FOREWORD

In my presidential address during the International Congress for the History of Religion in Rome in August 1990 I summed up many discussions with and remarks of colleagues and students by stating that it is high time that the history of religion be studied not only from a typical Western vantage point but also that it take into consideration other ways of looking at concepts like religion, God, revelation, and so on. To be sure, there are a number of scholars, especially from East Asia, whose contributions to the history or phenomenology of religion are remarkable, not only in the field of their own religious traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism or Shinto, but also in the study of other religions such as Islam. Nevertheless, our outlook seems still to be determined largely by our "biblical" background and the "classical" approach to scholarship.

Another topic that frequently came up during the discussions in Rome was the role of the feminine element in the various religious traditions. Here again, the inherited way of studying women's roles from an "external" viewpoint was considered important. But other interpretations, like the "spiritual role of the feminine" in the history of religions, were also mentioned—aspects which my late teacher and friend Professor Friedrich Heiler in Marburg discussed decades ago in his classes. It was he who liked to quote—with a certain sadness—the remark of the German Indologist Moriz Winternitz: "Women have always been the best friends of religion, but religion has generally not been a friend of women."

The truth of Winternitz's statement becomes particularly evident when it comes to the study of Islam and women's position in Islam. Islam has barely been studied from the phenomenological viewpoint in order to integrate its structures into the structures of other religions. Not a single book on the phenomenology of religion deals with Islam, which is generally considered to be uninteresting and uninspiring and to be, at best, a perfect example of a "legalist" religion. It is certainly much easier to look only at the surface and judge that the possibility of polygamy and easy divorce are negative features and to point constantly to the concept of purdah (although the overstressed application of veiling developed only after a certain period) than to try to see the more positive sides of Islam. Medieval Western remarks, according to which women have no soul in Islam, were happily taken over by scholars and even more by the general public. Very few scholars have tried to look beneath the surface and to discover structures that would surprise those who have been brought up with the traditional, negative attitude toward Islam. And unfortunately, recent events in the Islamic world have supported the convictions of the critics and the impression that women, in a militant, fundamentalist society, are an oppressed group without any rights, not able to voice their opinions or to have a say in

their own religious affairs. A look at the role of women in the Turkish war of liberation in the early 1920s or at the active participation of women in the Indian independence movement and the quest for Pakistan in the 1940s can easily prove the contrary.

Given these facts it is perhaps not surprising that a new approach to gender relations in Islam comes from a Japanese woman, Sachiko Murata, who, after a thorough study of Islamic law and of the esoteric tradition of Islam, offers in this book the fruits of her investigations and reaches conclusions which may surprise many readers.

Dr. Murata rightly points out that in Islam, as in every religion, the principle of unity, which differentiates itself into duality and from there into plurality, is central; hence the title of her book, *The Tao of Islam*. One can say without exaggeration that the problem of unity and its working in creation has been a central topic of theological, and especially mystical, thought in Islam. When I was teaching at the Faculty of Islamic Theology (Ilāhiyat Fakültesi) in Ankara, Turkey, in the 1950s and tried to explain to my students Rudolf Otto's definition of the two aspects of the *Numen* (the Divine or the Totally Other), that is, the manifestation of the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans*—the majestic, wrathful and the loving-kind, beautiful aspect of the One Divine Being—my students reacted with amazement: "But we have known that for centuries!" they said. "We always knew that God has a *jalāl* side and a *jamāl* side, the aspects of Powerful Majesty and Wonderful Kindness, and that these two fall together in Him as *kamāl*, perfection."

Their remark was to the point, and writing as a phenomenologist of religion I feel that there is no difficulty in naming the overpowering, masculine, *jalāl* aspect as yang and the loving-kind, beautiful, *jamāl* aspect as yin. For everyone knows that only by the togetherness of these two principles can life continue. There is no life without the systole and the diastole of the heartbeat, without inhaling and exhaling, or without the two poles between which the electric current can move. Long ago the Sufis interpreted the divine creative order *kun*, "Be!" (which is written in Arabic with the two letters *k.n.*) as pointing to the "two-colored yarn" which veils, like a fabric, the basic unity of the Divine Being. Mawlānā Jalāluddīn Rūmī in particular has described the constant interplay of the two aspects of life in powerful prose in *Fīhi mā fīhi* and alluded to it in ever so many verses in his lyrical *Dīwān* and his *Mathnawī*. And does not the mystical interpretation of the Arabic alphabet connect the first letter, the slim, straight *alif* with its numerical value of one, to the first manifestation of the Divine Unity; and the second letter, *bā'*, with its numerical value of two, with the beginning of the created universe? For the Koran's first letter is the *bā'* of the word *bismillāh*, "In the name of God."

Given this general tendency in Islam to organize things and mental states in dual groups and to see everything as created under this aspect, how could the masculine and the feminine sides to life not be equally important? For without their cooperation no new life can exist on earth. Not in vain did Rūmī see "mothers" everywhere: Virtually everything in the cosmos is a mother, giving birth to something higher than itself—whether it is the flintstone that "gives birth" to the spark, which in turn produces fire when it meets congenial matter, or the earth that, fertilized by the sky, produces plants as the result of the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage. Rūmī even described woman, in the first book of the *Mathnawī*, as someone whom one would be tempted to call "creator."

To correct the traditional misunderstanding of women's roles in Islam it would suffice to see how the Qur'ān mentions the *muslimūn wa muslimāt*, the *mu'minūn wa mu'mināt* together: the male and the female Muslims, the male and female believers. Women have the same religious duties as men (with the exception that they cannot perform these duties in a state of female impurity). The Prophet himself emphasized in a famous saying the fact that "God has made dear to me from your world perfume and women, and my spiritual consolation is

in prayer"—a saying which forms the basis of Ibn al-ʿArabī's chapter on Muhammad in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. The role which the Prophet's first wife, the mother of his surviving children, played in his spiritual development cannot be overrated: Khadīja, the "mother of the faithful," by her loving care and understanding, gave him the strength to endure the frightening experience of the first revelation that descended upon him to shake him to his innermost heart, for she believed in his message. Later, his youngest wife, ʿĀ'isha, not only played an important political role but also was the source of many hadiths in which she informed the listeners of the Prophet's customs and sayings, thus inaugurating the list of women who studied, transmitted, and taught Hadith in the Islamic Middle Ages. One must not forget Fāṭima, the Prophet's youngest daughter, who married his cousin ʿAlī, became the mother of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the second and third Imams of Shia Islam, and was elevated in Shia piety to an extremely high position—be it as a kind of *mater dolorosa* whose two sons fell victim to political machinations (even though that happened decades after her death) or as intercessor or, in mystical terminology, as *umm abīhā*, "her father's mother."

One could go on and enumerate the women who played a role in the history of mystical thought and practice, and it is evident from Sufi biographies that most of the future spiritual leaders received their first religious inspiration from their pious mothers—did not the Prophet state that "Paradise lies at the feet of the mothers"?

This feminine side to Islamic life is usually overlooked, since most scholars, being male, have never lived in the company of women in a Muslim home and hence have not seen how important a role women, and especially mothers, play in their homes, be it in Turkey or in the Indo-Pakistani world. Scholars might read of some medieval Muslim queens, such as Raziya Sultana of Delhi (1236–40) and her near contemporary Shajarat al-Durr of Egypt (1246–49) or mention the names of some princesses who influenced their consorts in their political decisions and were eulogized by great poets. Or they may have heard of a few highborn ladies who excelled in poetry, calligraphy, or religious pursuits. But of the inner family life, little has been known to them. Moreover, it is all too easy to judge a foreign civilization from the viewpoint of twentieth century Western standards. Wiebke Walther, in her fine and extensive study *Die Frau in Islam* (Women in Islam), has remarked that even in Germany in some areas men still had the legal right to beat their wives in the 1880s.

There is one verse in the Qur'ān which due to its context has often been misinterpreted but which points exactly, in my understanding, to the ideal gender relation: "Your wives are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them" (2:188). A garment is, according to ancient religious ideas, the alter ego of a human being. The garment can serve as a substitute for the person, and with a new garment one gains as it were a new personality. Furthermore, it hides the body, hinders the looking at the private parts, protects the wearer. According to this interpretation, husband and wife are so to speak each other's alter ego, and each of them protects the partner's honor. This seems to show how well the yang-yin principle works in marital relationships: Husband and wife are equal in their perfect togetherness.

Many of the disrespectful sayings about women, especially among ascetics and mystics, stem from the fact that in Arabic the word for soul, *nafs*, is a feminine noun and, based on the expression in sura 12:53, it is often understood as the *nafs ammāra*, "the soul that incites to evil." Therefore the *nafs* is usually represented under the image of a stubborn, restive horse or camel, a black dog, a snake, a mouse, but also as a disobedient woman. Whoever has read medieval Arabic and Persian texts is well aware of this application of the term *nafs*, whose major external projection is *dunyā*, the "world of matter," again a feminine noun. But similar deprecative descriptions of the dangerous woman and *Frau Welt*, "Mrs. World," can also be found in medieval Christian writings and sermons, where only the virgins are extolled as they strive to

emulate Mary's example. However, the concept of the "woman soul" has enriched Islamic literature. Its most famous representative is the figure of Zulaykhā, who consumed herself in her love for the paragon of beauty Yūsuf (Joseph). She was purified through long years of suffering to become, as one might say, the *nafs lawwāma*, the "blaming soul" (sura 75:2), and finally she was united with her lost beloved as *nafs muṭma'inna*, the "soul at peace" (sura 89:27). This development of the *nafs* through the stages mentioned in the Qur'ān has inspired not only Persian and Turkish mystics but also numberless Indo-Muslim poets. Supported by indigenous folktales in which the story always centers around a woman, they sang of the woman's wanderings through deserts and mountains in quest of her lost beloved until she is finally purified and dissolved in love. For the great mystery of the mystical path—the education of the lower faculties through submission in love—can best be expressed with the symbol of the woman soul. United with her beloved, she can reach the perfect unity of *jamāl* and *jalāl*, of yin and yang, in the all-surrounding *kamāl*, "perfection of the Divine."

These are just a few thoughts that came to me when I was reading Sachiko Murata's book. I know that some people will probably object to her sapiential approach to gender relations, as it seems to be too far away from the image they have acquired of Islam. But the texts which are translated in this book—most of them for the first time—show that her approach is perfectly valid. In fact, the numerous texts in themselves constitute a most important aspect of the book; they form an anthology of mystical wisdom in themselves and should be studied carefully by everyone interested in Islam. Even if the *ahl-i ẓāhir*, those who judge women's roles in Islam (and Islam in general) from a purely historical, sociological, or philological viewpoint, should disagree with some of Dr. Murata's conclusions, they will still discover a great number of hitherto unknown sources that may help them understand Islam somewhat better.

It seems fitting that a woman wrote this book on gender relations, just as the first true historical approach was given by a German woman, Wiebke Walther, and the first independent study of Rābi'a, the early woman saint in Islam (d. 801 in Irak), was published (in 1928) by a British orientalist woman, Margaret Smith. Rābi'a, who introduced the element of pure love into the early ascetic movements in Islam, was praised by generations of later writers and poets, and we may close our foreword with the lines which Jāmī (d. 1492 in Herat) quoted from the Arab poet al-Mutanabbī to honor this woman saint of Basra:

> If all women were like the one we have mentioned
> Then women would be preferred to men.
> For the feminine gender is no shame for the sun,
> Nor is the masculine gender an honor for the crescent moon!

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