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The Cambridge Companion to Sufism

Edited by Lloyd Ridgeon

Book DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139087599>

Online ISBN: 9781139087599

Hardback ISBN: 9781107018303

Paperback ISBN: 9781107679504

Chapter

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Chapter DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139087599.004>

Cambridge University Press



Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women

Laury Silvers¹

There is a significant obstacle to writing a history of early Sufi women: women are substantially missing from the major sources. The texts that have come to define the history, practice, and thought of Sufism from the early period onward contain few female figures.² Some reports of pious and Sufi women survived orally and in written form over the intervening centuries in collections of biographical notices of noted individuals, such as Abū ‘Abd

¹ Thanks to Kecia Ali, Yasmin Amin, Aisha Geissinger, Alan Godlas, Nate Hofer, Christopher Melchert, Kristian Petersen, Lloyd Ridgeon, Karen Ruffle, and others for answering any number of questions, sharing sources, helping to identify figures, and reading drafts (especially Geissinger); and thanks to Basit Iqbal for his meticulous editing work. All errors are mine. Death dates and locations are only given, when known, to help situate the women in their place and time. Due to the word limit, primary source citations are not exhaustive and I have cited only secondary sources specific to the issue at hand and which provide relevant bibliographies. References to Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Ṣifāt al-ṣafwa* are cited by entry number as “IJ, #000”; except where noted, these translations are by Silvers and Ahmed Elewa or Silvers and Yasmin Amin. References to Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī’s *Dhikr al-niswa* are cited by the pagination of R. Cornell’s translation (*Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-muta‘abbidāt aṣ ṣūfiyyāt* by Abū ‘Abd ar-Rahmān ās-Sulamī [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999]) as “AARS, 000–000.”

² Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 430/1038) *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* [28 women/649 men]; Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī’s (d. 897/1492) *Nafahāt al-uns* [35w/564m]; ‘Abd al-Wahhāb b. Aḥmad al-Sha‘rānī’s (d. 973/1565) *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* [16w/412m]. But the majority of the women named in these works, and those mentioned below, are members of the Prophet’s family, companions, or Qur’ānic figures. Likewise, see the women named in al-Qushayrī’s *al-Risāla fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf* [biographical section: 0w/83m], Abū al-Ḥassan ‘Alī b. ‘Usman al-Jullabī al-Hujwīrī’s *Kashf al-maḥjub* [12w/109m], Farīd al-Dīn al-‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 628/1230) *Tadhkirat al-awliyā’* [1w/72m], Khargūshī’s *Tahdhīb al-asrār* [7 women] (see C. Melchert, “Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*,” *Bulletin of the SOAS*, 73/1 [2010], 32 [corrected from 7% to 7 women]), Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī’s (d. ca. 470/1077) *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-l-sawād* [8w/478m] (see B. Orfali and N. Saab [eds], *Sufism, Black and White: A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-Sawād by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī* [d. ca. 470/1077] [Leiden: Brill, 2012]) [thanks to the editors for sharing this volume with me]; finally, see R. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa‘d to Who’s Who* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

al-Rahmān al-Sulamī's (d. 402/1012) *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidāt as-ṣūfiyyāt*, and Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 597/1200) *Ṣifāt al-ṣafwa*, as well as Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd's (d. 230/845) *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*.³ Despite likely access to such resources, however, major Sufi manuals and treatises such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's (d. 386/996) *Qūṭ al-qulūb*, Abū Bakr al-Kalabādhī's (d. ca. 380/990) *Ta'arruf*, Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj's (d. 378/988) *Kitāb al-luma'*, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) *al-Risāla*, and Abū al-Ḥassan al-Ḥujwīrī's (d. 470/1077) *Kashf al-maḥjūb* only mention by name the near-legendary Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya (Basra, d. 185/801) and a few other pious and Sufi women. While a number of women do appear in these texts, they are most often anonymous, and moreover are depicted as supporting players in accounts of more famous men.⁴ In al-Sulamī and Ibn al-Jawzī's works, a few of these men are depicted making an effort to transmit women's knowledge with women at the centre of the accounts.⁵ Individual women are mentioned in some early Sufi texts, such as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's (d. 320/910) account of his wife's extraordinary spiritual station.⁶ Certainly, men's names have been dropped from the sources. But the sheer number of extant reports of men compared to women in the formative literature means that women are read as marginal to the development, transmission, and preservation of Sufi practices, knowledge, and teaching.

³ Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifāt al-ṣafwa* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999); Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*; Muḥammad b. Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Lebanon: Dar Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabīyya, 1996). See Nana Asma'u's "Sufi Women" for the rare, possibly unique, biographical collection (in the form of a poem) by a woman about women (in Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd (eds), *Collected works of Nana Asma'u* (East Lansing, MI, 2012); also see Mack's chapter on Asma'u in this volume (Chapter 8).

⁴ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 15–20; also see A. Afsaruddin, "Gender and the poetics of narrative", *The Muslim World* 92 (2002), 461–480; V. Hoffman, "Oral Traditions as a Source for the study of Muslim women: Women in the Sufi orders", in A. El-Azhary Sonbol (ed.), *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2006), 365–380. On "restraint" in naming women other than family members (and then as supporting players) in one source, see Marín, "Saints, women, and family relationships", and using family genealogies as sources, see F. Chiabotti, "Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī: Family ties and transmission in Nishapur's Sufi milieu", both in C. Mayeur-Jaoun and A. Papas (eds), *Family Portraits with Saints: Hagiography, Sanctity, and Family in the Muslim World* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2013) [thanks to the editors for sharing this volume with me pre-publication]. On the sources available to authors, see A. K. Alikberov, "Genre tabakāt in early Sufi tradition", ACTAS XVI Congreso UEAI (1995), 23–30.

⁵ Notably reports attributed to Dhū al-Nūn (d. 244/859) and Aḥmad b. Abū al-Ḥawārī (d. 230/845 or 246/860). For Dhū al-Nūn's transmissions, see IJ, #620, #881, #908, #909, #974, #975, #991, #992, #993, #994, and #995; and AARS, 142–145. For Hawārī's transmissions, see IJ, #601, #731, #822, #823, #824, #825, #827, and #830; AARS, 82–83, 84–85, 86–87, 120–121, 124–125, and 126–127.

⁶ D. Reynolds, trans., "The Autobiography of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (with substantial contributions from his wife's dreams)", in D. F. Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 120–131.

Most surviving accounts of women in the formative period (namely, between the 1st/7th and 4th/10th centuries) concern those in the early piety movement – that is, prior to the rise of Sufism in the late 3rd/9th century.⁷ These “vigorous worshippers” (*muta‘abbidāt*) were known for their intense ritual practice, scrupulous ethics, and ability to inspire a sense of intimacy with God, but cannot be called Sufis in the historical sense of the term.⁸ Rather, pious women such as the famous Rabī‘a al-‘Adawiyya were cast as “Sufis” when Sufism was said to be “a reality without a name”.⁹ Likewise, Sufi literature tended to co-opt individuals identified with other mystical movements, such as the Malāmatiyya, as their own.¹⁰ The Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn al-Jawzī did the same, sharing the contributions of these women in keeping with his own perspective on worthy piety.¹¹ Despite the authors’ agendas, these sources offer valuable insights into the diverse pious and mystical movements of the early period. This chapter offers a summary of the reported thought and practices of early pious, mystical, and Sufi women in the contexts of the theological movements of their day, their social lives, and their teacher–student relationships.

These reports raise numerous methodological concerns. Some scholars are extremely sceptical of their historical reliability, but others, such as Shahzad Bashir, Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, and Aisha Geissinger, have written convincingly that such biographical reports retain some historical value.¹² These reports can offer important clues about the existence of individuals,

⁷ “Piety” is used here in a general sense to refer to devotional thought and practices prior to the rise of Sufism and sometimes concurrent with it, including those called *nussāk* (the devout), *abrār* (the righteous), *zuhhād* (renunciants), and *‘ubbād* (worshippers). On these terms, see Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 5–7.

⁸ S. Sviri, “Sufism: Reconsidering Terms, Definitions, and Processes in the Formative Period of Islamic Mysticism”, in G. Gobillot and J.-J. Thibon (eds), *Les Maîtres Soufis et Leurs Disciples IIIe-Ve Siècles de l’hégire (IXe-XIe s.) Enseignement, Formation et Transmission* (Beirut: Institute Français du Proche-Orient, 2012).

⁹ A. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2007), 100.

¹⁰ M. Ngyuen, *Sufi Master and Qur’an Scholar: Abū’l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 68–69; J. A. Mojaddedi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Tabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmī* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), ch. 1; on mystical traditions in the formative period see Karamustafa, *Sufism*; Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*; and S. Sviri, *Perspectives on Early Islamic Mysticism: The World of al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī and his Contemporaries* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹¹ On Ibn al-Jawzī, see “Ibn Djawzī”, *Elz*.

¹² For examples of extreme scepticism, see S. A. Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728 CE) and the Formation of his Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) and D. A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ‘A’isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

movements, and doctrines, as well as social realities.¹³ A single report will typically reflect several competing and complementary purposes. For example, it is reported that the mother of Mis'ir b. Kidam (Kufa, d. 155/772) prayed at the mosque five times a day and that Mis'ir walked her there and back.¹⁴ This seems straightforward enough; walking one's mother to the mosque is common practice even now, where women are permitted to attend. But consider too that while the notice is ostensibly about his mother, it also highlights Mis'ir b. Kidām's good character, demonstrating his reliability as a Hadith transmitter. The report may also indicate that at least older women in the city of Kufa around the mid-2nd century were permitted to pray regularly in the mosque. It may even have been intended to take a stand on a matter of dispute at the time by claiming that a respected Hadith transmitter approved of older women's mosque attendance.¹⁵

As I will show, the textual marginalization of these women does not seem to reflect their actual participation in pious or mystical circles. Sufi authors excised or downplayed women's roles for any number of interrelated social, economic, and political reasons, such as shifting modes of authority in the Seljuk period and the rise of the Sufi orders; personal reasons, such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's distaste for women; and to control controversy, whether due to criticism of women's relatively open participation or other concerns.¹⁶ Over time, transmitters and authors transformed some women's socially engaged lives, even in worship, into near total seclusion and silence, presenting the woman untouched by the world as the ideal.¹⁷ For instance, 'Amma, the sister of Abū Sa'īd b. Abū al-Khayr (d. 441/1049), told her brother that his words were like an ingot of gold. He replied, "... but your silence is an

¹³ See S. Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); N.M. El-Cheikh, "Women's history: A study of al-Tanūkhī", in M. Marín and R. Deguilhem (eds), *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources* (London: IB Taurus, 2002); and A. Geissinger, *Gender and the Construction of Exegetical Authority: A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qur'an Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

¹⁴ *IJ*, #467.

¹⁵ *IJ*, #474; B. Sadeghi, *The Logic of Lawmaking in Islam: Women and Prayer in the Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch. 5.

¹⁶ Ngyuen, *Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar*, 36–45; Karamustafa, *Sufism*, ch. 5; Beatrix Immenkamp, *Marriage and Celibacy in Medieval Islam: A study of Ghazali's Kitāb ādāb al-nikāh* (Dissertation for the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Kings College, Cambridge, 1994), 116–118; F. Sobieroj, "The Mu'tazila and Sufism", F. de Jong and B. Radtke (eds), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); and L. Ridgeon, "The controversy of Awḥad ad-dīn Kirmānī and handsome, moon-faced youths: A case study of *Shāhid Bāzī* in medieval Sufism", *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1 (2012), 1–28.

¹⁷ See Silvers, "Disappearing women: The case of Hafsa bt. Sirin", in progress.

unpierced pearl".¹⁸ The Hadith, legal, and biographical literature of the first few centuries of Islam demonstrates that there was an overall trend to restrict the manner in which women engaged in public life.¹⁹ Although much of this literature presents free women's seclusion as normative and religiously mandated, non-elite free women and enslaved women's public activities (manual labour, buying and selling, teaching, socializing, etc.) could not be controlled.²⁰ Nor could religious behaviour outside the direct control of authorities. As I will argue, other reports seem to vouch for women's socially unconventional behaviour such as privately and publicly visiting with men, attending mixed-gender gatherings, and, in some cases, setting up camp at the Kaaba or even preaching in the streets.

Writing a history of women's religious life raises the question of whether there is a distinct "women's spirituality". Gendered social expectations and obligations not only shaped how women were depicted in these sources, but also how women lived, worshipped, gave guidance, or received it. Maria Dakake has identified a common "language of domesticity" in early women's sayings. These sayings imagine God as the masculine object of feminine longing, while sayings attributed to men imagine God as the veiled beloved with whom they seek an elusive rendezvous.²¹ Dakake writes that, for women, God is the idealized male guardian who protects, comforts, consoles, and shares in intimacy with his obedient and loving servant.²² That said, while some reports recreate the trope of divine guardianship with gratitude and love, other reports depict women wracked with fear of displeasing him and thus suffering his abandonment in this world, or, worse, punishment in the

¹⁸ Moḥammad Ebn-e Monavvar, *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness* (Asrār al-towḥīd) (New York, Mazda Publishers, 1992), 412.

¹⁹ For example, see M. H. Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177–214; L. Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and M. Tillier, "Women before the Qāḍī under the Abbasids", *Islamic Law and Society* 16 (2009), 280–301; on women's marginalization in Hadith scholarship during the 2nd–3rd/8th–9th centuries, see A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 76–107.

²⁰ For example, see M. Yazigi, "Some accounts of women delegates to Caliph Mu'āwiya: Political significance", *Arabica* 52/3 (2005), 437–449; Y. Rapoport, *Marriage, Money, and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); M. Shatzmiller, "Aspects of women's participation in the economic life of later medieval Islam: Occupations and mentalities", *Arabica* 35/1 (1988), 36–58; A. Ghabin, *Hisba: Arts and Crafts in Islam* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009).

²¹ M. Dakake, "Guest of the inmost heart: Conceptions of the divine beloved among early Sufi women", *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3/1 (2007), 72.

²² Dakake, "Guest of the inmost heart", 75–79.

next.²³ Rkia Cornell has identified a thread in women's sayings, which she calls a "theology of servitude", marking their extreme sense of submission to God alone.²⁴ The degree to which such depictions were the imaginings of male transmitters is open to debate, but it is demonstrably the case that women's domestic obligations and other gendered social norms would have an effect on their theological perspectives and ritual lives.²⁵ Gender norms are also complicated by social class, political associations, environmental issues, and other factors. There is nothing inherent to women about any of these socio-historical contexts. Thus, there is little historical value in identifying a "spirituality" particular to women, unless it refers to the dynamic and intersecting socio-historical narratives that name certain types of bodies, experiences, and articulations "female".

WOMEN AND THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

Scholastic theologians argued their positions in technical language drawn from traditional sources as well as the Greek philosophical tradition.²⁶ Their views mainly reached the populace from mosque pulpits and circles of learning, and were sometimes enforced by Caliphal authorities.²⁷ Nevertheless, theology was not a top-down affair. Accounts demonstrate that male and female scholars and preachers who were familiar with the language of scholastic theology (*kalām*) but were not theologians themselves, as well as untrained popular preachers, revered pious folk, and perhaps even one's grandmother, had a stake in defining the proper boundaries of the divine-human relationship and took stands on controversial issues (such as whether one could comprehend God or see him in this world or the next).²⁸

²³ L. Silvers, "God loves me": The theological content and context of early pious and Sufi women's sayings on love", *Journal for Islamic Studies* 30 (2010), 33–59.

²⁴ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 54–60.

²⁵ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 54–60; Dakake, "Guest of the inmost heart", 73–97; and see examples below.

²⁶ "Kalām", *ET*.

²⁷ A. El Shamsy, "The social construction of orthodoxy", in T. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁸ On high/low distinctions, see A. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), ch. 1; on the relationship between popular and elite theologies, see El Shamsy, "The social construction of orthodoxy"; D. Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety: Sufism and the Dissemination of Islam in Medieval Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); D. Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sermons under the Zangids and Ayyūbids (1146–1260)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); J. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

And why not? People's understanding of the divine-human relationship generally arises from an effort to negotiate their lives in a meaningful way.²⁹ Whatever the historical reliability of the reports, they demonstrate that it was not unheard of for women to adopt such positions and that the popular voice mattered. One report has an unnamed woman clinging to the Kaaba, calling out,

O You whom eyes do not see, with whom imaginings (*al-awhām*) and conjecture (*al-zunūn*) cannot intermix, whom the things of this world (*al-ḥawādith*) cannot change, whom the describers cannot describe, O You who knows the weight of the mountains, the measure of the seas, the number of the raindrops and the leaves of the trees, and the number of everything upon which night falls and the day breaks. Heaven cannot hide itself from Him, nor the earth, nor the mountain its impassable terrain, nor the sea its depths.³⁰

Elite theologians had no choice but to respond to popular theological positions, whether by adopting, reshaping, or opposing them. Thus the two developed in conversation with one another, making it difficult to draw a clean line between them.

The first “properly theological dispute” in Islamic history developed out of early political divisions.³¹ Sayings from regions dominated by dissenters who held the political leadership responsible for the murder of the Prophet's family typically reflect a desire for people to be held accountable for their actions, meaning that God is bound to punish wrongdoing and reward good deeds.³² For instance, Umm Ibrāhīm al-Ābida (Basra, d. ca. late 3rd/9th century) was furious when she saw pilgrims on Hajj engaging in trade. She declared that on the Last Day, their actions would be exposed and they would be unable to escape punishment. She called out to God loudly enough for the pilgrims to hear, “My Love, they are engaged with this world and have left You!” Then she screamed and collapsed on the ground. When she came to her senses, her companion remonstrated with her for such extraordinary behaviour. She scolded him in turn, saying, “You layabout! When He is decreeing [either paradise or hell], for whom would God fake his pleasure?”³³

²⁹ J. Z. Smith, “Map is not territory”, in J. Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 289–310.

³⁰ II, #973.

³¹ K. Blankinship, “The early creed”, in T. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38.

³² S. A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29–30.

³³ II, #600.

Those regions dominated by the Ahl al-Ḥadīth, who promoted quietism in the face of these injustices, argued, by contrast, that the political situation was the will of God and judgment belonged to God alone.³⁴ Reports associated with these regions typically reflect a tendency towards notions of predestination in which God alone decides one's fate in the afterlife. Naqīsh bt. Sālīm of Mecca was overheard calling out in grief, "O Master of Humankind, misdeeds weigh heavily on me. Sadness has darkened my eyelids like kohl. I swear by Your majesty I shall never enjoy laughter until I know my destination in the final abode. Oh, what will be my home?"³⁵

Gender intersects with other socio-historical factors in shaping one's understanding of the divine-human relationship. Some men and women depicted God in anthropomorphic terms, with women reportedly imagining God as the idealized male lover and guardian. In the following account, a woman claims that her love for God outstrips even her good works in ensuring his good treatment of her in the afterlife:

"By God, I am so tired of life that if I were to find death for sale, I would buy it out of longing for Him and my love of meeting Him." So I said to her, "Are you so certain of your works?" "No, by God, rather out my love for Him and beautiful opinion of Him. Would He torment me when I love Him so?"³⁶

Taking the opposite position on human responsibility, Mu'mina bt. Bahlūl (Baghdad, lived late 3rd/10th century) is reported to have loved her guardian so abjectly that he had complete power over her. She feared that he would withdraw his intimacy from her and punish her in the afterlife. The gendered social dynamic of male guardianship established in the Qur'an is at play here. Men are made guardians over women and directed to correct them through progressively stringent means, involving abandonment of the marital bed, then physical punishment (Q. 4:34).³⁷ Mu'mina said, "The world and the Hereafter are not pleasurable except through You. So do not overwhelm me with the loss of You and the punishment that results from it!"³⁸

³⁴ See T. Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present*, trans. T. Thornton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ch. 2.

³⁵ IJ, #230.

³⁶ IJ, #1015; see also IJ, #596; and Dakake, "Guest of the inmost heart", 92, n. 17.

³⁷ Silvers, "God loves me", 44–46. On conceptions of the divine-human relationship in terms of idealized heterosexual and patriarchal gender roles, see S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); and M. Malamud, "Gender and spiritual self-fashioning: The master-disciple relationship in classical Sufism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64/1 (1996), 89–117.

³⁸ AARS, 86–87; IJ, #365.

As the reader may have noticed, reports from the early period – irrespective of theological position on free will or predestination – typically emphasize fear and sadness when contemplating judgment in the next world. Although there were periods and places of relative calm and wealth, the people of the formative period lived through civil wars that tore Muhammad’s community apart, local (sometimes violent) challenges to political authority, cycles of plague, and periods of famine. Coupled with the Qur’an’s emphasis on the threat of punishment and the promise of reward, it is not surprising that popular theological positions were deeply coloured by the fear of divine judgment even as they expressed hope – and certainty – of salvation.³⁹ Reports characterize some people as particularly fearful (*al-khā’ifūn*).⁴⁰ It was reported that Umayyah bt. Abū al-Muwarri‘ (Mawsul, lived *ca.* early 2nd/8th century) was among them:

When mentioning the Fire, she would say, “They have been doomed to the Fire, eaten from the Fire, drunk from the Fire, yet they live on [in the Fire].” Then she would weep at length and shudder as if she were a seed on a hot frying pan. At times when the Fire was mentioned she would even weep blood.⁴¹

CONTEMPLATING THE NEXT WORLD AND THE PRACTICE OF SORROW

Among men and women alike, fear and love were associated with moderate to extreme renunciation (*zuhd*) in the form of scrupulous behaviour, lengthy prayers, supererogatory fasting, and, as already seen, weeping.⁴² In most regions, but especially in Basra, there were men and women who wept in contemplation of the transience of this life and the return to God. These weepers are remembered in the literature with great flourish; one man is said to have wept so much in prayer that the pebbles beneath him would become soaked.⁴³ Lay people were encouraged to weep, too. Prophetic reports condemned wailing for the dead, but encouraged pious weeping as a ritually expiatory practice.⁴⁴ Women and men alike visited weepers who were able to

³⁹ C. Melchert, “Exaggerated fear in the early renunciant tradition”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21/3 (2011), 283–300.

⁴⁰ *IJ*, #630, #729, and #824; Melchert, “Exaggerated fear”, 288.

⁴¹ *IJ*, #729.

⁴² On *zuhd*, see C. Melchert, “Origins and early Sufism”, in this volume (Chapter 1).

⁴³ Melchert, “Exaggerated Fear”, 288.

⁴⁴ L. G. Jones, “He cried and made others cry”, in E. Gertsman (ed.), *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 103; for regional context, see Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers*, 24.

inspire others to weep. For women, pious weeping offered them a certain amount of religious and social authority that challenged scholarly efforts to direct orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and women's role in public religious practice, and also challenged social expectations such as marriage.

Weeping is portrayed in the reports as a highly personal response to one's relationship with God, but personal experience manifests in and responds to historical contexts. Weeping is part of a constellation of phenomena that includes political protest, social approbation, and personal experiences of transformation.⁴⁵ In some respects, women's practice of weeping is portrayed as an acceptable redirection of the practice of wailing for the dead. Prior to the coming of Islam, and for a short time afterwards, women acted as public and private mourners. Professionals, as well as friends and family, wailed and wept to help people grieve in public and private social rites. Wailing and elaborate funeral rituals were criticized by early authorities as out of step with a prophetic attitude of restraint and also as belying God's promise that true life would be found after death.⁴⁶ But in dominantly pro-'Alid garrison cities such as Kufa and Basra, women's wailing also played a role in fomenting rebellion against Caliphal powers and anticipated Shi'a rituals of mourning and protest for the injustices perpetrated against the Prophet's family.⁴⁷ Prohibitions against women's wailing for the dead was most stringent in Kufa.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it seems to have been a difficult practice to restrain.⁴⁹

Reports seem to advise that if women are to weep and wail, then they should direct their grief more properly towards contemplation of the next world. One report makes a connection between the wailing of a mother who has lost her child and wailing for God's sake. Ḥakīma al-Makkiyya (Mecca, lived early 2nd/8th century) lived with other women gathered around the Kaaba who engaged in constant worship. She waited day and night for the Kaaba to open. It is said that "[w]hen she saw its door open, she screamed like a mother whose child has died. She wept until she fell down faint".⁵⁰ Another report from the same period indicates that it may have been difficult to restrain women from visiting gravesites to wail for the dead, and advises that such practices be redirected towards the remembrance of death in the

⁴⁵ See Jones, "He cried and made others cry", 102–135; and S. Mahmood, "Rehearsed spontaneity and the conventionality of ritual: Disciplines of 'Ṣalāt', *American Ethnologist* 28/4 (2001), 827–853.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 119–127.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 132–134.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 127–135.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 135–138.

⁵⁰ *IJ*, #229.

service of worshipping God. The unnamed woman in the report seems to belong to a group of women who visit graveyards as mourners. While visiting a graveyard, she suddenly comes across a skull that sends her into an agitated state of repentance. When they want to know what happened, she replies, “My heart cried out from remembering death when I saw skulls inside the tomb! Leave me! Not one of you is serious about worshipping God and has come here longing to serve Him.”⁵¹

Pious weeping and its associated practices of fasting and praying at length seemed to excuse women from certain gender expectations and offer them religious authority. Some reports may address concerns that weeping and fasting were ruining women’s chances at marriage, and thus motherhood, by destroying their looks.⁵² Accounts seem to vouch for these women by presenting their ruined bodies as a great loss to men and thus presented as a sacrifice for God’s sake,⁵³ nowhere so explicitly as in the case of Khansā’ bt. Khidām. She reportedly “had a resounding voice and was a great beauty like a fattened camel adorned for sacrifice”, but she fasted until she was skin and bones, and wept until she lost her eyesight.⁵⁴

The marks of renunciation on women’s bodies testified to their sincerity and the soundness of their views and practices.⁵⁵ Sha’wāna (al-Uballa, lived mid-2nd/8th century) received elite validation by Abū Mālik b. Ḍaygham b. Mālik (d. 180/796), a respected Hadith scholar and renunciant, after he determined the exact place in the eye from which her tears fell. The evidence of her body would not only have demonstrated that she was no charlatan, but would also have served to vouch for her authority as a teacher and the propriety of her gatherings, in which she led men and women into ecstatic states through music and perhaps dance (*samā’*).⁵⁶

⁵¹ II, #204.

⁵² II, #234, #603, and #615; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 56–60.

⁵³ On the construction of maternity and male control of women’s reproductive bodies, see K. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013).

⁵⁴ II, #251 (she may be the young companion [Ibn Māja, *Book of Marriage*, 1/602]).

⁵⁵ Transmitters exaggerated or imagined lives of sorrow and renunciation to bolster the authority of early and late scholars (see S. A. Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*; M. H. Reid, *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013]; and on feigned weeping, see Jones, “He cried and made others cry”, 104). Nevertheless public weeping was a common practice before and after the coming of Islam (see Jones, “He cried and made others cry”; and M. H. Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* [New York: Routledge, 2007], 142).

⁵⁶ On *samā’*, see K. Avery, *A Psychology of Early Sufi Samā’: Listening and Altered States* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

My father said to him one day, “Describe her weeping for me.”

I said, “O Abū Mālik, I will describe it for you. By God she weeps day and night almost without stopping!”

My father said, “This is not what I asked you to describe. How does she begin her weeping?”

I replied, “Yes O Abū Mālik, whenever she begins a session of invocation (*samāʿ*) you will see tears pouring from her eyelids like rain.”

My father asked, “Which were more abundant – the tears coming from the inner corner of the eye beside the nose, or the tears coming from the outer corner beside the temple.”

I replied, “O Abū Mālik, her tears were too numerous to distinguish one from another. From the moment she begins her invocation, they flow, all at once, from the four corners of her eyes.”

My father wept and said, “It seems to me that fear has burnt up her entire heart.” Then he said, “It has been said that an increase or decrease of tears is proportional to the extent of the burning of the heart. When the heart has been fully consumed, the person who maintains the station of sorrow (*al-hazīn*) can weep whenever he wants. Thus, the smallest amount of invocation will cause him to weep.”⁵⁷

WOMEN’S WORSHIP IN CONTEXT: FAMILY, SLAVES, AND MARGINAL WOMEN

Widowed and Married Women

Domestic duties and other labour restricted most women’s time for worship, but older free women had the greatest flexibility to pursue lengthy prayers. Women who were widowed, with grown children or without children, and who had help caring for their needs could pray throughout the night and day, sleeping for just a few hours in the morning or the afternoon without concern for domestic obligations. They worshipped in mosques, or even in graveyards, but mainly at home or the homes of friends. Munayfa bt. Abū Ṭāriq of Bahrain only began praying at length in the last forty years of her life, after she had been widowed and her children were grown. While visiting overnight, her friend Amma observed her standing in prayer for hours, weeping as she repeated one verse of the Qur’an over and over: “And how could you disbelieve while the verses of God are recited to you and among you is His Messenger? And whoever holds firmly to God has been guided to a straight path” (Q. 3:101). She is reported to have prayed throughout the day (when

⁵⁷ AARS, 98–99; IJ, #630.

domestic duties would be performed) until the afternoon, when she would sleep until sunset (perhaps to avoid visitors).⁵⁸

Older women without anyone to care for them would have to be up in the morning to perform domestic chores or other labour, thus limiting the time they spent awake in prayers at night. In some cases, these women prayed a portion of the night and considered their daytime work as part of their renunciant path.⁵⁹ Māwardiyya (Basra, d. 466/1073) only took up regular fasting, nightly prayers, and practicing *niswān* (female chivalry) after the age of thirty (when, if she had children, they would no longer require her constant attention).⁶⁰ She probably continued her labour of making and selling rosewater. She lived until the age of eighty and ground her own flour and baked her own bread every day. In renunciant style, she ground her flour out of legumes rather than grain (a luxury food), and ate little meat, oil, or grapes.⁶¹

Married women are depicted admiringly as they encourage their immediate family to be more scrupulous, take up more ritual worship, or enter into extremes of renunciation.⁶² Some women cajoled while others scolded their husbands. One unnamed woman, who was known for her assiduous worship and sharp tongue, performed one hundred cycles of mid-morning prayer every day (taking at least two hours to complete, they could be performed after her morning chores and before the midday meal), recited either chapter 112 from the Qur'an or its opening verse ("Say He is God, One") 10,000 times a day while going about her business, and stood in prayer through the night:

She would say to her husband, "Get up! Take care! How long are you going to sleep? Get up, you heedless man! Get up, you idle oaf! How long are you going to be heedless? I swear that you will only provide for us by permissible means. I swear to you that you will not enter the Fire on account of me. On the piety of your mother, pray that God has mercy on you! Do not slack, for God will decide your case!"⁶³

In many accounts, married women are portrayed as having the admiration of their husbands and grown children. Jawhara's husband, Abū 'Abd Allāh

⁵⁸ II, #654; on avoiding visitors, see II, #623, #853, #931, and #934.

⁵⁹ II, #614.

⁶⁰ II, #619; on female chivalry, see below, p. 49.

⁶¹ See Waines, "Luxury foods of medieval Islamic societies", *World Archaeology* 34/3 (2003), 571–580.

⁶² On the problem of using the English word "family" in this and later periods, see "Introduction", Mayeur-Jaoun and Papas (eds), *Family Portraits with Saints*.

⁶³ II, #1011; see also II, #595.

b. Abū Ja‘far al-Barāthī (Baghdad, d. 300/912), a well-known renunciant (possibly Sufi), found her to be a worthy partner who prodded him to even greater feats of renunciation. The two only had mats woven from reeds to sit on, which she talked him into giving up by saying, “Isn’t it said in the Hadith, ‘The earth says to the child of Adam, ‘You put a barrier between you and I, and tomorrow you will be inside me?’”⁶⁴ In some cases, a husband or grown children express concern for his wife or their mother’s health due to the intensity of her worship. Umm al-Aswad’s (Kufa, d. ca. 100/718) legs were disabled and her daughter worried about her standing in prayer at such length.⁶⁵ ‘Uwayd b. Abū ‘Imrān al-Jūnī (Basra, d. ca. 123/740) tried to curtail his wife’s worship after she injured her legs standing in prayer such that she had to wrap them tightly in cloth.⁶⁶

Marriage, Sex, and Worship

The biographical material on Rābi‘a bt. Ismā‘īl (lived ca. 200/800) offers insight into the way that marriage and sex intersected with worship for these devout women. Although socially disapproved of, it seems to have been possible for non-elite women to choose to live alone, with other women, or avoid marriage entirely. For instance, the famed Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, who was reportedly a freed slave or an impoverished orphan, lived alone at times, but also shared her home with her companions and servants, Maryam, until Maryam’s death, then ‘Abda bt. Abū Shawwāl, who was with Rābi‘a when she died.⁶⁷ And Ḥasna al-‘Ābida, reportedly a great beauty, was in a position to declare, “Farewell to men!”⁶⁸ But Rābi‘a bt. Ismā‘īl was a wealthy widow, and thus if she desired to undertake a life of worship outside the protection of her family or a husband it would have been socially ruinous for her.⁶⁹ Women’s convents (sing. *ribāṭ*) had not yet developed, so a woman of Rābi‘a bt. Ismā‘īl’s social status had little choice but to marry a man who would permit her a life of worship.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ IJ, #360; see also IJ, #614.

⁶⁵ IJ, #466.

⁶⁶ IJ, #613.

⁶⁷ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 63; AARS, 84–85.

⁶⁸ IJ, #603.

⁶⁹ B. Shoshan, “High culture and popular culture in medieval Islam”, *Studia Islamica* 73 (1991), 67–107; S. M. Ali, “The rise of the Abbasid public sphere: The case of al-Mutanabbi and three middle ranking patrons”, *al-Qantara* 29/2 (2008), 467–494.

⁷⁰ On women’s use of *ribāṭs*, see Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce*, 38–44; on convents as an escape from marriage, see C. W. Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 222.

Rābi'a reportedly offered the well-known shaykh Aḥmad b. Abū al-Ḥawārī (d. 230/845 or 246/860) and his companions some seven thousand to thirty thousand dirhams, requested that their marriage be celibate, and encouraged him to take other wives.⁷¹ Aḥmad is the narrator of her life of piety: "She told me, 'I do not love you in the way that married couples do, instead I love you as do the brothers [on the path]. I want to be with you only to serve you.'"⁷² Aḥmad is portrayed here as a great lover of women, soul and body. In soul, he admired Rābi'a, acknowledged her as his spiritual equal, and took the trouble to transmit anecdotes about her and other accomplished women.⁷³ In body, he enjoyed the physically intimate company of his other wives, and possibly Rābi'a.⁷⁴ The reports' depiction of Aḥmad's admiration of Rābi'a and his virility are not unconnected. The narrative construction of Rābi'a and Aḥmad's piety is framed in terms of their faithfulness to the marital norms of their day; a clear link is made between submitting to one's husband and submitting to God.⁷⁵

Rābi'a would enter the relationship as his spiritual equal, but her social standing as a wife would require her obedience, including constant sexual availability.⁷⁶ She would be socially and legally obligated to check with him first before fasting through the day or praying throughout the night, in case he might want to have sex with her.⁷⁷ He is depicted expressing his pride in his wife's resolve to worship God in these moments by demonstrating how she both resisted his overtures and acknowledged his right to sex with her. In the following narration, he amplifies her piety by phrasing her resistance as almost desperate:

If I wanted to have sex with her during the day she would say, "I implore you in the name of God, do not make me break my fast today." And if I wanted her during the night, she would say, "I implore you in the name of God to grant me this night for God's sake."⁷⁸

⁷¹ IJ, #823; S. Bashir, "Islamic tradition and celibacy", in C. Olson (ed.), *Celibacy and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 140–141.

⁷² AARS, 316–317; IJ, #823.

⁷³ See footnote 5, this chapter.

⁷⁴ Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 37–38.

⁷⁵ A. Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41–44. On obedience in marriage and discipleship, see Malamud, "Gender and Spiritual Self-Fashioning"; and M. Dakake, "Walking upon the path of god like men? Women and the feminine in the Islamic mystical tradition", in J-L. Michon and R. Gaetani (eds), *Sufism: Love and Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 133.

⁷⁶ See K. Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 66–96.

⁷⁷ IJ, #823.

⁷⁸ AARS, 316–317; IJ, #823.

Having sex would be no small interruption to such a woman's worship. During the day, she would not be able to return to fasting. At night, she would have to perform the major ablution to return to her prayers. Public baths would not be available to her so late, so during much of the year she would have to wash herself in the cold.⁷⁹

The following report demonstrates his pride in having a wife who understands her place in the marital hierarchy but who loves God above all else. By marrying him, she gives her body to the man whom she admires and who admires her, but her love belongs to God alone:

I also heard her say while in a state of intimacy [with God]:

I have made You the One who speaks to me in the depths of my soul,
While I made my body lawful for the one who desires to sit with me.
My body is my intimate gift to my worldly companion
While my heart's Beloved is my true Intimate in the depths of my soul.⁸⁰

Whatever their life together may have been like, the narrative portrays the idealized link between women's piety and submission to their husbands, the need for a man to vouch for a woman's unusual behaviour, and real world compromises that women like Rābi'a might have had to negotiate.

Brothers and Sisters

There are a number of stories of brothers and sisters who shared homes or who worshipped together. Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 205/830) seems to have been close to his sisters, 'Abda and Āmina, and describes their intellect and dedication to worship as exalted.⁸¹ Bishr al-Ḥāfī (d. ca. 235/850) and his sisters, Muḍgha, Zubda, and Mukhkha, lived and worshipped together in Baghdad, where they visited Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855/241) and received visits from scholars and other pietists such as Āmina al-Ramliyya.⁸² They tended the home and wove textiles for income, which was a common trade for women and considered a legitimate source of income for the scrupulously pious.⁸³ Sisters Ghaḍba and 'Āliyya worshipped late through the night, and

⁷⁹ The warmest nights, given the average weather temperatures in Damascus in her era, would have been 60F/15C, but would often fall below freezing in winter. With or without a nearby fire, this would have been at least uncomfortable and perhaps even physically dangerous.

⁸⁰ AARS, 316–317.

⁸¹ IJ, #822.

⁸² IJ, #828.

⁸³ IJ, #382; M. Shatzmiller, "Women and wage labour in the medieval Islamic West", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40 (1997), 174–206; Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce*, 31–38.

had much (if not all) of the Qur'an memorized. One of them was heard reciting six of the lengthiest chapters of the Qur'an in just one cycle of prayer.⁸⁴ Ḥafṣa bt. Sīrīn's (d. ca. 100/718) father built her and her brothers private prayer spaces out of roofing planks to give them space for reflection in their bustling childhood home.⁸⁵

Mothers

There are few accounts of women with their dependent children. As mentioned above, the literature sometimes places the stress on women's solitary worship, and so downplays the women's identities as mothers or grandmothers and thus erases their social bonds.⁸⁶ Historically, however, women raised their children as part of a community of other women in which the shared experience of the cycles of life created strong social bonds. Ḥafṣa bt. Sīrīn's story is unusual in detailing a loving relationship between her and her son, whom she reportedly doted on and who cared for her in her old age. Hudhayl is even said to have stayed up with her during her long nightly prayers, feeding a quick-burning fire to make sure she was warm. His early death affected her deeply.⁸⁷ From the few sayings we have, it is easy to imagine that mothers took an active role in guiding their children. Umm Ṭalq warned her son of vanity: "How beautiful is your voice when you recite the Qur'an. I only hope that your voice will not lead to evil consequences for you on the Day of Judgment."⁸⁸ The advice reportedly struck him so deeply that he wept until he fainted. An unnamed woman was overheard advising her son, whom she brought to al-Barathī's gatherings, that nothing in this world could compensate for Paradise or be worth the suffering of Hell.⁸⁹ Other women worshipped alongside their children, some of whom excelled them in faith and practice.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ IJ, #605 and #606; also see IJ, #475.

⁸⁵ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, #3065.

⁸⁶ See A. Papas, "The son of his mother: Qalandarī celibacy and the 'destruction' of family", in Mayeur-Jaoun and Papas (eds), *Family portraits with saints*, 420–444; A. Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (London: Continuum, 1997), 89–97; and Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 152–153.

⁸⁷ IJ, #585. On attitudes towards children, see A. Giladi, "Herlihy's thesis revisited: Some notes on investment in children in medieval Muslim societies", *Journal of Family History* 36/3 (2011), 235–247.

⁸⁸ AARS, 294–295; IJ, #597.

⁸⁹ IJ, #368; see also IJ, #938.

⁹⁰ IJ, #587.

There are a few examples of women lamenting the birth of a child or mistreating their children in pursuit of their worship. Notably, these stories are not treated negatively in the literature. Not unlike those pious men who rejected their children, the strangeness of a woman's rejection of her own child seems to function as a testament to a life of worship in total commitment to God. In a woman's case it also serves to neuter her, thus transforming her into an exceptional "woman". Nusiyya bt. Salmān (Basra, lived mid-2nd/late-8th century) reportedly said, "O Lord, you do not see me as someone worthy of your worship, otherwise you not have preoccupied me with a child."⁹¹ Other women are distracted by their love of their children or grieve over their children's waywardness.⁹² 'Athāma (Syria, lived early 2nd/8th century) was so distracted by having to remind her son to perform his prayers that she lamented to herself:

O 'Athāma, why are you so distracted?
 Your house must have been invaded by a trickster.
 Weep so that you may complete your prayers on time,
 If you were to weep at all today!
 And weep while the *Qur'ān* is being recited.
 For once you, too, used to recite it,
 You used to recite it with reflection,
 While tears streamed down from your eyes.
 But today, you do not recite it
 Without having a reciter with you.
 I shall lament for you with fervent love,
 For as long as I live!⁹³

Slaves

Enslaved women who were married to other slaves, mothers, unmarried housekeepers, or used for sex by their owners had similar limits placed on their time for worship. But unlike a free woman, an enslaved woman would not gain significant time when her children were grown or hope that her domestic duties would be lightened until her old age. One woman, Hinayda, was married to another slave with whom she had a child. As a domestic or agricultural slave, she would have to fulfil her duties for her owner as well as her own domestic chores. Hinayda found solitude by waking to pray through

⁹¹ AARS, 92–93.

⁹² IJ, #937.

⁹³ AARS, 310–311; IJ, #820.

part of the night. Her husband and child admired her hard work and devotion, gladly accepting her encouragement in their own practice.⁹⁴ Enslaved women could fit worship into their full days by fasting, but for some women fasting most likely proved debilitating. Ibrāhīm al-Nukh‘ay (Kufa, d. 96/715) expressed concern for one of his slaves who fasted despite the extraordinary heat.⁹⁵ Khālid al-Warrāq (Basra, lived *ca.* 275/888) believed his slave was worshipping too much, given her circumstances, and advised her to slow down. She replied that there can be no slowing down in the race to achieve Paradise. Weeping, she said, “Khālid, don’t let anyone slow you down, for there is no second place for those who lost the opportunity to serve.”⁹⁶ Sometimes slaves had the chance to worship when they travelled with their owners on Hajj, or were able to visit the House if they lived in Mecca.⁹⁷ When not in service to their owners’ needs while on pilgrimage, social barriers would have been broken down, allowing slaves the freedom to worship that they might not have had otherwise.⁹⁸

Slaves are occasionally portrayed in informal teaching roles, such as Khalid al-Warrāq’s slave (mentioned above). When ‘Awn b. Abū ‘Amāra (Basra, d. 210/825) complained to a slave owned by his family that profits were tightening, she advised him to be content with God alone.⁹⁹ The well-known Hadith transmitters Āṭā (d. 114/732) and Mujāhid (d. 104/722) discretely visited a black slave in Mecca whose words would move them to tears.¹⁰⁰ A common narrative trope depicts slaves used for sex teaching their more sophisticated, and sometimes scholarly, owner a truth about God’s love through their simple purity of faith. These well-known men are so humbled by the women’s understanding that they release them.¹⁰¹ In this vein, slaves sometimes play a romantic role in the literature because their abject submission to their owners is analogous to abject submission to God. In a case of abject devotion, a young female slave is depicted hanging onto the curtains of the Kaaba, weeping and imploring God until, it is said, she died.¹⁰² The manumitted slave of the caliph

⁹⁴ IJ, #935; see also #475.

⁹⁵ IJ, #616 (she is called both *mamlūka* and *mawla* [K. Ali has remarked, in some cases, *mawla* denotes a slave not a client]); and IJ, #908.

⁹⁶ IJ, #618.

⁹⁷ IJ, #785.

⁹⁸ A. Geissinger, “Portrayal of the Ḥajj as a context for women’s exegesis: Textual evidence in al-Bukhārī’s (d. 870) ‘al-Saḥīḥ’”, in S. Günther (ed.), *Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 267.

⁹⁹ IJ, #621.

¹⁰⁰ IJ, #233.

¹⁰¹ Silvers, “God loves me”, 53–58.

¹⁰² IJ, #620; also see #785.

Mu'awiyya, Zajlah al-'Ābida (lived *ca.* late 1st/7th century) instructs that the free should obey God just as completely as they expect their slaves to obey them.¹⁰³ In some of these stories, black skin seems to articulate the ideal of spiritual poverty by connecting the lowest social status, an enslaved black woman, with the highest spiritual status. For instance, Sha'wāna's spiritual stature is affirmed by her protest, "[I am] nothing but a sinful black slave!"¹⁰⁴

Although domestic slaves might be treated as trusted members of the family, and were protected as such if released, they were still slaves and so were subject to their owners' decency or lack thereof. The average slave-owner must not have been particularly decent to their property, since the good treatment of slaves is so worthy of remark in the literature. The entirety of an entry describing the piety of one Kufan woman depicts how she restrained herself out of fear of God from whipping her slave.¹⁰⁵ Narratives about men releasing their slaves used for sex who teach them about divine love serve to illustrate the scholars' great humility, but also suggest that sex-slavery is not for "exceptional" women.¹⁰⁶ In a similar vein, the story of a slave who had gone mad from her total submission to God romanticizes slavery as abject submission, but also seems to acknowledge some discomfort with the practice. It is said that she wore a wool shirt with the words "Not for Buying or Selling" embroidered on it, suggesting that someone who literally has been bought and sold transcends her body while in the presence of God and, as she is said to have put it, is satisfied with her state.¹⁰⁷ The transmitters' assurance that she has transcended her body seems to try to compensate for the implications of the trade in human bodies. It suggests that for some transmitters, at least, transcending the body through suffering does not erase the injustice that may have caused the suffering in the first place.

Marginal Women

A number of women lived on the margins of society. They were impoverished, homeless, wanderers, or considered mad. Women on the margins faced

¹⁰³ IJ, #604; also see #597.

¹⁰⁴ IJ, #630. Likewise, skin blackened by fasting is a mark of exceptional piety (IJ, #478, #604). al-Sirjānī transmits a story in which a black man transcends the lowness of his skin color. As he draws near to God, his skin turns white. For that story and others marking the color black as low and even sinful, see B. Orfali and N. Saab, *Sufism, Black and White*, 12–16.

¹⁰⁵ IJ, #477.

¹⁰⁶ On male piety, virility, treatment of slaves used for sex, and related issues, see A. Geissinger, "Are men the majority in paradise, or women?" Constructing gender and communal boundaries in Muslim's (d. 261 A.H./875 CE) *Kitāb al-Janna*", in S. Günther and T. Lawson (eds), *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). K. Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*.

¹⁰⁷ IJ, #628; see also IJ, #479.

serious hardships, but these reportedly did not diminish their commitment to a renunciant life. As a result of her scrupulous behaviour, the daughter of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Makkī (d. 224/838) gave up her allowance from her father for one year and was forced to pick through the garbage heaps for her food.¹⁰⁸ While the poor received some charity in food from the government and individuals, the report demonstrates that it was not unheard of for the impoverished to resort to scavenging.¹⁰⁹ One report may be either an attack on the Quraysh for not caring for their own or praise for Qurayshi piety; whichever the case, it makes the point that some women must have been homeless. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Ḥakam said, “There was an old woman of the Quraysh in Mecca who had sought refuge in a burrow since she did not have any other home. Someone asked her if she was satisfied with her situation. She replied, ‘Isn’t this plenty for someone who is dying [to this world]?’”¹¹⁰ Whether by choice or in a state of homelessness, Muṭayya‘a al-‘Ābida (Basra, possibly lived late 2nd/8th century) lived in a graveyard without any family for fifty-four years.¹¹¹

Madness (*jadhba* or *junūn*) is regarded positively in Sufi literature; so much so, it becomes a well-worn romantic trope. Some Sufis are even said to have toured mental hospitals or private homes to catch some insight in the unreserved speech of “the mad”.¹¹² Their imagined or real social isolation and suffering may have been understood in terms of the emotional and physical suffering displayed by renunciants demonstrating their intimacy with God and perceived as redemptive. To her brother’s distress, Bukhkha (Kufa, lived *ca.* late second century) had lost her mind and had to be kept confined in a room on the roof of his house for some ten years. He brought doctors in to care for her, but she rejected them in favour of seclusion with the divine physician. Despite her torment, he reports she was able to keep herself ritually clean and perform her daily prayers. She was miraculously cured when she was offered a choice in a dream between being cured now or being patient with her condition and so gain Paradise in the next. She chose patience, but

¹⁰⁸ IJ, #232.

¹⁰⁹ See M. Bonner, “Poverty and charity in the rise of Islam” and I. Mattson, “Status-based definitions of need in early Islam and maintenance laws”, in M. Bonner, M. Ener, and A. Singer (eds), *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).
¹¹⁰ IJ, #240.

¹¹¹ IJ, #607.

¹¹² M. W. Dols, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 391–392, 388–422. On the difficulty of translating these terms, Dols’ sometimes romantic treatment of the subject, the ill-treatment of those considered mad, and the role of state and religious power in determining madness, see B. Shoshan, “The state and madness in medieval Islam”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35/2 (2003), 329–340.

politely bargained, "...but God is unstinting to His creation. Nothing is beyond Him. If He willed it, He could unite the two for me." And so she was granted both a cure and salvation.¹¹³

Mad or sane women who travelled or wandered on their own were open to harassment, such as children throwing rocks at them in the street, but also robbery and sexual assault.¹¹⁴ Dhū al-Nūn reportedly encountered a number of these women, one of whom was dressed as a man, suggesting the dangers of being a woman alone on the road.¹¹⁵ Transmitters seem to have protected the women whose stories they relayed from accusations of illicit sex, even if she were a victim of sexual assault. One report seems to be assuring us that Maymūna al-Sawdā' of Kufa, a black shepherd lost in ecstasy, was protected by God from such assaults. She is depicted carrying a cane and a wool cloak embroidered with the words, "Not for sale. If the sheep are with wolves, the wolves don't eat the sheep and the sheep don't fear the wolves." 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (Basra, d. 176/793) remarks to her, "I see the wolves are with the sheep! The sheep do not fear the wolves nor do the wolves eat the sheep. How could that be?" She replied, "Leave me alone! I fixed what is between me and my Master, and so He has taken care of the wolves and the sheep."¹¹⁶

GATHERINGS OF LIKE-MINDED WOMEN AND MEN

News of pious folk, mystics, and Sufis travelled far and wide. Stories about them were sought out; people would visit them for inspiration, to collect their insights, or simply to criticize or marvel at them. Reports indicate that when the pious or Sufis gathered, they might ask about and share stories of the remarkable people they met, including women. Sufyān al-Thawrī (Basra, d. 161/777) was at a gathering when he mentioned a woman from Kufa, and his friends inquired if he memorized any of her sayings.¹¹⁷ The reports attest that women welcomed women and men in their homes and visited others.

¹¹³ IJ, #480; Ibn Ḥabīb al-Naysabūrī, *Uqala al-majānīn*, ed. 'Umar al-As'ad (Beirut Dar al-Nafā'is, 1987), 294–295.

¹¹⁴ Dols, *Majnūn*, 396; see M. Tolmacheva, "Female piety and patronage in the medieval Hajj", in G. R. G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 167; and H. Azam, *Sexual Violence in Maliki Ideology: From Discursive Foundations to Classical Articulation* (PhD diss., Duke University, 2007).

¹¹⁵ IJ, #974.

¹¹⁶ IJ, #479. 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd reportedly visited an institution to hear the insights of the mad where he heard a patient claim that Maymūna would be his wife in Paradise, after which 'Abd al-Wāḥid sought her out (Dols, *Majnūn*, 391); also see IJ, #472.

¹¹⁷ IJ, #476, #630.

For instance, it is reported that ‘Athāma travelled a great deal in search of knowledge.¹¹⁸ They taught women and men and learned from them. They chatted with women and men in public, and met at private and public gatherings. They travelled for Hajj, where mixed-gender encounters were common on the road and during the pilgrimage.¹¹⁹

Mixed-gender gatherings may have been comfortable for many of those involved, but stories indicate that there were concerns about the propriety of these meetings, in particular the character of the women. Complaints are not uncommon in the literature, and there was even an accusation of sexual assault involving men from Junayd’s circle.¹²⁰ Some narratives seem to address these concerns by vouching for the character of the women and men alike. In these narratives, a well-known man encounters a woman in her home or in public. The man says something the woman disapproves of, she upbraids him, and he is humbled. In the most familiar set pieces, a man makes an unwelcome comment about the physical beauty of the woman he is visiting. The most well-known story may be that of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī’s visit with Umm ‘Alī (Balkh, d. 240/854), the wife of Abū Ḥamid Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh, during which he notices henna on her hands. Umm ‘Alī dismissively insults him, marking her as an exceptional woman and beyond moral reproach.¹²¹ Typically, the man is not shamed by telling the story; on the contrary, it demonstrates his humility, itself a cornerstone of religious authority. In some cases, the man desires to marry the woman because of her commitment to worship or out of a sense of guardianship. Malika bt. Muḥammad al-Munkadar of Medina dismisses two men from Basra, one of whom offered to marry her, by saying she would only consider marrying the famed Mālik b. Dīnār (d. 130/748) or Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī (d. 131/748). After the two men reveal themselves to be Mālik and Ayyūb, she responds, “Uff! I would have thought remembering God would have kept you too preoccupied to speak to women!”¹²²

Other accounts, for instance some of those depicting women as having bodies ruined from fasting or weeping, as being childless or distracted by children, or as being called “men” on the path, seem to vouch for the

¹¹⁸ II, #820.

¹¹⁹ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 60–70.

¹²⁰ Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 23; Outside this period, see A. Dahlén, “Female Sufi saints and disciples: Women in the life of Jalal al-din Rumi”, *Orientalia Suecana* 57 (2008); and K. Pemberton, “Women *pirs*, saintly succession, and spiritual guidance in South Asian Sufism”, *The Muslim World* 96/1 (2006), 61–87.

¹²¹ A. Azad, “Female mystics in Islam: A quiet legacy”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56 (2013), 76.

¹²² II, #200; see also #615.

propriety of women visited by men by denying their sexual availability, rendering them, in effect, sexually neuter.¹²³ Other stories even suggest that the onus was on men to control themselves in women's presence.¹²⁴ Although these stories demonstrate the respect these men had for the women, they do not challenge gender norms by recognizing the women's exceptional status; rather, they serve to reinforce the social status quo. When men vouch for women's exceptional status by rendering them sexually neuter, depicting them as having transcended their bodies, or by calling them "men", their praise only confirms that men hold the power to authorize women's value and women were typically perceived as spiritually and morally weak.¹²⁵ Analogously, given the slave narratives discussed above, extraordinary slaves used for sex must be "free", just as extraordinary women must be sexless or "men". As Carolyn Heilbrun remarks, "exceptional women are the chief prisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving any woman could do it and assuring, in their uniqueness among men, that no other woman will".¹²⁶

Informal Gatherings

Women and men regularly gathered on an informal basis.¹²⁷ It seems that 'Amada al-'Ufiyya of Syria had a great love of books and had gatherings in which to discuss them.¹²⁸ Aḥmad al-Ḥawārī passed along reports heard at social gatherings attended by Rābi'a bt. Ismā'īl, such as Ḥukayma's gloss on the verse of the Qur'an, "Except for who comes to God with a peaceful heart" (Q. 26:89). She said, "The 'peaceful heart' is the one that meets God without anything other than God in it."¹²⁹ One man's father sent him to sit and learn from Ṭalḥa al-'Adawiyya, who would sit with baskets of raisins, buckthorn, and fresh beans before her, counting praises to God with them and snacking on them in turn.¹³⁰ Ghufayra (Basra, d. ca. 100/718), Jawhara (Baghdad, lived early 3rd/9th century), and Ubayda bt. Abū Kilāb (Basra, lived 2nd/8th

¹²³ For instance, IJ, #251, #259, #470, #478, #589, #604, #616; Cornell, *Early Sufi women*, 59–60; Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*, 69–88.

¹²⁴ IJ, #253, #944, and #945; A. Knysh, trans., *al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism* (Berkshire: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 97.

¹²⁵ For example, see IJ, #946; see also Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 18; and Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 58–60.

¹²⁶ C. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton 1988), 81.

¹²⁷ IJ, #238.

¹²⁸ IJ, #826.

¹²⁹ AARS, 126–27; see also IJ, #731.

¹³⁰ IJ, #930.

century) received groups of regular visitors in their homes or other sites, such as a graveyard, for discussion.¹³¹ And, of course, Rābi'a al-ʿAdawiyya welcomed well-known scholars and renunciants to her home for discussion and guidance.¹³² In some cases, there are reports of women with great spiritual mastery, such as Fāṭima, the wife of Abū ʿAlī al-Rūdhbārī (Cairo, d. 322/934), whom we might expect to have held gatherings, but there seem to be no reports of it.¹³³ Some women, though, did not welcome being visited at home by men. Several women prayed at length while uninvited men waited, thus shaming them into leaving.¹³⁴ Lubaba seems to have been sought out to answer questions about ritual law, but tired easily of human interaction and at those times would retreat into seclusion for her devotions.¹³⁵ According to reports, men and women also met in public and stopped to chat, whether this be in their hometown, travelling, or on Hajj.¹³⁶

Other reports allude to informal networks in which women supported each other in their practices. Such women might be depicted in the literature as solitary worshippers, but these accounts suggest that women's devotions were taken up through networks of shared experience. A number of women found in Basra, Baghdad, and Mecca are reported to have used a variation of an old and well-known supplication: "The stars have sunk, the eyes are asleep, the kingdom has shut its gates, and your door is open. Every lover is alone with his lover, and so I stand before you."¹³⁷ If not a transmitter's interpolation, the supplication may have been shared by some women. In any case, pious, mystic, and Sufi women were engaged socially with one another. They visited each other at home, met at gatherings, travelled to spend time with each other, passed along accounts of each other's knowledge or practices, worshipped with one another, and caught up with each other's news.¹³⁸ The narrative frames of some transmissions show that they shared their knowledge in casual social interactions as one might expect. Ḥukayma's gloss on the Qur'an may have a formal feel to it, but it arose during a chat with Rābi'a bt. Ismā'il in

¹³¹ II, #368, #593, #594, #598, #601, #604, #607, #609, and #632.

¹³² On depictions of Rābi'a al-ʿAdawiyya as a guide in some Sufi sources, see Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 59–63; and H. A. Ford, *Constructing Sanctity: Miracles, Saints, and Gender in Yūsuf ibn Ismā'il al-Nabhānī's Jāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'* (Dissertation for the Department of Near Eastern and Languages and Cultures, Indiana University, 2000), 221–224.

¹³³ II, #851; AARS, 186–187.

¹³⁴ II, #623, #853, #931, and #934.

¹³⁵ AARS, 82; II, #783.

¹³⁶ See II, #787, #830, #880, #933, and #939; sections on women met at the Kaaba, II, #968–978; sections on women met on the road, II, #991–995.

¹³⁷ II, #201, #590, #596, and #615; and see Dakake, "Guest of the inmost heart", 85; noted in Malik, *Muwatta*, Kitāb al-salat/al-ʿamal fi dua', #505 (pointed out to me by A. Geissinger).

¹³⁸ II, #589, #590, #591, #592, #608, #654, #824, and #827.

response to her news that Aḥmad had taken another wife. It was Ḥukayma's way of saying that she was not impressed with his lack of judgment.¹³⁹

Some women also belonged to a female counterpart to *futuwwa* (male chivalry) called *niswān*, dating back at least to the early 3rd/9th century in Khurasan.¹⁴⁰ Sufi treatises present *futuwwa* "as a collection of virtues necessary for a pious believer, such as generosity, munificence, modesty, chastity, trustworthiness, loyalty, mercifulness, knowledge, humility and piety, and it was considered one of the stations that a 'traveller' passes on his way to God".¹⁴¹ For women in the early period, such as Umm 'Alī, the wife of Aḥmad b. Khaḍrawayh (Balkh, d. 240/854), *niswān* most likely referred to an informal association of women who undertook a commitment to developing and upholding shared character traits.¹⁴² Other women, such as Fāṭima al-Khānaqahiyya, made formal vows of service to *futuwwa* organizations themselves.¹⁴³

Women also entered into female-only groups in the performance of Hajj.¹⁴⁴ But some women stayed there for years, a few seemingly attaching themselves to the walls of the Great Mosque. A number of women wearing shifts made of wool and donkey hair were observed secluding themselves in the mosque area and refusing to speak during the day.¹⁴⁵ One woman, who had devoted herself to the Kaaba since childhood, reportedly wore an iron ring around her wrist to which she would chain herself (presumably) to a mosque wall.¹⁴⁶ It is not clear if chaining herself demonstrated her attachment, kept her from giving up her commitment, or kept others from removing her. Although contested then and now, the ritually liminal space of Kaaba seemed to allow for a degree of social and ritual egalitarianism.¹⁴⁷

Formal Gatherings

Other reports indicate more formal teaching environments in which people visited women and men as subordinates.¹⁴⁸ Sha'wāna and Baḥriyya held

¹³⁹ AARS, 126–127.

¹⁴⁰ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 67.

¹⁴¹ K. Gevorgyan, "Futuwwa varieties and the *futuwwat-nāma* literature: An attempt to classify *futuwwa* and Persian *futuwwat-nāmas*", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40/1 (2013), 4.

¹⁴² L. Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: A History of sufi-futuwwat in Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 10, 35; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 65–69.

¹⁴³ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 68.

¹⁴⁴ Geissinger, "Portrayal of the Hajj", 170.

¹⁴⁵ JJ, #784.

¹⁴⁶ JJ, #786; also see JJ, #784.

¹⁴⁷ Geissinger, "Portrayal of the Hajj", 165.

¹⁴⁸ On Sulamī's use of scholarly titles and Cornell's account of women's institutions in Sufism, see Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 58–73.

formal mixed-gender gatherings at which they led regular visitors and followers in *samāʿ* (ecstatic concert).¹⁴⁹ Shaʿwāna’s followers included Kurdiyya bt. ʿAmr and visitors such as Fuḍayl b. ʿIyāḍ (d. 187/803).¹⁵⁰ Fāṭima bt. ʿImrān of Damaghān is said to have taught the *fuqarāʾ*, “the poor ones” who had devoted their lives to God.¹⁵¹ Scholarly pious women, such as Ḥafṣa bt. Sīrīn, also held teaching circles.¹⁵² Women who preached in the streets or in graveyards seem to have had regular gatherings and followers.¹⁵³ In a report that reads as an upbraiding tale vouching for her authority to act in the capacity of preacher, a man saw a black woman preaching in the street to a crowd that then followed her into a nearby house and sat around her in a circle. He was outraged by her behaviour and approached her disrespectfully, demanding she account for herself. Standing over her while she was seated with her followers, he asked in an incredulous tone, “Have you no fear of pride?” She raised her head to look at him and said, “How could one who has not been informed about his return to God be proud of his works?”¹⁵⁴

Women were also regulars at gatherings of pious and Sufi leaders such as Sarī al-Saqatī, Ibrāhīm Khawwās, and al-Junayd of Baghdad; Abū ʿUthmān al-Hīrī of Nishapur; and Aḥmad ibn Abū al-Ḥawārī and Sulaymān al-Dārānī of Syria.¹⁵⁵ Miskīna al-Ṭafāwayya and Shaʿwāna both visited the gatherings of ʿĪsā b. Zādān in Ubulla, near Basra. The renowned Umm al-Ḥusayn al-Qurayshiyya of Nasa visited the circles of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Khiḍrī in Baghdad and Abū al-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādhī in Naysabur.¹⁵⁶ She reportedly berated al-Naṣrābādhī with criticism until he snapped at her to be quiet, to which she replied, “I will be quiet when you are quiet!”¹⁵⁷ In some cases, the teacher–student relationship was grounded in a household bond. Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī’s sisters, ʿAbda and Āmina, were his students. Ibrāhīm al-Khawwās (d. 291/904) taught his sister Maymūna.¹⁵⁸ Abū ʿUthmān al-Hīrī

¹⁴⁹ IJ, #601 and #630.

¹⁵⁰ IJ, #608; AARS, 116–117.

¹⁵¹ IJ, #678.

¹⁵² IJ, #585; and, for instance, IJ #366, #367, #783, #819, #821, #829; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 63–64; also see A. Geissinger, *Gender and the Construction of Exegetical Authority*; and Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*.

¹⁵³ IJ, #607 and #932.

¹⁵⁴ IJ, #625; also see IJ, #239.

¹⁵⁵ IJ, #369, #370, #371, and #689, Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 32 nt. 52, 154, 172.

¹⁵⁶ AARS, 250–251.

¹⁵⁷ AARS, 224–225.

¹⁵⁸ IJ, #822.

taught his daughter, ‘Ā’isha.¹⁵⁹ And Zaytūna was a servant and student of three Baghdadī Sufis, Nūrī, Junayd, and Abū Hamza.¹⁶⁰

A number of women seem to have had only female students. It is not clear if they led small circles of committed students or if, like other pious and Sufi teachers, there was a lay following as well. Mu‘ādha al-‘Adawiyya (d. ca. 1st/7th century) taught women such as Ghufayra who, in turn, taught others in Basra renunciant practices including prayer, fasting, and night vigils.¹⁶¹ Rābi‘a bt. Ismā‘īl studied under Ḥukayma.¹⁶² Umm al-Bunayn bt. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Marwān, the sister of ‘Umar, is reported to have had female students to whom she transmitted Hadith and instructed in pious worship and gaining intimacy with God.¹⁶³ Shabaka of Basra seems to have had a circle of very serious female students who undertook rigorous spiritual seclusion in underground cells dug into the floor of her home, where they likely fasted, prayed, and recited litanies.¹⁶⁴ An unnamed Syrian woman is reported to have taught other women at the mosque in Hims. The report suggests that women were not only welcome to pray in this mosque, but that women were permitted to teach and study there at that time. It is said that she instructed them in Qur’an, Hadith, and the religious obligations, as well as offering them inward guidance.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

That women were widely integrated into these circles or paths as leaders and followers should not be taken as proof that the pious and mystical paths were free of patriarchal assumptions or restrictions such as sexual availability in marriage and social hierarchies such as slavery, nor should they support an essentialized notion of “women’s spirituality”. On the contrary, I have argued that such women lived in complex social networks and that their experience and articulation of their relationship with God, and their transmitters’ reworking of it, was profoundly shaped by their socio-historical circumstances. Women’s lives were impacted by egalitarian impulses, but those impulses were formed within a patriarchal system of values, gender norms,

¹⁵⁹ IJ, #689.

¹⁶⁰ AARS, 158–161.

¹⁶¹ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 61; AARS, 88–89; IJ, #593.

¹⁶² AARS, 126–127.

¹⁶³ IJ, #821.

¹⁶⁴ AARS, 90–91.

¹⁶⁵ IJ, #829.

social hierarchies, and structures of authority. That said, so much more textual and historical analysis is still needed to clarify, correct, and add to our understanding of the historical situation of early women as well as the diverse agendas at work in the narrative constructions about women's lives.

FURTHER READING

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