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978-1-108-01591-2 - Rabi'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam

Margaret Smith

Excerpt

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## Part One

### CHAPTER I

Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya. *Her birth and early years.*

**I**n the history of Islām, the woman saint made her appearance at a very early period, and in the evolution of the cult of saints by Muslims, the dignity of saintship was conferred on women as much as on men. As far as rank among the "friends of God" was concerned, there was complete equality between the sexes.

It was the development of mysticism (Ṣūfism) within Islām, which gave women their great opportunity to attain the rank of sainthood.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the Ṣūfī's quest was union with the Divine, and the Ṣūfī seeker after God, having renounced this world and its attractions, being purged of Self and its desires, inflamed with a passion of love to God, journeyed ever onward, looking towards his final purpose, through the life of illumination, with its ecstasies and raptures, and the higher life of contemplation, until at last he achieved the heavenly gnosis and attained to the Vision of God, in which the lover might become one with the Beloved, and abide in Him for ever.

Such a conception of the relations between the saint and his Lord left no room for the distinction of sex. In the spiritual life there could be "neither male nor female".<sup>2</sup> All whom God had called to be saints could

<sup>1</sup> Cf. al-Hujwīrī: "You must know that the principle and foundation of Ṣūfism and knowledge of God rests on Saintship" (*Kashf al-Mahjūb*, p. 210).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Shabistārī: "In God there is no duality. In that Presence 'I' and 'we' and 'thou' do not exist, 'I' and 'we' and 'thou' and 'he' become one. . . . Since in Unity there is no distinction. . . . The Quest and the Way and the Seeker become one" (*Gulshan-i Rāḥ*, p. 27, l. 448).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

## RABI'A THE MYSTIC

attain, by following the Path, to union with Himself, and all who attained, would have their royal rank, as spiritual beings, in the world to come.

'Aṭṭār, to prove that saintship may be found in a woman as naturally as in a man, says:

The holy prophets have laid it down that "God does not look upon your outward forms". It is not the outward form that matters, but the inner purpose of the heart, as the Prophet said, "The people are assembled (on the Day of Judgment) according to the purposes of their hearts"... So also 'Abbās of Ṭūs said that when on the Day of Resurrection the summons goes forth, "O men", the first person to set foot in that class of men (*i.e.* those who are to enter Paradise) will be Mary,<sup>1</sup> upon whom be peace... The true explanation of this fact (that women count for as much as men among the saints) is that wherever these people, the Ṣūfīs, are, they have no separate existence in the Unity of God. In the Unity, what remains of the existence of "I" or "thou"? So how can "man" or "woman" continue to be? So too, Abū 'Alī Fārmadhī said, "Prophecy is the essence, the very being, of power and sublimity. Superiority and inferiority do not exist in it. Undoubtedly saintship is of the same type".<sup>2</sup>

So the title of saint was bestowed upon women equally with men, and since Islām has no order of priesthood and no priestly caste, there was nothing to prevent a woman from reaching the highest religious rank in the hierarchy of Muslim saints. Some theologians even name the Lady Fāṭima, daughter of the Prophet, as the first *Quṭb* or spiritual head of the Ṣūfī fellowship.<sup>3</sup> Below the *Quṭb* were four 'Awtād', from whose ranks his successor was chosen, and below them, in the next rank of the hierarchy, were forty 'Abdāl' or Substitutes, who are described as being the pivot of the world and the foundation and support of the affairs of men.<sup>4</sup> Jāmī relates how someone was

<sup>1</sup> The Mother of Jesus.      <sup>2</sup> *Tadbkīrat al-Awliyā*, I, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Goldziher, *Muhamm. Studien*, II, p. 300.

<sup>4</sup> Munawwar, *Asrār al-Tawḥīd*, p. 129.

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Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PART ONE, CHAPTER I

3

asked, "How many are the 'Abdāl'?" and he answered, "Forty souls", and when asked why he did not say "Forty men", his reply was, "There have been women among them".<sup>1</sup> The biographies of the Muslim saints, such as those compiled by Abū Nu'aym,<sup>2</sup> Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār,<sup>3</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī,<sup>4</sup> Jāmi<sup>5</sup> and Ibn Khallikān<sup>6</sup> and many others, are full of the mention of women Ṣūfīs, their saintly lives, their good deeds, and their miracles. The influence which these women saints exercised both during their lives and after their deaths, is perhaps best proved by the fact that Muslim theologians, opposed to the Ṣūfī movement, denounce also these women saints and the worship known to be given to them.<sup>7</sup>

The high position attained by the women Ṣūfīs is attested further by the fact that the Ṣūfīs themselves give to a woman the first place among the earliest Muḥammadan mystics and have chosen her to be the representative of the first development of mysticism in Islām.<sup>8</sup>

This was the saintly Rābi'a, a freedwoman of the Āl-'Atīk,<sup>9</sup> a tribe of Qays b. 'Adī, from which she was known as al-'Adawiyya or al-Qaysiyya, and also as al-Baṣriyya, from her birth-place: of whom a modern writer says, "Rābi'a is the saint par excellence of the Sunnite hagiography".<sup>10</sup> Her biographer 'Aṭṭār speaks of her as

That one set apart in the seclusion of holiness, that woman veiled with the veil of religious sincerity, that one on fire with love and longing, that one enamoured of the desire to approach

1 Jāmi, *Nafahāt al-Uns*, p. 716.

2 "Hilya al-Awliyā."

3 *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā*.

4 "Ṣafwa al-Ṣafwa."

5 *Nafahāt al-Uns*.

6 *Wafayāt al-A'yān*.

7 Cf. Goldziher, *op. cit.* II, p. 300.

8 Cf. Dozy, *Hist. de l'Islamisme*, tr. Chauvin, pp. 318, 319.

9 Šibt Ibn al-Jawzī, "Mir'āt al-Zamān", fol. 256 a. Taghribardī, *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira*, I, p. 365.

10 L. Massignon, *Textes Inédits Relatifs à la Mystique Musulmane*. (Proof kindly communicated to me by the author.)

Cambridge University Press

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Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

## RĀBI'A THE MYSTIC

her Lord and be consumed in His glory, that woman who lost herself in union with the Divine,<sup>1</sup> that one accepted by men as a second spotless Mary—Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, may God have mercy upon her. If anyone were to say, "Why have you made mention of her in the class of men?" I should say... "God does not look upon the outward forms... If it is allowable to accept two thirds of our faith from 'Ā'isha<sup>2</sup> the Trustworthy, it is also allowable to accept religious benefit from one of her handmaids [*i.e.* Rābi'a]. When a woman walks in the way of God like a man, she cannot be called a woman".<sup>3</sup>

A later biographer, al-Munāwī, says of her:

Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya of Baṣra, was at the head of the women disciples and the chief of the women ascetics, of those who observed the sacred law, who were God-fearing and zealous... and she was one of those who were pre-eminent and experienced in grace and goodness.

He gives the names of several well-known women saints and goes on to say, "She was the most famous among them, of great devotion and conspicuous in worship, and of perfect purity and asceticism".<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately there is no writer very near her own time to give us her biography, and for an account of her early life we can find material only in the *Memoir of the Saints* of 'Aṭṭār, already mentioned, who lived

<sup>1</sup> Cf. St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, p. 69: "The soul on fire with the love of God longs for the perfection and consummation of its love, that it may be completely refreshed".

<sup>2</sup> A large number of the Traditions concerning Muḥammad, on which Muslims rely, were derived from his favourite wife 'Ā'isha.

<sup>3</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> "Al-Kawākīb al-Durriyya," fol. 50. Cf. Muḥammad Zihnī: "Although she was a woman, in character she was so enlightened of heart that she was manifestly superior to many men in the matter of human perfection, and for this reason she was called 'The Crown of Men'. Her works of piety and asceticism were so renowned that her praise was on everyone's tongue, and her exalted name became a kind of proverb for ascetic men and women" (*Meshāḥir al-Nisā*, p. 225).

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Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PART ONE, CHAPTER I

5

more than four hundred years after Rābi'a. Much of what he tells of her must be regarded as purely legendary. Yet though the legends which surround Rābi'a's name may not, and in many cases certainly do not, correspond to historic facts, at least they give some idea of her personality and shew the estimation in which she was held by those who lived after her and had heard of her fame.

She was born probably about A.H. 95 or 99 (= A.D. 717)<sup>1</sup> in Baṣra, where she spent the greater part of her life.

Born into the poorest of homes, according to 'Aṭṭār (though a modern writer says she belonged to one of the noble families of Baṣra),<sup>2</sup> miraculous events were reputed to have taken place even at the time of her birth. 'Aṭṭār tells us that on the night of her birth there was no oil in the house, no lamp nor swaddling clothes in which to wrap the new-born child. Her father already had three daughters, and so she was called Rābi'a (= the fourth). The mother asked her husband to go and ask for oil for the lamp from a neighbour, but he had made a vow that he would never ask anything of a creature (*i.e.* as a true Ṣūfī he would depend only upon God to supply his needs),<sup>3</sup> and so he came back without it. Having fallen asleep in great distress at the lack of provision for the child, he dreamt that the Prophet Muḥammad appeared to him in his sleep and said, "Do not be sorrowful, for this daughter who is born is a great saint, whose intercession will be desired by seventy thousand of my community". The Prophet said further:

To-morrow send a letter to 'Īsā Zādhān, Amīr of Baṣra, reminding him that every night he is wont to pray one hundred prayers to me and on Friday night four hundred, but this Friday

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Massignon, *Lexique Technique*, p. 193, note 5.

<sup>2</sup> M. Zihni, *Mesbābīr al-Nisā*, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> See Part II, Chapter IX.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01591-2 - Rābi'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam

Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6

## RĀBI'A THE MYSTIC

night he has neglected me, and as a penance (tell him) that he must give you four hundred *dīnārs*, lawfully acquired.<sup>1</sup>

Rābi'a's father awoke, weeping; he rose up, wrote the letter as directed and sent it to the Amīr through the latter's chamberlain. The Amīr, when he had read the letter said:

Give two thousand *dīnārs* to the poor as a thank-offering, because the prophet had me in mind, and four hundred *dīnārs* to that Shaykh and say to him that I desire that he should come before me that I may see him, but it is not fitting that such a person as he is should come to me, but I will come and rub my beard on his threshold.<sup>2</sup>

But in spite of this event of good augury, 'Aṭṭār relates that misfortunes fell upon the family, and when Rābi'a was a little older, her mother and father died and she was left an orphan. A famine occurred in Baṣra and the sisters were scattered. One day, when Rābi'a was walking abroad, an evil-minded man saw her and seized upon her and sold her as a slave for six *dirhams* and the man who bought her made her work hard. One day a stranger (one who might not look at her unveiled) approached her. Rābi'a fled to avoid him and slipped on the road and dislocated her wrist. She bowed her face in the dust, and said, "O Lord, I am a stranger and without mother or father, an orphan and a slave and I have fallen into bondage and my wrist is injured, (yet) I am not grieved by this, only (I desire) to satisfy Thee. I would fain know if Thou art satisfied (with me) or not". She heard a voice saying, "Be not sorrowful, for on the day of Resurrection thy rank shall be such that those who are nearest to God in Heaven shall envy thee".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Ṣūfīs would not make use of money unless it had been earned by means accounted lawful according to the sacred law of Islām.

<sup>2</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* pp. 59 and 60.

<sup>3</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* I, pp. 60 and 61.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01591-2 - Rābi'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam

Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PART ONE, CHAPTER I

7

After this Rābi'a returned to her master's house and continually fasted in the daytime and carried out her appointed tasks and in the service of God she was standing on her feet till the day. One night her master awoke from sleep and looked down through a window of the house and saw Rābi'a, whose head was bowed in worship, and she was saying, "O my Lord, Thou knowest that the desire of my heart is to obey Thee, and that the light of my eye is in the service of Thy court. If the matter rested with me, I should not cease for one hour from Thy service, but Thou hast made me subject to a creature". While she was still praying, he saw a lamp above her head, suspended without a chain, and the whole house was illuminated by the rays from that light. This enveloping radiance or *sakina* (derived from the Hebrew Shekina = the cloud of glory indicating the presence of God) of the Muslim saint, corresponding to the halo of the Christian saint, is frequently mentioned in the biographies of the Ṣūfis.<sup>1</sup>

Rābi'a's master, when he saw that strange sight, was afraid and rose up and returned to his own place and sat pondering until day came. When the day dawned, he called Rābi'a and spoke kindly to her and set her free. Rābi'a asked for leave to go away; so he gave her leave, and she left that place and journeyed into the desert. Afterwards she left the desert and obtained for herself a cell and for a time was engaged in devotional worship there.<sup>2</sup> According to one account, Rābi'a at first followed the calling of a flute player, which would be consistent with a state of slavery. Then she became converted and built a place of retreat, where she occupied herself with works of piety.<sup>3</sup>

Among other stories related of this period of her

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Goldziher, "Le culte des saints chez les Musulmans", *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, 1880, pp. 270, 271.

<sup>2</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* I, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* Uyghur version, II, p. 56.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01591-2 - Rābi'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam

Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

## RĀBI'A THE MYSTIC

life, is one telling how she purposed performing the pilgrimage to Mecca and set her face towards the desert; she had an ass with her to carry her baggage, and in the heart of the desert the ass died. Some people (in the caravan) said to her, "Let us carry thy baggage". She said, "Go on your way, for I am not dependent upon you (for help)", *i.e.* she placed her trust in God and not in His creatures.

So the people went on and Rābi'a remained alone, and bowing her head, she said, "O my God, do kings deal thus with a woman, a stranger and weak? Thou art calling me to Thine own house (the Ka'ba), but in the midst of the way Thou hast suffered mine ass to die and Thou hast left me alone in the desert".

She had hardly completed her prayer, when the ass stirred and got up. Rābi'a put her baggage on it and went on her way. The narrator of this story said that some time afterwards he saw that same little ass being sold in the bazaar.<sup>1</sup>

Another story tells us how she went into the desert for a few days and prayed, "O my Lord, my heart is perplexed, whither shall I go? I am but a clod of earth and that house (the Ka'ba) is only a stone to me. Shew Thyself (to me) in this very place". So she prayed until God Most High, without any medium, spoke directly within her heart, saying, "O Rābi'a...when Moses desired to see My Face, I cast a few particles of My Glory upon the mountain (Sinai) and it was rent into forty pieces. Be content here with My Name".<sup>1</sup>

It is told how another time she was on her way to Mecca, and when half-way there she saw the Ka'ba coming to meet her and she said, "It is the Lord of the house whom I need, what have I to do with the house? I need to meet with Him Who said, 'Whoso approaches Me by a span's length I will approach him by the length of a cubit'. The Ka'ba which I see has no power over

<sup>1</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* 1, p. 61.



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Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PART ONE, CHAPTER I

9

me; what joy does the beauty of the Ka'ba bring to me?"<sup>1</sup>

In connection with this legend, which indicates how highly favoured by God Rabi'a was, in the eyes of her biographers, it is related that Ibrāhīm b. Adham<sup>2</sup> spent fourteen years making his way to the Ka'ba, because in every place of prayer he performed two *raka'as*, and at last when he arrived at the Ka'ba, he did not see it.

He said, "Alas, what has happened? It may be that some injury has overtaken my eyes". An unseen voice said, "No harm has befallen your eyes, but the Ka'ba has gone to meet a woman, who is approaching this place". Ibrāhīm was seized with jealousy, and said, "O indeed, who is this?" He ran and saw Rabi'a arriving and the Ka'ba was back in its own place. When Ibrāhīm saw that, he said, "O Rabi'a, what is this disturbance and trouble and burden which thou hast brought into the world?" She said, "I have not brought disturbance into the world, it is you who have disturbed the world, because you delayed fourteen years in arriving at the Ka'ba". He said, "Yes I have spent fourteen years in crossing the desert (because I was engaged) in prayer". Rabi'a said, "You traversed it in ritual prayer (*namāz*) but I with personal supplication (*niyāz*)".<sup>3</sup> Then, having performed the pilgrimage, she returned to Baṣra and occupied herself with works of devotion.

For these early years only legends are available, but they give us a clear idea of a woman renouncing this world and its attractions and giving up her life to the service of God, the first step on the mystic Way to be trodden by the Ṣūfī saint.

1 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* 1, pp. 61, 62.

2 Prince of Balkh, converted to Ṣūfism by a heavenly voice while out hunting, who lived in the second century of Islām. Cf. al-Sulamī, "Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya", fols. 3 b ff.

3 'Aṭṭār, *op. cit.* 1, p. 62.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01591-2 - Rābī'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam

Margaret Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER II

## Rābī'a's choice of celibacy. Her associates.

Rābī'a al-ʿAdawiyya received many offers of marriage, but rejected them all, feeling that in the celibate life only could she pursue her quest unhindered. Among those who sought her hand in marriage was ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd, who was renowned for his asceticism and the sanctity of his life, a theologian and a preacher and an advocate of solitude for those who sought the way to God; the reputed writer of verses declaring that

The Ways are various, the Way to the Truth is one,  
Those who travel on the way of Truth must keep  
themselves apart.<sup>1</sup>

He was the founder of one of the first monastic communities near Baṣra, and died in A.D. 793. Rābī'a did not welcome his offer but shunned him with the greatest loathing, and said to him, "O sensual one, seek another sensual like thyself. Hast thou seen any sign of desire in me?"<sup>2</sup>

Another who sought her hand was Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Hāshimī, the ʿAbbāsīd Amīr of Baṣra from A.H. 145, who died in A.H. 172.<sup>3</sup> He offered a dowry of a hundred thousand *dīnārs* and wrote to Rābī'a that he had an income of ten thousand *dīnārs* a month and that he would bestow it all on her, but she wrote back, "It does not please me that you should be my slave and that all you possess should be mine, or that you should distract me from God for a single moment".

1 Abū Ṭālib, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, I, p. 153.

2 Abū Ṭālib, *op. cit.* II, p. 57. Hamadhānī "Shakwa" MS. Berlin, fol. 37 b. See L. Massignon, *Textes Inédits*. (Proof kindly communicated by the author.)

3 Cf. L. Massignon, *Lexique Technique*, p. 193, note 5.