> *"we encounter a God who desires and loves to be known, who experiences*
> *anguish without creation, and whose creative process is captured through*
> *images of pregnancy, labor, and mothering. These metaphors invoke a*
> *vital aspect of deep connection, interiority, and nurture between God and*
> *humanity (Shaikh, 2019)."*

This is the language of relational connectivity, of organising and ordering relationship with God in accordance with roles and expectations that are defined. Relational connectivity includes the emotion of relationship but is much more, it is also the belonging and identity of community enacted in the everyday through detailed roles.

In a relationally connective world then, the idea of connecting with God through submission is the fullest expression of negotiating the relationship. Accepting what God gives, what 'comes' from him, is evidence of love and honour being expressed to him and acknowledges him enacting his role. When one of the students was killed, and I found myself dealing with the family, their acceptance of what had happened I quickly labelled as fatalistic. After all, being a passenger riding side-saddle on the bike, without a helmet and then saying 'as God wills', seemed defenceless fatalism. I look

back now and can see how this was an expression of submission according to roles, even when love and violence seemed juxtaposed in these tragic incidents.

The relationship is more than submission, and the fulfilling of roles. To live as true Muslims, to live faithfully, women need God to train them, that is also a part of him fulfilling his role. Belonging and identity, becoming the truest expression they can of themselves as faithful Muslims, requires the other, God, to involve himself in their lives. Research among Muslim women has demonstrated their desire to live faithfully, truly, to fulfil their role in relation to God (Buergener, n.d.; Dale, 2016; Mahmood, 2012). Women want to see their faith having a direct impact on their daily lives. This has been described as a

> *"shift from tradition as the ignorant tradition of religious customs to a life shaped by informed religious practice (Buergener, n.d., p. 127)."*

Recognising and accepting women's agency in their relationally connective embrace of God requires an acceptance that outward practices, such as the veil and performance of religious rituals, are 'modalities of action'. It moves beyond a view of agency as resistance and brings into focus the kind of relationship established between women and God.

> *"... [A]ction does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them (Mahmood, 2012, p. 157)."*

Women accepting their roles toward God in this relationally connective structure, is not fatalistic submission, rather, as Mahmoud argues, is an active pursuit of connectivity.

Relational connectivity draws our attention to an understanding of God that holds paradoxes together as part of defined roles and relationships. Knowing God,

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when explored through this framing, is an active pursuit of faithfulness in roles. It is where love is more than an emotional connection. Therefore, how can we reimagine the religious practices of women and see them as giving expression to relationship and connection with God?

The role of religious practices in a relationally connective world

In the story of a brother and sister, in the research of Suad Joseph, certain behaviours, dress, and practices become the embodiment of their relational connectivity. What is interesting is the space these behaviours, dress and practices create for navigating the relationship and giving full expression to the paradoxes within the relationship. It seems to create spaces to practice the role and bring those roles to maturity as members of the family and the wider community (Joseph, 1999a). Saba Mahmood provides a helpful framework from which to allow the external expressions of religious life to speak. She calls for understanding 'bodily practices' as

"a symbolic act [that] presumes a different relationship between the subject's exteriority and interiority... (Mahmood, 2012, p. xi)".

This, I consider, is an exhortation to look for how behaviours, practices and dress connect beliefs in a relational connective world. In harmony with Suad Joseph's work, it helps identify the creation of performative spaces that nurture growth and maturity.

To explore the religious practices in which Muslim women embody piety as an expression of their relational connectivity with God we need to move away from regarding religious life at its core as the affirmation of a set of beliefs that require individual assent and response. In the relationship between practice and inward belief, while the two are not inseparable, we might also see that

"belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them (Mahmood, 2012, p. xv)."

How does this help us ask different questions about veiling and other forms of dress, prayer, fasting, and even the activism of Muslim women in order to hear their expressions of knowing God? Arguments around the veil, for example, often centre around whether it is an essential practice of faith or a symbolic, even cultural, identifier of religion. If we move beyond this bifurcation argument, what do we hear of women giving voice to their understanding of and connection with God?

Elisabeth Buergener noted in her research that Muslim women assumed that she was on her way to becoming a true Muslim when they saw her wearing *hijab* when she visited the mosque (Buergener, n.d., p. 125). Wearing the veil often has different phases. Women might be required to wear it by family or the community when they reach the age of puberty. Some go on to make a choice to reject wearing it later but will then return to wearing it as their religious journey and their dress practices coalesce. Research into the piety movements has documented women's articulation of this journey:

"the main change that happened... [was]... a shift from tradition as the ignorant imitation of religious customs to a life shaped by informed religious practice: 'I was a traditional Muslim. Then I became a knowledgeable Muslim' (Buergener, n.d., p. 127)."

Prayer also shapes women's perceptions of God (Dale, 2016, p. 193).

"Dhikr prayers show Muslim women's yearning for a God who will offer refuge and safety in the precariousness of their lives, and also their felt need for Divine forgiveness. Dhikr prayers express hope that God will

offer healing, protection, beneficence, hearing and answering their
prayers (Dale, 2018)."

These invocations call on God to act in accordance with his role as a refuge, protector, provider, healer.

In light of Joseph's research, we may consider whether Muslim women are socialised into their roles as part of the Muslim community through the practices of their religion. Taught the religious practices of daily prayers, dress, submission, and fulfilling the five pillars from a young age, women are expected to mature in their religious life through these ongoing practices, overseen by other members of the family, the community and the *ummah*.

This socialisation does not preclude space for resistance. This resistance is not necessarily to the basic premise of the of the relationship with God, it is usually around whether the woman is acting appropriately, in accordance with the basic premises of the relationship. The basic premise acknowledges and accepts asymmetry in the connection with God, the love and power/violence dynamic. Resistance does not always mean challenging the right to authority over, nor, what may seem to us, to be a fatalistic acceptance of divine power and even violence. Many of the young women at the College where I was working in South Asia had a small space of time and geography for resistance. Some of them gave full expression to that. They embodied that resistance in their dress, or even in pursuing behaviours that were noncompliant with honour in the religious community's life.

Honour is both cultural and religious. It is individual behaviour reflecting on/in the community. The connective identities of women are linked to the community's honour. It is in the community that we see behaviours judged as appropriate, or otherwise. Whereas we might try to link those behaviours to how they reflect on the

individual's relationship with God, it is in the community that relational connectivity with God is worked out. Maturity in connecting with God is expressed in relational connection within the community.

Religious practices, it seems, give expression to both inner life, being a true Muslim, as well as community, the location of lived faith and therefore expression of that individual relationship with God. These are behaviours of belonging to God which must be seen in belonging in the community. Constructions of belonging link individual and collective behaviour. A dynamic process, belonging is

> *"not just about social locations and constructions of individual and collective identities and attachments but also about the ways these are valued and judged. Closely related to this are specific attitudes and ideologies concerning where and how identity and categorical boundaries are being/should be drawn, in more or less exclusionary ways, in more or less permeable ways (Yuval Davis, 2006, p. 203)."*

It may be helpful to explore women's connection with God as a practice of the dynamic of constructing belonging. A woman who does not belong in a community is seen as unprotected, exposed.

In examining the religious practices of Muslim women, we have identified the way the dynamic of relational connectivity may give fresh scope to reconsider how such practices are an expression of connection to God. It calls for reimagining practices, to move beyond viewing them as an expression of inner life to also consider how practices create inner life. It also calls us to situate understanding connection with God as a communal connection, not so much individual.

If we do that, what can we learn in our connections with Muslim women; for understanding their relationship with God and the invitation God gives to relationship

with himself? How should we live our faith as we engage into a relationally connective social structuring?

Meeting our Muslim women friends in a relationally connective world

As we connect with the Muslim women where we live, we are confronted by the need to reimagine relationship. For many of us from strongly individualistic ways of social organisation reframing modes of relating around the navigation of asymmetry in relationships is challenging. This asymmetry includes defined roles that are acted out as part of a community that understands and accepts these inherent inequalities. We can draw lines of understanding from what we see lived out in the community to the way women navigate their relationship with God.

Reframing the way connection with God is expressed as an outworking of roles that are defined by this asymmetry in the organisation of social structures calls for fresh views of who God is as we connect with our Muslim women friends. The *Qur'an* and *ahadith* speak to the nature of God. The ninety-nine names provide pictures of his nature. We would do well to position our understanding of the nature of God for our friends within the scope of his performance of his role. What would we change if we were to picture God fulfilling his roles as the all-powerful, the just, the compassionate, the merciful...? As we do that, we need to look for the ways women are performing their role in this connection with God. Acts of submission that can feel so fatalistic may need to be seen as fulfilling her role in this relational connection with God. A different set of questions around practices may help us uncover deeper insights into women's connections with God.

The links we make between connecting with God and community, with its place in creating identity and constructing belonging, may also look different. Community is

a place where believing is given daily lived expression. It seems that it may be in community, in the way community creates boundaries, frames religious life, creates belonging and identity that we can find fresh insights into connection with God. Knowing God becomes more than reasoned assent and moves into spaces of performative practices as part of community. Believing is belonging in community and navigating that in the everyday. This may mean recapturing some of those things that are core to the way the Bible describes being in relationship with God. Embracing ideas of asymmetry, with the paradoxical tensions of love and power and violence as part of them, is confronting at the very least. We would do well to acknowledge the tension and wrestle with how we live the Kingdom of God among us into such contexts. A relationally connective social system has imbalances that are not always good for women. While we must acknowledge these, we will, perhaps, help ourselves by exploring how God reveals himself in our scriptures and holds such paradoxes in a healthy tension, not denying them but redefining them.

In all of this we may need to learn to hold the way we have traditionally come to know Islam, as a set of orthodox beliefs and practices, together with culturally constructed ways of social organisation and ways of being that give definition to religious practices and beliefs. This demands of us an ability to look, listen and learn from those who are our friends and colleagues from within Islam. When we present Christ as a set of logical, rational beliefs we will most likely hear such a definition in return. Starting from a place of relational connectivity opens a new space for listening to learn how women connect with God.

At the same time as growing our capacity to hold paradoxes of belief in healthy tension, our learning on relational connectivity calls us to a ministry of relational practices. I have lived and worked in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa

for close to forty years now, and yet only now am caught up in thinking more coherently and intentionally about relational connectivity as a framework for living the Kingdom of God among us as a proclamation of the good news.

Relational practices of being in the communities of Muslim friends will, of necessity, start with our ways of being and thinking of ministry practice. While there is a lot of talk around community today, we often struggle to embrace and live it. This is, in part, because of the costly nature of community life, partly because submission challenges my individualistic worldview, partly because of an inability to hold our individual call in a healthy tension with belonging and identity as part of community, partly because achievement is an individual matter[83]. Relationally connective ways of being and belonging call us to start with being, and if necessary, creating, community; community from which we work, community that is a safe space for our friends to explore connecting with God and where growth to maturity can be nurtured.

Engagement and ministry will also require understanding and learning to live out our roles in our relationships with our friends. Part of the challenge of this is not only understanding these roles but redeeming the broken places in relationally connective roles so that the Kingdom is transformational of cultural modes of being and relating. While often those from individualistic ways of viewing and organising our worlds find asymmetrical relational roles at the very least distasteful, there is a need to provide a framework within which women can explore ways of relating to God and

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[83] This is not an exhaustive list but perhaps represents the things I have struggled or journeyed with others with in seeking to live a community vision for revealing the Kingdom of God among us.

being, ways of belonging. Helping women on their journey requires those working among women living under Islam to join them to discover these new paths together. Rethinking the faith journey may include accepting the role of external practices in forming internal beliefs. A confessional rubric of faith means the journey that people are on could be missed when they join the practices of Christian faith without having yet confessed belief. As it has been shown how family and community are spaces for practicing roles towards maturity, so ministry practice would do well to consider how space for journeying in religious practice from the Christian tradition may be part of the journey to a fully confessed mature faith.

This will need to go further. In the journey to maturity in faith with our friends, we would do well to consider the daily living of our faith as a performative practice, one that creates a new mimetic ideal of relational connection with God. While embracing the personal and individual nature of our relationship with God, the public performance of faith and religious life is an important part of fulfilling our role in the faith journeys of our Muslim women friends. Discipleship, which I use to describe faith journeys from initial encounters to confession and then maturity, needs to recognise roles, embrace community and model navigating the everyday. This of course circles back to the essential place of community, remembering that it is in community that God has primarily been known and understood.

Relational connective ways of being and belonging, as the ground in which identity is formed, must be lived in a community where honour is given expression. The dishonour experienced by those who by their traditional standards have dishonoured family and community, requires spaces of honour to forge a renewed identity as God's people, God's new creation. "Re-establishing rights requires rebuilding relationalities for connective selves (Joseph, 1999b, p. 61)." God's honouring of his children needs to

be embodied in community. It needs a lived experience for those who have known the reality of bringing dishonour. This means safe spaces where resistance to known structures can be acted out, while continuing to have the protection, provision, and boundaries of community.

Shared faith journeys with Muslim women in a relationally connective world of 'knowing' God calls for self-examination firstly and then to reimagining everyday practices of being and ministry. It calls those of us working with women living under Islam to be community that represents God in the fulness of his nature and being, to create new models of the Kingdom of God among us. The great shift is from a wholly individualistic view of relationship with God to embodying knowing him, at least in part, as a relationally connective community performance.

A final word

Ways of knowing have an implicit cultural framing. This paper has demonstrated the potential for exploring Muslim women's ways of knowing God through the lens of relational connectivity. In societies where family and community have higher value than individuality, relational connectivity has been shown to explain the complex connections of relationships that frame identity formation and creates the space of belonging. Exploring women's 'knowing' God through these eyes, shows a relationship that is exercised through roles, fostered in community, and premised on a power asymmetry. It is formed through submission and practiced most fully in community that embodies knowing God.

Introducing and representing the living God, who is in his very nature relational, calls for those who have an individualistic view on organising the world to reimagine relationship, including accepting that there is agency and intentionality in relational

connectivity. It points beyond individualistic ways of defining relationships and looks for reflections of God in the symbiotic relationships of connectivity. Journeying with Muslim women to faith maturity needs those who work with these friends to create relationally connective communities of God's people who can develop new mimetic ideals of being and belonging, and safe spaces for identity construction in the community of those who know God.

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