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RABI'A AL - ADAWIYYA'S DEVOTION TO GOD

It took Ibrahim Ibn Adham fourteen years to reach the Kaaba in pilgrimage, because he said long prayers at every shrine along the way . . . but when he got there, there was no Kaaba to be seen. "What is this?" he asked himself. "Have I gone blind?"

"No," a Voice said, "you can't see the Kaaba because it has gone out to meet a woman." Burning with jealousy, Ibrahim ran toward the outskirts of Mecca till he ran into Rabi'a, who was just arriving. He turned around, and saw the Kaaba back in its usual place. Then he turned to Rabi'a.

"What's this craziness you've brought into the world, woman?" he demanded.

"It's not I who am the author of craziness," she replied, "but you. You were crazy enough to take fourteen years to get to the Kaaba with your ritual prayer, while I, with my inner prayer, am here already."¹

Rabi'a al-Adawiyya was born in 717 C.E. in Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq. Most of the facts and stories about, and by, Rabi'a, cannot

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1. Charles Upton, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabi'a* (Vermont: Threshold, 1987), pp. 10-11. Actually, Ibrahim Ibn Adham, was a prince according to Muslim legend, who gave up his throne and became a wandering dervish. It is not fair to point to Ibrahim, as opposed to devotional love, since his path incorporated the prayer of focusing on God's merciful name, and was simply different than Rabi'a's in orientation. Closeness to God remained Ibrahim's goal, just as it was Rabi'a's central aim. How they achieved their mutual goal was different in means, but their end obviously was always the same. It may have been a matter of temperamental preference or training. In any event, these two are solid examples of the variety of techniques employed in the God-journey.

be accurately traced historically. These are hagiographical and brimming with a mystique of holiness giving to Rabi'a, an archetypal quality universalizing her personal life and teachings.

In the above teaching of Rabi'a's, the point is that consciousness of God must work from within outward. Being a true mystic and Sufi, Rabi'a had little respect for asceticism for asceticism's sake, and examples of her acerbic remarks to the other sages of that era, such as Ibrahim Ibn Adham, can be attributed to lessons on the difference between Rabi'a's devotional love and the outward practices of fasting, vigils, saying "long prayers at every shrine" on the way to the Kaaba, that characterize superficial piety. Rabi'a's zeal is not unique in the history of religions, one has only to look at the life of Buddha or Jesus, both of whom condemn external asceticism: cleaning the outer cup, but leaving the inside of the cup dirty.

It is fascinating however, to look at just how much of an ascetic Rabi'a was for all her condemnations of this purifying path. She did prove in her person the difference between the asceticism which is a path in itself resulting in pride and separation from other beings, and that true asceticism which purifies the heart bringing one closer to God through viewing the reflection of the sacred in the world within and without.

"True devotion is for God: not to desire heaven nor fear hell."² Rabi'a believed that even in the spiritual life, there existed a temptation to turn away from the Beloved either through desires that form unhealthy attachments, or, through fears that block the necessary trust existing in any genuine love relationship. Rabi'a, therefore, is known throughout the Muslim world, as the model of the selfless lover who ceaselessly seeks God first, and thereby, avoids any of temptation's pitfalls. To this day, one is complimented by being referred to as "another Rabi'a," she who lived only for God, the second Mary.³

2. Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, with an Introduction by Robert Graves (New York: Doubleday, 1971), quoting Rabi'a, p. 185.

3. See, Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1928).

Rabi'a is the herald of love mysticism, her very clear prayer consisting of the words: "Thou art enough for me."⁴ Rabi'a attained a unified God-consciousness in her life exemplifying that pragmatic holiness at-one with God. She was always available to people who sought for themselves a relationship of union with God. And, she remained open to God's immanence in the created universe. No animal ran from Rabi'a, and when she would pray in the mountains, "all the animals, the deer and the wild asses, the goats and gazelles, came up to her, and gazed at her, and danced around her."⁵

Purification

Although the goal of the mystical journey is union with God, purification is the most important level. Without purification, God is an abstraction hidden by the veils of the false ego blocking the pathway into divine perception and reality.

Rabi'a chose purification as a path of continual self-examination, especially in the higher states of mystical union when deception appears in the guise of supernatural powers or insights. This is not to say, that the human being's natural state does not contain elements of enlightenment and gifts such as telepathy. The Sufis, in particular, believe that individuals who pass through purification will indeed exhibit such secondary characteristics. Nonetheless, as too the ancient Hindu teachings describe, the Sufis believe that these powers are certainly not the goal of spiritual progress, nor the end of the journey. God alone is the goal, and the powers which come with the opening of the layers of the subconscious, are necessary to experience God's immanence active in a clear mind and the cycles of nature. However, supernatural powers must not be used as magical toys to lure the superficial follower, nor the gullible disciple. Rabi'a:

One day Hasan of Basra saw Rabi'a down by the riverside. He came up to her, spread his prayer-rug on the surface of the water, and said: "Come sit with me and pray."

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4. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 40.
 5. Upton, *Doorkeeper*, p. 30.

"Do you really *have* to sell yourself in the market of this world to the consumers of the next?" said Rabi'a. Then she unrolled her own prayer-rug in thin air, and sat on it: "What you did any fish can do, Hasan, and what I did any fly can do. Our real work is far beyond the work of fish and flies."⁶

What is the real work Rabi'a is demonstrating through her living parable? Is it not the continual purification of the psyche in order to create a space for God? Rabi'a never re-linquished her belief in God's grace, and in the response the individual had to such a call. The purgative road is a response to a deep call to oneness, a yearning that will even be capable through simplicity and honesty, to stand before one's ego and past, as partners on the road to transparency and love. Rabi'a believed in developing the utmost clarity of mind in order to stabilize the psyche in the center of divine Reality. She did this for the most part internally, but practiced asceticism when necessary to achieve that emptiness which draws one into God's fullness.

Rabi'a's definition of purgation is a sophisticated one. Here is where Rabi'a's intuitions become those of Sufis, for she makes statements which ontologically identify with God, with the internal self, and with the "signs of the earth," as one unified continuum. *Tawhid*, is faith in the unity of all, in the stage of clarifying discernment, the ability to differentiate and identify the thread of the sacred acting within one's own psyche and external situations, as part of the necessary preparation for understanding, and further development into, a more complete union with Allah.

Discernment then, is a gradual enlightenment brought about through grace and effort. It is an unlearning and relearning in a new way under the guidance of God and divine principles of insight. It is a reconditioning process occurring after the breakdown of the false ego in the painful cleansing experienced during purification. Gradually, the mystic will honestly declare, "Thy will be done . . ." knowing that will is wiser, more compassionate, and altruistic.

6. Ibid, p. 30.

Union

Rabi'a was the first Sufi to dwell extensively and thoroughly, on a theology of love. The kind of union Rabi'a experienced and described, has since her day been developed by some of Islam's greatest theologians, thinkers, and saints. Rabi'a called God, "Friend," but more intimately, "Beloved:" "Rabi'a's love of God was absolute; there was no room left for any other thought or love."⁷ She achieved a type of continuous awareness of God's presence within and without her, which today, we would describe as liberated awareness. Everything she touched, every person Rabi'a spoke to, every job performed, even every meal she cooked, Rabi'a was united to her Beloved. Her words, "my Beloved is always within my own presence,"⁸ could sound quite strange, if it were not for the fact that Rabi'a was speaking from an awakened consciousness experiencing no separation between lover and Beloved.

One of the most famous parables of Rabi'a, gives evidence of her union with God, and the instruction that arose out of such oneness :

I carry a torch in one hand
 And a bucket of water in the other:
 With these things I am going to set fire to Heaven
 And put out the flames of Hell
 So that voyagers to God can rip the veils
 And see the real goal.⁹

For Rabi'a, nothing must stand in the way of union with God, not even fear of retribution in hell for wrongdoing, nor reward in heaven for being a good person. She emphasizes her unwavering position in another verse which describes the same possible distractions from union with God: "If you're afraid that people might discover your sins, Better start worrying they might find out about your good deeds!"¹⁰ Here, ironically, Rabi'a is making the rather startling statement that one's good deeds can be a greater obstacle to union with God, than one's sins! Rabi'a recognized the

7. Schimmel, *Mystical*, p. 39.

8. Widad El Sakkakini, *First Among Sufis: The Life and Thought of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya*, translated by Nabil Safwat, with an *Introduction* by Doris Lessing (London: Octagon Press, 1982), p. 70.

9. Upton, *Doorkeeper*, p. 41.

10. Cf: Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967).

temptation of parading one's goodness in front of people, instead of doing what one could in mercy, yet always remaining free of praise or blame. Rabi'a's insight that praise may be more of a blockage than blame, is also elaborated in the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* says that one must work without thought of the reward, working for God alone.

Rabi'a's Teaching Methodology

Rabi'a was certainly not a pedant who preached to others as a type of intellectual escapism from the essential reality of truth. Rabi'a's teaching relied solely on an ontological basis, centered in her own union with God, awareness of God's presence, and therein, teaching was an outflow of a tremendous qualitative gift within. Teaching was a sharing of self, of wisdom, of divine presence. Because Rabi'a was not interested in power or impressing with quantitative knowledge, her ideas go right to the heart of the listener, creating within her or him, a germinating garden of spiritual possibilities. In the 1986 book, *Women's Ways Of Knowing*, Rabi'a's eighth century teaching method is accurately described :

Item : Midwife-teachers, assist others in giving birth to their own ideas, in drawing them out, in making others' own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it.

Item : Midwife-teachers do not administer anesthesia. They support the persons' thinking but they do not do the thinking for them or expect the persons to think as they do.

Item : Midwife-teachers' first concern is to preserve the others, fragile newborn thoughts, to see that they are born with their truth intact, that they do not turn into acceptable lies.

Item : Midwife-teachers, focus not on their own knowledge but on the others, knowledge. To them, the baby is not theirs, but the other persons'.¹¹

Rabi'a's teaching called forth from the student the inner core of the self which was concealed behind the layers of unconscious projections

11. Maria Harris' adaption of Christopher Loque's poem *Ode to the Dodo*, quoted in Harris' book, *Women and Teaching* (New York : Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 72-73.

and illusions. Her gift was the ability she possessed to crack through even spiritual stereotyping, and help the student to birth her or his own discerning spirituality. Rabi'a's only concern was that the student would reach God on her own. If the student needed help, Rabi'a was present to prode, guide, cajole, and through her own archetypal spirituality, give the student a continuous example of liberated holiness.

"Come to the edge."

It's too high.

"Come to the edge."

We might fall.

COME TO THE EDGE.

And they came.

And she pushed them.

And they flew.¹²

Rabi'a's kind of teaching was incisive, daring, and transformative. She pushed her students over the edge into their own released perceptions and deification, creating a new understanding of who they were as human beings in relationship to their own deepest self and humanity. Perhaps one of Rabi'a's greatest gifts was the crystalline expression she conveyed of truths which normally are hidden. She never acted coyly or smugly, but like any great master, expertly revealed her teaching through qualitative presence, superb accuracy, and the subtle art of illustrative parables.

Ecological Implications of Sainthood

Rabi'a, like the numerous saints in differing religious traditions, recognized the organic unity between the transcendent and immanent realms. The God who is invisibly present and transcendent, is also the God who is visibly immanent and present. All sacredness whether invisible or visible, is a tribute to Allah, to the glory of the Creator manifested through the abundance of creation. Rabi'a longed to teach of the evident bond between Creator and creation, for she had experienced the essential relationship between transcendence and immanence in her own prayer life and reflections. She gives us a modern ecological theology because of her internal attitude to the creation nourished through her daily encounters with Allah of the near, Allah of unknowability:

12. Upton, *Doorkeeper*, p. 11.

O God,
Whenever I listen to the voice of anything You have made . . .
The rustling of the trees
The trickling of water
The cries of birds
The flickering of shadow
The roar of the wind
The song of the thunder,
I hear it saying:
God is One!
Nothing can be compared with God!¹³

That Rabi'a understood the voice of Being speaking in her own spirit and in the trickling of water, the cries of birds, and the song of thunder, points to the total embodiment of her faith, and why, Rabi'a's spirituality is important to contemporary ecology.¹⁴ She was seeing the material universe through a deified vision, and it is that vision which has been lost for the most part, especially in the industrial West: "non-religious man has lost the capacity to live religion consciously."¹⁵ Therefore, a religious vision such as Rabi'a's, incorporating an ontological transformation of values, is critical to the recovery of the sacred in relationship to one's own spirituality and justice issues including the right of the planet and planetary life, to exist without the infringement and desecration of violent exploitation.

Rabi'a truly lived a dedicated spirituality of non-harming: "This saint was credited with complete abstinence from animal products so that animals no longer fled from her."¹⁶ Rabi'a included every dimension of life to be deserving of her reverence and respect. The ecological implications of Rabi'a's holiness, are that she sought and found the thread of the sacred in all levels of being, and therein, made no creature unworthy of her appreciatory love. Allah was revealed in the small and the large, no amount of profit or so-called "progress," justified desecrating holy ground. Rabi'a's unique insight and contribution, was that she found that holy ground, everywhere.

13. Ibid. p. 48.

14. Cf: *Qur'an* 51:20-21: "And in the earth are signs to those of real faith, and in yourselves. What I do you not see?" *Al-Qur'an*, translated by Ahmed Ali (Princeton University Press, 1988).

15. Mircea Elide, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 213.

16. Schimmel, *Mystical*, p. 358.