

Women Called to the Path of Rumi: The Way of the Whirling Dervish

Shakina Reinhertz

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In America, the word “Islam” is often preceded by the pejoratives “radical” or “fundamentalist.” Reinhertz attempts to correct misconceptions about Sufis and Islam, and the attitudes and perceptions toward the two interlocking groups.

Historical context is vital to understanding how much progress “women called to the path” have made in the last thirty years. Sufism, generally regarded as the second major reaction to the spread of Islam after Muhammad’s death, seems to be the guardian of the more traditional faith and practice of Islam, a way of attaching to God in love and worship.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, at least half (and perhaps as many as three quarters) of the male Islamic population was connected to a Sufi order. Women, segregated by tradition, were taught, allowed to participate, and eventually initiated into an order by the male head of the household, their father or father-in-law.

Over time, the role of women diminished and the separation by gender became more pronounced, until only men were allowed to participate in public. Reinhertz came to whirling (turning round and round in synchronization with the hope of reaching ecstasy) in the 1970s when the Turkish government allowed Mevlevi celebrations marking the 700th anniversary of Rumi, the scholar and mystic. Her descriptions of the physical difficulties involved in the practice of turning are reminiscent of the balancing and discipline taught in yoga. It is not uncommon for whirlers to be physically sick or off balance during their training.

Remnants of Rumi’s poetry, translated by Coleman Barks and others, anchor Reinhertz’s desire to combine the best of the Eastern and Western traditions. Her spiritual journey and practice have been rooted in Rumi’s phrase “God Opens Doors.”

The author states that her initial inspiration “came in the form of a vision, a hand offering a book with its pages fanning open in front of me.” During the course of her research and writing, thirty-three women shared their “stories, insights and reflections.” The most moving stories are of the American women who were allowed entrance into the mosques and homes of the Turkish Sufis. The women discovered, as Rumi promised seven centuries ago, that “Ideas, language, even the phrase ‘each other’ doesn’t make any sense” to seekers.

Reinhertz’s scholarly work, including footnotes, exposition, and translation, offer context, while her narrative gives the book its heart. *Women Called to the Path of Rumi* is an important step in understanding the traditions of women both in Sufism and Islam.

PAM KINGSBURY (July / August 2001)

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