Foreword

Western scholars have described Islam as a “male” religion, a characterization that continues to be repeated well into the twenty-first century. As evidence for this position, commentators state and restate that no women are observed in the mosque for prayers, that only boys appear to be students in the Quranic schools, and that female participation is lacking during the major religious feasts (the *Iid al Fitr* which follows Ramadan, and the *Iid al Adha*, or feast of sacrifice). If this is actually the case, how could Islam be seen as other than male-focused? This view arises from several misconceptions.

Primary among these is the early scholars’ need to compare Islam to a familiar system, i.e., Christianity. Such a comparison ignores a central fact: the mosque is not, like the Christian church, the center of religious observance. The focus of Muslim practice, like the focus of Judaic religious practice, lies in the home. The home is where the rituals marking the religious year take place and where women have tended to pray. And girls have always attended Quranic schools and received religious education, though often in private settings separate from boys. Further, early Western studies of Islam were text-based, rather than being the result of on-the-ground research and fieldwork in Muslim countries. The absence of a common language has also contributed to an ethnocentric view. Until very recently, knowledge of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other languages spoken by Muslims around the world was minimal in the West. Muslim scholars themselves only began to write in English, French, and German after the nineteenth-century incursions by Western colonial powers.

Ethnocentrism also affected scholars’ recognition of the importance of

different categories of religious behavior that might not be present to the same degree in Christian practice. Here I speak of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, and the far-flung series of lodges that the Sufi brotherhoods and sisterhoods have established over the centuries throughout the Islamic world. Sufi lodges, or *zawiyas*, are found from Morocco across the Fertile Crescent to Turkey, South Asia, and the Gulf States. (They are not found, of course, among Wahhabi adherents in Saudi Arabia.) Sufism, however, has always been regarded with some ambiguity by Muslim *imams* and *mullahs*, who see the rituals of the Sufi *tariqas* (organizations) as less than orthodox. But as is the case with all religious institutions, the way in which a belief is formally stated and the way in which it is expressed often differs among believers. Thus, just as the rise of holy figures and the pilgrimage to shrines such as Lourdes, Ste. Anne de Beaupré, and Our Lady of Guadalupe arouse controversies within the orthodox hierarchy of Christian Catholicism, so do the activities of the regional cults or organizations evoke mixed feelings among the theologians of Islam.

But the Sufi brotherhoods and sisterhoods have persisted, despite religious disfavor and government attempts to curtail their practices. In Libya, during the Italian colonial period, it was the chain of Sufi Senussi lodges that kept Islamic learning alive and served as a rallying point for Muslims objecting to Italian occupation. Mustafa Kemal outlawed the Sufi lodges in Turkey in the 1920s, believing that they had a deleterious influence on his country's modernization program, and also perhaps posed a political threat to his new republican government. In Morocco and Algeria, young survivors of the French colonial period saw the shrines as evidence of backwardness, and a program to discredit them began among the newly independent citizens. But the Sufi groups survived, and they continue to prosper throughout the Islamic world. Similar organizations are found in South Asia.

Sufi rituals vary from country to country and from rural to urban areas. In some, the lodge is an adjunct to the local mosque, and the activities are closely related. In others, the lodge is a separate building and organization. The organizations embrace both men and women in the rituals, sometimes separately, sometimes together in congregational settings. French ethnographers in North Africa noted early the *marabouts* (shrines) scattered through the countryside as well as the cities, shrines dedicated to *walis* (holy men), which are the focus of annual *moussems*, or celebrations of the lives of the holy men and women for whom the shrines are named. But the French ethnographers seldom mentioned the women auxiliaries of these same *marabouts*. It is only in the work of indigenous social scientists, such as the Tunisian anthropologist Sophie Ferchiou, that we find accounts of women's

participation in annual rituals, and their daily or monthly visits (*ziārat*) to the shrines. And almost nothing has been published in English about men and women in South Asian Sufism.

Given these gaps in western scholarship about Islam, then, it is a great pleasure to introduce the book that follows: *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual*, by Shemeem Abbas. Dr. Abbas is a native of Pakistan who has lived and studied in the West over a period of several years and holds advanced degrees from both British and American universities. Dr. Abbas' first interest in South Asian Sufis focused on the linguistic and performance aspects of their regular rituals. For her doctoral dissertation, she documented performances and linguistic variations within Pakistani communities. She attended sessions not only in her native land, but also in England and the United States, where Pakistanis far from home were developing their own versions of traditional rituals.

Now Dr. Abbas has built upon her earlier research to give us the following work. She has set down events in the ritual cycle in which both men and women are participants. Through her work in historical archives, she has discovered early examples of women's roles as participants, performers, and creators of texts. In travels throughout Pakistan, she visited village and city groups, recorded local variants of rituals, and interviewed not only the Sufi singers (both men and women), but also members of the audiences and local critics. This was possible because of her command of local languages, which allowed her access to local oral traditions. She has translated many of the texts in a fluid and accessible style. Dr. Abbas' research and insight has allowed her to integrate this new material into a South Asian case study, an in-depth view, in English, of women's role in Sufism.

The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual will come as no surprise to Muslim readers. But for Western audiences, it offers an introduction to an area of religious expression—that of women—which has been largely ignored and which is important to all people in the diverse world of Islam.

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