



When Women Speak...

God and women in Islam

Webzine



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Editorial

In one sense all When Women Speak webzines are concerned with God and Women in Islam. So it may be that in coming to this issue you are wondering ‘What’s new?’, or at least ‘What perspective is being taken this time?’ What you will actually find as you read on are a variety of complementary perspectives arising from the attentive listening of each of the contributors which all have the potential to inform and enrich our engagement with Muslim sisters.

The first three articles focus, in different ways, on voices from within Islam to provide insights about the ways in which Muslim women perceive God and how Islamic perceptions of God shape women’s lives. These are followed by two articles by experienced practitioners which identify content of the Christian Good News that has particular relevance to experiences, perceptions and beliefs of Muslim women. The final thoughtful article visits the question of how women, and especially women of the Middle East, South Asia, and other predominantly Muslim contexts, usually come to know things. In so doing it foregrounds threads that actually run through most of the webzine as it touches on issues of discipleship, imitative learning, and the importance of relational community. On reading it, readers may find they want to go back over the other articles to ponder afresh what shapes the relationship between God and women in Islam and to review how we, who are followers of Jesus, respond to this.

In the opening article, Moyra Dale encourages us all to be observers. On the basis that it is in personal practice, rather than through formal acknowledgement of impersonal dogmas, that our individual friends reveal their understanding of God and how it impacts their self understanding, she takes us straight to the topic of prayer. Having provided comprehensive detail about the different forms of Islamic prayer in a previous webzine ([November 2020, Volume 7, No 1](#)), here she offers discerning guidance about things to consider, and ask, as Muslim friends fulfil their obligations to perform salah and take up their options for other forms of prayer, in order to find out what might truly be their answer to the question ‘Who is your God?’

Whilst prayers are a strong indicator of how someone conceives of God and of their relationship to him, primary scriptures are, theoretically, the authoritative source of concepts and ideas that shape a belief system. For this reason the second article turns to the Qur’an. But, rather than rehearsing contemporary discussion about the place of women, this article provides a rare overview of all references to women characters mentioned in the Qur’an. The Traditions (ie., Hadith and early commentaries) which shape much Muslim thought are referred to sparingly (Barbara Freyer Stowasser’s *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation*, 1994, remains the most comprehensive summary of the materials that shape Muslim dogma on the topic) as the article simply tracks the ways women are included in the emerging message at different stages in the prophetic life of Muhammad. It aims to be a resource to help you develop clarity and confidence in the face of claims and counterclaims about content of the Qur’an: you may find it helpful to make a note of what you expect will be covered before reading the article to make it easy to note discoveries and surprises when you reach the end. Two observations from

the survey of women characters which provide particular pause for thought are that it adds weight to descriptions of the Qur'an as 'a canon-in-process' and shows that, throughout, it is women found in the Bible who serve as examples. Arguably both should embolden us to become more familiar with the stories of women in the Bible and ready to explore them with our Muslim sisters as a means to discover more about God and women.

Article three brings a different authoritative voice. Or, more accurately, the voices of a number of adult Muslim women are released through the writing of one who is now a follower of Jesus. In its beautiful crafting it hauntingly expresses hopes dashed, and airs hard questions. It ends with longing, in the midst of uncertainty about how friends might discover Love and the Light of Life.

The two articles that follow pinpoint particular elements of the Christian Good News which speak to such longings and questions. Miriam Williams explains why she has become convinced we should focus on who God is, rather than what God does, as we seek to effectively share our faith. Referring to interaction with a number of dear friends she outlines ways to open the door for them to discover the lovingkindness of God through such things as modelling confidence in His goodness when praying and introducing examples and promises from the Bible. She observes that many friends reveal they are conscious of their need of forgiveness, and encourages us to have confidence that the changes our Saviour has wrought in us are evident to those we spend time with. Anna Shean also counsels confidence in core aspects of our faith, as she discusses the far reaching importance of God being Trinity, both for our lives and as we speak of Jesus with Muslim women. She is well aware that we tend to avoid talk of Trinity because of common accusations of worshipping three gods, and acknowledges that there are certainly unhelpful ways of speaking about it. However, she rightly reminds us of ways in which our Christians identity is bound up with God being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and then very insightfully shows how leading concerns and felt needs of Muslim women find resolution through this great truth.

The perspective of the final article is shaped by listening to a different voice, so that it considers the question of 'how' someone comes to know and to hold particular beliefs rather than 'what' they know or need to know. Drawing on the work of the Lebanese scholar Suad Joseph, Cathy Hine looks at how 'relational connectivity' functions as the medium which shapes ideas and beliefs of women in non-Western parts of the world. The observations on cultural ways of knowing lead her to make a strong case for proposing that 'a different set of questions around practice may help us uncover deeper insights into women's connections with God. She identifies those questions, and in the process unwittingly endorses various insights that occur in other articles, not least to do with the way shared practice creates inner life. Thus the article, in some ways, takes us full circle as it echoes the first in contesting the traditional view that Islam is defined by a set of orthodox beliefs and practices. Together they bookend a set of articles which are each distinctive yet illustrating something of how to fulfil the requirement behoved to all of us, 'to look, listen and learn'. A part of my own response has been to find myself reflecting on different elements in the Gospel of John, where on the one hand there is clear and strongly presented Trinitarian teaching but on the other a narratival unfolding of the ways in which a community of people grew into faith. I was provoked to wonder if I have been overlooking wisdom for ministry in scriptures that I think I know well. Your own response may take you in different directions, but I am confident that as you read on you will find some things that are new, and perspectives that are helpful.

Carol Walker



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