Gendered Sufism: Women’s Roles and Practices in Mystical Islam

part of Islam in the Global Context Speaker Series: Islam and Gender

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With citations to famous female mystics like Rabiyya Adawiyya, it is commonly held that Islamic mysticism or *tasawwuf* is the unique realm of Islam that is most accommodating of women and where gender equality is observed. Zahra Ayubi’s presentation problematizes this claim. While the study of Sufi women reveals great feats of mystical strength, and demonstrates expressions of power and feminine agency, Sufi women, like other women (and other Muslim women) have been subject to gendered power relations and patriarchal expectations of women.

Zahra draws on a variety of pre-modern mystical sources such as poetry and prose by Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Chishti Sufis, and medieval hagiographies of women Sufis to create a historical narrative of the ways gender operated in medieval Islamic mysticism. Shifting away from the women worthies model of studying individual Sufi women, towards critical examination of women’s roles in Sufi circles, tells us more about how gendered Sufism mirrors other Islamic discourses and practices as a potential, but not definitive, space for gender equality.

*Zahra Ayubi is a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research is on women, constructions of gender, and gender relations in ethical, philosophical, and mystical texts.*

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