When Women Speak...
God and women in Islam
Webzine

Webzine
VOL 9, NO 1 | DECEMBER 2021

God and women in Islam

5 Who is your God?
Moyra Dale

13 The women mentioned in the Qur'an
Carol Walker

43 God and Women and Islam
Nur

50 Teaching the Loving kindness and Goodness (hesed) of God
Miriam Williams

63 The Triune God and our Muslim friends
Anna Shean

77 God and Women: Believing and Belonging in a relationally connective world
Cathy Hine

whenwomenspeak.net

Copyright © 2020 When Women Speak... • The views expressed in these articles do not necessarily represent the views of When Women Speak...

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

Who is Your God?

People's prayers tell us something about the God whom they worship.

I was talking to a friend recently who is going through a very difficult time, and she mentioned that she was asking God what lesson he was wanting to teach her. That's one question we can ask, a question that comes from viewing God as Teacher (often with potentially punitive overtones). Our Muslim friends often assume that God is testing them through difficult situations. This is a view of God as Examiner, with the power to pass or fail. There are other questions which we could ask, reflecting different understandings of God. For example, we could ask, what gift is God giving me in or through this? This is an understanding of God as the Gift-giver of good things (James 1:17; Matt 7:8-11). Or we could simply ask, where is God in this? We can cry out as the psalmists do, asking God why he feels absent, recognising that we believe in God who is Emmanuel, Present with us. Or we can simply ask whether he is here, silently weeping with us (John 11:35)?

People sometimes debate about whether Christians and Muslims believe in the same or a different God. We are both monotheistic faiths, which means that there *is* only one God. Kenneth Cragg suggests that we both have the same subject of the sentence, "God is...." However the rest of the sentence, the predicate, is different: what we say or believe about *who* God is.

As with our prayers, the content of the prayers of our Muslim friends is both expressive and also formative of who they believe God to be. Constance Padwick, introducing her classic book *Muslim Devotions*, commented that, "In Islam, as in any other faith, a stranger desiring not to remain a stranger could best feel the pulsing life

of religion through a study of the devotions actually in use.[1] Asking how and what our friends pray tells us much about their understanding of the character of God, and what that means about their own interaction with God in life and prayer.

The first place to explore is the *salah* or daily liturgical prayer.[2] This reflects an understanding of God who must be approached when we are ritually pure,[3] and (especially as women) appropriately covered, even in the privacy of their own homes or closets. Covering for *salah* prayer corresponds approximately to the body covering appropriate with non-*mahram* (not closely related) males. Body posture reflects and imprints an understanding of God who is transcendent, to be approached with humility and reverent awe (*khashu'*). The *salah* set prayers are to God who is greater than anything else, and who is to be therefore praised and exalted: a God who offers refuge from Satan, and who listens to the prayers of those who praise Him. Within the set *salah* there are also options for the pray-er: after they pray the *Fatihah*, the first chapter of the Qur'an, they can choose another chapter to recite (*Ikhlas*[112] or *Falaq* [113] or *Nas* [114] are often used). Have a look at those *surah*s in the Qur'an and see what understanding of God they offer. What *surah* does your friend like to pray? The *salah* prayer also includes spaces for recommended *du'a* of praise. Which ones does your friend include? What belief about God's character do they reflect?

---

[1] Padwick, Constance E. *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1961, p.xi.
2 https://whenwomenspeak.net/article/vol-7-no-1-november-2020-salah/
[3] https://whenwomenspeak.net/article/vol2-no1-april-2018-ritual-purity-and-defilement/

Du'a is the area of prayer that may tell us most about our friends' understanding of God.[4] More akin to what western protestant Christians usually mean when they talk about 'prayer', *du'a* can include the poured-out longings of the heart: and, more usually, the popular memorised prayers recited at particular occasions, that can be found in the little prayer booklets scattered across the Muslim world, in shrines, markets and bookshops. Drawn from the Qur'an, *hadith* and *sunnah*, "Fortress of the Muslim" "حصن المسلم" is one of the more popular. These prayers are commonly written in Arabic and often also transliterated for those who cannot read Arabic script (as well as the meaning given in the local language), suggesting an understanding that God is most appropriately / effectively addressed in Arabic: universal deity is firmly grounded in the Middle East context, whence his word in the Qur'an was revealed. These invocations are most often situational: what to say when you wake up; when getting dressed or undressed, entering and leaving the toilet, leaving or returning home, going to or leaving the mosque. There are other petitions for if you have a nightmare or are feeling lonely, when it is windy or thundering, when you see the first dates of the season or hear a dog bark. Many of the invocations include the benefits associated with reciting them: a hundred good deeds recorded for the pray-er, or a hundred trees planted for them in Paradise. Some of the invocations are to be recited three times, or a hundred times. These may indicate a transactional view of God (the metaphor of trading with God is used among scholars as well as in popular Islam),[5] of a

[4] https://whenwomenspeak.net/article/vol-7-no-1-november-2020-dua-in-the-21st-century-exploring-womens-perspectives/

[5] Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp.94-96. See also al-Nisa' 4:40.

God who the pray-er negotiates with to achieve what they want. Perhaps you could ask your friend what *du'a* she prays on what occasions, and what benefits she seeks through them.

Du'a can also be the spontaneous prayers of the heart, in someone's heart language, offered either after *salah* or at any time. Does your friend feel able to offer these kinds of prayer, in her heart language, or does she feel confined to the more formal prayers? Was there ever a time when she cried out to God in this way? Who was the God she was seeking?

Muslim women are often involved in some form of *dhikr,* prayers of recollection which are often focused on recounting particular aspects of God.[6] *Dhikr* prayers are taken from the Qur'an, *Hadith* and other sources to centre the extended awareness of the worshipper on God. Recited or sung, accompanied by movement or quiet sitting, they draw the reciter to reflect on God's names and nature. *Dhikr* may be performed in a group or as individuals at home. There are particular *dhikr* prayers or choruses or there can be longer *wird* (litanies) to pray. *Dhikr* prayer allows more freedom to choose the content of what is prayed. The popularly chosen chants may serve as an indication of how those praying them look to God, the aspects of God's nature that they focus on as most significant. They express the direction or longing of the worshippers' hearts towards God.

In the corporate *dhikr* times I attended at a women's mosque programme, they usually began by taking refuge in God, and invoking the name of God, the

---

6 https://whenwomenspeak.net/article/vol-7-no-1-november-2020-muslim-women-in-prayer/; https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/women-in-sufism/; https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/remember-god/; https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/dhikr-in-the-heart-of-faith/.

Compassionate, the Merciful. *Salah* also begins with taking refuge: and the Qur'an seeks refuge from the external danger of the devil or people (*al-Nahl* 16:98; *al-Falaq* 113:1; *al-Nas* 114:1). Together with the invocation of God's name, the 'seeking refuge' (*a'udh bi'Allah*) is a protective prayer in the uncertainties of daily life (whether in health, education and employment, communal relationships or wider politics) and in the face of surrounding malign spiritual forces and the impact of envy (or the evil eye). This is God who potentially can offer protection in the face of forces that threaten to overcome us.

The women in this programme also often invoked God's refuge in seeking forgiveness:

> *"I take refuge in You from the evil I have done, and I come to You in Your grace to me, and I come to you in my sin, so forgive me, for there is no one who forgives sins except You."*

This longing for God's forgiveness was also evident in the oft-repeated "God, forgive!" *istaghfir Allah*, and other common invocations. Humanity, created weak by God (*Al-Nisa'* 4:28), tends by nature to sin, while God's nature is to mercy. God's sovereignty excludes any necessity to forgive. However it is easy for Him in his omnipotence to forgive: because He has not been sinned against, it does not cost Him. In the transaction between Forgiver and forgiven, there is no obligation to forgive, no cost to God in doing so; and receiving God's forgiveness doesn't carry any need to forgive others.

God's attributes are recited and repeated, whether to invoke God's help, or as part of affirming the faith of those praying. The most frequent attributes I heard included Healer, Giver, Defender, Forgiver, the One who relieves troubles, who offers

help, orders affairs, hears our voices and answers petitions. God is sovereign and bestows blessings such as protection, healing and provision of needs, as He wills: such bestowal is arbitrary, not guaranteed. However on the recipients' side, they place themselves in position to receive blessing through pious practices, including the use of prescribed invocations, often at particular times of the day, or for a set number of repetitions.

There are also prayers seeking God's blessing on Muhammad, reflecting the belief that God will bless those who bless Muhammad: and, crucially, Muhammad himself will intercede for them on the day of judgement. Again this reflects the felt need of an intercessor with God, for the one who can never be sure that they have amassed enough good deeds, or that God will in fact extend his mercy.

Prayer is often understood as a corporate activity, whether *salah* (even in one's home, the pray-er joins with the worldwide community in set times, the same direction, words and actions), group *dhikr* or group *du'a.* Group prayers both shape and express communal understanding. When your friend prays at home on her own, how does she pray? And is there any difference between her prayers on her own and in the community?

The names of God within Islam include an understanding of God who is all-powerful and all-present, greater than any other being: and we fully concur with this. Of the ninety-nine names of God, which ones does your friend most focus on, remember, or use in her prayers? What aspects of God's character are invoked by them? When we ask about how our Muslim friends understand God, we go beyond official statements of faith, to ask about the actual content of our Muslim friends' prayers. These tell us more about who the petitioners believe God to be, and what is possible in relation between God and the one worshipping him.

We might also ask about when we pray, especially when we are praying for our Muslim friends, and in their presence, what our own prayers reveal about the God to whom we pray, who we believe God to be. Who is the God to whom we are pointing our Muslim friends? Sometimes as I have prayed for someone, they have commented on the sense of intimacy and of the presence and power of God: and this is the gift of the Spirit, going beyond words. We seek to understand more deeply the reality and possibilities of how our Muslim friends understand God and seek to worship him. And we also look to God's power to guide and empower our own words and prayers, and to lead us into richer understanding of what it means to worship God who is revealed in Jesus Messiah, in every aspect of our words and our lives.

The women mentioned in the Qur'an

According to Islamic tradition, at least as reported by some,[7] the verse stating

"For Muslim men and women,

for believing men and women,

for devout men and women,

for men and women who are patient and constant

for men and women who humble themselves,

for men and women who give in charity,

for men and women who fast,

for men and women who guard their chastity,

and for men and women who engage much in God's praise,

for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward."

(AL-AHZAB, Q33:35)

was revealed after Umm Salama (one of Muhammad's wives) asked "Why are men mentioned in the Qur'an and why are we not?".

[7] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1991): 118.

Some hadith cite other wives as the source and present the question with slightly different nuance.[8] Indeed, given the number of women mentioned in revelations usually dated earlier than al-Ahzab, the question may rather have been "Why are we women never mentioned in the Qur'an as men are?" As Figure 1 below shows, most references to women characters pre-dating Umm Salama's question refer to women who feature in the Bible. It is possible Umm Salama was unaware of these revelations, though this seems unlikely, or she considered the women mentioned in pre-Median revelations as simply incidental and so not mentioned in the same way as the men.

This article cast its eye over all women mentioned to review their roles in the Prophet's messages, from earliest days. Some attention is given to resonance with detail in the Bible. The main intention, though, is to consolidate information to enable those of us who read as outsiders re-consider how the Qur'an portrays the relationship between God and women, and so, perhaps, better understand what their foundational scripture does and does not offer for the life and faith of our Muslim sisters.

[8] Asma Lamrabet, 'When the Qur'an responds to women claims…' (2019) lists four hadith which each present the question with slightly different wordings and sources. http://www.asma-lamrabet.com/articles/when-the-qur-an-responds-to-women-claims/.

Figure 1 – **Women Mentioned in the Qur'an**

	Meccan period			Post-Hijra period
	Early	Middle	Late	Medinan
Wife of Abu Lahab	Q111:4-5			
Wife of Adam		Q20:115-121	Q7:18-25	Q2:35
Wife of Noah				Q66:10
Wife of Abraham		Q51:24-30	Q11:69-73	
Wife of Lot		Q15:58-60,; Q26:171; Q37:135	Q11:81; Q27:57; Q29:32-33;	Q66:10
Daughters of Lot		Q15:71	Q11:78-79	
Mother of Moses		Q20:38-40;	Q28:7-18	
Sister of Moses		Q20:40	Q28:11	
Woman Moses married			Q28:22-28	
Wife of Pharoah			Q28:9-13	Q66:11
Wife of Egyptian Governor			Q12:21-35	
Egyptian women who cut their hands			Q12:30-31	
Queen of Sheba			Q27:20-44	

Woman of Imran (Mary's mother)		Q3:35-36
Mary, mother of Jesus	Q19:16-34, Q21:91, Q23:50.	Q3:31-63; Q4:156; Q5:17, 75, 116; Q66:12
Mothers of the believers /wives of Muhammed		Q24:11-26; Q33:6,28-40,53; Q66:3-5
'The woman who pleads'		Q58:1;
'The women to be evaluated'		Q60:10

The arrangement of Figure 1 is slightly inconsistent to enable an easy overview. In broad terms, all women except the wife of Noah are listed in light of the likely date of the first revelation to mention them, and all except the wife of Abu Lahab are also categorised according to the epoch in which they lived. The overall effect shows that, other than the wife of Abu Lahab, all women mentioned in pre-Hijra revelations are to be found in the Bible, linked to characters recognised by the Qur'an as prophets and mostly to those understood to be leaders of previous epochs of monotheism. The attentive will also note that al-Tahrim (Q66), the Medinan sura in which the wife of Noah features, uniquely brings together women from across the epochs, whilst the final two characters in the list seem tantalizingly unlinked to any notable men.

The wife of Abu Lahab – text, context, and insights from tradition about the early days

Stylistically, like other early surahs, Q111 evokes sooth-sayers' oaths of the pre-Islamic era, as each of its five verses is a pithy one-liner curse. Hadith and commentary

explain that Abu Lahab was an uncle of Muhammad named Abdul ʿUzza[9] who fiercely opposed him. The surah serves as punning retort, with the opening three verses predicting that the one nicknamed 'Father of Flame' because of his fiery temper[10] will burn in the Flaming Fire.

By all accounts Abdul ʿUzza became clan leader when Muhammad's uncle and guardian Abu Talib died around the same time as Muhammad's wife Khadija, withdrawing clan protection from that moment (619CE). His belligerence may have been reaction to Muhammad's assertion 'that the ancestors of the clan were in Hell'.[11] The *sira* (biography of Muhammad) names his wife as Umm Jamil, sister of Abu Safyan[12] who as Meccan leader later led the forces against Muhammad's followers at the Battle of Uhud (625CE). These characters remind us that Muhammad faced strong opposition from both men and women within his home community in the early days. The commentaries and sources describe how Umm Jamil strew twisted palm fibres intertwined with thorns along pathways Muhammad would take at night, to create discomfort and injury.[13] The Qur'an details none of this but the short evocative curses against her in the last two verses accord with the stories.

As we begin to consider portrayals of women in the Qur'an it is noteworthy that this Meccan wife is not incidental. Like all other women mentioned in the Qur'an except Mary she is not named but, as other married women, is identified in terms of her

---

[9] Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, (IDCI 2004 edition), 395.
[10] A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*, (1975): 1804 n. 6294.
[11] W. Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, (1970): 11.
[12] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*, (1992): 48.
[13] Marmaduke Pickthall, *Glorious Qur'an*, (2004 edition), 395. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, (1975): 1804 n. 6295.

husband. Nevertheless she is not presented as some kind of female stereotype. She is clearly recognised as a culpable individual responsible for her own actions. However, we also note that there is no reference at all to Khadija in the qur'anic material. Islamic tradition, not the Qur'an, provides the back story to the early days and, indeed, purports allusions to Hagar, to A'isha, and (for Shi'a) to Fatima at other points in the text. The leading interests and emphasis of the Qur'an seem to be elsewhere.

Women associated with biblical narrative – unfolding insights

The wife of Adam:

When reading the Qur'an as a typical book, going from surah to surah in canonical sequence the first woman to be encountered is the wife of Adam (al-Baqarah Q2:35). Though al-Baqarah dates from the late Meccan or even early Medinan era, the account of humanity's creation and succumbing to temptation (Q2:30-39) serves a foundational role. It is preceded (Q2:6-29) by warnings of judgement for those who reject faith contrasted with the consolations awaiting believers that includes promise of their portion in gardens shared with pure companions or spouses (*azwāj,* Q2:25). As Robinson observes, 'the gardens, which the believers and their spouses are promised in the hereafter (Q2:25), represent a return to the blessed state originally enjoyed by Adam and his spouse (*zawja*, Q2:35).'[14] But if the passage sets the context for the rest of the Qur'an's message, it also more simply anticipates the second half of al-Baqarah, which delineates the most detailed legislative material for the newly forming Muslim community to be found

[14] Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, (Georgetown University Press, 2003): 206

within the Qur'an. The legislation particularly deals with misuse of the good provision of God as detailed in Q2:35, ie., with food, fasting, coveting, 'giving of substance' and related topics (eg., Q2:168-173; 188; 194; 264-5, 275) and in relation to women, intercourse during times of fasting, divorce, widowhood, and witnessing of commercial contracts (Q2:187; 228; 232; 240, 282). In light of the details, and the address to Adam in Q2:35, Kecia Ali concludes that whilst there is 'an undeniable reciprocity in the marital relationship' (eg., Q 2:187) the text is 'speaking to men about women.'[15]

The story of the rebellion by Iblis and its impact is retold on seven occasions in the Qur'an (Q2:30-36; Q7:10-25; Q15:28–44; Q17:61–64; Q18:50; Q 20:116–117, and 38:71–85). Other than that in al-Baqarah two of these include reference to the presence of Adam's wife, ie., al-Aʿrāf (Q7:10-25) and Ṭa Ḥa (Q20:115-128). Ṭa Ḥa was likely the first mention of Adam's wife in Muhammad's proclamations. It has become particularly important in the works of contemporary Muslim women scholars[16] seeking to 'depatriarchalise' readings of the Qur'an as they rightly point out that, despite the dual verb form indicating that both ate of the tree and found themselves naked, it is Adam, referred to in the third person singular, who is described as disobeying and allowing himself to be seduced. Eve is not blamed in the Qur'an. She is simply there, mentioned but not addressed.

---

[15] Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics & Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence.* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006): 112.

[16] Riffat Hassan, 'Made from Adam's Rib: The Woman's Creation Question', *Al-Mushir, Theological Journal of the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, Pakistan*, (Autumn 1985):124-56 led the way. Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, (University of Texas Press, 2002) has arguably been the most effective in disseminating awareness.

The remaining reference to Adam's wife (Q7:19) uses the term *uskun* (translated variously in commentaries to convey spousal comfort) here and in a parallel phrase later in the surah (Q7:189) to establish the relationship between the pair. The term is also used in al-Baqarah (Q2:35). In al-Aʿrāf the parallel usage indicates that the *zawjahā* (female partner) thus described was created from the original 'soul' (*nafs*), before going on to describe parents who, perhaps at the suggestion of Satan, collude in wrongful association (*shurakā'*) after their child is born (Q7:189-202). Tradition from the ninth century provides strange possible background stories to do with Eve being duped into dedicating a child to Satan. Stowasser explains that by al-Ṭabarī's time (839-923CE) the woman 'had become Satan's tool and was seen as afflicted with the curse of moral, mental, and physical deficiency,' whilst the man 'alone embodied the human conscience, was aware of his error, and repented; free of God's curse, he was forgiven.'[17] The traditions are not corroborated in the qur'anic text, which simply implies that the couple and their progeny are faced with temptations and challenges as life unfolds.

[17] Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, (Oxford University Press, 1994): 30.

Women related to Noah, Abraham and Lot:

Noah's wife is only mentioned once, as a disbeliever, in the Medinan surah al-Tahrim (Q66:10). Tradition, however, suggest she is to blame for her son's rebellion as recounted in Q11:43[18]

As Figure 1 shows, the wife of Abraham features in two surahs, whist the wife of Lot features in seven and his daughters in two of these. Two further surahs report Abraham being told the good news that he is to have a son (Q15:51-60, Q37:99-113). All the references are found in surahs termed 'Punishment Narratives" in contemporary scholarship.[19] These comprise strings of warning messages brought by earlier prophets, or angelic messengers, which climax in 'God's punishment of the unbelievers and his vindication of the righteous.'[20] In some the story of Lot and his family is tied into that of Abraham's as mysterious messengers not only tell Abraham of the son to be born but of the judgement to be meted on the people amongst whom Lot resides (Q11: 69-81; Q15:51-71; Q29:16-32; Q51:24-37). Though not named, in both surahs in which she features, Abraham's wife speaks. In Q51:29 her self-deprecating exclamation, *"ajūzun 'aqīmun'* ('a barren old woman?'), is echoed later in the surah to describe the 'withering wind' (*ar-rīḥa al-'aqīm*) that came against the 'Ad community, reducing

[18] Etiqani Abdulqadir Hamid, 'The Concept of Reform in the Qur'an', in (eds.) Khaleel Mohammed & Andrew Rippin, *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an: A volume in honor of Professor Issa Boullata*, (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International , 2008): 22 n28, (citing the opinions of Mujāhid and al Ḥasan, as found in al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ, VII, 31.)

[19] Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 171, David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers*, (RoutledgeCurzon 2004): 27-37, and W. Montgomery Watt & Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1970): 127-134, provide overviews.

[20] Marshall, (2004): 34.

everything to rottenness (Q51:42). Whilst the 'Ad are destroyed the messengers emphasise to Abraham's wife's that the Lord has spoken. Their tone is open to interpretation here and in the chronologically later Q11. Q11:71-73 provides further glimpse of her personality as Abraham's wife laughs and converses with the mysterious messengers, who ultimately challenge her astonishment at the 'glad tidings'. It is not clear whether her initial laughter is in response to the news that she is to give birth, to do with the messengers' appearance, or with Abraham's need for reassurance from them. No extended back story beyond their arrival, greeting of 'Peace' and Abraham's sense of fear, informs the accounts. The Qur'an says nothing of Sarah being passed off as Abraham's sister or of the efforts to resolve their childlessness through Abraham sleeping with Sarah's servant Hagar. She is, nevertheless a recipient of good news alongside her husband, in the midst of stories of warning and judgement.

The wife of Lot was not so lucky. The Qur'an indicates that she was ordained to suffer the punishment rendered on the city in which the family had been living (see especially Q27:57, but see also the predictions in Q11:81 and Q29:32). That her demise is referred to six times in Meccan surahs, twice accompanied by accounts of Lot handing over his daughters to forestall the sexual abuse of his male guests (Q15:71; Q11:78), would seem to indicate that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a significant narrative in the early period. It is not clear whether the implied abominations where characteristic of Meccan society at that time. There is strong possibility that the stories were familiar, not least because several passages indicate 'that the locality of the story is known and can

be seen' (Q15:76; Q37:137; and possibly Q25:40, 42).[21] Yet despite this, as indicated by the Medinan surah al Anfal (Q8:31-2), it seems disbelievers viewed them as 'ancient fables' and mocked any suggestion of relevance to their own lives.[22] Given the intertwining of the story with that of the visit of the mysterious visitors to Abraham and his wife in the Qur'an, as in the Bible, there are no grounds for concluding that it makes women purely instrumental: Abraham's wife is shown to have agency in her interactions, and is recipient of revelation about the nature of God. That Lot's wife was destined to stay behind is more broadly illustrative of qur'anic presentation of the sovereignty of Allah in all things. The judgement that is meted has its parallels in other repeated elements within the punishment narratives. However, distinctions between detail in the two qur'anic accounts of the treatment of Lot's daughters suggest discomfort at the content of the 'ancient fables'. Waleed Ahmed has helpfully tracked the detail to observe that whilst the brief, chronologically earlier reference (Q15:71) gives no specific meaning to what is intended when Lot says "Here are my daughters, if you must be doing so", the fractionally longer, later reference (Q11:78-9) has given commentators scope for explaining how this referred to the daughters being offered in marriage.[23] Ahmed nevertheless argues that the significance of the episode recounted in the two references would have been adduced by 'the audiences' "interaction" with the parallel

[21] Watt & Bell (1970): 130.

[22] Marshall, (2004): 8.

[23] Waleed Ahmed, 'Lot's daughters in the Qur'an', in (ed.) Gabriel Said Reynolds, *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in its historical context 2*, (London: Routledge, 2011): 411-424.

Biblical story … Qur'anic texts, and, possibly, a concomitant oral discourse.'[24] It remains a disconcerting event for us all, which perhaps looms larger in Jewish and Muslim thought than in Christian.[25]

Women in the life of Moses:

Moses is referred to more than any other character in the Qur'an: his name recurs 136 times across thirteen surahs, including in some lengthy passages and portions. The women are referred to in two surahs which provide extended accounts of his life., ie., Q20:9-99 (out of 135 verse) and Q28:3-83 (or perhaps we should say all of the 88 verses, depending on how the interpretative elements are to be applied). Notably all the women in Moses life are presented positively mostly on account of their parts in caring for Moses when he was a child.
In Ṭa Ḥa (Q20:38-40) the account serves as a reminder given to Moses after he is called to go speak to Pharaoh (Q20:9-37). In al-Qaṣaṣ the longer review of the circumstances of Moses' upbringing (Q28:7-13) sits within what is described as 'part of the story of Moses and Pharaoh' (Q28:3). The portion opens '*wa-awḥayna*' (and we inspired), so that the story begins by saying 'We inspired the mother of Moses ..' That is, like the wife of Abraham she is addressed directly by divine speech, whilst like the wife of Lot the pathway of her life is ordained. She received guidance to suckle the boy and to put him in the river when she fears for his safety. She also receives the prediction that he will be made a messenger and

[24] *Ibid*., 424.
[25] *Ibid*., 414

a source of grief to Pharaoh. Then, as the first phase is fulfilled when Pharaoh's wife finds the hidden child (Q28:9), she receives divine strengthening: if this had not happened her motherly yearnings would have led her to divulge the real situation. Instead, because it had been ordained (Q28:12), the child refused to feed from wet nurses until his sister approached the Egyptian women and suggested a home where people would bring him up 'for you'. The portion concludes with the divine voice observing that 'thus did we restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of God is true: but most of them to not understand' (Q28:13). Wadud notes the 'tenderness' toward Moses' mother which contrasts with the threat by Pharaoh, as the decrees of Allah are fulfilled. [26]

Though Moses' mother, Abraham's wife, and Mary (Ar. Maryam) all receive 'revelation or inspiration from God ..., the consensus of the tradition is that they are not prophets'.[27] Nevertheless they are mentioned and are shown to have been addressed. Indeed Moses' mother, (and also Mary, as we shall see) received strength from the divine to sustain her faith and enable her to complete her calling. Also, notably, the women with whom the surah starts (Q28:7-18) provide contrast to Qarun, of the people of Moses, with whom the surah closes (Q28: 76-82). Together they illustrate the lesson that ultimately God alone prospers or curtails lives (Q28: 82). The women's story provides an apt illustration summed

[26] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspectiv*e, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 38-9.
[27] Daniel A. Madigan, 'Themes and topics' in ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *The Cambridge Companion to The Qur'an*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 93.

up in advice to Muhammad, that he will not be able to guide everyone, but God guides whom he will, and knows best who will follow guidance (Q28:56). The endorsement of the women's actions echoes that found in the biblical rendering in Exodus 2:1-10 with the Qur'an placing emphasis on divine inspiration whilst Exodus arguably foregrounds female initiative.

The other story in al-Qaṣaṣ (Q28:22-28) illustrates respect for women in a different way. It describes Moses chivalrously watering flocks that were under the care of two daughters of a 'very old man' of Midian. His action contrasted with the behaviour of other men watering their own sheep. Bible readers will note commonalities with the story in Exodus 2:15-22, but also be reminded of Abraham's servant seeking a wife for Isaac (ie., prayer for God's will to become clear - Q28:24 cf., Genesis 24:12-14) and Jacob encountering his wife / wives to be at a well (ie., marriage conditional to working for the father for a defined number of years - Q28:27-28 cf., Genesis 29:10-18). In the al-Qaṣaṣ rendition the daughter who communicates her father's invitation to meet, following the chivalrous intervention, is described as approaching Moses 'bashfully' (Q28:25). Stowasser has helpfully reviewed how Ibn Kathir, and more recently al-Sha'rawi, cite this qur'anic story 'as scripturalist proof that Muslim women's work outside of the home is religiously acceptable only as long as it is truly unavoidable and does not entail association with strangers (that is, nonrelated males).'[28] The young woman is approved for her attitude to work in support of her aged father, and for the way she behaved modestly given the difficult situation. For Ibn

[28] Stowasser (1994): 61.

Kathir, her 'bashful gait' illustrated the separation 'of the free-born (respectable) Muslim woman from the (not-so respectable) slave'. For such as al-Sha'rawi it distinguishes 'the traditional Muslim woman from her modernist sister who "tries to behave like a man".'[29] The modernist sister is disapproved. Thus al-Qaṣaṣ lends itself to nuanced affirmation of women. It endorses their initiatives within bounded spheres of activity. It shows God to be active in those spheres.

Some foreign women: In the lives of Moses, Joseph and Solomon:

Pharaoh's wife is not referred to in Ṭa Ḥa and only directly in one phrase (Q28:9) in al-Qaṣaṣ. By declaring the baby Moses 'a joy to behold' and instructing others not to kill him she is shown to have a mother's heart. Her status as believer is only clearly recognised in al-Taḥrim (Q66:11) where she may serve as endorsement for the presence of Muhammad's Egyptian concubine Maryam within his Medinan household.

Egyptian women also feature in the story of Joseph's life. Q12 (Surah Yusuf) mirrors parts of the narrative found in the final part of the biblical book of Genesis (Genesis 37-50). Unlike other surahs, the narrative in Surah Yusuf follows a single plot line. According to Witztum similarities are not so much due to any intended engagement with Jewish traditions, let alone the Hebrew Bible, as with Christian Syriac tradition. He cites overlapping omissions of biblical detail in Syriac material and in the Qur'an, and demonstrates a 'striking instance of a shared expansion concerns Potiphar's wife' (ie., the wife of the Egyptian

[29] *Ibid.*

Governor) which includes a scene in which she confesses after first falsely accusing Joseph.[30] In the Syriac material the embellishment serves to 'establish Joseph's generosity and forgiveness'. In the Qur'an it underlines his utter innocence and but also the sincere repentance of Potiphar's wife.[31] Further correspondences, not least concerning the garment left in the woman's hand,[32] lead Witztum to observe that ways in which Joseph serves as role model for Muhammad in the surah echo 'the Christian typological reading, where Joseph stands for Christ while the brothers stand for the Jews.'[33] Somewhat in contrast Shafaie draws attention to parallels in Midrashic exploration of the struggle of Joseph to resist.[34] These observations all draw attention to the likely milieu into which the qur'anic revelation was made and inform explanation of the attention given to the repentance of the Governor's wife.

Whereas the woman to become Moses' wife (Q28:25) displays decorum, the Egyptian Governor's wife displays lustful aggression (Q12:23-25). (On all accounts the two surahs originate in a similar period. They even contain similar exclamations by Egyptians regarding the young soon-to-be heroes: '... he may be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.' Q12:21 cf. Q28:9). Hadith take the Egyptian Governor's wife to be the embodiment of female sexuality, with

[30] Joseph Witztum, 'Joseph among the Ishmaelites: Q12 in light of Syriac sources' in (ed.), Said Reynolds (2011): 430-1
[31] *Ibid*., 432-3.
[32] *Ibid*., 434-7.
[33] *Ibid*., 446.
[34] Shirin Shafaie, 'Toward inter-theological hermeneutics: A case study in reading between the Joseph stories' in (eds.) Daniel J. Crowther et al, *Reading the Bible in Islamic Context*, (London: Routledge (2018): 54, 57-8.

Joseph's struggles indicating how this serves Satan's efforts.[35] Later commentators discuss how their qur'anic text is elucidating the encounter between prophetic *'isma* (sinlessness) and female slyness. On this reading the women who cut their hands (Q12:31) in reaction to Joseph's beauty are falling victim to their violent sexual desire.[36] Qutb (d.1966) dismissed the medieval representations of Joseph whist seeing in the Governor's wife and the women who cut themselves prototypes of the *jahili* Egyptian society that surrounded him.[37] Shafaie summarises well in saying 'this incident has created a wealth of theological discussion among Muslim exegetes and interpreters, especially with regard to the doctrine of '*isma*'.[38] For all that, we note that at its conclusion the women hold the prophet (Joseph) in awe, whatever their socio-religious backgrounds or initial behaviour.

The Queen of Sheba provides further opportunity to consider quranic depiction of foreign women and their response to God's prophets. The account comes amidst 'punishment narratives' in al-Naml (Q27). Lot's wife is referred to euphemistically in Q27:57 in a short section encapsulating Lot's message, the people's response and consequent outcome (Q27:54-58). Other warnings are through Moses to Pharaoh (Q27:7-14), to the Thamud through Salih (Q27:45-53), and more directly to the Children of Israel (Q27:76-85) who are ultimately told,

[35] Stowasser (1994): 52 citing al-Bukhari *al-Sahih*,Vol.3., Cairo (n.d.): 243

[36] Stowasser (1994): 53 citing al-Baydawi, *Anwar al-tanzil fi asrar al-tawil*, Vol. 1, (ed.) H. O. Fleischer Osnabruck (1968): 458.

[37] Stowasser (1994): 55.

[38] Shafaie (2018): 56.

'One day We will gather those of every people who reject our signs ... The word against them will be fulfilled because of their wrong doing, and they will be unable to speak' (Q27:83, 85). The Queen of Sheba dominates in a much longer, contrasting, early section that tells something of Solomon's wisdom and impact whilst giving little immediate sense of warning (Q27:15-44). Rather, the story 'begins with evidence of her (pagan) political wisdom and ends with her submission'[39] to "the Lord of the Worlds" (Q27:44). Wadud reads it as a celebration of 'both her political and religious practices', making her a positive exemplar for female leadership.[40]

Yusuf Ali helpfully observes how symbolism in the physical world points to greater wonders in the spiritual world in the stories in al-Naml.[41] Thus we are told of the hoopoe's visit to Saba and his report back to Solomon. He tells of a woman ruling there who has everything needed and sits on a great throne yet, along with her people, worships the sun evidencing that they are deceived by Satan. In response Solomon sends her a letter. This she recognises as worthy of respect (so Yusuf Ali) or, maybe, 'of noble origins' (so Jardim[42]). It summons her to visit 'in submission' (*muslimin*). Whether by magic or skilful organisation, before she arrives Solomon is able to acquire her throne and then disguise it as a ploy to discover if she one of the guided. On arrival she affirms the similarity to her throne and testifies to having submitted to God, but is then confronted with a

[39] Stowasser (1994): 65.
[40] Wadud (1999): 40
[41] Yusuf Ali (1975): 977.
[42] Georgina Jardim, 'Biblical Ruth as a qur'anic Queen of Sheba' in (eds.) Daniel J. Crowther et al., (2018): 210.

second test as she has to cross a floor which she mistakes to be a lake. This leads her to confess that she had wronged her soul and now submits (‘*aslamatu*) with Solomon to the Lord of the Worlds. Her use of ‘*aslamatu* could imply allegiance to monotheism in general or conversion to Islam. The latter would signal ‘not only … the acceptance of monotheism over polytheism or animism, but … the consistent reproach to polytheism that it served other gods in *addition* to Allah.’[43]

It is rare to come across such repeated use of the term *slm* (ie., in cognate forms) in a single surah. It is found in reference to Abraham and the People of the Book close to the heart of the second surah (Q2:128, 132, 133, 136) and likewise in reference to Jesus, Abraham, other ‘Old Testament’ prophets and the People of the Book in the third surah (Q3:52, 64, 67, 80, 84, 102). Here in al-Naml its use establishes the Queen of Sheba as a challenging counter-point to the Children of Israel (Q27:81) and validation of Muhammad as declared in the surah’s conclusion: ‘… I am commanded to be of those who submit (*muslimin*)… ‘I am only a warner’’ (Q27:91-2). Though, as Jardim’s observes, there is ‘Islamic and Jewish post-scriptural lore that seeks to subvert the powerful female image and threat the Queen of Sheba represents to male power’,[44] attention to resonances across the surah suggest that this foreign woman is especially recalled as a rebuke to the people of the Book. Indeed the story evokes a warning by Jesus recorded in the Gospel (Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31). Addressing those who ask for a miraculous sign He spoke both of the Ninevites response to Jonah’s message and

[43] *Ibid*., 211.
[44] *Ibid*.

of the Queen of the South who 'will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon …'. Both the Gospel and these qur'anic stories of foreign women celebrate the faith response of female 'outsiders'.

More exemplary mothers – Mary and her mother:

The first surah to recount the annunciation to Mary (Surah Maryam Q19) was probably revealed before those which mention the foreign women (see above). The second (Āl ʿImran Q3), which also tells of her mother and the circumstances of her birth, might just have preceded Umm Salama's question.

Mary is mentioned some thirty-four times, over seven surahs, quite often in single verses as metronymic for her son, ʿIsa, who gets referred to as Ibn Maryam. The annunciation accounts are by far the longest in which she features. Both bring together the birth of ʿIsa with that of Yahya (John the Baptist), to some extent echoing the gospel of Luke. Thus Surah Maryam opens by recalling the Lord's mercy to Zechariah, Yahya's father (Q19:1). The surah seems to be framed with punning elements; *dhikr* – recall (19:2), Zechariah / *zchr* (19:2) and concluding with *rikz* – whisper (19:98)[45]. Portions within it are also introduced with the word *dhikr*. So the story of the annunciation (Q19:16), the account of Abraham's rejection of his father's idolatry (Q19:41), Moses' calling (Q19:51), Ishmael's calling (Q19:54) and that of Idris (Q19:56). The section featuring Mary concludes with statements about ʿIsa and some of the sects who follow him

[45] Robinson (2003): 147-8.

(Q19:29-40). In ways that parallel the description of Yahya's attitude to his parents in the preceding section (Q19:14), and after the account of Mary's travails in giving birth (Q19:23), ʿIsa is described as 'kind toward his mother and not overbearing or graceless' (Q19:32). That is, the various quranic injunctions to care for parents (Q6:151, Q17:23, Q29:8) and especially mothers, because of all they experience in the birthing and early years care of their child (Q31:14 and Q46:15), are shown as fulfilled in these birth stories. Each character is shown as exemplary in their respective roles.

Both Surah Maryam and Āl ʿImran set up parallels and contrasts between the prayerful piety of Mary and of her mother, with Zechariah (Q19:8-9 with 20-21, Q3:35 with 38; 40 with 47). All we hear of Zechariah's wife is that she is barren (Q19:8; Q3:40). Āl ʿImran establishes that as guardian of Mary, Zechariah is bemused and deeply moved by evidence of the effectiveness of her prayer (Q3:37-38). This leads him to pray for a child. His words echo those of Mary's mother. She has been surprised by birthing a daughter after dedicating her womb to the Lord; being delivered of a female child she asks protection of God for her daughter, and her daughter's offspring (Q3:36). In this way the surah shows the birth of a woman as ordained by God, establishes how both Mary and her son ʿIsa 'escaped "the pricking of the devil" at birth'[46] and demonstrates the efficacy of women's prayer. Both women characters are examples of faith. Nevertheless, for some muslima the impact of lore and tradition, and perhaps descriptions of her being secluded (eg., in a chamber under Zechariah's care – Q3:37, when she

[46] Stowasser (1994): 69.

received the annunciation – Q19:17, and as she awaited the birth – Q19:22), leaves them frustrated by perceptions of a passive pious Mary.[47] In contrast, on the basis of her giving birth without sex or 'biological matter', another finds her to be a subversive exemplar who unsettles accepted categories of decency.[48] The Qur'an's evaluation is less extreme. Mary has the notable status of being addressed by God's messenger (Q3:42-51; Q 19:17) and is specifically described by him as chosen by God: 'chosen above all women' (Q3:42). In al-Tahrim (Q6612) she is also described as 'one of the *qanitin*', which as Wadud rightly observes emphasises her status amongst all the Qur'an's exemplars through use of the masculine plural form where the feminine plural would otherwise have sufficed.[49] That verse in part echoes what is said of her in Q21:93, a brief verse concluding an extended list of prophets who had faced opposition and problems (Moses and Aaron, Abraham and Lot, Noah, David and Solomon, Job, Ishmael, Idris, Dhu'l-Kifl, Jonah, and Zachariah, Q21:48-90). As the others so she is one whom Muhammad should call to mind, though the verse also affirms that her son was made 'a sign for all people' with her. One western scholar has accordingly described her as a proto-prophet.[50]

There are many aspects to references to Mary in the Qur'an. The text always refers to her with respect. Her name occurs most often with reference to her

---

[47] Nimat Hafez Barazangi. *Women's Identity and the Quran: A New Reading*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004): 39-42.

[48] Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, *Divine Words, Female Voice: Muslima Explorations in Comparative Feminist Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 150

[49] Wadud (1999): 40.

[50] Michael Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010): 147.

son, and some of those occasions are clearly to counter beliefs in his divinity, (Q4:171; Q5:17, 75, 116) and any hints of divinising her as well (Q5:75). In al-Tahrim links with her son are, however, all but ignored. It is her modesty, but also her receptiveness to truth and to scriptures (Q66:12) which makes her stand out. The depictions of the qur'anic Mary witness to there being 'no god but God', and he being 'the Exalted, the Decider' (Q3:61) who 'creates whatever he will' (Q5:17) and is 'alone the All Hearing and All Knowing one' (Q5:76). Like the story of Moses' mother, there is intimation of divine tenderness toward Mary; her cries during childbirth are met with reassurance and the miraculous provision of water and ripe dates (Q19:24). In her voice God is described at this point as 'the most merciful' (*ar-rahman*) (Q19:26).

The Median period – clarifying perspectives

Some of the references to Mary will have come into being after Umm Salama's question was asked. Others, like most of the references to women who also appear in the Bible, would already be known to the community (see Figure 1). It seems, then, that the question may have been to do with who was being addressed rather than who featured in earlier revelations. Whilst we may deduce things about women, their status before God and how they can or should practice their religion from the passages, it would seem that originally the stories were primarily geared to impacting a different audience. This changes somewhat in the Medinan period.

The wives of Muhammad feature prominently in surahs al-Nur (Q24), al-Ahzab (Q33) and al-Tahrim (Q66), which all at various points use clear forms of address. al-Ahzab (Q33) is likely the earliest of these surahs. In it the wives of Muhammad are described as the mothers of the believers (Q33:6), and at various points guidance and

regulations pertaining to them is given. Sometimes the formal addressee is the Prophet, sometimes his wives and sometimes the community of believers. Some instructions to the Mothers of the Believers are through the Prophet. Q33:28-40 contains what has been termed 'the verse of choice'[51] (Q33:28-29) after beginning 'Oh Prophet say to your wives…' He is told to place the options, of following desires for the attractions of this present life or pursuing the great rewards God has prepared for those who do good, before them. The portion then directly addresses his wives twice in succession (Q33:30-31, 32-34), underlining the choice and their particular responsibilities and privilege. Instructions not to speak in alluring ways, to stay home and not flaunt themselves are, in part, related to their home being the place where prayer is performed. The concerns are picked up again when the Prophet is told to give his wives, his daughters and other believing women further instructions (Q33:59-64) which, with preceding verses addressed to believers (Q33:53-58), form the textual basis for discussions about veiling and seclusion that continue through to today. What is clear is that at this stage in the community's growth comings, goings and interactions in the Prophet's house needed regulating. As part of this the *hijab* (variously translated 'curtain', 'screen' or 'veil') was designated as the barrier which men should not contravene. For their part the women were to ensure their outer dressing appropriately covered them.

The portion in al-Nur likewise provides regulation understood to have arisen from the behaviour of one of Muhammad's wives. The Qur'an does not provide the background story, but it is generally understood that the stipulations around witness

[51] Stowasser, (1994): 96.

and scandal-mongering were given in response to gossip about A'isha. Apparently, whilst journeying back with Muhammad and others from a military expedition, she lost a necklace when she went aside to relieve herself. The group moved on without realising she was not in her covered litter. Rumours spread when she was returned to the group by a young man who found her.[52] The rulings deal with adultery and fornication (Q24:3), soiling reputations (Q24:4-23), modesty of men and of women (Q24:30, 31) and appropriate marriage partners (Q24:26, 32). 'Those who believe' are told not to enter the homes of others without permission (Q24:27-29).

Events in the Prophet's household also lie behind the content of al-Tahrim (Q66). The lively stories provided by tradition,[53] which may relate to the 'verse of choice' (see above), can cause us to overlook ways this concise twelve verse surah not only adds to insights about Muhammad's family life and the early community, but pulls together threads that run through the earlier quranic material we have considered. The central verses remind believers to guard their families from the Fire of judgement (Q66:6) and seek the idylls of Paradise (Q66:8), and warns the disbelievers not to make excuses (Q66:7). The opening and closing portions, which begin with address to the Prophet (Q66:1, 9), enable comparison between two of Muhammad's wives (Q66:3-5) with on the one hand the wives of Noah and Lot (Q66:10) and on the other the wife of Pharaoh and Mary (Q66:11-12). For the first and only time the women from the past are described as examples, clearly mentioned so that women in the community can learn from them. From the wives of Noah and Lot the pair being rebuked for betraying

[52] Stowasser, (1994): 94-5.
[53] *Ibid*., 99-100.

a confidence are to learn that being married to a righteous servant of God profits nothing if they prove false. In contrast reference to Pharaoh's wife indicates that this woman of foreign pagan origins prayed to be saved from her husband's doings and to be received into God's mansions. By implication she and Mary, who is defined by family origins as she had no husband,[54] are received in Paradise on the basis of their independent faith.

Because of the examples used, and the initial warning sanctioning that Muhammad could divorce his wives and replace them with others 'previously married or virgins' (Q66:5), tradition arose that Pharaoh's wife (named Asya), Mary, along with Khadija and A'isha, are all 'Muhammad's wife consorts in paradise.'[55] Whilst there is no qur'anic basis for this conclusion the surah does provide a level of completion to speculation about consorts in heaven. Figure 2, below, shows the shift in language describing companions in Paradise.

Figure 2 – Companions in Paradise

Description	Early	Middle	Late	Medinan
kawā'iba atrābān (mates: referencing breasts)	Q78			
al-ḥūr al-ʿīn (maidens: referencing wide eyes)	Q52, Q56	Q37, Q44		

[54] There is contemporary scholarly discussion which suggests that the attributions 'sister of Aaron' and 'Daughter of ʿImrān' may not be due to confusion with Moses' sister, but draw on Syriac symbolism that creates association with priestly forebears, see Michael Marx, ''Glimpses of a Mariology in the Qur'an: From Hagiography to Theology via Religious-Political Debate' in (eds.) A. Neuwirth et al. *Qur'ān in Context*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), especially 553.

[55] Stowasser, (1994): 80.

qāṣirāt at-ṭarf **(maidens restraining their glances)**		Q37, Q38	Q43	
zawj / pl. azwāj **(corresponding partner or mate)**	Q78	Q36	Q43	Q2, Q3, Q4

It is possible that at some stage in the community's development, perhaps on the basis Q43:70, members had understood that their earthly spouses corresponded to their companions in Paradise and that their homes were a foretaste of heaven. In Medina however, even, or perhaps especially, in Muhammad's home, household situations were becoming more complex. In this situation, terming his wives *azwaj* (Q66:3) rather than the more usual word *imra'a* (pl. *nisā*), by which the wives of all the other prophets except that of Adam are identified, seems a fitting means of clarification. For al-Tahrim establishes that there is no guarantee that *azwaj* of the Prophet will attain to Paradise whilst indicating that women of exemplary independent faith gain access. Detail about Mary at the end of al-Tahrim (Q66:12) may also reference sexual restraint exercised by Muhammad, if that is what he had forbidden himself for a time (see Q66:1). She, then, is commended for her openness to God's Spirit and acceptance of his revelations. Muhammad, meanwhile, is freed from his misplaced vow, so can consort with his wives or divorce them. Indeed, if others in the community were constrained through ideas about vows of celibacy this surah releases them without betraying respect for Mary.

Thus al-Tahrim endorses rightly directed female agency, and acknowledges that women from outside the community may believe and so attain to Paradise. Surahs al-Mujadilah (Q58) and al-Mumtahanah (Q60), which both refer to specific women, develop these insights further. The title of al-Mumtahanah translates as 'Evaluated Women'. Believers are instructed (Q60:10) not to send back female refugees who are

leaving unbelievers, but to test them. On the basis of their oath of fealty such women are to be received into the community (Q60:12). The opening of al-Mujadilah (Q58:1) approves an appeal by 'The Woman who pleads'. From close examination of the verse and unfolding detail Jardim[56] observes the significant role played by this determined woman: practice was re-evaluated, male offenders rebuked and fresh guidance emerged all because of the reasoned complaint against her husband which she brought. This late Medinan surah shows women to be active participants within the community and agents in the revelatory process too. It is a message now located at the heart of the Qur'an.

Some concluding observations

Tracking the women mentioned in the Qur'an along a (loose) diachronic trajectory lends support for the description by Neuwirth, Jardim and others of the Qur'an as 'a canon-in-process'.[57] In contrast to the early days, in the Medinan period there are even quranic regulations shaped through female voice.

Nevertheless we have seen that, despite being identified in terms of a male relative, from the beginning individual women are clearly depicted as distinct personalities accountable for their own actions and decisions. Some, such as Mary (the prayerful) or even the Queen of Sheba (the foreign leader), provide lessons for others regardless of gender.

---

[56] Georgina Jardim, *Recovering the Female Voice in Islamic Scripture: Women and Silence*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016): especially chapter 9.
[57] *Ibid*., 98.

Focus on wives and mothers no doubt reflects the normal roles and duties of women in Muhammad's time, but also sustains a quranic perspective on the appropriate spheres of female activity. Conjugal relations are viewed warmly, but are also the focus of much regulation. Mothers are honoured and those whose stories are told, whose experiences have been ordained, receive tender care from God. Foreign women are repeatedly shown to be amongst the faithful: the community is instructed to be ready to receive them.

Interestingly, it is women from Judeo-Christian scriptures who serve as examples throughout, though it is only in the later period that the likes of Umm Salama are instructed in how to learn from them.

God and Women and Islam

> *"I was so happy when I was told that I am going to be a bride. I imagined that it will be as in the fairytales. I was thinking that I am beloved one. But reality was different. From my first day of marriage I am just a machine to increase the number of next generation"*
>
> *(JAMILYA)*

There is no identity. She is a vase where someone can put something and take it back. This is how, from generation to generation, girls are raised. Most of them don't know the whole picture of what to expect. First of all, there is a nice picture that a women called to be a partner in marriage. But after marriage the reality is that women are just a thing to use.

> *"Being a woman is a punishment by itself. There is no joy. There is no security. I don't know why God found me an unnecessary person. I don't know what I've done to be punished in a such way. The dogs have a better life; they can leave if they want".*
>
> *(ZEINEP)*

The eyes I looked at were full of tears, the lips that pronounced these words were shaking. She tried to calm herself. I saw a hatred not of men or God or of Islam, but hatred toward her 'woman being' (for her nature as a woman). So much pain and despair was in her eyes. I remembered the story of woman who was taken to Jesus to be stoned because of adultery. Jesus has no condemnation toward her. Jesus gave her a chance to start again.

> *"I look at the women in our history, they were brave, free, and courage. They have had this privilege because of their fathers, who support them, who raised them up in equality with their sons. It is very sad that our fathers preferred a different future for their daughters, making them slaves to religious principles in which there is no truth. They gave chains instead of bracelets of happiness".*
>
> *(AJAR)*

This lady was wondering why our ancestors made the choice to accept Islam? What were they thinking about at that time? What kind of veil covered their eyes? Wanting to get another woman, have they thought about what awaits their daughters? The gift from fathers should be an insurance that the girls, the daughters are accepted by them in any situation. That they have a safe place to stay alive. There are lots of examples when Jesus treats us as His daughters who deserve the best.

> *"no one can dare to say and to point me what to do. I am free. Even God. Because I made a woman. That means that I need to fight always to keep my freedom and to testify to others that the woman is not shaitan. That I am not weak and stupid. I can do the same things men do. That's why I am not married at 50 years old. If I want I will take a girl from orphanage, just to raise her up as a strong woman".*
>
> *(AINUR)*

Some women call brave those women who can stand against all religion and even God's rules. But they don't know what pain such women are carrying. Some men say that they are haram because they did not fulfill the Qur'anic injunctions for women. But

those men don't realize that the cause is actually the way they treat women. Is the way she is treated established by God?

> *"I hope that my husband will see me as his wife, not just as a cleaner, cook etc. I always try to be visible when he is at home. But I feel that I become weak and hopeless. During these 25 years of marriage I just want a smile from him, I want him to ask me how am I? what do I want? I know him and his habits, what he wants, but he doesn't know me"*
>
> *(GULZAT)*

To live but be a ghost. She has a body to satisfy her husband, she has different skills to provide him a comfortable life. She has an ability to give birth. And she has....she has nothing. What a sadness. She feels sorry for her daughters as they also are going to have the same life as hers. With what morsels does she have to find happiness?

> *"I know that it is foolish to desire your husband. But after so many years of marriage (47years) I want to go back to my young age and choose my future. I want my husband to be gentle with me. I was kidnapped and became his wife. To be honest I hate him".*
>
> *(ZINA)*

A woman who is grandmother of several grandchildren told such things. Disappointment came into her life on the very first day she became an adult. She wore hate like a dress. She wants things to have gone a different way but the time is gone.

> *"I live in a fear. I don't know how I can do something by myself. I can't trust to anyone to get help. As the religion we confess has ears everywhere. It is not right to say something about women's freedom or*

her personality. Otherwise I will be punished by Allah. My husband Is the hands of Allah. He can do everything to me. I know that it is the only way for me"

(NAZIRA)

There is no way to be saved. There is no man who can protect her. She is sure that her destiny is to be under the foot of her husband because Islam points to this clearly. I asked her: "what is the image of God?" the answer was: "The image of Allah is the cruel man, who has the whip in his hands". I told her about God the Savior who has wounds on His hands because of me. The God who protects me as a woman, who fights for me every single day. She cried. I hope that she will come to that God who gives a freedom, equipping us with truth.

I know that most of us met these women.

They are around us. They cry out but we don't hear them as their cry is in the deep of their hearts. The hearts which are closed and covered by the pain, by the shame, traditions, by the "truth". Sitting with them and drinking our milky tea was a time when I realized how Jesus is precious to me. I said 'drinking a milky tea' but we drank our tears. Tears of hopeless life. I asked them: "why can't you choose another life?" the answer was: "The fear of rejection, the shame. Better to stay as a victim rather than to be ashamed. There is no place they can go with children. The hatred of children would be the result of their choice".

The Love of God is a mockery or punishment for women.

God created women as a toys for men. And at the same time there is a word ***LOVE*** which contradicts God, women and love itself. What is LOVE if the creator made us

women, as an instrument for pleasure? Who is God when he is so quick to punish us women, for nothing? Who is the woman? Where is her place? So many questions are followed with anger, frustration, pain and disbelief. Even in the heaven women will be satisfying the men. So than, what is Allah's love for us? It is like a candy to lure a person into the nets. It is sweet but when it ends the taste also disappears. Only an illusion remains. It is scary for women to walk in such love as it is like a fog. You don't see where you go. One lady says that: "the sin is to be born a woman."

There are lots of songs about love. But who knows what it is when there is no source of it? Love is just a collection of pleasant words and sayings.

As there is no idea of sin in Islam, God (A...) can do what he wants and when he wants. But at the same time there is a punishment for sin and no grace or reward for righteous people.

The woman in Islam.

Who is she? She is the one has no voice. She must obey someone always. She has no life as she dedicated to by others. She can be used and thrown away. She has no identity, no personality. Her failure is a shame for her family, but her achievements belong to her family (husband, father). She is alone. She is alone even when she gets married and has children. She stays alone with all her fears. Therefore, a woman in Islam is slowly but rapidly sinking. And even seeing other women next to them who also go with her to the bottom, who are already knee-deep in the water, up to their throats, or someone just stepping on the water, at arm's length, they can't help each other. But what are they doing? They encourage each other to go further to the bottom. It's very scary. Why can't they support each other? Because there are norms that must be adhered to, there are traditions, there is Islam. But in Islam there is no

God. And what can she do? Nothing. It remains for her to die slowly. But what does this death bring again? It brings nothing but death itself. Nothing but disappointment and hopelessness.

Where is God? He is everywhere but not with women.

God who is the Creator of all creature is the One who cares of women's feelings and emotions. He is the One who wants and can heal and restore our broken lives.
I could share the Gospel of Jesus with some of them, whom we, women can trust. Some of them ask questions and our dialogue is still continuing. I hope they will have the Light of life. I hope and pray that they can feel and see the Love.

I am just so grateful to my Jesus who invited me to be His and belong to Him. I am so grateful that I was heard by God Himself.

Teaching the Loving kindness and
Goodness (hesed) of God

Whilst my Muslim friends will not use the language of sin, get a group of women together for a party or an event and their talk will be peppered with what comes across to my ears as a throw away exhortation: "Astaghfirullah" or "I seek forgiveness from Allah". This expression is often followed by a wry smile or even a ripple of laughter. I have come to understand this as an admission that "I shouldn't have done it, but I did". When I have opportunity to share more intimately with one or two Muslim friends they will talk about the heart's desire to be forgiven and the anxiety of not knowing until death whether this forgiveness has been extended to them. It would be easy for me to jump in and lead my friends through a conversation and discussion on what we Christians term "assurance of salvation" but am I really hitting the spot here when I do that? Talking about Jesus taking our sin on Himself on the cross thus giving us forgiveness of sin and securing eternal life for us when we repent and accept Him into our life has little meaning for Muslims. Why would it when, in Islam, the gravity of sin is not recognized[58] and when 'it is Allah who decides who will be saved and who will be damned.'

Of Fear, Forgiveness and the Loving Kindness of God

Over the many years in which I have spent time with Muslim women, better understanding the rhythms, responsibilities and worries of their lives I have come to a

[58] In Islam sin is seen as a forgetting of the primordial covenant Allah made with all humanity to obey him. The task of the prophets is to remind the believers of this covenant and to warn un-believers of the consequences of their forgetting.

growing conviction of the value of sharing with my friends more of who God is rather than what God does. I've begun to focus more on describing God's character rather than on topics such as sin, repentance or salvation. A longing has grown in my heart that my Muslim friends would come to a deep experience and understanding of the loving-kindness and goodness of God.

The Hebrew word most often translated *"lovingkindness"* is *hesed*, which literally means "*covenant loyalty*." Most English translations of the Bible substitute more common English words such as *faithfulness*, *unfailing love*, *mercy*, or *good favour*. All of these are viable substitutions, but, as with many Hebrew words, *hesed* has no exact match in English. As we read the Bible, we need to remember that God's *hesed* is all of these, all at once; and it is out of this foundational basis of His character that God chooses to relate to humanity. Many places in Scripture speak of the lovingkindness of the Lord.[59] Lovingkindness is part of who God is; He delights in showing lovingkindness[60] and we praise Him for it[61]

Recently, in the small Monday night Bible study group with new believers out of Islam, we had a discussion reviewing the sermon given the day before on the gift of eternal life which Jesus spoke of repeatedly in John 6[62]. Most in the group had understood that through faith and trust in Jesus we are rescued from the danger of hell-fire into life forever with God. "But what is the benefit to our life now?" asked one who has thrown off Islamic identity in frustration and dissatisfaction and is cautiously

---

[59] Exodus 20:6; 34:6-7: Deut 7:12: 2 Chron 1:8; Psalm 31:6

[60] Micah 7:18

[61] Psalm 138:2

[62] Jesus intimated 7 times that he was the source of eternal life

but seriously exploring following Jesus. This led us on to explore Jesus' words in John 10:10 "I have come that they might have life in all its fullness" As group members shared together of the freedom from fear, the presence of God's Holy Spirit within us, the comfort which His loving kindness affords us there was an aha moment in the mind of our enquiring friend: " Ah, Islam tells us that we must be ready to die but Jesus is saying that when we follow Him we can be ready to **truly live.**"

Yes, there is clear distinction here between an understanding of God who is capricious in nature, who has put on this earth to test us, and who decides our fate at death - who will be saved and who will be damned; and God whose steadfast love and kindness is seen in a proactive faithfulness towards us which is inclined to bless us. This realization is truly life-giving. Having attended a Prophets Stories' group[63] where, over 10 weeks, we had dialogued on the commonalities and differences of the stories of 7 prophets common in the Qur'an and the Bible, a Sudanese friend was able to express: "t appears that God in the Qur'an is always angry but God in the Bible is love." When, a couple of years later, this same friend saw advertising of the Prophets' Stories activity being offered again she shared with me the change that this knowledge had made in her daily life: " I used to be afraid of all sorts of things – and especially when my daughters were sick. But now, because I know God is love, I hardly ever feel that fear. And, the funny thing is" she said, almost conspiratorially "I don't think I even deserve it". My friend is on the journey to discovering God's love, His beneficent power over fear and His grace for her.

---

[63] Prophets' Stories dialogue resource see http://prophetstories.org.uk/

For Volf, there is an important distinction in the way God's nature is understood by Muslims and by Christians. In Islam God is loving and does loving acts in response to those who obey Him. But Christians can be clear that God is Love in His very essence. "To say that God is love is not merely to describe the nature of God's activity toward the world. It is to name the character of God's eternal being, to describe the fountain from which the divine loving flows" [64] Traced throughout the Old Testament and fulfilled in the coming of Jesus in the New, "God's eternal and unchanging love is the foundation stone on which everything else is built – the gift of creation with its myriad delights, the gift of God's coming into the world to redeem humanity from evil, and the gift of eternal and glorified life" [65] This can only be understood in the light of the Christian understanding of God who is a community of self-giving Love in Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So can we talk in terms of discipling our friends towards a new understanding of who God is? In a story about the patriarchs we see a lone woman in the desert and in distress. God calls her by name and then proceeds to engage in conversation with her about her plight. On receiving both instruction and blessing from God, Hagar, in her response, gains the honour of the only woman in Scripture who names God: "You are the God who sees me." (Gen. 16:13) She has experienced herself to be truly known and this turns her fear to trust and future flourishing[66]. How do we help our friends experience this beautiful reality for themselves?

---

[64] P165

[65] *Allah*. Miroslav Volf p.172

[66] https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/sight-embrace-and-flourishing/

Modelling confidence in prayer because of his loyal *hesed* love

We know that prayer is an activity which forms the structure of each day for Muslim people and that even when our women friends are excluded from praying the salat during times of impurity they are able to perform du'a or informal prayer**.** And yet there are often times when one hears expressions which betray a lack of confidence that their prayers are enough or that their prayers are reaching God.

All over the Psalms and throughout the Old Testament stories we come to see that God is a prayer-answering God[67]. Such are the stories of Hannah, Ruth and Naomi – all women who carried their burdens to God in prayer and saw Him respond in miraculous ways. Some of us will have had the joy of our friends approaching us to ask that we pray for them: "your prayers work" or "your prayers are powerful" has been the refrain. I find it helpful at that point to share how Jesus, when teaching his companions to pray,[68] spoke of God as being our Father figure from whom good gifts could be expected. This, I will explain, has helped shape my understanding of God as being one who is more than ready to hear us and answer our prayers. The story Jesus told of the persistent widow, who only got what she requested because the judge was tired of her pestering him, could be offered as a contrast to God who loves to hear us as his loving kindness and goodness moves Him to bless us. Modelling language as we use opportunities our friends give us to pray for/with them may grow a confidence in them to ask for good gifts from our Good God.

---

[67] Psalm 20 Psalm 65:2: 145:18; Psalm 91:15

[68] in Luke 11: 9-13 Matt.7:7-11

God's *hesed* love is generous and limitless

The Bible often describes God's hesed as abounding and abundant[69]. It is generous and limitless[70]; sufficient for each of us and for all of us. The fact that we can never reach the limit of God's hesed directly challenges the world-view of limited good in which many Muslim women operate. Anyone who is seen to have more than their share of the finite good that there is in the world threatens the equilibrium of the community and so is exposed to the possibility of destructive envy on the part of another. I've seen how many of my friends line their new born babies' eyes with Kohl to make them look unattractive and so protect them from the eye of envy; how they hide their joy at the achievements of their children and their pleasure in having, themselves, succeeded in personal goals. This world view and its ramifications robs people of fully enjoying life, manipulates them and keeps them captive to fear of being prey to circulating evil forces which are ready to make their presence felt. Women may feel absolutely powerless in these situations and engage in folk Islamic practices in order to garner power in the face of the possibility of evil visiting them[71]. Rather than decry these practices let's find ways of speaking to them of the hesed of God which is undeserved kindness from One in power to one who is weak. God bends down to give unmerited kindness to us in our weakness. Let's tell them stories of Jesus' healing power which overturned the grip of a fever and even death. Let's place our hands over them/their sick child and pray in the power of that healing name. When we are given lucky

[69] Numbers 14:18
[70] Psalm 57:10

talismans let's accept the gift, discuss where true power lies and speak of the power of our Good God to do good to us[72]. This may open eyes to see that God's hesed love and power could be available for them, too[73].

We can be sustained in suffering by God's *hesed*.

Lina, from Syria, who has had to flee to the west due to conflict in her country, wrings her hands as she talks of the horrific journey she, her husband and young son endured. My Iraqi friend, Rihab, sighs and stifles tears as she absorbs the implication of her 7 year old son's diagnosis of chronic illness. Rashida, from Pakistan, stays behind after English class is over to quietly explain the reason for her absence, yet another miscarriage. When, in each situation, I seek to respond with words of sympathy the common refrain I hear from them is 'alhumdillah' or' may God be praised'. As I sit with Khadija, my Moroccan friend, who has suddenly and unexpectedly lost her husband, there are whispered words repeated to her as each mourners arrives: *"sabr wa iman".* Literally translated "patience and faith", this phrase is used more as an admonition not to question the difficulty being faced but to endure the trial which Allah has sent with patience. This belief is rooted in a theology that God created the world with evil and death in it, fully intending that we would suffer in our lives, and that this is a test which is set for us. My friends talk about their hope that they will "pass this test" and explain to me that "we say *'alhumdillah'* because we have to accept whatever God wills". I think there is another opportunity here to share of Hope/trust, rather than

[72] Psalm 119:68
[73] Psalm 147:11

mere endurance in suffering. Our Christian Hope is enabled by a deep knowledge of the goodness and loving kindness of God. Here is an opportunity to speak again of our own experience of God's hesed love – his steadfast love – which doesn't give us a pass on suffering. Rather, it holds us IN suffering. Personal testimony of knowing God's love and faithfulness through a time of trial can be powerful. Within the context of an honest conversation about the concerns I myself might have for my children, my health, future or finances I've found it useful to talk about the discipline of choosing to live in the environment of our loving, generous God rather than under the dictatorship of my own poor needs; so learning to live under blessing when faced with anxious thoughts and foreboding fear[74].

Hesed love which restores honour /lifts from shame

Stories of Jesus' interactions with women enable us to encourage those Muslim friends who carry around with them a sense of shame derived from ascribed shame, embodied shame or the female universal of menstruation.[75] The story of Jesus healing the bleeding woman, and the way that Jesus asked for her to identify herself as the one who touched Him so that power went out from Him, mayat first sight feel indiscreet of Jesus. However, when we understand that Jesus did this to reinstate her into community, we begin to understand that the crowd were witnessing that not only was she healed but that she was to be recognized by all present as having been healed; and so re-instated back into community. The woman who wept at Jesus feet and wiped

[74] Lamentations 3:22

[75] https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2018/01/03/women-shame/

them with her hair is acclaimed by Jesus. Her 'welcome' of Him is over and above any hospitality that he had been offered by his religious hosts and Jesus declares that wherever the gospel is spoken of her story will be shared. In these few words Jesus raises this woman, in the face of the disapproving gaze of the men around her, from shame to honour. An act of lovingkindness, indeed.

We're called to show *hesed*.

My Somali friend and I enjoy meeting up together once a month to walk around a local beauty spot. As we walk the conversation invariably turns to our faith experiences. She's also part of a wider friendship group of 7 of us – 6 of whom are Christian. She has noticed a kindness amongst us and is intrigued. When she and I met recently we returned to the topic of kindness but in the context of the alarming (to her) news that some people from her country were becoming Jesus followers. "It's this dangerous kindness of Christians which first attracts people" she, only half-jokingly, said. A colleague has spoken of a conversation with a Pakistani friend who says she has been deeply impressed by the kindness of Christian people she's come across who offer support, not expecting anything in return. Another colleague was visiting the home of an Afghan family when the mother asked her son the meaning of the English word kindness. He replied "you know, it's how Christian people are." What each is recognizing is the fruit of God's presence in us and the work of his Spirit shaping our character. We need to understand such comments as more than just flattery, taking them as opportunities to speak of our understanding of God whose hesed love we have experienced and in response want to share with others. Indeed, Scripture expects that

we bless others[76] and the apostles demonstrate for us the authority we are given to pass on blessings in Jesus name.

Forgiveness and rescue because of God's *hesed*.

So how DO we engage with Muslim friends who glibly cry *"Astafigullah"* whilst in company with their friends? Some may have told us, within the safety of a personal conversation, that they present this earnest cry before God when alone in their room, crying out to God for forgiveness on the night of power during Ramadan. I have found that people respond well to the image and language of rescue of which there are so many biblical examples: "*Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love (hesed).*" Psalm 44:26; Psalm 103 is full of the language of God's hesed love – compassion, faithfulness, steadfast love - which moves Him to intervene on behalf of loved ones and to rescue those who call on Him; "You, Lord are forgiving and good, abounding in love (hesed) to all who call on you" Psalm 86:5; God, as a compassionate Father, reaching out to us in the person and work of Jesus to forgive us beyond measure (v3,8-12), to redeem (v4) and to restore (v5). The stories of the Old Testament speak loudly of rescue: God provided the boat for Noah's rescue, the whale for Jonah's rescue, the blood over the door sill for the rescue of the first born son from death, the parting of the sea for the rescue of the people of Israel, and a ram for the rescue of Abraham's son from death. From sharing these things it's not too difficult to move on to the mention of John the Baptist, or Yahya (as known by Muslim people) who pointed his own companions to Jesus and said "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin

[76] 1 Peter 3:9

of the world" and then talk of Jesus, the pure and sinless one, as the one who rescues us from unclean hearts full of sin and who leads us from death into life. It's not difficult, but I find it needs regular revisiting and regular and persistent sharing as for my Muslim friends this good news is almost too good to be true.

Extended to all?

Hesed, or lovingkindness, as it relates to the character of God, is most often used to describe God's heart toward those who are His own. It is the love of Covenant Love. Discussion by Christian women engaging with women from an Islamic heritage has shown that some would wonder whether the promises of God's hesed love made available to us are made only for those within the covenant? In response, I find plenty of evidence in both the Old and New Testaments of women from outside the covenant community to whom God reveals His hesed love and goodness. God speaks words of comfort and consolation to Hagar, an Egyptian bonds woman: "the Lord has heard your cry[77]" and goes on to make promises of blessing for her future through her son[78]. Hesed is one of the key words controlling the book of Ruth whose story traces a Moabite woman, who experiences the hesed love of God in several ways, to the extent that she becomes an ancestor in the covenantal line to Jesus. The Syro-Phonecian woman who pleaded before Jesus for the health of her demon-possessed daughter experienced both His loving and affirming response to her initial (some would say inappropriate and bold approach) to Him and His healing power. In a short, but clear, study of God's heed

[77] Genesis 21:17,18
[78] Genesis 16:11,12

blessings, as set out in Psalm 67 and in Ephesians 1, Dale[22] shows how the blessings of fertility, fruitfulness and flourishing[79] and forgiveness of sins and redemption[80] is there for peoples of all the nations. In both passages of Scripture the result of this blessing will be that God will be honoured by all.

I think I am seeing this in the life of a dear friend. A Turkish single parent for whom life is filled with struggle and with whom I walked for over 12 years, recently shared with me an experience she'd had when she felt that God had cleared a space in the clouds in the sky so that He could look at her. And in that gaze she knew that she was loved. For now, for her, that is enough. Like the experience of my Sudanese friend at the beginning of this piece, she is finding that being touched by God's hesed love is making a difference to her every day. Neither have come to a "saving faith" but my prayer is that as I continue to rehearse, live out and offer them stories, words of blessing and discussion on the goodness of God, who gives and gives and gives again, I will be working to create for my friends a template for building truth narratives of God who is, indeed, Love and who invites them to step into this covenant community of those who enjoy His hesed love.

[79] Psalm 67
[80] Ephesians 1: 3 ff

The Triune God and our
Muslim friends

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

The oneness of God – both in uniqueness and in supremacy is a common belief for Christian and Muslim people alike. And yet it is also one of the key points of difference between us. One of the core beliefs for Muslims is that Allah's oneness is a simple unity. One of the core beliefs for followers of Jesus is that God's oneness is complex, he is 3 persons yet one God. This is more than a different understanding of God. It is integral to our faith and life. Our faith would be meaningless without God being the triune God. God is the saving, loving & missional God because he is Father, Son and Spirit. Our relationship with God is only possible because God is triune. The distinctives of our faith are based on the nature of our triune God.

And yet as we talk with our Muslim friends about this magnificent God accusations of worshipping three gods abound.

We don't fully understand the Godhead let alone be able to explain it to a Muslim and so the temptation is to keep silent. Perhaps we may do some fancy footwork to avoid the question or explain it away as unimportant to avoid offending, confusing or shutting down the conversation. However, in doing this we not only hide what we truly believe, we fail to give our friend a true picture of Jesus, of God and of the gospel. We hide from her the essential reason for following Jesus.

How ought a Biblical understanding of the triune God influence our practice as we seek to introduce our Muslim friends to the Lord Jesus Christ?

In this article I will discuss the role of the trinity in our lives and on our mission as we speak of Jesus with our Muslim friends.

The Place of the Trinity in Our Lives

That God is Father Son and Spirit is core to our identity and life as followers of Jesus. It is only because God is Father, Son and Spirit that we are who we are and do what we do.

Creation was a trinitarian activity (Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-5). Jesus' incarnation was only possible as the Father willed it, the Spirit enabled it and the Son was willing to take on human flesh (Luke 1:26-38; John 1:14; Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus' ministry was authenticated by Father and Spirit (Matthew 3:13-4:1, 17:1-8; Mark 1:9-13, 9:2-8; Luke 3:21-22, 4:1, 9:28-36). He spent much time in prayer with the Father and taught and did only what the Father told him (John 5:19-23). In fact, Jesus was one with the Father so there was no room for error (John 10:30, 14:6,9). He displayed God's character to us so that we could actually know God (John 1:14; 5:22-23; Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus' death was his decision, enabled by the Spirit as an act of submission to the Father's will (Hebrews 9:14). His resurrection was an act of Father, Son and Spirit (John 10:17; Philippians 2:5-10; Acts 2:24, 32, Romans 1:4; 8:11; 1 Peter 3:18). As Jesus leaves the earth the Father sends his Spirit to continue the work of convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgement - all of which relate to the world's response to Jesus as the returning Son of the Father (John 16:7-11).

God has acted to draw us to himself by defeating death and sin in the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son empowered by Father and Spirit. We only know this to be true because of the work of God's Spirit. We only continue to

know and grow as a child of God as the Spirit teaches us, sanctifies us and shapes us by God's word which speaks of the eternal Word (John 16:13-15).

In the incarnation Jesus was literally 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23; John 1:14) and after his ascension God indwells us individually and collectively by His Spirit. God is indeed in us and with us.

We are now children of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by the work of the Spirit in our hearts and minds.

Jesus repeatedly talks of the unity Father, Son and Spirit enjoy in eternity and his prayer is that we too will be unified in them and be unified as a church just as Father, Son and Spirit are (John 15:4,5,8; 17:20-26; Philippians 2:1-11).

Our core identity as individuals and as a church springs from God's identity as three yet one; perfectly unified in purpose yet with different roles to play, unity in diversity.

We are the family of God, God's house; his building; the bride of Christ – built together by God's Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). And the Father continues to draw people into his family through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son by His Spirit. As the family of this triune, missional God we share his missional heart.

We live, we love, we serve, we forgive, we repent, we pray because God is triune. We only know him because he is relational and is truly with us by His Spirit. He is not a distant god isolated in his glory. We can pray freely to him because his Spirit prompts us and because the Spirit and Son intercede for us (Romans 8:9-11, 26-27, 34). We love even those who might be strangers to us or even enemies because God is love (1 John 4:14, 16, 19).

Disciples of Jesus love. (John 13:34-35; 15:12-14). This is essence of the Father, Son and Spirit in their unity and in their service of one another and of us. Love. God has given this essence to us. We love because he first loved us.

All that God, Father, Son and Spirit is he is making us to be because he lives in us and shapes our mind and heart.

And so we go into all the world to make disciples because that is the heart and purpose of Father, Son and Spirit. Our desire is to see people welcomed into God's reunited family by the work of the Spirit through Christ.

God's triune identity is the reason we are who we are. God's triune identity is the reason for our mission.

The Place of the Trinity in our Ministry to our Muslim Friends.

Do We Have to Speak about it?

The triune nature of God is key to who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. It is why we want to seek the lost. How highly ought it feature in our conversations with our Muslim friends?

My first memories of learning about God were as a 5 year old at Sunday school. I learnt stories of Jesus from the New Testament and stories of God from the Old Testament. I automatically connected Jesus with God – perhaps because of the way the Sunday school teacher connected all the stories together. It was only as I got older that I explored the concept of the trinity...but by then, I didn't need to be convinced of its truth. God as Father, Son and Spirit was someone I knew and had experienced. From what I knew of Jesus, it made sense. From what I knew of how God had acted in history to make me his daughter the triune God not only made sense, it was essential to me knowing Him, being forgiven, being made holy.

For our Muslim friends who haven't experienced life with God in them and with them God as Father, Son and Spirit is heresy.

For those who don't have a background of hearing Old and New Testament Bible stories, that God is triune doesn't make sense.

Let's face it ... it doesn't make sense to us either, but we have experienced its truth and so we are convinced.

So, do we dare try to explain it as we understand it or do we avoid the language of Father, Spirit and Son? Do we explain these terms away in order to avoid the issue or should we simply shower our friend with stories of Jesus in the hope she'll be so attracted to him she won't ask, and pray that one day she will understand?

Yes and No.

We do want to keep that conversation going and continue to stoke the interest in Jesus as we tell stories of his authority, power and love. We want our friend to see that Jesus is the one who gives hope and peace. And so we don't want to throw in a grenade of 'Trinity' that could close the interest forever. And it is true that as we spend time telling story sets from creation to Christ God's big picture and plan can become clear and our friend can decide to follow Jesus without knowing or understanding all the details about him.

Sarah was part of a discussion group made up of Muslim and Christian women. Over several years we discussed stories of Jesus and stories spanning from Genesis to the resurrection. We didn't avoid the deity of Jesus or the presence of the Holy Spirit... we just didn't dwell on it. At one point Sarah decided to follow Jesus. When we were reading the Bible together 3 years later, Sarah said "but

Jesus isn't God...!" We read a few more passages together including John 1; Revelation 1; John 14:8-10, 20:26-29. It was a wonderful growth spurt for her. Had she truly been a follower of Jesus before this? Absolutely! This new awareness was simply helping her join all the dots that were previously disconnected. It helped everything she had heard before make sense.
I suspect this is the path many of our friends take. Praise God for it!

At the same time, consider the things we talk about with our Muslim friend, the stories we commonly tell her. Then consider the things we want to talk about with our Muslim friend; the things that would speak into her life and attract her to Jesus; the things that would keep pulling her toward the God we know and love. They are all intimately bound up with the fact that God is three persons yet one God.

What We Need to Say

I have observed that some of the important things in Muslim women's lives concern purity; intimacy with God; honour, belonging &identity; power in life especially over spirits. (see WWS blogs). When we speak of how Jesus speaks to these issues we often have fruitful conversations.

How do we address each of these with our Muslim friends? We focus a lot on Jesus Christ as the perfect man, miraculously drawing people to God. However, unless we also share the deity of Jesus Christ (the Eternal Word, Creator, Wisdom and Son and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit) the conversation remains the word of one prophet against another.

1. Purity.

My Muslim friends ask me “do you do *wudu*?”, “why aren’t you worried about being clean before God?”

She doesn’t understand that we know we are unclean and need to be purified to be able to come into God’s presence. We need to be pure not just to pray but to have life as God intended it, now and forever. Water cannot achieve it, not can intention. We can only be truly purified by a pure one. Jesus Christ is the means only because he is THE pure one, God himself come as human. It is only the Son who could take our impurity, shame and sin onto himself and give us his purity, honour and righteousness to make us truly pure as God himself is. This is essential if we are to live with God, and God with us. It cost God dearly that the incarnate Son had to die to grant us purity but that is the extent of God’s love (Father, Son and Spirit’s love) for us. At the same time, he is the eternal Son, and so he rose from death, having the victory over death itself.

As I talk with my Muslim friend about purity, I want her to know that I agree with her. We must be pure to approach God. While we can purify ourselves symbolically (wudu for Muslims, ritual baths and sacrifices for ancient Jews) it is only a symbol. How can this purity be real and eternal? We can’t do it ourselves. God himself must do it. And so I speak of Jesus who, we agree, is the perfect one. He is the one who exchanges his purity and honour for our impurity and shame. We see this throughout his life e.g. in the stories of Jairus’ daughter and the woman with an issue of blood (Mark 5:21-43); Healing of the man with many demons (Mark 5:1-20) Jesus

the Messiah's mission to die (Mark 8:27-38); the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-57).

2. *Nearness to God.*

The intimacy we enjoy with God is not simply a bonus because we call ourselves 'Christian". It is God's purpose for humankind – to be with his people; to dwell in his people. The tabernacle and temple were symbols of the reality only realised when 'the Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, full of grace and truth." John 1:14.
Only when the incarnate Son lived among humankind was this realised. Only after his death and resurrection and ascension was it fully realised, when God's Spirit came to live within his people, individually and collectively. It will be ultimately realised when we are with Father, Son and Spirit forever in eternity.

This is what I want to share with my friends. I won't use the term 'Trinity' but I will share the reality. I will tell them that I know God (not just his will) and He knows me.

I will tell them I know God because He is in me. He comforts and sustains and gives me his peace and joy and hope because His Spirit lives in me. I feel joy even when I am sad because I know God is walking with me. I will share the story of Nicodemus (John 3) with my friends to show them it is God's spirit that gives new life; and the story of the Woman at the Well in John 4 to teach them that Jesus himself gives the water for life.

It is only because of who Jesus Christ is – the incarnate Son, that we can have confidence that God hears us when we pray. When I pray for my friends, I want them to know that God hears me and answers my prayer because I pray in Jesus' name. Because I follow him and have been cleansed by him, Jesus and I joined together so as I pray it's as if Jesus himself is praying.

I can also share Jesus' prayer for unity (John 17:20-26) showing the essential unity of Father, Son and Spirit as well as God's desire for all his people to be united in him and with each other.

3. *Honour & Identity.*

It is because the Spirit of God is in me that my identity first and foremost is that I am part of God's family, a child of God. And this belonging is secure so I am filled with hope and joy even when life is hard, even when I am sad.

I am always the daughter of God, exalted and honoured (Eph 1: 3-6, 2:6). Being a daughter of God is my identity so when I pray for my friends, I address God as 'My Father' (as Jesus taught me to in Matt 6:9).

When asked 'Why do you do what you do?' I try to communicate that it's all about bringing honour to the one I belong to. It's all about God himself empowering me and changing me to be able to honour and obey him. It is about me loving God and wanting to honour him.

I seek to live up to the family name and so I seek to copy Jesus in all I do (Rom 6:1-11). When Jesus rose from the dead, I rose with him. I have new life as the Holy Spirit lives in me and am forever connected with the

eternal Son. And so I have life now and forever. I know how to live because he has shown me and taught me. I know how to live because God's Spirit living in me directs me, shapes me, rebukes me; encourages me. God is with me directing my steps.

To answer the oft repeated comment "it's easy for you. You just ask to be forgiven and then can live however you want" we need to explain how unthinkable this is. Why? Because of the intimate relationship we have with God. He lives in me by His Spirit, he is my Father, the head of my family and that I am bound to Jesus Christ.

I was at a new brother's baptism on a beach. All his believing friends were from different churches. We didn't know each other. His Muslim friend was there too. When she saw us greeting each other and talking together she asked me "Are you all one family?" I said "well, yes and no! Most of us are meeting for the first time but as followers of Jesus we are all children of God. We share His Spirit who binds all followers of Jesus Christ together as one family. We are brothers and sisters and God is our Heavenly Father."

4. Power not Fear.

I often tell the story of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11) where Jesus prays ""*Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me*." or the story where Jesus feeds the 5000 (Matthew 14; John 6) where *"he looked up towards heaven and blessed the*

food" or *"he gave thanks to God".* My Muslim friend invariably says "yes he did this miracle by Allah's permission".

Sadly, if we let our friends believe this, they will not grasp the full power of the Lord Jesus and their access to that power, which is what many Muslim women are striving for. It might only take a question to unsteady their resolve. "Is Jesus asking God for anything here?"

Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son who raises the dead, forgives, heals, orders nature, creates, commands evil spirits and casts judgement as he chooses because he is the creator God. Jesus prays, thanks God and does what the Father has told him not because he is asking permission but to demonstrate the unity between Father, Son and Spirit.

This is the difficult thing for our Muslim friends to understand as the Qur'an itself states "No son did God beget, nor is there any god along with Him: (if there were many gods), behold, each god would have taken away what he had created, and some would have lorded it over others!" Surah 23.91 (Transl. Abdullah Yusuf Ali).

The incarnate Son submits to the Father's will but in no way does that imply inferiority or a need for permission to act. In fact, Jesus the incarnate Son has the authority of the eternal Son (John 5:21-23). The Jews understood that in what Jesus was doing and saying he was claiming equality with God (John 5:18). What all of it shows is the perfect unity Jesus spoke of in John 17.

And once we understand that, the power that Jesus displayed and promises to his people Is breathtaking.

Jesus speaks and acts on his own authority. And so I speak frequently of Jesus power over all things including evil and our failures and sin as I tell stories of the Paralytic in Mark 2 or of Legion in Mark 5; of Jesus calming the Storm in Mark 4 and of Jesus on the cross with the two thieves in Luke 23:39-43.

When I am asked outright "Why do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" I need to have an answer. As well as clarifying what they mean by 'Son of God" my answer needs to be clear and will always include telling one of these aforementioned stories so that they can daw the conclusions I have.

The same truths are present in many of the stories we tell, albeit slightly veiled to those who don't know the creator God of the Old Testament. When Jesus calms the storm, it is reminiscent of God bringing order out of chaos in Genesis 1, Job or the Psalms. When Jesus feeds the crowds, he is pointing us to God's provision to Israel in the desert (Numbers). The same truths are present when Jesus identifies himself as the 'I Am' when he states 'I am the good shepherd,' 'I am the light of the world', 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the gate', 'I am the living water,' etc. At some point, I want my friend to understand this.

I was part of a story telling group made up of Muslim and Christian women for a few years. Over this time we told many different sets of stories including one that swept through the Old Testament from Genesis through to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. As we told the story of Jesus' crucifixion I was preparing for the objections. But they didn't come. Instead came the question, "Why did he **have** to die?"

"Why did God **make** him suffer?" "Isn't that cruel of God?" It is only in the light of God who is Father, Son and Spirit can this make any sense.

The previous stories had prepared our friends for the fact that Jesus would suffer and die. Now they were ready to hear why Jesus. They understood that the sacrifice of a mere man or woman wouldn't achieve anything. They understood perfect obedience was impossible for mere humans. It had to be God himself taking the shame, being the sacrifice because only then would justice and mercy be served.

So how do I Speak of the Trinity with my Muslim Friends?

I speak to my friends of how God addresses their concerns. I speak of how God, Father, Son and Spirit speaks to their hearts' desires. I don't avoid the true nature of God because only in his true nature can he address their needs.

I don't want to put unnecessary barriers in our way so I will speak of God in the stories he has given us, often leaving them with questions and ideas to ponder. I bear testimony to the presence of God in my life and allow them to observe it.

I answer their questions openly – but always challenging my friends to read the Scriptures and draw their own conclusions. Where I can meet regularly to consider the story of God in our world from Creation to Christ I will do that too so that like me in my Sunday School class, they will come to believe in God who must be Father, Son and Spirit.

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

[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,

[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..' (Qur'an 7:180).

'He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the best names.' (Qur'an 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,

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

[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.

References

Barlas, A. (2002). *"Believing Women in Islam":Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Karachi: Sama Editorial and Publishing Services.

Buergener, E. (n.d.). *'Becoming a True Muslim': Syrian Women's Journey to Devoutness*. Unpublished Thesis. Theology and Religion. Univeristy of Birmingham.

Dale, M. (2016). *Shifting Allegiances: Networks of Kinship and of Faith*. Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock.

Dale, M. (2018). Dhikr: in the heart of faith.

Duderija, A. (2011). *Constructing a Religiously Ideal "Believer" and "Woman" in Islam: Neo-traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslims' Methodis. of Interpretation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hidayatullah, A. A. (2014). *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hoefstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1). https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014. *Online Readings in psychology and Culture*.

Joseph, S. (1994). Brother/Sister Relationships: Connectivity, Love, and Power in the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Lebanon. *American Ethnologist, 21*(1), 50-73.

Joseph, S. (1999a). Brother-Sister Relationships: Connectivity, Love, and Power in the Reporduction of Patriarchy in Lebanon. In S. Joseph (Ed.), *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self and Identity*: Syracuse University Press.

Joseph, S. (1999b). Searching for Baba. In S. Joseph (Ed.), *Intimate Selving in Arab Families; Gender, Self, and Identity*: Syracruse Univeristy Press.

Joseph, S. (Ed.) (1999c). *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self and Identity*: Syracuse University Press.

Lamptey, J. T. (2018). *Divine Words, Female Voices: Muslima Explorations in Comparative Feminist Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lamrabet, A. (2018). *Women and Men in the Qur'an*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mahmood, S. (2012). *Politics of Piety* (Second ed.). Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Shaikh, S. d. (2019). Allah, hidden treasures, and the Divine Feminine.

Stowasser, B. F. (1994). *Women in the Qur'an., Traditions and Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Yuval Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the Politics of Belonging. *Patterns of PRejudice, 40*(3), 197 - 214. doi:DOI: 10.1080/00313220600769331

When Women Speak...