

“A Woman of Perfume and Prayer speaks with Christ-Sophia: Wisdom as a Basis for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims”, a paper presented at 'Gathering the Threads' Women Scholars in Religion and Theology Conference, Brisbane, January 1998.

A WOMAN OF PERFUME AND PRAYER SPEAKS WITH CHRIST-SOPHIA: WISDOM AS A BASIS FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS

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Woman Wisdom is not one to tarry.
Just as she has taken many forms
in many places throughout history
and made many new alliances
today, too,
she calls to a new configuration.

Throughout history “practical” Wisdom has appeared in many guises. As goddess, in proverbial sayings, in theosophical and theological reflection and even in personified form. In all her forms she brings a sense of the dynamism and movement of Reality. In her is found the integration of the sensual with the divine, the immanence with the transcendence of God, the material with the spiritual, the experiential with the philosophical, the particular with the universal. Von Rad refers to the “unfinished” and perhaps “unfinishable” nature of Wisdom.¹ I like to think that perhaps the form in which she is now appearing is that of a feminist liberation ethic as this emerges today with its stress on God's ongoing involvement with and in creation.

Many feminist scholars today, Jewish, Christian and some Muslims are addressing themselves to a feminist critique of their respective religious traditions and to the birth of new forms of doing ethics. Feminist ethical theory arises from the analysis of human experience and activity, especially that of women and the poor, most of whom are women. In this way it differs from most current ecumenical and interreligious dialogue which is dominated by male members of the human race. As women (and at times feminist men) from different faith communities increasingly get in contact with one another in order to share their vision of liberation and try to work together towards a new praxis for personal and social transformation, there is brought to birth not only an academic method which re-envisages how the religions are studied but which also embraces a new social and religious vision which affects what religion is i.e. how religions are lived and practised.²

A Feminist Liberation Ethic

Several characteristics of a feminist or “wisdom” liberation ethic mark it off from

“malestream” approaches to ethics³ which are characterised by an order imposed externally usually within the context of law and reinforced by religious sanctions. A “wisdom” ethic on the contrary gains its authority by its appeal to personal experience and individual judgement, based on an attitude of trust in the all-pervasive presence of God in every aspect of creation.

Apart from its insistence on the foundational importance of women's experience and praxis, its most striking aspect is that it occurs within the context of relationships in community - a community characterised by “relationships of equality and mutuality with others, in a co-operative and co-creative relationship with God and in a reverent relationship with the earth”.⁴ This religious community must be a community of both reflection and resistance as Sharon Welch has so well outlined in her *study A Feminist Ethic of Risk*.⁵ Within the reflective process there is dialogue with the religious tradition⁶ - a two-way process of interaction between the experience of the community and its tradition. In an interreligious context there would also be dialogue between religious traditions, each helping to draw out the richness of the other and also, at times, serving as a corrective to the blind spots, distortions or underdeveloped aspects of the tradition of the other. At least some of the analysis must be done by those most affected by the issues under discussion, the poor and marginalised and especially women. Finally, the process releases energy and creative power to do radical love and justice.

In the case of both Christians and Muslims the “justice of God” is the core value at the heart of their ethical systems. Both traditions also adhere to the central value of community. For Muslims the ummatah wasatah, the “justly balanced community” (Sura 2: 137), is the context for living out that call. For Christians this value is expressed in the “root metaphor” of the Kingdom or rule of God,⁷ which is lived out in relationships of mutuality and equality in community. It is within this framework that the Islamic “Woman of perfume and prayer” can converse with Christ-Sophia.

Since the consideration of Wisdom within the Jewish-Christian tradition is a large enough topic to be the subject of another paper, in the time I have here I will concentrate on the sources of Islamic Wisdom and ways it could be brought into conversation with Christian wisdom.

Islamic wisdom

The main sources of Islamic wisdom are to be found in the Qur'an, in creation wisdom and in Sufism. Islamic wisdom (in Arabic: hikma), though of course developing much later than the wisdom of Israel, can only be properly understood in the context of its common origins in the clan wisdom of the nomadic desert tribes of Arabia and Syria.⁸ The main source of Islamic wisdom, the Qur'an, reveals that Muhammad as leader of a new community was called upon to exercise a kind of wisdom in decisions affecting his people at Mecca and especially at Medina. Like much of wisdom literature, the Qur'an emerged within the context of human struggle to understand God's purposes in a particular life situation. R. Zakaria says “As he struggled God guided him. The Qur'an is the sum total of that guidance”.⁹ The central concern of the Qur'an is human behaviour and the ordering of

society. It is not primarily a theological work. However, through all its verses, as Zakaria points out, the central and universal message is that of the oneness (tawhid) and supremacy of God. On this there is no compromise.¹⁰

Also identifiable in Islam is a tradition of “creation wisdom” in which creation was taken seriously as a form of God's revelation.¹¹ Although Islam differed in emphasis from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which recognised God's Self-revelation in nature, there are important verses of the Qu'ran which speak of the created world as a sign (ayat) of God's mercy.

Your God is one God;
there is no God but He,
the All-merciful, the All-compassionate.

Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth
and in the alternation of night and day
and the ship that runs in the sea with profit
to men, and the water God sends down from heaven
therewith reviving the earth after it is dead
and His scattering abroad in it all manner of
crawling things, and the turning about of the winds
and the clouds compelled between heaven and earth -
surely there are signs for a people having understanding.

(Sura 2: 157-60)

Sufism

The Sufi tradition has often been at odds with the mainstream culture of Islam, with the latter's perception of an almighty, transcendent God and emphasis on Law and obedience to the detriment of personal religious experience and independent speculative thought. However, the Sufi tradition is also without a doubt an intrinsic part of Islam,¹² highlighting as it does both the transcendence and immanence of God and drawing attention to the complexity of the Quranic perception of the relationship of the individual to God. The recovery of this aspect of Islam would seem to be ever more crucial today if Islam is to be able to contribute to a global ethic which is not dualistic or patriarchal in its basis but holistic and relational in its ethos. Islam has these resources within its greater tradition though they have lacked development. Perhaps a recovery of its wisdom tradition would enable the Islamic community to make a much-needed contribution to a global ethic that is appropriate for the world community of the twenty first century.

Muhyialdin Ibn al-'Arabi

One of the most interesting and controversial of the sufis is the mystic-philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi. Ibn 'Arabi's entire system is generally designated by the term wahdat al-wujud, “unity of being”. So there is the Absolute Reality (al haqq) and its polarisation into the creator God and the created world. The purpose of God in creation was a desire to be

known. As it is said in the tradition (hadith) of Islam,

I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known.¹³

As outlined by A. Schimmel everything gains its wujud, its existence, by “being found” i.e. perceived, by God, and “only their face that is turned to God is real, the rest is pure non-Being”. God is above all qualities - they are neither God nor other than God. On the plane of essence, God remains inconceivable and nonexperiential. However, in their actual existence creatures, while not identical with God, are reflections of God's attributes.

Such a theory gives very high value to human life and the existence of creation, which could become the basis of an agreed-upon global ethic. God is necessary to us in order that we may exist while we are necessary to God in order that God may be manifested to Godself.

I give God also life, by knowing God in my Heart.¹⁴

Ibn 'Arabi's theosophical mysticism is attractive, Schimmel feels, because it gives an answer to most of the questions of being and becoming of creation and return. Unfortunately, she says, the creativity apparent in his thought was not further developed by others in later years.¹⁵

Another aspect of Ibn 'Arabi's thought which could prove a starting point for the development of a wisdom ethic within Islam is the role he attributes to the female element. Woman reveals for Ibn 'Arabi the secret of the compassionate God.¹⁶ The word for essence, *dhat*, being feminine in Arabic offered Ibn 'Arabi different methods to discover this feminine element in God and meant that he could speak of the “woman creator”. His contemporary, the Egyptian poet Ibn al-Farid used the feminine gender in his mystical odes when talking of the divine beloved.

In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, commenting on Muhammad's saying “Three things have been made beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and prayer”, Ibn 'Arabi suggests, within his overall schema of the God-cosmos polarity, that of the three symbolic elements, the word “women” very well represents the various aspects and nature of the cosmic pole, suggesting as it does multiplicity, nature, form, body, receptivity, fecundity, becoming, beauty, fascination.¹⁷ The word “perfume” symbolises both the current of the creative Mercy and also the spiritual nostalgia that draws the human spirit back to its source in God. Although Ibn 'Arabi's further development of the ternary relationship between God, woman and man in this context reflects the patriarchal culture of the period in which it was written, nevertheless there is a positive affirmation of the necessary place which women have in the revelatory process (far from being a “distraction” it is through woman that man properly knows his relationship to God) and a worldview which portrays the connection of human beings with God as being essentially dependent on their own relationality, since God cannot be known in Godself. It is such aspects of creative theology in Sufism which have the potential to contribute to a global ethic that is relational, inclusive and holistic in its ethos.

Again, these more imminent and experiential aspects of Islamic spirituality which issue in a kind of “practical wisdom” can be found in the reflections and writings of such Sufi mystics as Rabi'a and Rumi who could even perhaps be seen as early forerunners to the kind of mysticism emerging once more in today's world which Sobrino calls “political holiness” in which mysticism and ethical action are seen to be in dynamic relationship with one another.¹⁸

Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya

Rabi'a (713 - 801) is generally regarded as the person who introduced the element of pure love into the austere teachings of the early ascetics and gave Sufism the hue of true mysticism.¹⁹ As a wisdom figure herself, she seems to have freely instructed others, particularly men, in the Sufi way and has become an important symbol of the role that could be assigned to the feminine element in Islamic religious life.²⁰ Although strict jurists would say that humans cannot love God, the Sufis challenge the tradition to go beyond this position.

One story about Rabi'a in particular demonstrates an exceptional understanding of the universality of God's love. Her unwillingness to depend on any save God was a part of her deep understanding of God's providence in all of creation. She once refused to accept the assistance of a wealthy benefactor saying

Shall not He who provides for those who revile Him, provide for those who love Him?
He does not refuse sustenance to one who speaks unworthily of Him, how then should
He refuse sustenance to one whose soul is overflowing with love to Him?²¹

Rabi'a's acceptance, with equanimity, of both good and adversity as coming equally kindly from the hand of God, finds its parallel in the Book of Job.

M. Jalaluddin Rumi

The poetry and writings of the Sufi Rumi (d. 1273) also display a wonderful sense of immediacy and intimacy with God. His poetry abounds with symbols taken from music and mystical dance; for him dance was a life-giving moment, part of the heavenly dance in which the stars and the angels take part. Rumi has been described as the unsurpassable master of love and passion in the highest sense. For him, as for many of his predecessors and followers, love was the power innate in everything, working through everything and directing all things toward unification. He stresses the dynamic character of love – it makes the ocean boil like a kettle and it is the power that changes everything for the better, purifying it and quickening it.²²

Never think the earth void or dead-
It's a hare, awake with shut eyes:
It's a sauce-pan, simmering with broth-
One clear look, you'll see it's in ferment.²³

His poems speak of the fact that he has experienced the divine in all of his senses. Like Ibn 'Arabi he was accused of pantheism, but although sensual experiences are reflected strongly in his poetry, the fine balance between sensual experience and divine love is well maintained.

I am so close to you I am distant
I am so mingled with you I am apart
I am so open I am hidden
I am so strong I totter.²⁴

Many of his stories are full of practical wisdom such as his well known fable of the group of people all trying to identify by touch an elephant which was being kept in a dark room.²⁵ Of course each gave a different description and all were right. In this simple story Rumi is able to present the idea of humanity's only partial understanding of truth which nevertheless does not deny that there exists Truth on a larger scale than human beings are able within themselves to grasp.

Rumi, I believe, provides almost a boundless source of the wisdom tradition in Islam. His writings are the product of intense personal experience and theological and philosophical reflection. In them there is a sense of the dynamism and movement of Reality together with its constancy.

Al-Hallaj

Another of the most interesting figures in the Islamic wisdom tradition, as far as making connections with Judeo-Christian wisdom is concerned, is that of the tenth century Persian Sufi known as Al-Hallaj (d. 922). Although the most comprehensive account of his life was recorded by Louis Massignon, a devout Christian, and is no doubt open to the accusation that it has been interpreted through Christian lens, nevertheless the parallels with the life of Jesus are striking.²⁶ Both lives unfolded in the midst of communities heavily weighed down by religious legalism. Both, by teaching of the universality of God's love and of its accessibility to all, became threats to the religious and political establishments of their day. Both were subjected to doubtful trials and were "hung on a gibbet". Both believed the sacrifice of their lives to be, in a mysterious way, revelatory of God's Love. Al-Hallaj is the closest Islam gets to an incarnational Wisdom figure in the Christian sense.

Al-Hallaj was a traditional Muslim in his acceptance of the emphasis on obedience to the commands and will of Allah as expressed in law (*shari'a*). However, he also developed a doctrine of union and love of God that has universal significance. He taught that in the human act of obedience God's action becomes dynamic when human action is transformed into divine action. This means that God's will is latent or static until activated or acted upon by human beings. The *fiat* is the divine commandment, the uncreated Word, and this commandment finds completion and creation in human language and action. Al-Hallaj has an understanding of God which, as well as acknowledging God as Creator, stresses God's ongoing dynamic involvement with and in creation. He also has an understanding of humanity, and indeed of creation itself, which attributes to it the dignity of sharing in the very life of God.

Conclusion

In the study of the development and teaching of wisdom in both Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions we find a wide variety of forms and approaches. There is no theoretically self-contained picture of the world, no ideal picture of humanity to lead it out of itself. It does not seem to be able to be systematised or scientifically constructed or comprehensively explained. However Von Rad ends up deciding that this is by no means a negative thing. 'There is the fact that the truth about the world and about humanity can never become the object of our theoretical knowledge; that reliable knowledge can only be established through a relationship of trust with things.' The secret lies in letting things retain their constantly puzzling nature and, by letting them have their say, set humanity right. This process of "getting wisdom" continues into our own time forever taking new forms and new shapes.

The insight of Paul Knitter²⁷ that it is in the recognition and recovery, where necessary, of the richness of their wisdom traditions that the world religions will make their best contribution to a global ethic seems to be one worth pursuing. In a world where our global relationality is becoming increasingly unavoidable, the full development of a modern wisdom ethic which has the capacity to include the value of experience with the necessity of law, which can recognise the immanence of God as well as God's transcendence and which emphasises interconnectedness over control, may prove the saving grace most needed in our days.

¹ Von Rad, G. (1972), *Wisdom in Israel*. London: SCM., 318.

² King, U. (1998), "Feminism, the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions". In *Pluralism and the Religions*. Edited by John D'Arcy May. London: Cassell, 42.

³ For an outline of five main ingredients of a feminist or "wisdom" ethic see Zappone, K. 1989. 'Is There a Feminist Ethic?' in *Ethics and the Christian*. Edited by S. Freyne. Dublin: Columba Press, 117ff.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵ Welch, S. 1990. *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

⁶ for the purposes of this discussion the term "religious tradition" could also theoretically include other traditions such as humanism.

⁷ Carr A. (1989). She quotes S. McFague in 'Feminist Theology in a New Paradigm'. In *Paradigm Change in Theology*. Edited by H. Kung and D. Tracy. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 404.

⁸ Seale, M. (1978) *Qur'an and Bible*. London: Croom Helm, 16-7, and 28.

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- ⁹ Zakaria R. (1991) *Muhammad and the Qur'an*. London: Penguin, 6.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹¹ Beavin, E. (1982), 'The Wisdom Literature' in *Interpreters One Volume Commentary*. Edited by C. Laymon. Nashville, 1105.
- ¹² V. Danner states that Sufism traces its origin back to the Quranic revelation and the Sunnah (norm of the prophet) by means of the silsilah or chain of transmission. Therefore the silsilah really indicates that the ultimate origin and root of the path (tariqah) is to be found in the Divinity, who revealed it to the Messenger through the archangel of Revelation, Gabriel, the personification of the revelatory function of the Spirit. He believes the fact "that both the Law and the path should repose on the same Qur'an and Sunnah shows that we can look on the Islamic message from two different but complementary perspectives, the esoteric and the exoteric.....Both dimensions are to be found in the Qur'an and the Sunnah". ["The Early Development of Sufism" in *Islamic Spirituality*. Edited by S. Nasr. *World Spirituality* series (vol 1). London: SCM, 1989, 239].
- ¹³ quoted in Griffiths, B. 1989. *A New Vision of Reality*. London: Collins, 144.
- ¹⁴ Schimmel, A. 1978. *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill, University of Nth Carolina Press, 266.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 403.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 431. In this respect it is interesting to note that two of Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual teachers were women. One was Shams who lived in Marchena, the other was Fatima of Cordova. Other women also had a strong influence on his life. [Austin R.J.W. (1980). In Introduction to Ibn al-'Arabi's *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusus al-hikam)*, trans by R.J.W. Austin. (*Classics of Western Spirituality* series). New York: Paulist. 3].
- ¹⁷ Ibn al-Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 269-72.
- ¹⁸ referred to in Schillebeekx, E. 1987. *Jesus in Our Western Culture*. London: SCM, 70-3.
- ¹⁹ Schimmel A. *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 38
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 426. It seems to have been a continuation of roles such as that assigned also to Fatima daughter of Muhammad.
- ²¹ Smith M. (1994), *Rabi'a*, Oxford: One World, 43.

²² Schimmel A. *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 292-3

²³ Harvey A. (ed). 1988. *Love's Fire*, (selections from Rumi's *Rubaiyat*). London: Jonathon Cape, 3

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁵ Whinfield E. (ed) (1994), *Masnavi I Ma'navi: Teachings of Rumi*. Trans. By E. Whinfield. London: Octagon Press, 122.

²⁶ Massignon L. (1982) *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, (3 volumes), trans. by H. Mason, Bollingen Series XCVIII. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. I have also used some ideas originating from O'Connor M. (1994) *The Muslim Mystic Al-Hallaj*. Unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin.

²⁷ Knitter P. 1995. *One Earth, Many Religions*, New York: Orbis, 123-4.

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