

PART 3:**A SUNNI WOMAN'S HEART****PART FOUR: DESIRE FOR GOD'S APPROVAL AND
AMBIVALENCE TOWARD HIS NEARNESS****BY TAHIRA**

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Religion is often a human attempt to get nearer to God. But religion can also be a subtle way to hold God at arm's length while appearing to want his presence and approval. In the New Testament, the Pharisees exemplify people who *thought* they wanted to be close to God and approved by him, and who certainly wanted to appear that way to others. But their ungracious religious attitudes made clear that the God they believed in wasn't the sort of being one would want as a constant companion in life. And when God did come to them in Person, as the Messiah for whom they longed, they looked down their noses at him and emphatically rejected him.

The Muslim women among whom I live sometimes remind me of the Pharisees. They willingly, and even eagerly, follow hundreds of detailed regulations in order to meet God's approval. They want to be near him, at least in order to receive his acknowledgement and rewards. But God, as he is portrayed in their circles, is not the sort of being around whom one can ever rest. Although they insist that God's mercy is greater than his wrath, their pre-occupation with rules, merits and demerits, and the Day of Judgment belies an anxiety about God's watchful presence. My Muslim friends do not expect God to be accessible to them personally, and this void is experienced both as a sad longing and (more tacitly) as a relief.

How can we minister to women like these? Their understanding of God and their attitudes toward him create powerful barriers to truly knowing him, but the desire of some to know him suggests a possible opening.

Barriers

The barriers can seem overwhelming. Although longing for God's approval is wholesome, the theology of Sunni Islam hampers the development of a personal relationship with God by teaching that his approval is based on human behaviour. Traditional Sunni women have no concept of a personal relationship with a loving Father with whom one can live in safety apart from performance. God is portrayed as so transcendent that talk of his immanence seems alien.

Fear of speaking about God in human terms robs Muslim women of vocabulary suitable for expressing an intimate relationship with God. Rejection of the incarnation deprives these ladies of the knowledge of God in the face of Christ. Both the formulaic nature of prayers and the emphasis on the Muslim as a slave create a sense of prodigious distance. The countless rules guarantee uncertainty as to whether one is compliant enough.

Conservative Sunni women, whatever their longing, have been thoroughly trained not to expect much in the way of tender closeness with the Almighty and to distrust those who claim it is possible or desirable. A Muslim follower of Jesus described to me how the rigor of conscientious adherence to Islam made it impossible for her to feel love for the God who imposed such hardship on her, and yet she felt guilty for that lack of love.

Nevertheless, many Muslim women feel some sort of awareness of God's alleged nearness and approval in their religion, despite the fact that Islam keeps God at a distance. There is a strong belief that gaining God's approval and being near him are connected. I suspect that doing what they believe to be right gives the women a good feeling about themselves which they interpret as being at peace with God. They do not expect a direct relationship with God: everything is mediated through the Qur'an and Hadith, the consensus of the community, the intercession of Muhammad and the communication of angels. Even in heaven, nearness to God is portrayed in terms of physical distance and the honour which comes with God's approval, not intimacy. Since the women have not experienced a Father-child affection with God, and since they are taught not to expect it, they may not seek it and may be sceptical when it is offered, especially when it is offered freely.

Even the stiff variety of Sufism which is admired by some traditional Sunnis is seen as unattainable by ordinary women. Some of the avenues to Sufi piety are considered appropriate only to men, and others require special circumstances not accessible to normal daughters, wives and mothers. The result is distance. They cannot conceive of a God who forgives and delights in them *as they are*.

For Muslim women, God's favour is earned. This is not merely an accepted doctrine, but also the basis of intuitive responses to God. If someone longs to be closer to God, she automatically begins to ask herself, 'What can I do to make myself more acceptable to God?' Her stunted understanding of God's covenantal relationships and her total ignorance of his unconditional love prevent her from approaching him with empty hands and faith in his grace alone. It also leads her intuitively to minimize the problem of sin.

The focus on image in Arab society in general makes intimate discussions difficult. Fear of self-disclosure and vulnerability hamper probing and frank

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conversations about a person's relationship with God or lack thereof, especially since it is assumed that lack of a satisfactory relationship would be a sign of weakness and a cause for shame. Even if a Sunni woman is longing for intimacy with God, she would find it difficult to articulate that longing either to herself or to another person. This makes the job of the evangelist much harder.

The need for approval by others is so important in Arab society that often the approval or disapproval of others is interpreted as the approval or disapproval of God.¹ This is particularly true with regard to parental judgments. In the Levant region, one frequently sees bumper stickers that say, 'Oh, to please God and the parents!' Desire for human approval inhibits transparency with others, self and God, thereby making more difficult the sort of confession and genuine repentance by which one learns to find God's approval in Christ alone.

Bridges

But the situation is not hopeless. God has placed in all people's hearts an intuitive awareness of his existence and greatness. The devotion of pious Muslim women could well be an expression of a genuine desire to know God, even if they do not recognize it as such or admit that personal knowledge of God is possible. I have found that assuming such a desire in conversations with Muslim women contributes to mutual respect and a spiritual orientation in discussion. The testimonies of women from Muslim backgrounds vary enormously, but common to many is the delight they found in discovering that God wants to be their loving Father.

The Qur'an and the Hadith contain a number of expressions appropriate to begin a discussion about a personal relationship with God. In Sura 93 for example, God, seeking to comfort and encourage Muhammad, reminds him of how he found him, met his needs and displayed to him divine grace. Sura 94 begins in a similar vein. One popular saying of Muhammad is striking in its similarity to James 4:8: 'And whoever came nearer to me by a span of a hand, I came nearer to him by a span of a forearm; and whoever came nearer to me by a span of a forearm, I came nearer to him by a span of outstretched arms; and whoever came to me walking, I came rushing to him.'² Muslims are familiar with several biblical characters like Enoch, Abraham, Hagar, Moses, David and Jesus who model intimacy with him.³ Many Sunni women have a degree of admiration for Sufism, strong reservations notwithstanding, and this lends a degree of

1. This is the case for other cultures as well: Hesselgrave, 'Missionary Elencitics,' 480.

2. In Arabic it reads, ومن أتاني يمشي أتيته هرولة، ومن تقرب مني ذراعا تقربت منه باعا، ومن أتاني يمشي أتيته هرولة. This saying can be found, among other places, in (المكتبة الثقافية: Beirut), 57.

3. It is necessary, however, to supplement the traditional Islamic knowledge of these characters with details from the Scriptures.

acceptability to talk of a love relationship with God. Both Evangelicals and Sunnis acknowledge that at times we fail to win God's approval, that there is a distance between God and humanity that needs to be spanned, that he is full of wrath against sinners, that he has taken the initiative in bridging the gap, and that his acceptance is ultimately based on his mercy. The use of Muslim theology, sources and expressions may help the Muslim hearer to listen thoughtfully, and not just reject the idea of intimacy with God out of hand.⁴

Fault Lines

When it comes to the themes of God's nearness and approval, I sense in Muslim women a great deal of ambiguity. There is a significant amount of talk about God's nearness in theory among the women I studied, but virtually nothing of personal experience of God himself. Reality does not match the ideal. God may be 'nearer than your jugular vein,' but who wants to be near a God who watches her every move with criticism or appreciation?

Islam serves as a God-substitute, and it would be surprising if some of the women did not have an inkling that only what is real can satisfy. Aside from a few trite Sufi quotations, Sunni leaders in my region describe nearness to God in the most vague or superficial terms. Surely this must be unsatisfying for some. There is a long history of tension in Sunni Islam between the scholars and the mystics, a tension that may be reflected in the lives of some Muslims who want to cling both to the known, impersonal law and a to a distant ideal of intensely personal spirituality. Muslims might be challenged to consider Jesus as a way of resolving this tension with a righteousness based on relationship with the Righteous One.

Missional Strategies

If I want something and someone else has it, I will be interested in knowing how that person got it. The Muslim might be interested in the cause of a believer's confidence in God's approval and love, particularly if that confidence is accompanied by genuine goodness. Of primary importance in encouraging others to have a personal relationship with God is allowing others to see one's own relationship with God in word, deed and character. The result will be some things that are attractive to this subculture (gratitude in all circumstances, the fruit of the spirit, intrinsic motivation for

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4. Some believers from a Muslim background question this statement. One friend points out that there is a lack of Qur'anic teaching on intimacy with God and the suspicion of many Sunnis that Sufism is the domain of heretics.

holiness), and some that are not (focus on Jesus as the mediator, confession of sin, lack of conformity to the rules and critical spirit of some Muslim 'Pharisees'). We can speak of God in endearing terms, and explain the nature, basis and source of our relationship with him. Personal testimony is more memorable than theological argument for ordinary people. Evangelical clichés (such as 'knowing God as your personal Saviour') must be avoided at all costs: only what is fresh and vital will have an impact.

My experience is that women of this background will listen to personal testimony with a wary curiosity, but will rarely try to contradict it. This is in contrast with a rational apologetic approach, which nearly always results in debate, usually of dubious value. Talk of intimacy with God can be made to sound less alien by the circumspect use of Qur'anic terminology, by reference to people like Abraham and Hagar who knew God personally, and by quotations of the sort of Sufis most acceptable to a conservative Sunni audience.⁵ An evangelist who talks about personal experience of God must be prepared to answer some

hard questions, particularly about how God speaks to individuals and the relationship between the personal relationship and authoritative revelation. He or she must reiterate continually that confidence in God's acceptance has everything to do with his mercy and nothing to do with human religious superiority.

If we are aware of specific emotional needs in a person's life, we can recount how God met a similar need for us in Jesus.⁶ As one believer from a Muslim background points out, we make clear that we do not see ourselves as superior when we speak of our own needs. Instead, we point to Jesus, who showed us God's grace when we were needy.

Although it may be intimidating to some, it may be beneficial to gently ask a Muslim friend what is happening in her relationship with God: what God is teaching her, how he is transforming and comforting her, and so on. If the answer is lame, the Muslim

probably recognizes the fact, even if she tries to save face. However, an answer may be an indication of how the Holy Spirit is working in the person's life and an opportunity to cooperate with that work. Some Muslims are happy for followers of Jesus to pray with and for them that they can know God more intimately.

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5. That is, al-Ghazali and not al-Hallaj. Rabi'a is a favorite of women. Ignorance of the lives and histories of biblical characters may inhibit some women from appreciating the significance of their walk with God.

6. One worker notes that this still leaves a big gap between accepting Jesus as *a* mediator and accepting him as *the* mediator.

It is helpful to build on shared beliefs such as God's mercy and our need for it, God's initiative in restoring relationships when we fail, the need for intrinsic motivation in order to be truly pious, the need for God's help to overcome temptation, and that the pious person should be characterized by love, joy and confidence. Muslims will need to have explained to them that forgiveness is costly, and that the experience of forgiveness between humans is a partial picture of God's forgiveness. They also need to hear a Christian understanding of heaven in which relationship to God is the central joy.⁷

As with all new believers, those from a Muslim background will benefit by mature guidance in exploring and developing their relationship with God. Evangelical churches are weak in understanding the social implications of the individual's relationship with God, and need to think these through for themselves in order to find comprehensible ways of explaining them to Muslims.

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Conclusion

I once asked Mazhar Mallouhi how he responds to a Muslim who asks his opinion of the Qur'an. Mazhar replied with this parable: 'I am drowning in the sea, and on the shore stand people who want to help me. Most of them are throwing me their favourite books about how to swim, but One is holding out his hand to me. To which should I turn?'

Many Muslims are valiantly paddling to reach the shore of God's approval, some deceive themselves that they are already on solid ground of their own making, and others have given up. And One comes, walking on the water, nearer than expected, graciously holding out his hand, ready to speak peace. I would love for every Muslim woman I know to discover from personal experience of Jesus how intimately near God can be to her, nearer even than her jugular vein.

7. This may be of special interest to women who resent the traditional Muslim view of The Garden as a playboy's paradise.