

## STUDIES OF RELIGION

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Rabi'a al Adawiyya was an Islamic wafiya, or saint, born in 717CE in modern day Iraq. Her difficult childhood as an orphan and slave shaped her passionate devotion to God, being willing to receive ma'rifa (higher knowledge) despite hardship. Being religious for Rabi'a meant passionately pursuing a close relationship with God despite her status as a woman. Tillich's view is accurate when applied to a woman who suffered in asceticism gladly due to devotion for God, the answers she received not only 'hurting' her, but the Muslims of orthodoxy surrounding her who pursued paradise for self-interest and not purely for the authority of Allah. Rabi'a transformed Sufism into a form of ecstatic love mysticism and had a major spiritual influence in the classical Islamic world due to her respected reputation, sainthood and poetic genius, causing her to take on a legendary enigma.

The passionate search for meaning Tillich describes found answer for Rabi'a in complete devotion for God. Her willingness to suffer and submit to Allah was unprecedented. She even chastised a follower for suggesting she pray for healing during illness, asserting that God wills her suffering and it is not well to oppose one's "Beloved". Rabi'a taught of divine love and disinterested love, where one should "not serve God like a labourer in expectation of wages". Her passionate belief that God should be loved for His own sake is exemplified in reports that she walked the streets of Basra with a flaming torch and bucket of water, exclaiming: "I want to pour water into Hell and set fire to Paradise so that these two veils disappear and nobody worships God out of fear of Hell or hope for Paradise, but only for the sake of His eternal beauty". This shows her belief that fear and hope were veils, or hindrances, to love of God. Al Ghazali confirmed this disinterested love, stating "in her heart was no leaning towards paradise, but to the Lord of paradise". Sin terrified her not from fear of punishment as was the belief for orthodox Muslims but because it led to separation from the divine. Due to her belief of love, she believed that Tawba (repentance) was a sin in itself because it is a selfish act.

Rabi'a practiced submission through love for God and willingness to accept His will, even welcoming suffering. She had a desire to unite with Him by attaining a mystic state where there is nothing exempt God, a love so consuming she had "no room for hating Satan" or even loving the Prophet, telling the Prophet in a dream: "my love of God has so possessed me that no place remains for loving and hating save Him." Rabi'a has been accused of heresy in this teaching and this reflects her distinctive principle of submitting to God attained through asceticism due to devotion. Her worldly possessions were a broken jug from which she drank, a rush mat to sit upon and a brick for a pillow. Her ascetic practices of nightly prayers (sleeping for an hour before dawn and chiding herself if she slept longer) and fasting resulted in complete self-loss in the aim of pursuing a constant contemplation and active love of God. By living in a state of Zuhd, or poverty, Rabi'a willingly suffered to receive 'meaning' described in Tillich's statement through constant love of God, reflecting her belief of the requirement of a dark night of the soul before perfect union with Allah in paradise. These beliefs challenged Orthodoxy, which often dismissed Sufism "as unnecessary, and even heretical".<sup>1</sup>

Rabi'a's unconventional lifestyle injured (or 'hurt') mainstream religious 'answers' regarding gender, even refusing marriage (typically an obligation for Muslims) and living as a recluse. This challenged Orthodoxy, which "limited the role of women by maintaining the traditional, often pre-Islamic, norms of the culture in which Islam was practiced". Additionally, the archetypal dervish, or practicing Sufi, was a male. Despite Rabi'a's femininity she was considered a spiritual master and men especially pursued her company and mystical knowledge, seeking her answers. A particular example of this is an account of esteemed Sufi leader Hasan al-Basri who was humbled by Rabi'a and in a narrative declares: "I passed one whole night and day with Rabi'a speaking of the Way and the Truth and it never passed through my mind that I was a man nor did it occur to her that she was a woman. At

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Smith, *The Way of the Mystics: The Early Christian Mystics and the Rise of the Sufis*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978

the end when I looked at her I saw myself as bankrupt and Rabi'a as truly sincere." As such, Rabi'a is viewed as an important figure because she was a woman "belonging to the sex which Muslim theologians commonly attributed to little capacity to thought, and less for religion".<sup>2</sup> However, the Qur'an states that theoretically, at least, woman is placed on spiritual equality with a man.<sup>3</sup> Rather than directly challenging gender roles in Islam, however, she transcended them. This is because she is referred to as the first true saint of Islam not because she represented womankind, but because "when a woman walks in the Way of Allah like a man she cannot be called a woman" as her Islamic biographer Farid al-Dinn Attar claims.<sup>4</sup> Thus, she had not only saintly status but reputation, and "men accepted her as a second spotless Mary."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Tillich's view is accurate for the contribution of Rabi'a al Adawiyya because she was the founder of classical Sufi thought, not learning from a master but passionately seeking meaning and receiving answers from God in an intimate relationship. She preached near Jerusalem until her death and her interpretation of the Tawhid, or unity of Allah, encouraged others to follow her model and seek uns, an intimate union with Allah. Despite her radicalness at the time and people who were 'hurt' by her religious answers, the mystic poetry transmitted after her death in 801CE expresses her communion with Allah and is passed down as testament to her importance. Her passionate devotion for Allah and commitment to Shari'a law earned her much respect despite the fact mysticism was not a widely accepted practice. Her dedicated contribution to mystic Islam has left a legacy, earning her respected reputation similar to Al-Ghazali. Rabi'a's contribution to Islam can be seen symbolically in modern Islamic culture: it is customary to nickname any pious woman in a Muslim society Rabi'a.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an Surat al Al-'Aḥzāb 33:35. Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women... the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so-for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.

<sup>4</sup> Farid al-Dinn Attar, a major Muslim luminary, devotes a chapter to Rabia in his *Tadhkirat al-Auliya (Memorial of the Saints)*, a compilation of biographical anecdotes from the lives of Islamic mystics.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Smith, op. cit.

Nusba Parveen, 2009. The Contributions of Rabia Al-Adawiyyah in Sufism, IQBAL Review, Journal of the Iqbal Academy Pakistan Vol. 40 No. 1. Retrieved from <<http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr99/5.htm>> Date accessed 18/06/13.

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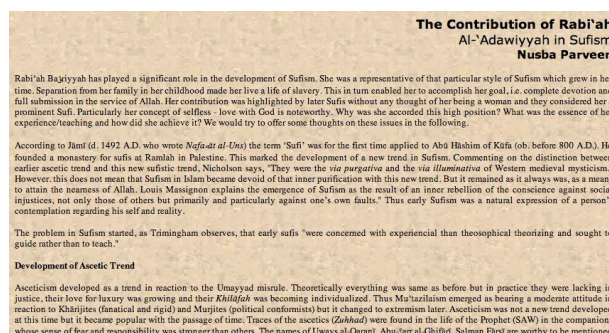
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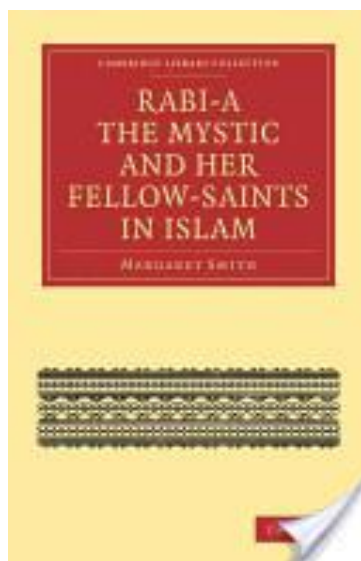
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Source 1: The Contributions of Rabia Al-Adawiyyah in Sufism by Nusba Parveen, IQBAL Review, 2009.



Published in a journal by a statutory body which is the centre for Islamic Studies for the government of Pakistan, the Iqbal Review is devoted to research studies about Iqbal and his areas of interest: Islamic studies, philosophy and sociology. I accessed the article through the centre's multilingual library database online and the author is an independent researcher who has published papers for the International Islamic University, indicating the author's credibility. I approached the source skeptically despite its academic tone, as I was wary of biases due to the journal's pro-Islamic emphasis and source. However, the source, that was separated into subsections outlining the development of Rabia's ideas, the ascetic trend, her biography and teachings were an excellent source of factual information. Occasional opinionated statements such as "Allah mentions her name with praise, for devoting her life for the service of Allah" clouded its academic tone however the essence of these comments was helpful in gaining understanding of how respected Rabi'a is in Islamic circles. Although the writing style was sometimes awkward and swapped tenses often due to translation errors it was a great overview into her lifestyle and contribution to the Sufi movement.

Source 2: Rabi'a the Mystic and her fellow saints in Islam. By Margaret Smith



Viewed as a classic for information on Rabi'a al Basri, this scholarly book is the first modern biography on Rabi'a as a saint in Islam and compilation of information on the figure, exploring her place in the Islamic tradition and an assessment of female contribution in Islamic heritage. The book focuses primarily on Rabi'a but also uses her lifestyle to study the nature of mystical belief and the Sufi tradition, branching into the work of other Sufi saints. Dr Smith thoroughly surveys Persian and Arab works that contain biographical references to Rabi'a and include her teachings and her personal quotes that were very useful. However, it mentions legends that are impossible to cite as fact and is permeated with the preoccupation that Islamic mysticism was founded on Christian values without evidence to support it, such as the claim that Rabi'a's teachings "are very possibly founded on the teaching of the Christian gospel." The need to fit Rabi'a into a Christian ideal of sainthood distracts from the otherwise scholarly focus. Despite this bias where the book is sometimes a prime example of a Western representation of Islam and Smith presents assumptions as historical fact, the work's merit is in its excellent source of biographical information and focus on Rabi'a's role as a woman in male dominated society.

Source 3: 'Mysticism and sexuality in Sufi thought and life' by Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd for the Mystic Quarterly, 1992.



Although the article's primary focus is not on Rabi'a as a figure of Sufism, its information on the principles of Islamic mysticism and use of Rabi'a to demonstrate the early ascetic movement and Sufi attitudes towards sexuality and its relationship with spiritual life was helpful in gaining knowledge on her celibate lifestyle and her rejection of the guardianship of men. The author, a professor teaching Islamic studies in the Studies of Religion program at the University of Illinois presented facts in a scholarly tone and used examples and evidence to support facts and I found it extremely reliable. It's conclusion that after Rabi'a "the theme of God as beloved became standard" was a useful assessment of her influence. The source was invaluable in assessing Islamic ancient biographer Farid al Attar who claimed Rabi'a transcended gender, the author analysing its implied degradation to female sex as a whole and its suggestion of the common Islamic view that "true spirituality is normally only found among men." Its note that academics have drawn "undesirable comparisons" with Christian nuns and monks when the Qur'an rejects monasticism and the Orthodox view of following Mohammad's sunna (example) of married life paralleled my reaction to Dr Smith's book and was interesting to note.