

MTM Article for Rahbar on SINGLENES by Vivienne Stacey

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1. Singleness – socially and culturally:

Miss Fatima Jinnah, the sister of the Qaid-e-Azam, founder of Pakistan, was single. She appeared on public platforms with her distinguished brother thus making this easier for wives of political leaders to accompany their husbands. She was chosen as the candidate of the Combined Opposition Parties in the elections for the presidency of Pakistan. The incumbent Muhammad Ayub Khan was the other candidate who won the vote as was expected.

2. Singleness – religiously:

a. Singleness in Islam

In religious teaching and practice there is a case for singleness in Islam and Muslims are well aware of singleness. Jesus Christ, recognized as one of the six main prophets of Islam, who features prominently in the Qur'an, never married. The prophet John the Baptist, Yahya in the Qur'an was called chaste (hasur), and never married. (Q.3 v. 39). He was the cousin of Jesus and figures in the gospels. One well-known hadith states that "marriage is half the faith" (al-zawaj nisf al-iman). Rabi'a, one of the most famous Muslim mystics, held in the highest regard, was single. It seems that she had made a vow of consecration to God so that she could have closer union with him. Some Sufi orders encourage celibacy for religious reasons. In fact, the early Sufis often exhorted their students to remain celibate. Al Ghazali commends celibacy if one cannot cope with the expenses and burdens of family life. Those Muslims who do not see Sufism as an authentic expression of Islam could consider Jamal al-Din al-Afghani the highly respected orthodox reformer of the nineteenth century and the teacher for Muhammad Abduh who laid the foundations of modern Islamic reform in Egypt and beyond. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani never married although on his travels throughout the Muslim world he had many offers. Whenever an admiring disciple offered his daughter in marriage his answer was always the same: "The umma (Islamic community) is my spouse". Nowadays voluntary celibacy for certain causes is increasing among the Muslims, for example, among those who are involved in the liberation of Palestine.

b. Singleness in Christianity

Both Islam and Christianity see the celibate life as the exception. Let us look at two of the three great families of the Christian church.

Catholic: the main reasons for consecrated celibacy in the Roman Catholic tradition are:

1. for the sake of the Gospel. (Matthew 19 v. 12). Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, is an example of this. Like all priests he had taken a vow of celibacy. The order he founded was particularly dedicated to spreading the gospel through the world. We have historical records of Jesuits reaching Lahore in the time of the Moghul Empire. His Act of total dedication should be read in the light his vocation.

"Take all my freedom, Lord.

Accept the whole of my memory, understanding and will.

Whatever I have or hold come to me from your bounty.

I give it all; back to you,

surrender it all to the guidance of your will.

Your grace and the love of you are wealth enough.

Give me but that, and I ask for nothing more."

2. for the service of one's fellow human beings. In this category one outstanding example is Mother Theresa and the work she and her helpers have done among the extreme poor and the dying in Calcutta and elsewhere.
3. for closer imitation of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

Protestant: the Protestant reasons for singleness and celibacy also include these points except for imitation of the Virgin Mary. In the Protestant view Mary may well have had children by Joseph although those referred to in the gospels could have been Joseph's children by a former marriage. (Matthew 13 v.55). The statement in Matthew 1 verse 18 certainly does not support Mary's perpetual virginity. In this account I am referring to men just as much as to women and only to those who have a personal saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Singleness is not just a matter of the general will of God but of his specific plans for each individual member of his family. (Ephesians 2 v. 10). We have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. This is our calling to salvation. However, God has his tailor-made plan for each one of those whom he has saved. This is a matter of our vocation – the individual seeking of God's will and purpose. In explaining this to those of the wider community we certainly need to stress that God's will is not just general but also specific and personal. This is a new concept to many.

3. Singleness – personally:

Maybe it would help to illustrate if I quote from my own experience. I came from a secular background in England. I was greatly influenced by the life of a fellow student who was a Christian. Through hearing that Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead I realized that Jesus was relevant to today's world and that if he had risen from the dead he is alive and can be met now. In desperation I sought him and he made himself known to me. This was my calling for salvation. Soon after as a young student I again heard through a believer, through information and through the Bible of the need of others in other lands and of my responsibility to share good news. (Luke 12 v. 48). After training as a teacher, teaching for three years and studying theology for two years I joined a missionary society and was commissioned by my local church to work abroad. This was as a result of God's personal guidance to me step by step. God had alerted me to the fact that mine might be a path of singleness and might sometimes be lonely. I took no vow of singleness but I did not expect that marriage would go well with what God was specifically calling me to do. As I look back now after nearly forty years I can see that this is true. As a married person I could not have travelled so constantly in the Gulf countries and in many other areas of the world with a teaching and preaching ministry.

During my travels I met one Christian worker who had a much clearer call to singleness than me. She related how early on she as a nurse without family responsibilities was able to give extra voluntary time through the night in seeking out a baby who was not admitted to the hospital as the doctors and nurses on duty were too swamped with work to take on an extra case. This child miraculously survived and she watched him grow up normally without the expected brain damage or any complication from a 107 degrees of fever. In her case the personal guidance of God included his specific call to singleness. (Matthew 19 v. 12) She declares how fulfilling her life has been and how little time there has been for feeling lonely. However, there is a cost to be counted. Singleness has its hardships and difficulties as does marriage. Neither state is more honourable in God's sight than the other. What matters is the doing of his will joyfully not grudgingly. Obviously most people will marry but God requires that the Christian should be willing to remain single. The willingness is everything. Marriage is not a right or even a duty. It is a matter of what God wants of us. In some societies and this is true to quite an extent in Pakistan the individual does not have as much say in the matter as

the family and maybe the family does not seek God's will in the way that the individual does. What then? "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers..." writes the apostle Paul. (2 Corinthians 6 v.14). There are times when it is right for the believer to refuse to marry a non-believer even if they both belong to the same community. In some cases God guides the believer to accept the arranged marriage believing that God will so work in the partner's heart that he or she will come to saving faith.

However, sometimes the family does not make the expected marriage arrangement and the eldest sister who may be a nurse or a teacher provides for the education of half a dozen brothers and sisters. The years slip by and somehow she does not marry. We all know of such people. Was that their choice or was it circumstances, was it the carelessness of the family or was it the will of God? These are difficult questions but in this as in everything else a believer can rest in the assurance that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose". (Romans 8 v.28).