



I sigh and close the
book I'm reading—

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita
in Tehran*. Nafisi's account of
the lives of young Iranian women
at the turn of this century under
fundamentalist Islam and the
Ayatollah Khomeini has gotten to me.

Dear X-wide

By Valerie Bell

{ in focus }

Life in Iran, governed by mullahs who use religion as an instrument of power, oppression, imprisonment and torture, is beyond dark.

All things Western—even shaking hands with the opposite sex, clapping or whistling in public, wearing colors, reading Western literature—are considered decadent symbols of Western plots to bring down Islamic faith and culture. The smallest infractions are punishable with incredible severity.

Page after page I've met young women who are members of a secret literary reading circle. Under the veils, the black scarves and robes they wear American jeans and t-shirts. One defiantly paints her fingernails red and then wisely wears gloves. Another has been subjected (because of the suspicions of her brother) to virginity testing which resulted in her receiving lashes. Others have been imprisoned. Their meetings are dangerously defiant attempts to restore freedoms as basic to Americans as breathing air.

My heart goes out to the women behind the veils. I want to shout the Gospel across the ocean into their lives. *YOU ARE UNIQUELY AND WONDERFULLY MADE! THERE IS NOTHING SHAMEFUL ABOUT BEING A WOMAN. COME TO JESUS! LOSE THE VEILS! SHED THE SCARVES AND ROBES! YOU ARE CREATED FOR LIFE . . . NOT OPPRESSION!*

But instead I hear silence.

If I listen very carefully I can hear a few voices but, in the larger sense, I wonder what's happened to our collective shout? Why is my own voice so silent? What's happened to the voice of American Christian women? For centuries, spiritual women joined the cultural dialogue and impacted world issues. They were at the forefront of abolishing slavery. Women of faith were the initial prison reformers and leaders in demanding child labor laws. They were pioneer missionaries. Our world is different today because of their influence. But, where in the world are WE? What mark are we leaving behind?

Sometimes I'm concerned that the template for Christian women's spirituality today is deep, but not wide.

I know there are exceptions, but generally when we gather, our "group think" focuses on personal needs. Conference after conference, Bible study after Bible study, we delve deeper into God through the lens of our own myopic concerns. Spiritual formation is often presented exclusively as self care—slowing down life rhythms so there is space for God, self examination, prayer methods—all without an "otherness" component. The most

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popular topics for retreats and small groups are ones that reflect our personal and immediate concerns . . . family issues, marriage matters, personal piety. Books reflecting "felt needs" spill from publishers into our homes in a never-ending flow of promised help for any problem we could imagine. We are deep and getting deeper all the time, but is it

enough? Contrast this view of spiritual formation with Robert Mulholland's definition: "Conforming to the character of Christ *for the sake of others.*"

Where has the "otherness" of Christianity gone?

Where are the weekend retreats for Christian women who want to develop strategies for fighting the AIDS pandemic? Who's planning discussions and reading groups for women in our churches around current world issues? Are we educating each other so we can speak Christ into the crises of our communities, nation and the world? Let me be very clear: I'm not necessarily talking about increased involvement in political agendas or social activism. What I am talking about is a cultural relevancy that covers the world with the message of God's love in alto and soprano voices. And speaking of the world . . . is anybody praying for lost people anymore, or did that die out with the missionary circles of another generation?

In a recent interview with *Christianity Today*, author Eugene Peterson made an observation about spirituality that is subtly self-focused and leaning towards narcissism.

We've all met a certain type of spiritual person. She's a wonderful person. She prays and reads the Bible all the time. But all she thinks about is herself. She's not a selfish person. But she's always at the center of everything she's doing. "How can I witness better? How can I do this better? How can I take care of this person's problem better?" It's me, me, me disguised with spiritual talk. We need to get people bored with themselves so they can start looking at Jesus.

In another characterization of "Christian-women think," best-selling author Donald Miller, in *Searching for God Knows What*, writes so charmingly we may not notice the insight behind the humor.

Some time ago I attended a seminar for Christian writers. Some of the nicest people you could ever hope to meet will be at a Christian writer's seminar, I'll tell you that

right now. Very small people, though, mostly women, not the sort of folks you would imagine taking literature captive for the glory of God . . . The woman sitting next to me was writing a wonderful series of Christian devotionals for girls who were taking ballet classes, and the lady on the other side of me was writing a series of devotionals you could read while drinking tea. When she told me this, a lady in front of me turned around and smiled because she was working on a series of devotionals you could read while drinking coffee. I told them their books sounded terrific, because it is true that some people like tea and some people like coffee, and for that matter, some people dance in ballets.

Donald, your point is heard. Are we missing the big picture while we sip tea and pray and try to become marketable? We want to be women of influence, but are we too preoccupied with insular pursuits? It's hard to admit, but I fear that both Eugene and Donald are somewhat right about us. Maybe it's time to get a little bored with ourselves so there's room to fall deeply in love with Jesus again.

Spirituality without "otherness" is bound to be anemic, fruitless and unsatisfying. Leaders of women need to be particularly sensitized to the health of the communities we serve. When we plan our programming, our retreats, our discussions, we need to encourage depth, but we also need to stretch that depth to include breadth. We desperately need a wider focus in our spiritual templates.



A number of years ago I had a personal lesson in the importance of "otherness." I was struggling with an empty nest depression. I read everything I could about fulfillment in the different stages of life. I worked at staying busy. We moved. I redecorated. But try as I might to engage life and find God, I was still down.

One night, I was scheduled to speak to our church's grief ministry. A depressed speaker in a room full of grieving people didn't sound like a good idea to me. Unenthusiastically, I dragged myself there. After the meeting, the leaders pulled me aside and asked if I would talk to a couple who needed special help. They were not believers. Neighbors had suggested they come to our grief ministry. Four days before, their only child—a troubled fourteen-year old daughter—had hung herself in their family room. Devastated, crushed and anguished were words too small to describe their empty nest.

I listened, wondering what I could possibly say to help, and then, from somewhere inside, God's words came from my mouth and poured out love and compassion into their brokenness. Walking through their hell, I had a sense that it was exactly where God had called me to be and where he intended to meet me. Before my jeep was parked in the garage that night, my depression had lifted completely. A touch of "otherness" in my search for God was what had been missing.

For a few years now "otherness" has been directing my spirituality farther and farther from my own felt needs and interests.

Best of all, I am not alone. I sense a movement at hand. My small group joined me in reading about women in the Islamic world. Together we fell back in love with Jesus while our hearts broke for women behind the veil. Then, like a growing number of Christian women, I am struggling to find a personal response to AIDS. Lately, when I'm with other women, the talk seems to be shifting to "otherness" concerns—human sex trafficking, female genitalia mutilation, global health concerns—and I'm hearing the discussions on these issues all in the beautiful range of alto and soprano voices!

Donald Miller, I hope it won't be long before we're reading books by Christian women who've danced through other women's veiled hells with the love of God spilling from their souls. I'm ready to buy volumes about Christian women who can drink tea while raising money to fight AIDS. I'm interested in the conferences, the weekend retreats, the small groups where women go both deep and wide—where the thoughts, dreams and talk among ourselves is taken captive once again for the glory of God. I'd like my morning devotions with a cup of sugar-free cinnamon dulce non-fat tall latte coffee with a huge dollop of otherness included.

In this aching world, **how could it be anything but shouting time for Christian women?**