



The Women's Khutbah Book

Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality
and Justice from around the World

Sa'diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat

With an Edited Collection of New Khutbahs

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The Women's
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Spirituality and Love
around the World

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The Gift of Four Human Births

NUR ROFIAH

(Indonesia)

Beloved congregants, *rahimakum Allah*. In this khutbah I will show that humans are born four times during their lives in the journey to becoming fully human and realizing the deepest message of Islam. First, a person experiences biological birth, when a fetus develops and a new human body arrives out of a mother's womb. However, the possessor of that life easily forgets the importance and merit of a woman as the mother of life. Therefore, Allah (*subhanahu wa ta'ala*) reminds us of this truth:

And We have enjoined upon the human, good treatment to his parents,
His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship,
his gestation and weaning took thirty months. (Q. 46:15)²⁵

And We have enjoined upon man [care] for his parents.
His mother carried him, in weakness upon weakness,
and his weaning is in two years.
Be grateful to Me and to your parents,
to Me is the [final] destination. (Q. 31:14)²⁶

In these two verses, Allah commands every human being to be filial and show loving regard to both parents. However, the command to care for parents is especially focused on the mother because of her pregnancy, child-bearing, and breast-feeding. The verses express gratitude to the mother, and a child is considered grateful to Allah by thanking the mother of life. So as humans, we may grow up to become whatever we want to be—a businessperson, a state official, a politician, an engineer, a scientist, a farmer, a teacher, a worker. Yet we must never forget our essential debt to the woman who endured the challenges and pain of pregnancy, birthing, and breast-feeding us. By remembering the hardship endured by our mothers, the bearers of our very existence, and by expressing appreciation to her, we give thanks to Allah.

The second birth the human experiences is spiritual birth. The human is a creature like any other that has a body. After death, the body is devoured by the earth, yet the spirit remains alive and must take full responsibility for and be accountable to the life the human led. Thus, the most important iden-

ity of the human is as a spiritual being. Every human being has a freedom and inherent subjectivity as a servant only of Allah. So, we may not want to be anyone and anything other than Allah, nor treat anyone and anything like a servant. To be a servant of Allah means refusing to give absolute obedience to anybody or anything else—not to oneself or other people, nor to wealth, power, sexual libido, nor any other worldly attractions.

The Prophet Muhammad reminds us that there can be no obedience to those who are created if it requires disobedience to the Creator, al-Khalq. When we fully recognize that we are created to be a servant only of Allah, that we are never to be servants to any other person or relationship, whether marital, family, work-related, or other social relations—then we are actually experiencing a spiritual birth.

The third birth the human being experiences is social birth. In addition to our inherent spiritual status, we also have an inherent mandate as *khalifah f-al-ard*, the recipients of the Divine Trust (*amanah*) on earth, to realize and embody the greatest benefit for all creation:

Indeed, We offered the Trust

To the heavens and the earth and the mountains,

They declined to bear it and feared it;

The human being undertook it:

Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant. (Q. 33:72)²⁸

Every human being, both male and female, has an obligation to rise themselves and other people with respect and dignity (with *ma'dab* or a "beneficial" way), as best they can. This obligation is related to *rahmah* (recognizing Allah as the singular, absolute deity requires an attitude that also values all God's creatures. True faith in Allah requires decency; good deeds and the greatest benefit directed toward all God's creatures. When we realize that each of us is at the same time obliged and entitled to the greatest benefit on earth, then we are actually experiencing social birth—we truly come into our social being.

The fourth birth the human being experiences is intellectual birth. Unlike other creatures, humans are given minds and hearts to consider what is and is not permissible, what is good and not good, and what is appropriate and inappropriate in our capacity as servants of Allah, gifted with the mandate to realize the greatest *maslahah* or benefit on earth. Thus, as Muslims we are always required to think many times before undertaking an action. First we must ask, Is this action allowed by Allah? Only if the answer from within

our moral conscience verifies that it is lawful and permissible may we proceed with spiritual integrity.

However, we all have unique life conditions; we may be responsible for children and parents, healthy and sick, or we may be in a normal situation or experiencing a crisis. Like the diversity of such conditions, not everything is always good. Humans are required to use their minds and hearts to discern whether an action permitted by a religion is good or allowed by religion with the specific conditions of their lives. In answer to the question that the intellect poses, the heart and the mind must indicate beyond doubt that the action is good (*ayyiban*). When we experience the mind and heart in this way, then we are experiencing true intellectual birth.

Finally, because social conditions continually change, what is good in one place is not necessarily good or appropriate in another; or an action might be permissible and appropriate in one place and at a certain time, yet in other places or at different times the same action might be inappropriate. Humans are required to use their minds and hearts to discern appropriate actions (*ma'rifan*) that enjoin the good. This capacity for wise discernment and suitable response is part of our inherent status and mandate with all other human beings as both servant of Allah and as *khalifah f-al-ard*. When the awareness arises to continuously use our minds and hearts as best we can so that we always take action in *halalan* (lawful), *ayyiban* (good), and *wa ma'rafan* (appropriate) ways, then we have been born as an intellectual or right-minded being. Beloved congregants, *rahimakum Allah* (may Allah be merciful). Our first birth as a human is a necessity, and it is Allah who determines when we are born and from which woman's womb. However, our next three births—spiritual, social, and intellectual—are entirely in our own hands within the realm of our endeavors and choices (*ikhtiyar*) as humans. There are people who, until they arrive at death's door, function solely as physical beings; their lives occupied only in pursuit of physical happiness for themselves. They forget God, forget the happiness of others; they even use their human capacities and intellects to do damage on earth and take selfish actions:

We have certainly created man in the best of stature,

Then We return him to the lowest of the low;

Except for those who believe and do righteous deeds,

They will have a reward unending. (Q. 91:4–6)²⁹

Conversely, some humans experience the four births from an early age. Their faith in Allah as the one and only God guides them to do good toward

everyone and anything at any time, anywhere. Their presence becomes a gift to their surroundings, as a rare and precious sustenance to a person in need, or as a child is a gift to their parents, and a parent, a gift to the child; as a husband is a gift to his wife, and a wife, a gift to her husband; as a trader, a gift to a buyer, and a buyer, a gift to the trader; or as a leader is a gift to the people, and the people, a gift to their leader.

This relationship of gifting embodied in one's very being, life, and every deed is the state of the *al-itsan al-kamil* (the complete human being), aspired to in Islam. Humans who exist as gifts to themselves, to their families, to others in their society, and to people everywhere are in fact giving birth to themselves to the fullest extent. This is the heart of Islam in accordance with the mission of the Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of Allah, and it is our life's mission as his loyal followers, for the Qur'an states:

And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds. (Q. 21:107)

Friday congregants, *kefahkukan Allah* (may Allah protect us), let us pray together—may we strive to become human beings who are gifts to fellow Muslims, and to all the creatures of Allah.

Amin, Amin, Amin, Ya Raḥmā al-'Alamin.

Nur's Journey to the Minbar: "Engage Deeply with Allah in All Situations"

I WAS THE YOUNGEST in my family, with five brothers and a sister. As two daughters among several sons, my sister and I were the children the family "accepted." Unfortunately, my mother passed away when I was nine years old. I do not have any memory of her in good health—she was always sick. My father passed away three years after her. Thus I had neither father nor mother at the final stage of elementary school. I followed my sister, continuing my studies in the same Islamic boarding school in another province; at least an uncle lived close by at the time. My sister is six years older than me, and after we were together for a year at the boarding school, she left for university. I think my spirituality began to develop when I found myself alone, without my sister, at the boarding school.

I began to make decisions for myself, including about me. Sometimes I felt as if I was all alone in the big universe, that no one worried and cared

about my life—I imagined all parents do this for their children. This loneliness meant that I could not depend much on anyone, except Allah. Thus I started to engage deeply with Allah in all situations I found myself in, and I continue this. Currently I am a lecturer in Qur'anic Sciences in Jakarta, Indonesia. The campus is well-known as a male campus because for decades it has mostly accepted males in its undergraduate and graduate programs, has mainly male lecturers, and accepts only a small number of female undergraduate students. The students, usually engaged in religious fields, go on to work in the Ministry of Religion or as religious leaders in their communities.

During the month of Ramadan, male students and staff are sent to mosques throughout Indonesia and abroad to lead *tarawih* prayer and other special activities—being the authority to become imams and *khatibs*. As a lecturer in the field of *tafsir* at PTIQ, I am eligible in terms of individual standing to be an *imamah* and *khatibah*. I am eligible in terms of individual qualification as a doctor in the field of *tafsir*, an alumna from Ankara University (Turkey), and institutionally as a lecturer at PTIQ. All my fellow male lecturers are offered the opportunity to be *khatibs*, as are my male students. I, however, am not offered this opportunity. Instead, I am positioned as a *tafsir* lecturer of *khatibs* in training at PTIQ. I therefore can conclude that the only capital I do not have to become a *khatib* is a penis. I am not biologically male, which, unfortunately for me, counts as an absolute social condition for my exclusion. Ironically, as a woman with all the educational qualifications, I teach male *khatibs* but am not allowed to perform the khutbah in my community.

The majority of Indonesian society is Muslim—87.6 percent (2018) of women, for example, as preachers on national television, administrators of the Indonesian Ulama Council, lecturers at universities with mixed students or men-only students, heads of Islamic institutes (private and public), and leaders of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). Women are also owners and managers of informal religious organizations providing routine Islamic studies, pregnancy birth, circumcision, graduation, marriage, and commemoration of the day of death, even religious holidays or giving religious advice. But they cannot perform the Friday khutbah or other sermons in front of men.

I lecture *tafsir* in all-male classes, undertake teaching in *pesantren* for

thousands of male students, and train male employees at the Ministry of Religion on Islamic discourse. As a *tafsir* lecturer, I integrate gender in my teaching subjects, including Islamic studies, literature studies of the Qur'an, *tafsir 'ilmi*, classical and contemporary *tafsir*, social *tafsir*, and the history of *tafsir*. I include gender in the paradigm and method of *tafsir*, as an analytical perspective and as a specific discussion topic.

Since 2019, I have led an initiative that provides a discussion forum on Islamic gender justice, called Ngaji KGI (Keadilan Gender Islam), as a response to the lack of study forums on Islamic gender justice; the public can access it for free. Those who attend are mostly women. Nevertheless, I take every opportunity in any forum attended by men to talk about Islamic themes integrated with gender. I have noticed many men who feel a sense of unease regarding gender-biased understandings of Islam and the subordination of Muslim women. During a class discussion on polygyny, which elicits excitement in a men-only class, the atmosphere quieted when I asked, "What would you do if your mother became very ill and your father remarried?" One student burst out, "I would kill my father." In that moment, I demonstrated the adverse effects of polygyny on men too. Recounting this incident at an Ngaji KGI event, a male participant confessed that he had really wanted to kill his father who had remarried when his mother fell ill.

I am thankful for the opportunity to contribute a khutbah to this book. It has sparked within me an idea to compile my own collection of Friday khutbahs. For easier acceptance, I might perhaps have to publish such a collection under a male-sounding pseudonym—Nur Rofi, AH. Such a book might be one strategy for the message of Islamic gender justice to reach the Friday prayer *jama'ah* (congregation), who insists that to be its *khatib* you must also be a man!



Spirituality of the Ordinary

SA'DIYYA SHAIKH

(South Africa)

Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim.

When My devotee asks you concerning Me, I am indeed close
I answer the prayer of every suppliant when they call on Me

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