

forget through Eternity. Of her first dawn on the Nile she wrote, It looks not lurid and thick, as very brilliant colours in an English sky sometimes do, but so transparent and pure, that one really believes one's self looking into heaven and beyond, and feels a little shy of penetrating into the mysteries of God's throne.

It is so pleasant to see a place [the mosque] where any man may go for a moment's quiet, and there is none to find fault with him, nor make him afraid. Here the homeless finds a home, the weary repose, the busy leisure, if I could have said where any woman may go for an hour's rest, to me the feeling would have been perfect. The mosque leaves the more religious impression of the two (church/mosque), it is the better place of worship. We mounted the minaret; the muezzin was just there, calling to prayers in the loud monotonous recitative. The abstraction of a Mahometan at his prayers is quite inconceivable; on board boat, in a storm, it is just the same; the hour comes, the Mahometan falls on his knees, and for five minutes the world is nothing to him; death may come, but it cannot interrupt him; even gain may come, but it will not disturb him. Christians say this here, and laugh at it; but you cannot laugh. The Mahometan religion takes man on the side of his passions; it gratifies all these; it offers him enjoyment as his reward. The Christian religion takes him on the side of penitence and self denial. This seems the fundamental difference: otherwise there is much good in the Mahometan religion. Charity is unbounded; and it is not the charity of patronage, but the charity of fellowship. If any man says to another, "Inshallah (In the name of God)," he may sit down at his table and partake of anything that he has.

At the time of her journey, Muslim societies were still known for their honesty, generosity, and dignity that Florence deeply appreciated and which seem to have withered away today. Florence commented several times on the injustices she witnessed that troubled her so deeply. She noted how corrupt the Christians in Egypt were and how poorly they reflected the teachings of Christianity.

In opposition to the self-denial of Christianity, Florence Nightingale viewed Islam as a pleasure-driven religion, which has remained one

of its enduring aspects for many people, since Islam does not deny the sensual enjoyments of humanity but simply curtails them for one's own good. If she had been more aware of the lives of the Muslim Saints at the time of her visit, she would most certainly have welcomed the spiritual path of Islam in which the overcoming and actual annihilation of the experiencing self is the goal. In her later years, she wrote, "You must go to Mohametanism, Buddhism, to the East to the Sufis and Fakirs, to Pantheism, for the right growth of Mysticism." In her book, Notes from Devotional Authors, she mentions that one of her favorite poems was by a Persian mystic:

***Four things, O God, I have to offer Thee  
Which Thou has not in all Thy Treasury;  
My nothingness, my sad necessity,  
My fatal sin and earnest penitence.  
Receive these gifts & take the Giver hence.***

Florence's own spiritual pursuit and desire to understand the path of total surrender was a constant theme in her writing. The word "surrender" is repeated over and over to describe her own desired state with God. "True religion is to have no other will but God's," she quotes a medieval mystic, adding, "Compare this with the definition of Religion in Johnson's Dictionary: 'Virtue founded upon reverence of God and expectation of future rewards and punishments'; in other words, on respect and self-interest, no love. She also wrote, "We really love God if we desire to do His Will. I make it my earnest prayers that I may live so as to have fulfilled the will of God in everything."

Having herself increased in understanding and compassion during her voyage in Egypt, as well as increasing those around her, by the end of her journey, the Egyptians who accompanied Florence wept tears at her departure, a true testimony to her noble character and the truth and sincerity of her being. In evaluating her mostly disinterested comments and experiences throughout her sojourn in Egypt, we can come to appreciate something of the many epiphanies she had concerning both God and Islam that might help many Muslims better understand their own tradition. At the same time, her criticisms of the Muslim world are as insightful and important today as they were then, reflecting as they do her unflinching fairness and goodwill toward the peoples and places she visited. In honouring her by looking at her life in all its aspects, and in remembering her invaluable contributions to our world, we honour the best in ourselves.

# Florence



**In 1849, a young English lady journeyed with family friends from her native England to Egypt. Twenty-eight-years-old at the time, she had not yet married, and by Victorian standards she was proving to be of an "intractable nature." In taking such a journey abroad, she hoped it would help her decide what to do with her life. It turned out that the voyage did, in fact, help her commit to her mission, to which she had felt a strong calling but had refrained from embracing wholeheartedly up until then. Her name was Florence Nightingale.**

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**S**he went on to found modern Nursing and to effect permanent changes in health care, hospital design, statistics, military organization, and global politics. She inspired a Swiss humanitarian to establish the Red Cross, which is currently the single most important relief organization in the world and whose highest achievement award is named after her. She received medals and awards from several heads of state.

Many people recognize the name. Few, however, know how truly distinguished she was. Among Florence's many gifts, one that is often overlooked is her uncanny power of observation, which served her well as she administered care to those in need. It was this keen ability of hers to observe others and her surroundings that enabled her, during her year in Egypt between 1849 and 1850, to perceive certain truths about Islam and Muslim society that are more relevant today than ever before.

Florence was born on May 12, 1820 in Florence, Italy, while her family was sojourning there, and her mother appropriately named her after the city. The Nightingales were well-to-do British landowners, and her father associated with the Whig party and was involved in the anti-slavery movement. He was also a Unitarian and by its doctrine did not accept the divinity of Christ. Florence, because of political problems associated with her father's affiliation with the Unitarian dissenters, was raised in the more mainstream Anglican Church, but her writings reveal a strong Unitarian flavor nevertheless, no doubt from her father's influence, and Unitarians today claim her as one of their own.

While Florence was growing up, her father, who had no male children, treated her as a son, bestowing upon her the full attention a firstborn male in Victorian England would normally enjoy. Himself a graduate of Cambridge University, Florence's father chose to give Florence the best university education possible, but at home, since at that time women were not allowed to attend universities in person. However, free thought

flourished among the Unitarians, and women raised in Unitarian households were often highly educated.

As recently as 1873, a notable scientist argued that "an overindulgence in matters of the mind would shrivel a woman's reproductive organs" and that their minds were "too fragile for difficult mental activity." This was certainly not the case with Florence, who threw herself into her studies with a relish, rising daily between the wee hours of 4 and 6 a.m., while her family still slept, to prepare her day's lessons. Her curriculum included Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, history, grammar, philosophy, and mathematics. She also studied the newly emerging social sciences and the embryonic science of statistics. In fact, the invention of the pie chart, commonly used in presenting data today, is attributed to her.

Florence's mother, Fanny, though also from a staunch Unitarian household, but conscious of herself more as a lady of her time, would usually retire to the drawing room with her only other daughter, Parthe, to work on their embroidery, while Florence and her father headed for the library to discuss metaphysics, politics, and current social issues.

When Florence reached the age of sixteen, she believed that God was calling her to a great cause she could not yet discern. In a private note to herself, she wrote, "On February 7th, 1837, God spoke to me and called me to His service." Though her mother had high ambitions for her young, talented, and very attractive daughter in society, Florence found the petty ambitions of Victorian women intolerable. She refused several marriage proposals, including that of a well-placed and very wealthy suitor, a certain Lord Houghton. Her comment about these proposals was, "I knew God had not made me to tend to Garden parties."

During frequent visits to London and a trip to mainland Europe, Florence was exposed to "high society" in upper-class British culture, but in all this, she never forgot her calling to God. In a private note she wrote that in order to make herself worthy of God's service she would need to overcome "the desire to shine in society." But she was already shining. Her natural beauty and delicate features, coupled with her evident sincerity and selflessness made her highly desirable marriage material. She often complained however about the lack of men who

wished to accompany her on her journey of discovery. The call of God was too great for her, and she could not see her way clear to serve both God and husband at the same time. Florence would have found a kindred soul in Islam's Rabia Adawiyya, the great 9th century Basran mystic who refused marriage several times, preferring passionate love of God as a devotional path instead.

Florence asked Dr. Howe: "Do you think it would be unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospitals and elsewhere as Catholic sisters do? Do you think it would be a dreadful thing?" His answer was, "My dear Miss Florence, it would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is apt to be thought unsuitable; but I say to you, go forward if you have a vocation for that way of life; act up to your inspiration, and you will find that there is never anything unbecoming or unladylike in doing your duty for the good of others. Choose, go on with it wherever it may lead you, and God be with you."

### **The Dawn of Knowledge**

Florence's initial impressions of Egypt, and of Islam in particular, were understandably negative. Egypt was corrupt, impoverished, and seemingly on its last legs. Much of what she saw came as a tragic surprise. She had never seen people in Europe living in such degrading and oppressive conditions as those she found in Egypt. But as her journey unfolded her perceptions of both Islam and the Egyptian people began to change due to a combination of personal experience and the fact that she was reading all the available literature that she could during her many leisure hours.

Florence's very first letter from Egypt was dated November, 19, 1849: Yes, My Dear People, I have set my first footfall in the East, and oh! That I could tell you the new world of old poetry, of Bible images, of light, and life, and beauty what that word opens. My first day in the East, and it has been of the most striking I am sure, one I can never

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*Florence Nightingale*