

CHAPTER 16. WOMEN IN ISLAM

Muslims often argue that Islam has liberated women, giving them a dignity that no other religion has given them. Christians, on the other hand, have often been critical of the treatment of women in Islam. If one side has used this issue to commend Islam and the other to attack it, might it not seem wiser to leave such a sensitive and controversial issue completely alone? There are three reasons why it may be appropriate at least to open up the subject:

1. The family plays such an important role in Islam that it is impossible to understand Muslim culture without understanding something of the place of women in Islam.
2. A study of the role of women in Islam leads us straight to several subjects which are crucial for our understanding of the nature of Islam, such as the place of the Qur'an, the traditions about the Prophet, and Islamic law (shari'a). If we can understand how Muslims think about this crucial subject, we should be able to appreciate more of their total worldview.
3. Tackling this subject should make us aware of some of the pitfalls in any comparison of Christianity and Islam. There are three in particular which we need to avoid: comparing what we think is the worst in Islam with the best in Christianity; criticizing Islam for the faults and weaknesses in individual Muslims without recognizing that Christians have often been guilty of exactly the same things; and judging Muslims in the past by contemporary moral standards, which for many of us are simply those of the Western world in the twenty first century.

The material in this chapter, therefore, is not intended to be used as ammunition for scoring points against an adversary. Our task is to try to understand rather than to be judgmental, and to enter with as much sympathy or empathy as possible a culture which is very different from our own.

THE TEACHING OF THE QUR'AN ABOUT WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

The following are the main points in the teaching of the Qur'an, with references to some of the relevant verses:

- Men and women were created "from a single soul" (4:1).
- God has created all living beings in pairs, male and female, and marriage is ordained by God (51:49; 30:20-21; 42:11).
- God will reward both men and women in Paradise (3:195; 16:97).
- Men are commanded to treat women kindly (4:19).
- Passages which appear to teach that women are inferior to men because "men are a degree above them" are generally interpreted to mean that husbands are responsible for leadership of the family and for maintaining their wives; wives are to be obedient and chaste, and can be beaten if they are disobedient (4:34; 2:228).
- Women should dress modestly and draw their cloak or veil around them when they go outside, but there is no suggestion that they should be completely veiled (33:59; 24:30-31).
- Men may marry up to four wives, provided they treat them all fairly

and equally (4:3). This permission was given after the Battle of Uhud, when seventy Muslim men were killed, and is therefore seen as a way of caring for widows and unmarried women in any community where there are not enough men. Some interpreters today believe that since it is virtually impossible for a husband to deal absolutely fairly with more than one wife, the passage should be interpreted to mean that polygamy is not encouraged, if not actually proscribed.

- The same verse that allows up to four wives also teaches that a Muslim may have any number of slave-concubines in addition to the four legal wives (4:3).
- Muslim men may marry Jewish or Christian wives (5:5) but may not marry women from any other religion (2:221).
- Intercourse is not allowed during menstruation (2:222); women are to be regarded as “filth for you (to cultivate)” or “a field of tillage” (2:223).
- Adultery is to be punished severely (4:15-18; 17:32; 24:20).
- Divorce is permitted (226:242; 60:1-2; 65:1-2) but only after an attempt has been made at reconciliation (4:35). It would seem that no provision is made in these verses for a wife to divorce her husband.
- A person’s estate is to be divided among his or her relatives after death (2:180). A husband is to receive a half of his wife’s estate, while a wife should receive a quarter of her husband’s estate (4:7-12).
- Descriptions of Paradise include ‘dark-eyed virgins’ or ‘wide-eyes houris’ (e.g. 44:54; 52:20; 55:56; 56:22-24).

THE TEACHING AND EXAMPLE OF MUHAMMAD

These are some of the relevant sayings of the Prophet which have been recorded in Muslim tradition, and which are therefore given considerable authority by Muslims:

Paradise lies at the feet of your mothers.

The best among you is the one who is the best towards his wife.

O people, your wives have certain rights over you and you have certain rights over them. Treat them well and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers.

The following basic facts about the wives of Muhammad are based on authoritative traditions and are accepted by all Muslims:

years old at the time and had been widowed twice. She was his only wife for twenty-five years and bore all Muhammad’s children except one. She died at the age of sixty-five.

- At the age of fifty, Muhammad married Sawda, whose husband had immigrated to Abyssinia to escape persecution and then died there.
- In the same year there was a proposal of marriage to ‘A’isha, who was seven years old, the daughter of his companion Abu Bakr. The marriage was not consummated until after the Hijra in 622 when she was nine years old, and she became his favorite wife. For six years, until he reached the age of fifty-six, Muhammad had only these two wives, Sawda and ‘A’isha.
- Between the ages of fifty-six and sixty Muhammad contracted marriages with nine women, including Hafsa and Juwayria, both widows whose husbands had been killed in battle; Zaynab bint Jahsh, a cousin

of Muhammad who had been the wife of his adopted son Zaid and became Muhammad's wife after he received a special revelation permitting him to marry her (recorded in the Qur'an, 33:37); and Mariya, a Coptic (Egyptian) slave girl who bore Muhammad's only son, Ibrahim. He died at eighteen months.

Gai Eaton explains how Muslims understand polygamy today and the traditions concerning Muhammad's married life:

'In accordance with the Qur'anic injunction, he treated his wives equally in all material matters and in matters of justice. He divided his nights fairly between them and he drew lots to determine who should accompany him on his campaigns; but, as he himself said, a man's affections are outside his control and his particular fondness for 'A'isha was common knowledge. Jealousy was inevitable, and he tended to make light of it. Once he came to a room where his wives and other members of the family were assembled bearing in his hand an onyx necklace, which had just been presented to him. Holding it up, he said: "I shall give this to her whom I love best of all!" He allowed a pause while they whispered together, sure that he would give it to the daughter of Abu Bakr. When he had left them long enough in suspense, he called his little granddaughter to him and clasped it round her neck. "If the revelation comes to me when I am under the coverlet of a woman," he said once, "it is only when I am with 'A'isha." She herself, as was mentioned previously, was not without a streak of jealousy. He asked her once, half-teasing, if she would not like to die before him so that he could bury her and pray at her funeral. "I should like that well enough," she said, "if I did not think that on returning from my funeral you would console yourself with another woman." The tense and delicate balance between the glory of Muhammad's prophethood, his closeness to God and his visionary gifts, the Herculean tasks he undertook and accomplished in the world, and the warmth and liveliness of his household is at the heart of the Muslim view of life; if this is understood, Islam is understood.

ISLAMIC LAW

Since the Qur'an does not contain a complete system of law, the Muslim community had to develop its laws gradually after the death of Muhammad, using the Qur'an and the traditions about the Prophet as their starting point. It was in the period from about 850 to 950 that the shari'a came to be codified and developed into a complete and all-embracing system of law. During this time the four main schools of law emerged, each of them placing different emphasis on the four main Islamic sources of authority (see chapter twelve).

These were some of the basic provisions concerning women and marriage contained in the *shari'a*:

- A man may marry up to four wives.
- The husband has to pay a dowry to his wife at the time of the wedding. The first part of the dowry consists of jewelry or cash, which is spent on the bride's trousseau or household furnishings. The second part is payable in cash or in kind in case of divorce.
- The testimony of two women is equivalent to the testimony of one man.

- Temporary marriage (*mut'a*) was marriage for a limited period (varying from a few days to many years), which involved the payment of a dowry, however small. Probably a pre-Islamic custom in Arabia, the practice was given legal sanction in the Qur'an (4:24) and the traditions of the Prophet. It became a common practice in Shi'i Islam, mainly in Persia. Later opinion was divided, with some regarding it as little more than legalized prostitution.

- Women can own property. Wives have a right to their own earnings, and they can give away their property and earnings as they wish. A woman has a right to a proportion of the inheritance of her dead father, husband or childless brother, but only half of the share of other male relatives, since men have greater financial responsibilities.

- A Muslim man should marry a Muslim woman. A Muslim man may in some cases marry a Jewish or Christian woman. A Muslim woman, however, is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man.

- Divorce (*talaq*) is allowed on the grounds of incompatibility, cruelty, injustice, prolonged absence, adultery, insanity and incurable or contagious diseases. Although in the past Muslim women have not generally

been allowed to divorce their husbands, it is now allowed in many Muslim countries. There are strict rules to ascertain the paternity of a child in cases where a divorced wife is pregnant.

- Abortion is strictly forbidden, although in Tunisia today it is legally possible, and in many other countries it is practiced clandestinely.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

Many women have played a significant role in the history of Islam. 'A'isha is the source of a large number of traditions about the life of the Prophet. During the Battle of the Camel she took up arms against Ali. One of the Prophet's granddaughters, Sayyida Zainab (died 684), has been venerated as a saint for many centuries, and her tomb in Cairo is still an important shrine today.

Rabi'a of Basra (died 802) was one of the earliest and best known of the Sufi saints. She is especially remembered for her prayer: "O my Lord, 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." Many women after her played an important part in the Sufi movement, and women have been as deeply influenced by the movement as men. Princess Radiya, for instance, ruled in Delhi for four years from 1236 until she was supplanted by one of her brothers.

In the twentieth century women played prominent roles in many Muslim countries. Halide Edib Adivar, for example, was active in public life in Turkey as a teacher, journalist and author from the early 1900s until her death in 1964. Begum Ra'ana, the wife of the first prime minister of Pakistan, was ambassador to the United Nations and in 1979 gained a human rights award from the U.N. Benazir Bhutto in 1988 became the first woman to be prime minister of a Muslim country (Pakistan) and was elected again in 1993. Several Muslim women from France and North Africa have competed for their countries in the Olympic Games.

LAW REFORM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Turkey was the first Muslim country to bring in a family law in 1917. In Egypt a series of laws was passed between 1920 and 1929, and in 1943 a new law of inheritance was passed. Similar laws were passed in Jordan in 1951, and in Syria in 1953. In 1979 amendments to the 1929 personal status law were passed, giving women better rights in divorce and for alimony and child custody. Tunisia made polygamy illegal in 1956, and in 1959 made all sex discrimination illegal.

Amir Taheri describes some of the obstacles to the reform of laws relating to the status of women in countries of the Middle East:

The 1980s could be described as a period of retreat for those who supported the cause of legal equality and more individual liberties for women. Under pressure from Islamic fundamentalists most Middle Eastern governments have either postponed or cancelled earlier policies in favor of more rights for women.

THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN ISLAM

Reforms initiated by such rulers as Muhammad ‘Ali and Isma‘il Pasha were intended to enable Egyptians to attain the same cultural level as Europeans, and therefore encouraged some women to changes aspects of their traditional Islamic way of life. Reformers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh and Qasim Amin pressed, for example, for better education for girls and women, and spoke against the practice of polygamy.

In 1919 the leadership of the movement passed to Huda Sha‘rawi (1879-1947), the chairperson of the Women’s Executive of a major political party in Egypt. In that year she led a demonstration of veiled women to support Egyptian nationalism. In 1923, after leading an Egyptian delegation to the meeting of an International Alliance for Women in Rome, she threw her veil to the sea as she disembarked on her return to Egypt. Through the growing influence of the movement, a new marriage and divorce law was passed in 1928.

The feminist case has been argued strongly in recent years by a growing number of Muslim women who have tried to understand the culture of both the Muslim and the Western worlds. Fatma Sabah, for example, a North African sociologist, is critical of the record of traditional Islam over its attitudes to women. This is how she explains “the ideal of female beauty in Islam”:

The ideal of female beauty in Islam is obedience, silence and immobility, that is inertia and passivity. These are far from being trivial characteristics, nor are they limited to women. In fact, these three attributes of female beauty are the three qualities of the believer vis-avis his God. The believer must dedicate his life to obeying and worshipping God and abiding by his will.

In the sacred universe, the believer is fashioned in the image of woman, deprived of speech and will and committed to obedience to another [God]. The female condition and the male condition are not different in the end to which they are directed, but in the pole around which they orbit. The lives of beings of the female sex revolve around the will of believers of the male sex.

Using Sabah's analysis, Fatima Mernissi, a sociologist working at the Research Institute of the University of Rabat in Morocco, tries to explain why some recent feminist thinking represents such a threat to traditional ways of thinking in Islam:

What happens when a woman disobeys her husband, who is the representative and embodiment of sacred authority, and of the Islamic hierarchy? A danger bell rings in the mind, for when one element of the whole structure of polarities is threatened, the entire system is threatened. A woman who rebels against her husband, for instance, is also rebelling against the umma, against reason, order and, indeed, God. The rebellion of woman is linked to individualism, not community (umma); passion, not reason; disorder, not order; lawlessness (fitna), not law.

When she explains the dilemma facing many Muslim women in the modern world, Christian readers will recognize the uncanny parallel with the tensions among Christians over traditional responses to feminism:

In the struggle for survival in the Muslim world today, the Muslim community finds itself squeezed between individualistic, innovative western capitalism on the one hand, and individualistic, rebellious political oppositions within, among which the most symbolically loaded is that of rebellious women. The common denominator between capitalism and new models of femininity is individualism and self-affirmation. Initiative is power. Women are claiming power—corroding and ultimately destroying the foundation of Muslim hierarchy; whence the violence of the reaction and the rigidity of the response. Femininity as a symbol of surrender has to be resisted violently if women intend to change its meaning to energy, initiative and creative criticism.

In this context it may be helpful to look again at the issue of the wearing of the veil. Westerners are often surprised to find out that Muslim women who wear the veil can be highly educated, working women. In many countries there is nothing strange about seeing a professional woman wearing a veil and working at her computer. Hinde Taarji, a Moroccan journalist, wrote a book in 1991 titled *Les Voilees de l'Islam*, in which she recorded the results of interviews with women throughout the Arab world who had decided to wear the veil (hijab). These are some of the reasons given for wearing the veil:

- It can liberate women by helping them to escape from masculine aggression in public and encouraging men to respect them. The veil will not necessarily destroy the emancipation of Muslim women.
- It is a sign of total commitment to Islam, and provides the security and stability of a familiar code in a changing society.
- It has little or nothing to do with a desire to remain secluded in the home, since many who wear the veil want to go out to work.
- It indicates to men that Muslim women can have their own interpretation of Islam, in spite of the fact that men have traditionally been the guardians of orthodox Islamic teaching. These veiled women are “entering the center of Islam”—with the approval of men.

ISLAMISATION AND THE DEMAND TO RETURN TO THE *SHARI'AH*

In several countries groups of Muslims are calling for their governments to adopt a new legal

code which is based on the shari‘a rather than on Western law codes. Abdur Rahman I. Doi expresses the feeling of many that Muslims have absorbed too much from the West in their attitudes toward women and need to recover a more traditionally Islamic approach:

During the days of European colonialism and the scramble to take over the Muslim world, the influence of feminism spread to Muslim countries. The first victims of the glittering Western way of life were the Muslim rulers of various Muslim countries. In the days of the political decline of Islam, they were made to believe that the Muslim world was lagging behind because of the “maltreatment and slavery of women.”¹³

I would like to appeal to Muslim scholars the world over to re-examine the role they played in this most difficult period of Islamic history when the Christian West had almost dominated the Muslim world. I have a feeling that perhaps they went too far in proposing reforms in the Shari‘ah. Perhaps with the best of intentions, they proposed so-called “reforms” in the matter of the Shari‘ah and galloped on the unbridled horse of reason and imagination, giving fatawa [juristic opinions] which did great damage which they did not live long enough to see.

Many of my Egyptian friends will not be happy to read that not only did Egypt shelve, and to a great extent discard, the Islamic system of values as taught by the Qur’an and the Sunnah by adopting Western culture and the Western way of life, but it also exported it to other Arab and Muslim countries. Walking in the streets of many cities in Egypt, one feels that one is in Europe.

SOME OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. There is always going to be a huge gulf between the ideal that is taught by religious teachers and how people within that community actually carry it out.

2. what is local and cultural and what is Islamic

pre-Islamic customs incorporated into Islam

3. The status of women has changed considerably as a result of western influence

4. There is bound to be tension between traditionalists and modernists and fundamentalists

5. Western women have converted to Islam

6. Questions that remain for Christians

7. How much are we dealing with human nature

Christian failings

In the first place, we need to be careful when we speak about “the teaching of the Bible” with

regard to women and marriage. The early chapters of Genesis speak about origins, and describe the marriage of one man and one woman as something instituted by God since the beginning (Genesis 2:18-24). Sadly, however, there are many examples in the rest of the Old Testament of great characters, such as Abraham, David and Solomon, who did not always live up to the ideal described in Genesis. Was it that they did not know that monogamy was God's ideal for the human race, or that God was allowing the Jewish people to learn the hard way, through experience?

Jesus bases his teaching about marriage squarely on the teaching of Genesis (Mark 10:1-12), whereas Paul sees the relationship of love between Christ and his church as the pattern of the relationship between husband and wife in marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33). While we may find it difficult to explain some of the behavior described in the Bible, most of us would feel that when we take the whole of the Bible's teaching, there are significant differences between biblical and Qur'anic teaching about marriage.

We need to resist the temptation, however, to exaggerate these differences or to compare the best in our own tradition with the worst in the other. We also need to be extremely careful about our motives in making the comparisons or speaking about the differences with Muslims.

Although we may believe that the Christian faith provides a better basis for the dignity of women than any other faith, we need to admit that the Christian church has not always had a very good record in its attitudes to women. We may be able to explain this to ourselves by saying that at certain periods Christians cannot have been fully aware of the distinctive Christian teaching, or that they were more influenced by their culture than by the gospel. Our problem often is, however, that Muslims do not generally find it easy to distinguish between Christian teaching and Christian practice.

We have not, I trust, acquired a new armory of weapons to use against Islam and Muslims. I hope rather that we have gained some insight into the role of women in Islam and developed some sympathy for the aspirations of women in different Muslim communities.

If we have also recognized the need for greater humility, and deeper repentance over Christian failures to live up to the standards set before us in the Christian tradition, we may have added something to our reflection in Part one on meeting our Muslim neighbors, and be better prepared for the kind of discussion and dialogue we need to explore in part three, "Entering into Discussion and Dialogue."