

Rabi'a

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Rabi'a, a Muslim Sufi woman, was born in A.H. 95 or 99 (713–714 or 717 C.E.), at Basra where she spent most of her life and where she was buried in A.H. 185 (801 C.E.). She is known as Rabi'a Basri on account of her birthplace, but also as Rabi'a Al-Adawiyah or Al-Qaysiya because she belonged to Al-'Atik, a tribe of Qais b. 'Adi.

Rabi'a's image is shrouded in legends including stories of miracles brought about by her intense devotion to God. But as sketchy as the historical details of her life are, they point to an extraordinary personality. Probably a fourth (*rabi'a*) daughter, she was born into extreme poverty. Orphaned at a young age, she was sold into slavery for a paltry sum. She served her master by day but spent most of her nights fasting and praying to God. Once aware of her profound piety, her master released her from bondage.

Among Rabi'a's devotees who lived a celibate, highly austere life were spiritual and temporal leaders of her time. But though many sought her prayers or guidance, she solicited no help from anyone, including God, despite the fact that her life was filled with penury, hardship, and physical afflictions. Her prayers, including the following, reflect an all-consuming passion for God that makes even Heaven and Hell irrelevant: "O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty."

Rabi'a, one of the earliest and most outstanding Sufi saints in an age of saints, whose name is used to refer to women who attain the highest spiritual station in any age, has been a source of inspiration to many mystics, including her biographer Farid ud-Din 'Attar who, in his famous poem (*The Conference of the Birds*), pays her the high compliment of being the "Crown of Men" (Taj ar-Rijal).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The only full-scale biography of Rabi'a in English is Margaret Smith's *Rabi'a, the Mystic A.D. 717–801 and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* (1928, repr. 1977). Most subsequent writing on Rabi'a in English have borrowed heavily from this book, which has an extensive bibliography of writings on Rabi'a in Western as well as non-Western languages.

Useful sources of biographical information are "Rabi'a Al-Adwiya," in *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, edited by H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers (1953); and Annemarie Schimmel, "Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, vol. 12, 1987, pp. 193–194.

References to Rabi'a may be found in most books on Islamic mysticism or mysticism in world religions. Significant Muslim thinkers such as Al-Ghazali (in *Ihya' ulum ad-Din*) or 'Attar (in *Tadkirat al-Awliya*) have written about Rabi'a and her contribution to the history of mysticism in Islam. Rabi'a also figures prominently in biographical books about Muslim women, such as Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women* (1983), or *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, edited by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan (1977, repr. 1980).

Non-English sources include Al-Hashimi, Talib, "Hazrat Rab'ia Basri," in *Tarikh-e-Islam ki char sau ba-kamal khwateen*, Lahore, 1996, pp. 108–112, and Jeerajpurai, Aslam, "Hazrat Rab'ia," in *Namwar Musulman Khwateen*, Lahore, 1996, pp. 76–81.

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