

Epilogue

The one question all the non-Muslims, who had read an earlier version of this study, had in common was: do Muslim women in the Muslim world today receive this noble treatment described here? The answer, unfortunately, is: No. Since this question is inevitable in any discussion concerning the status of women in Islam, we have to elaborate on the answer in order to provide the reader with the complete picture.

It has to be made clear first that the vast differences among Muslim societies make most generalizations too simplistic. There is a wide spectrum of attitudes towards women in the Muslim world today. These attitudes differ from one society to another and within each individual society. Nevertheless, certain general trends are discernible. Almost all Muslim societies have, to one degree or another, deviated from the ideals of Islam with respect to the status of women. These deviations have, for the most part, been in one of two opposite directions. The first direction is more conservative, restrictive, and traditions-oriented, while the second is more liberal and Western-oriented.

The societies that have digressed in the first direction treat women according to the customs and traditions inherited from their forebears. These traditions usually deprive women of many rights granted to them by Islam. Besides, women are treated according to standards far different from those applied to men.

This discrimination pervades the life of any female: she is received with less joy at birth than a boy; she is less likely to go to school; she might be deprived any share of her family's inheritance; she is under continuous surveillance in order not to behave immodestly while her brother's immodest acts are tolerated; she might even be killed for committing what her male family members usually boast of doing; she has very little say in family affairs or community interests; she might not have full control over her property and her marriage gifts; and finally as a mother she herself would prefer to produce boys so that she can attain a higher status in her community.

On the other hand, there are Muslim societies (or certain classes within some societies) that have been swept over by the Western culture and way of life. These societies often imitate unthinkingly whatever

they receive from the West and usually end up adopting the worst fruits of Western civilization. In these societies, a typical “modern” woman’s top priority in life is to enhance her physical beauty.

Therefore, she is often obsessed with her body’s shape, size, and weight. She tends to care more about her body than her mind and more about her charms than her intellect. Her ability to charm, attract, and excite is more valued in the society than her educational achievements, intellectual pursuits, and social work. One is not expected to find a copy of the Qur’an in her purse since it is full of cosmetics that accompany her wherever she goes. Her spirituality has no room in a society preoccupied with her attractiveness. Therefore, she would spend her life striving more to realize her femininity than to fulfil her humanity.

Why did Muslim societies deviate from the ideals of Islam? There is no easy answer. A penetrating explanation of the reasons why Muslims have not adhered to the Qur’anic guidance with respect to women would be beyond the scope of this study. It has to be made clear, however, that Muslim societies have deviated from the Islamic precepts concerning so many aspects of their lives for so long.

There is a wide gap between what Muslims are supposed to believe in and what they actually practice. This gap is not a recent phenomenon. It has been there for centuries and has been widening day after day. This ever widening gap has had disastrous consequences on the Muslim world manifested in almost all aspects of life: political tyranny and fragmentation, economic backwardness, social injustice, scientific bankruptcy, intellectual stagnation, *etc.*

The non-Islamic status of women in the Muslim world today is merely a symptom of a deeper malady. Any reform in the current status of Muslim women is not expected to be fruitful if not accompanied with more comprehensive reforms of the Muslim societies’ whole way of life. The Muslim world is in need for a renaissance that will bring it closer to the ideals of Islam and not further from them. To sum up, the notion that the poor status of Muslim women today is because of Islam is an utter misconception. The problems of Muslims in general are not due to too much attachment to Islam, they are the culmination of a long and deep detachment from it.

It has, also, to be re-emphasized that the purpose behind this comparative study is not, by any means, to defame Judaism or Christianity. The position of women in the Judaeo-Christian tradition might seem frightening by our late twentieth century standards. Nevertheless, it has to be viewed within the proper historical context. In other words, any objective assessment of the position of women in the Judaeo-Christian tradition has to take into account the historical circumstances in which this tradition developed.

There can be no doubt that the views of the Rabbis and the Church Fathers regarding women were influenced by the prevalent attitudes towards women in their societies. The Bible itself was written by different authors at different times. These authors could not have been impervious to the values and the way of life of the people around them. For example, the adultery laws of the Old Testament are so biased against women that they defy rational explanation by our mentality. However, if we consider the

fact that the early Jewish tribes were obsessed with their genetic homogeneity and extremely eager to define themselves apart from the surrounding tribes and that only sexual misconduct by the married females of the tribes could threaten these cherished aspirations, we should then be able to understand, but not necessarily sympathize with, the reasons for this bias.

Also, the diatribes of the Church Fathers against women should not be detached from the context of the misogynist Greco–Roman culture in which they lived. It would be unfair to evaluate the Judaeo–Christian legacy without giving any consideration to the relevant historical context.

In fact, a proper understanding of the Judaeo–Christian historical context is also crucial for understanding the significance of the contributions of Islam to world history and human civilization. The Judaeo–Christian tradition had been influenced and shaped by the environments, conditions, and cultures in which it had existed. By the seventh century C.E., this influence had distorted the original divine message revealed to Moses and Jesus beyond recognition. The poor status of women in the Judaeo–Christian world by the seventh century is just one case in point. Therefore, there was a great need for a new divine message that would guide humanity back to the straight path. The Qur’an described the mission of the new Messenger as a release for Jews and Christians from the heavy burdens that had been upon them:

“Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own Scriptures--In the Law and the Gospel-- For he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good and prohibits them from what is bad; He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them.”(7:157)

Therefore, Islam should not be viewed as a rival tradition to Judaism or Christianity. It has to be regarded as the consummation, completion, and perfection of the divine messages that had been revealed before it.

At the end of this study, I would like to offer the following advice to the global Muslim community. So many Muslim women have been denied their basic Islamic rights for so long. The mistakes of the past have to be corrected. To do that is not a favor, it is a duty incumbent upon all Muslims.

The worldwide Muslim community have to issue a charter of Muslim women’s rights based on the instructions of the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet of Islam. This charter must give Muslim women all the rights endowed to them by their Creator. Then, all the necessary means have to be developed in order to ensure the proper implementation of the charter. This charter is long overdue, but it is better late than never. If Muslims worldwide will not guarantee the full Islamic rights of their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, who else will?

Furthermore, we must have the courage to confront our past and reject outright the traditions and customs of our forefathers whenever they contravene the precepts of Islam. Did the Qur’an not severely criticize the pagan Arabs for blindly following the traditions of their ancestors? On the other hand, we

have to develop a critical attitude towards whatever we receive from the West or from any other culture. Interaction with and learning from other cultures is an invaluable experience. The Qur'an has succinctly considered this interaction as one of the purposes of creation:

“O mankind We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other.”(49: 13)

It goes without saying, however, that blind imitation of others is a sure sign of an utter lack of self-esteem.

It is to the non-Muslim reader, Jewish, Christian, or otherwise, that these final words are dedicated. It is bewildering why the religion that had revolutionized the status of women is being singled out and denigrated as so repressive of women. This perception about Islam is one of the most widespread myths in our world today.

This myth is being perpetuated by a ceaseless barrage of sensational books, articles, media images, and Hollywood movies. The inevitable outcome of these incessant misleading images has been total misunderstanding and fear of anything related to Islam. This negative portrayal of Islam in the world media has to end if we are to live in a world free from all traces of discrimination, prejudice, and misunderstanding.

Non-Muslims ought to realize the existence of a wide gap between Muslims' beliefs and practices and the simple fact that the actions of Muslims do not necessarily represent Islam. To label the status of women in the Muslim world today as “Islamic” is as far from the truth as labelling the position of women in the West today as “Judaean-Christian”. With this understanding in mind, Muslims and non-Muslims should start a process of communication and dialogue in order to remove all misconceptions, suspicions, and fears. A peaceful future for the human family necessitates such a dialogue.

Islam should be viewed as a religion that had immensely improved the status of women and had granted them many rights that the modern world has recognized only this century. Islam still has so much to offer today's woman: dignity, respect, and protection in all aspects and all stages of her life from birth until death in addition to the recognition, the balance, and means for the fulfilment of all her spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional needs.

No wonder most of those who choose to become Muslims in a country like Britain are women. In the U.S. women converts to Islam outnumber male converts 4 to 1.¹

Islam has so much to offer our world which is in great need of moral guidance and leadership. Ambassador Herman Eilts, in a testimony in front of the committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives of the United States Congress on June 24th, 1985, said,

“The Muslim community of the globe today is in the neighbourhood of one billion. That is an impressive

figure. But what to me is equally impressive is that Islam today is the fastest growing monotheistic religion. This is something we have to take into account. Something is right about Islam. It is attracting a good many people.”

Yes, something is right about Islam and it is time to find that out. I hope this study is a step on this direction.

1. The Times, Nov. 18, 1993.

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