

# WOMEN IN ISLAM VERSUS WOMEN IN THE Judaeo-CHRISTIAN TRADITION:

THE MYTH & THE THE REALITY

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Friday khutbah by Br. Sherif Muhammad  
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Four and a half years ago, I read in the Toronto Star issue of July 3, 1990 an article titled "Islam isn't alone in patriarchal doctrines", by Gwynne Dyer. The article described the furious reactions by the participants of a conference on women and power held in Montreal to the comments of the famous Egyptian feminist Dr. Nawal Saadawi. Her politically incorrect statements included: "the most restrictive elements towards women can be found first in Judaism in the Old Testament then in Christianity and then in the Quran"; "all religions are patriarchal because they stem from patriarchal societies"; and "veiling of women isn't a specifically Islamic practice but an ancient cultural heritage with analogies in sister religions". The participants couldn't bear sitting around while their faiths were being equated with Islam. Thus, Dr. Saadawi received a barrage of criticism. "Dr. Saadawi's comments are unacceptable. Her answers reveal a lack of understanding about other people's faiths", declared Bernice Dubois of the World Movement of Mothers. "I must protest" said panelist Alice Shalvi of Israel women's network, "there is no conception of the veil in Judaism." The article attributed these furious protests to the strong tendency in the west to scapegoat Islam for practices that are just as much part of the west's own cultural heritage. "Christian and Jewish feminists were not going to sit around being discussed in the same category as those wicked Muslims" wrote Gwynne Dyer.

I wasn't surprised that the conference participants had held such a negative view of Islam, especially when women's issues were involved. Islam is believed, in the West, to be the symbol of the subordination of women par excellence. In order to understand how firm this belief is, it is enough to mention that the Minister of Education in France, the land of Voltaire, has recently ordered the expulsion of all young Muslim women wearing the veil from French schools ! What intrigued me the most about the conference was one question: Were the statements made by Saadawi, or any of her critics, factual ? In other words, do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have the same conception of women? Are they different in their conceptions ? Do Judaism and Christianity , truly, offer women a better treatment than Islam does? What is the Truth?

It is not easy to search for and find answers to these difficult questions. The first difficulty is that one has to be fair and objective or, at least, that one does one's utmost to be so. This is what Islam teaches. The Quran has instructed us to say the truth even if those who are very close to us don't like it: "Whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned" (6:152) "O you who believe stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor" (4:135).

The other great difficulty is the overwhelming breadth of the subject. Therefore, during the last few years, I have spent many hours reading the Bible, The Encyclopedia of Religion, and the Encyclopedia Judaica searching for answers. I have also read several books discussing the position of women in different religions written by scholars, apologists, and critics. Today, I am here to present some of the important findings of this humble research. I don't claim to be absolutely

objective. This is beyond my limited capacity. All what I can say is that I have been trying, throughout this research, to approach the Quranic ideal of "speaking justly".

Before we start, I would like to emphasize that my purpose from this presentation is not to denigrate Judaism or Christianity. As Muslims, we believe in the divine origins of both. No one can be a Muslim without believing in Moses and Jesus as great prophets of Allah. My goal is only to vindicate Islam and pay a tribute, long overdue in the West, to the final truthful Message from God to the human race. I would also like to emphasize that I concerned myself only with Doctrine. That is, my concern is, mainly, the position of women in the three religions as it appears in their original sources not as practiced by their millions of followers in the world today. Therefore, most of the evidence cited comes from the Quran, the Bible, the Talmud, and the sayings of some of the most influential Church Fathers whose views have contributed immeasurably to defining and shaping Christianity. This interest in the sources relates to the fact that understanding a certain religion from the attitudes and the behaviour of some of its nominal followers is misleading. Many people confuse culture with religion, many others don't know what their religious books are saying, and many others don't even care.

## **1. Eve's fault ?**

The three religions agree on one basic fact : Both women and men are created by God The Creator of the whole universe. However, disagreement starts soon after the creation of the first man, Adam and the first woman, Eve. The Judaeo-Christian conception of the creation of Adam and Eve is narrated in detail in Genesis 2:4-3:24. God prohibited both of them from eating the fruits of the forbidden tree. The serpent seduced Eve to eat from it and Eve, in turn, seduced Adam to eat with her. When God rebuked Adam for what he did, he put all the blame on Eve "The woman you put here with me --she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it." Consequently, God said to Eve "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree .... Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life..."

The Islamic conception of the first creation is found in several places in the Quran, for example 7:19-25 "O Adam dwell with your wife in the garden and enjoy as you wish but approach not this tree or you run into harm. Then Satan whispered to them your Lord only forbade you this tree lest you become angels and he swore to them both that he was their sincere adviser. When they tasted the tree their shame became manifest to them. Their Lord called unto them did I not forbid you that tree...They said: our Lord we have wronged our own souls and if You forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your mercy, we shall certainly be lost..."

A careful look into the two accounts of the story of the Creation reveals some essential differences. The Quran, contrary to the Bible, places equal blame on both Adam and Eve for their mistake. Nowhere in the Quran can one find even the slightest hint that Eve tempted Adam to eat from the tree or even that she had eaten before him. Eve in the Quran is no temptress, no seducer, and no deceiver. Moreover, Eve isn't to be blamed for the pains of childbearing. God, according to the Quran, punish no one for another's faults. Both Adam and Eve committed a sin and then asked God for forgiveness and He forgave them both.

## **2. Eve's legacy**

The image of Eve as temptress in the Bible has resulted in an extremely negative impact on women throughout the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In order to understand how negative the impact on women was we have to look at the writings of some of the most important Jews and Christians of all time. Let us start with the Old Testament and listen to excerpts from what is called the Wisdom Literature in which we find, "I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare....while I was still searching but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand but not one upright woman among them all." (Ecclesiasticus 7:26-28) One has to ask what is the wisdom in denying the existence of even one upright woman on earth? In another part of the Hebrew literature which is found in the Catholic Bible we read, "No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman....Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die"(Ecclesiasticus 25:19,24) Orthodox Jewish men in their daily morning prayer recite "Blessed be God King of the universe that Thou has not made me a woman." The women, on the other hand, thank God every morning for "making me according to Thy will."

The same severe tone is found also in the New Testament. Listen to St. Paul, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I don't permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam wasn't the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner, but women will be saved through childbearing...."(I Timothy 2:11-15) St. Tertullian was even more blunt than St. Paul, while he was talking to his 'best beloved sisters' in the faith, he said, "Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil's gateway: You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree: You are the first deserter of the divine law: You are she who persuaded him whom the devil wasn't valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man." St. Augustine was faithful to the legacy of his predecessors, he wrote to a friend, "What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman." Centuries later, St. Thomas Aquinas still considered women as defective, "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence." Finally, the renowned reformer Martin Luther couldn't see any benefit from a woman but bringing into the world as many children as possible regardless of the possible side effects, "If they become tired or even die, that doesn't matter. Let them die in childbirth, that's why they are there" Again and again all women are denigrated because of the image of Eve the temptress, thanks to the Genesis account.

If we now turn our attention to what the Quran has to say about women, we will soon realize that the Islamic conception of women is radically different from that of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Let the Quran speak for itself. "For muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise-- For them all has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward"(33:35) "Whoever works evil will not be requited but by the like thereof, and whoever works a righteous deed -whether man or woman- and is a believer- such will enter the Garden of bliss"(40:40) "Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him/her we will give a new life that is good and pure, and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions"(16:97)

It is clear that the Quranic view of women is no different than that of a man. They, both, are God's creatures whose sublime goal on earth is to worship their Lord, do righteous deeds, and avoid evil and they, both, will be assessed accordingly. The Quran never mentions that the woman is the devil's gateway or that she is a deceiver by nature. The Quran, also, never mentions that man is God's image, all men and all women are his creatures, that's all. According to the Quran, a woman's role on earth isn't limited only to childbirth. She is required to do as many good deeds as any other man is required to do. The Quran never said that no upright women had ever existed. To the contrary, the Quran has instructed all the believers, women as well as men, to follow the example of those ideal women such as the Virgin Mary and the Pharaoh's wife (66:11-13)

### **3. Shameful daughters ?**

In fact, the difference between the Biblical and the Quranic attitude towards the female sex starts as soon as a female is born. For example the Bible states that the period of the mother's ritual impurity is twice as long if a girl is born than if a boy is (Leviticus 12:2-5). The Catholic Bible does state explicitly that "The birth of a daughter is a loss" (Sirach 22:3) In contrast to this shocking statement, boys receive special praise, "A man who educates his son will be the envy of his enemy." (Ecclesiasticus 30:3) A daughter is considered a painful burden, a potential source of shame to her father "Your daughter is headstrong? Keep a sharp look-out that she doesn't make you the laughing stock of your enemies, the talk of the town, the object of common gossip, and put you to public shame."(Ecclesiasticus 42:11)

It was this very same idea of treating daughters as sources of shame that led the pagan Arabs, before the advent of Islam, to practice female infanticide. The Quran severely condemned this heinous practice "When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on contempt or bury her in the dust? Ah! what an evil they decide on?"(16:59) It has to be mentioned that this sinister crime would have never stopped in Arabia if it were not to the power of the scathing terms the Quran used to condemn this practice (16:59, 43:17, 81:8-9). The Quran, moreover, makes no distinction between boys and girls. In contrast to the Bible, the Quran considers the birth of a female as a gift and a blessing from God, same as the birth of a male. The Quran even mentions the gift of the female birth first, "To Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. He creates what he wills. He bestows female children to whomever he wills and bestows male children to whomever he wills"(42:49)

### **4. Female education ?**

The difference between the Biblical and the Quranic conceptions of women is not limited to the newly born female, it extends far beyond that. Let's compare their attitudes towards a female trying to learn her religion. The heart of Judaism is the Torah, the law. However, according to the Talmud, "women are exempt from the study of the Torah." In the first century C.E., Rabbi Eliezer said: "If any man teaches his daughter Torah it is as though he taught her lechery." The attitude of St. Paul in the New Testament isn't brighter "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."(I Corinthians 14:34,35) How can a woman learn if she is not allowed to speak? How can a woman grow intellectually if she is

obliged to be in a state of full submission? How can she broaden her horizons if her one and only source of information is her husband at home?

Now, to be fair, we should ask: is the Quranic position any different? One short story narrated in the Quran sums its position up concisely. Khawlah was a Muslim woman whose husband Aws at a moment of anger pronounced this statement: "You are to me as the back of my mother." This was held by pagan Arabs to be a statement of divorce which freed the husband from any conjugal responsibility but didn't leave the wife free to leave the husband's home or to marry another man. Having heard these words from her husband, Khawlah was in a miserable situation. She went straight to the Prophet of Islam to plead her case. The prophet was of the opinion that she should be patient since there seemed to be no way out. Khawla kept arguing with the prophet in an attempt to save her suspended marriage. Shortly, the Quran intervened; Khawla's plea was accepted. The divine verdict abolished this iniquitous custom. One full chapter (Chapter 58) of the Quran whose title is \*Almujadilah\* or "The woman who is arguing" was devoted to this incident, "Allah has heard and accepted the statement of the woman who pleads with you (the prophet) concerning her husband and carries her complaint to Allah, and Allah hears the arguments between both of you for Allah hears and sees all things...." (58:1). A woman in the Quranic conception has the right to argue even with the Prophet of Islam himself. No one has the right to instruct her to be silent. She is under no obligation to consider her husband the one and only reference in matters of law and religion.

## 5. Adultery

Women's position, role, rights, and duties in the Quran are very different from those found in the Bible. Let us take some examples. Adultery and fornication are considered sins in all religions. The Bible decrees the death sentence for both the adulterer and the adulteress (Leviticus 20:10). Islam also equally punishes both the adulterer and the adulteress (24:2). However, the Quranic definition of adultery is very different from the Biblical definition. Adultery, according to the Quran, is the involvement of a married man or a married woman in an extramarital affair. The Bible only considers the extramarital affair of a married woman as adultery (Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22, Proverbs 6:20-7:27). The extramarital affair of a married man isn't per se a crime in the Bible. Why this dual moral standard? According to Encyclopedia Judaica, the wife was considered to be the husband's possession and adultery constituted a violation the husband's exclusive right to her; the wife as the husband's possession had no such right to him. The New Testament echoes the same attitude in Matthew 5:31-32, where it is attributed to Jesus to have said, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." Why didn't he label the man who divorces his wife and marries another woman as adulterer? To the present day in Israel, if a married man indulges in an extramarital affair with a woman, his children by that woman are considered legitimate. But, if a married woman has an affair with another man, her children by that man are not only illegitimate but are forbidden to marry any other Jews except converts and other bastards. This ban is handed down to the child's descendants for 10 generations until the taint of adultery is presumably weakened.

The Quran, on the other hand, never considers any woman to be the possession of any man. The Quran eloquently describes the relationship between the spouses by saying, "And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them and He has put love and mercy between your hearts: verily in that are signs

for those who reflect" (30:21) This is Quranic conception of marriage: love, mercy, and tranquility, not possession and double standards.

## **6. Bearing witness**

Another issue in which the Quran and the Bible disagree is the issue of women bearing witness. It is true that the Quran has instructed the believers dealing in financial transactions to get two male witnesses or one male and two females (2:282). However, it is also true that the Quran in other situations accepts the testimony of a woman as equal to that of a man. In fact the woman's testimony can even invalidate the man's. If a man accuses his wife of unchastity, he is required by the Quran to solemnly swear five times as evidence of the wife's guilt. If the wife denies and swears similarly five times, she isn't considered guilty and in either case the marriage is dissolved (24:6-11).

On the other hand, women were not allowed to bear witness in early Jewish society. Women in Today's Israel are not allowed to give evidence in Rabbinical courts because the Talmud says: "Women are temperamentally light-headed" The Rabbis, also, justify why women can't bear witness by citing Genesis 18:9-16, where it is stated that Sara, Abraham's wife had lied. The rabbis use this incident as evidence that women are unqualified to bear witness. It should be noted here that this story narrated in Genesis 18:9-16 has been mentioned more than once in the Quran without any hint of any lies by Sara (11:69-74, 51:24-30).

If a man accuses his wife of unchastity, her testimony will not be considered at all according to the Bible. The accused wife has to be subjected to a trial by ordeal (Numbers 5:11-31). In this trial, the wife faces a complex and humiliating ritual which was supposed to prove her guilt or innocence. If she is found guilty after this ordeal, she will be sentenced to death. Also, if a man takes a woman as a wife and then accuses her of not being a virgin, her own testimony will not count. Her parents had to bring evidence of her virginity before the elders of the town. If the parents couldn't prove the innocence of their daughter, she would be stoned to death on her father's doorsteps. If the parents were able to prove her innocence, the husband will only be fined one hundred shekels of silver and he must not divorce his wife as long as he lives (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). Why should the poor woman live with the man who slandered her in public for the rest of his life?

## **7. Female inheritance**

One of the most important differences between the Quran and the Bible is their attitude towards female inheritance of the property of a deceased relative. According to Numbers 27:1-11, widows and sisters don't inherit at all. Daughters can inherit only if their deceased father had no sons. Otherwise the sons receive the entire inheritance. Among the pagan Arabs before Islam, inheritance rights were confined exclusively to the male relatives. The Quran abolished all these unjust customs and gave all the female relatives their just share (4:7,11,12,176).

## **8. Plight of widows**

Because of the fact that the Old Testament recognized no inheritance rights to them, widows were among the most vulnerable of the Jewish population. The male relatives who inherited all of her deceased husband's estate were to provide for her from that estate. However,

widows had no way to ensure this provision was carried out and lived on the mercy of others. Therefore, widows were among the lowest classes in ancient Israel and widowhood was considered a symbol of great degradation (Isaiah 54:4). But the plight of a widow in the Biblical tradition extended even beyond her exclusion from her husband's property. According to Genesis 38, a childless widow must marry her husband's brother, even if he is already married, so that he can produce offspring for his dead brother, thus ensuring his brother's name will not die out. The widow's consent to this marriage is not required. The widow is treated as part of her deceased husband's property whose main function is to ensure her husband's posterity. This biblical law is still practiced in today's Israel. The pagan Arabs before Islam had similar practices. The widow was considered a part of her husband's property to be inherited by his male heirs and she was, usually, given in marriage to the deceased man's eldest son from another wife. The Quran scathingly attacked and abolished this degrading custom (4:22).

Widows and divorced women were so looked down upon in the biblical tradition that the high priest must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a prostitute (Leviticus 21:13). In Israel today, a descendent of the Cohen caste (the high priests of the days of the Temple) cannot marry a divorcee, a widow, or a prostitute. In the Jewish legislation, a woman who has been widowed three times with all the three husband's dying of natural causes is considered 'fatal' and forbidden to marry again. The Quran, on the other hand, recognizes neither castes nor fatal persons. Widows and divorcees have the freedom to marry whomever they choose. There is no stigma attached with divorce or widowhood in the Quran (2:231,232, 234, 240).

## 9. Polygamy

Let's now tackle the important question of polygamy. Polygamy is a very ancient practice found in many human societies. The Bible didn't condemn polygamy. To the contrary, the Old Testament and Rabbinic writings frequently attest to the legality of polygamy. King Solomon is said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3) Also, king David is said to have had many wives and concubines (2 Samuel 5:13). The Old Testament does have some injunctions on how to distribute the property of a man among his sons from different wives (Deut. 22:7). The only restriction on polygamy is a ban on taking a wife's sister as a rival wife (Leviticus 18:18). The Talmud advises a maximum of four wives. European Jews continued to practice polygamy until the sixteenth century. Oriental Jews regularly practised polygamy until they arrived in Israel where it is forbidden under civil law. However, under religious law which overrides civil law in such cases, it is permissible.

What about the New Testament? According to Father Eugene Hillman in his insightful book 'Polygamy reconsidered,' "No where in the New Testament is there any explicit commandment that marriage should be monogamous or any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy." Moreover, Jesus hasn't spoken against polygamy though it was practiced by the Jews of his society. Father Hillman stressed the fact that the church in Rome banned polygamy in order to conform to the Greco-Roman culture (which prescribed only one legal wife while tolerating concubinage and prostitution). He cited St. Augustine, "Now indeed in our time, and in keeping with Roman custom, it is no longer allowed to take another wife" African churches and African Christians often remind their European brothers that the Church's ban on polygamy is a cultural tradition and not an authentic Christian injunction.

The Quran, too, allowed polygamy, but not without restrictions, "If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four but if

you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one"(4:3). The Quran, Contrary to the Bible, limited the maximum number of wives to four under the strict condition of treating the wives equally and justly. It should not be understood that the Quran is exhorting the believers to practice polygamy, or that polygamy is considered as an ideal. In other words, the Quran has "tolerated" or "allowed" polygamy, and no more, but why? Why is polygamy permissible or allowed? The answer is simple, there are places and times in which there are compelling reasons for polygamy. Islam as a universal religion suitable for all places and all times couldn't ignore these compelling reasons.

In most human societies, females outnumber males. In the U.S. there are, at least, eight million more women than men. In a country like Guinea there are 122 females for every 100 males. In Tanzania, there are 95.1 males per 100 females. What should a society do towards such unbalanced sex ratios? There are various solutions, some might suggest celibacy, others would prefer female infanticide (which does happen in some societies in the world today !). Others would think the only outlet is that the society should tolerate all manners of moral decadence : prostitution, sex out of wedlock, homosexuality ...etc. Other societies (like most African societies today) would see the most honourable outlet is to allow polygamous marriage as a culturally accepted and socially respected institution. The point that is often misunderstood in the west is that women in other cultures don't necessarily look at polygamy as a sign of women's degradation. For example, many young African brides (whether Christians or Muslims or otherwise), would prefer to marry a married man who has already proved himself to be a responsible husband. Many African wives urge their husbands to get a second wife so that they don't feel lonely. The problem of the unbalanced sex ratios becomes truly problematic at times of war. Native American Indian tribes used to suffer highly unbalanced sex ratios after wartime losses. Women in these tribes, who in fact enjoyed a fairly high status, accepted polygamy as the best protection against indulgence in indecent activities. European settlers, without offering any other alternative, condemned this Indian polygamy as uncivilized.

After the second world war, there were 7,300,000 more women than men in Germany (3.3 million of them were widows). There were 100 men aged 20 to 30 for every 167 women in that age group. Many of these women needed a man not only as a companion but also as a provider for the household in a time of unprecedented misery and hardship. The soldiers of the victorious Allied Armies exploited these women's vulnerability. Many young girls and widows had liaisons with members of the occupying forces. Many American and British soldiers paid for their pleasures in cigarettes, chocolate, and bread. Children were overjoyed at the gifts these strangers brought. A 10 year old boy on hearing of such gifts from other children wished from all his heart for an 'Englishman' for his mother so that she need not go hungry any longer. We have to ask our own consciences at this point: What is more dignifying to a woman? An accepted and respected second wife as in the native Indians' approach, or a virtual prostitute as in the 'civilised' Allies approach? In other words, what is more dignifying to a woman, the Quranic prescription or the theology based on the culture of the Roman Empire?

The world today possesses more weapons of mass destruction than ever before and the European churches might, sooner or later, be obliged to accept polygamy as the only way out. Father Hillman has thoughtfully recognized this fact," It is quite conceivable that these genocidal techniques (nuclear, biological, chemical..) could produce so drastic an imbalance among the sexes that plural marriage would become a necessary means of survival...Then contrary to previous custom and law, an overriding natural and moral inclination might arise in favour of polygamy. In such a situation, theologians and church leaders would quickly produce weighty reasons and biblical texts to justify a new conception of marriage"



It has to be added also that polygamy in Islam is a matter of mutual consent. No one can force a woman to marry a married man. The Bible, on the other hand, sometimes resorts to forcible polygamy. A childless widow must marry her husband's brother, even if he is already married, regardless of her consent (Genesis 38).

It should be noted that in many Muslim societies today the practice of polygamy is rare since the gap between the numbers of both sexes is not huge. One can, safely, say that the rate of polygamous marriages in the Muslim world is much less than the rate of extramarital affairs in the West. In other words, Men in the Muslim world today are far more strictly monogamous than men in the Western world !

## **10. The Veil**

Finally, let us shed some light on what is considered in the west as the greatest symbol of women's oppression and servitude, the veil or the head cover. Is it true that there is no such thing as the veil in the Judaeo-Christian tradition? let's set the record straight. According to Rabbi Dr. Menachem M. Brayer (Professor of Biblical Literature at Yeshiva University) in his book 'The Jewish woman in Rabbinic literature', it was the custom of Jewish women to go out in public with a head covering which, sometimes, even covered the whole face leaving one eye free. He quotes some famous ancient Rabbis saying, "It is not like the daughters of Israel to walk out with heads uncovered" and "Cursed be the man who lets the hair of his wife be seen....a woman who exposes her hair for self-adornment brings poverty." Rabbinic law forbids the recitation of blessings or prayers in the presence of a bareheaded married woman since uncovering the woman's hair is considered "nudity". Dr. Brayer also mentions that "During the Tannaitic period the Jewish woman's failure to cover her head was considered an affront to her modesty. When her head was uncovered she might be fined four hundred zuzim for this offense." Dr. Brayer also explains that veil of the Jewish woman wasn't always considered a sign of modesty. Sometimes, the veil symbolized a state of distinction and luxury rather than modesty. The veil personified the dignity and superiority of noble women. It, also, represented a woman's inaccessibility as a sanctified possession of her husband. It is clear in the Old Testament that uncovering a woman's head was a great disgrace and that's why the priest had to uncover the suspected adulteress in her trial by ordeal (Numbers 5:16-18).

What about the Christian tradition? It is well known that Catholic Nuns have been covering their heads for hundreds of years, but that's not all. St. Paul in the New Testament made some very interesting statements about the veil," Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman doesn't cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man didn't come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head." (I Corinthians 11:3-10) St Paul's rationale for veiling women is that the veil represents a sign of authority of the man, who is the image and glory of God, over the woman who was created from and for the man. St. Tertullian in his famous treatise 'On The Veiling Of Virgins' wrote, " Young women, you wear your veils out on the streets, so you should wear them in the church, you wear them when you are among strangers, then wear them among your brothers..."

Among the Canon laws of the Catholic church today, there is a law that require women to cover their heads in church. Some Christian denominations, such as the Amish and the Mennonites for example, keep their women veiled to the present day. The reason for the veil, as offered by their Church leaders, is "The head covering is a symbol of woman's subjection to the man and to God" : The same logic introduced by St. Paul in the New Testament.

From all the above evidence, it is obvious that Islam didn't invent the head cover, but Islam endorsed it. The Quran urges the believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their modesty and then urges the believing women to extend their head covers to cover the neck and the bosom "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty.....And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms..." (24:30,31). The Quran is quite clear that the veil is an essential part of a recipe designed for the purposes of modesty, but why modesty? The Quran is still clear "O prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their bodies (when abroad) so that they should be known and not molested" (33:59). This is the whole point, modesty is prescribed to protect women from molestation or simply, modesty is protection.

Thus, the only purpose of the veil in Islam is protection. The Islamic veil, unlike the veil of the Christian tradition, is not a sign of man's authority over woman nor is it a sign of woman's subjection to man. The Islamic veil, unlike the veil in the Jewish tradition, is not a sign of luxury and distinction of some noble married women. The Islamic veil is only a sign of modesty with the sole purpose of protecting women, all women. The Islamic philosophy is that it is always better safe than sorry. In fact, the Quran is so concerned with protecting women's bodies and women's reputation that a man who dares to falsely accuse a woman of unchastity will be severely punished," And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations)- Flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence ever after: for such men are wicked transgressors"(24:4).

Compare this strict Quranic attitude with the extremely lax punishment for rape in the Bible " If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives" One must ask a simple question here, who is really punished? The man who only paid a fine for rape, or the girl who is forced to marry the man who raped her and live with him until he dies? Another question that also should be asked is this: which is more protective of women, the Quranic strict attitude or the Biblical lax attitude?

Some people, especially in the West, would tend to ridicule the whole argument of modesty for protection. Their argument is that the best protection is the spread of education, civilized behavior, and self-restraint. We would say: Fine but not enough. If 'civilization' is enough protection, then why is it that women in North America, dare not walk alone in a dark street - or even across an empty parking lot ? If Education is the solution, then why is it that a respected university like ours has a 'walk home service' for female students on campus? If self restraint is the answer, then why are cases of sexual harassment in the workplace on the news media every day? A sample of those accused of sexual harassment, in the last few years, includes: Navy officers, Managers, University professors, Senators, Supreme Court Justices, and the President of the United States! I couldn't believe my eyes when I read the following statistics, written in a pamphlet issued by the Dean of Women's office at Queen's University:

- In Canada, a woman is sexually assaulted every 6 minutes",
- 1 in 3 women in Canada will be sexually assaulted at some time in their lives",
- 1 in 4 women are at the risk of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime",
- 1 in 8 women will be sexually assaulted while attending college or university, and
- A study found 60% of Canadian university-aged males said they would commit sexual assault if they were certain they wouldn't get caught."

Something is fundamentally wrong in the society we live in. A radical change in the society's life style and culture is absolutely necessary. A culture of modesty is badly needed, modesty in dress, in speech, and in manners of both men and women. Otherwise, the grim statistics will grow even worse day after day and , unfortunately, women alone will be paying the price. Therefore, a society like France which expels young women from schools because of their modest dress is, in the end, simply harming itself.

## Conclusion

In the light of the evidence presented above, there is no doubt that Islam has immensely improved the status of women compared to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Quran has offered women dignity, justice, and protection which ,for long, have remained out of their reach. That's why it is no surprise to find that most converts to Islam, today, in a country like Britain are women. In the U.S. women converts to Islam outnumber men converts 4 to 1. The problem is that the majority of the population in the West do not know these facts. They easily believe the media's distorted image of Islam. Therefore, it is a must that we change our defensive attitude towards the whole issue of women in Islam. We must stop being apologetic. We have nothing to be ashamed of. What the Quran has given to women is unparalleled in the history of religion. Instead of always reacting to the consistent barrage of articles defaming Muslim women, we have to take the initiative. We have to act first and let others react. We should boldly initiate discussions with our friends and colleagues regarding the true status of women in Islam. Tell them how the Quran has ended so many injustices against women found in other scriptures. We have to talk to the media, write to the press, and Invite the whole world to read the Quran, read other scriptures and compare for themselves. It goes without saying that the sisters' role is far more important than the brothers' in this respect.

The Quran is an incredibly powerful book and it is our task to spread its impressive message to the world. But, are we up to this task ?

## Notes

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7. Thena Kendath, "Memories of an Orthodox youth" in Susannah Heschel, ed. On being a Jewish Feminist (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 96-97.
8. For all the sayings of the prominent Saints, see Karen Armstrong, The Gospel According to Woman (London: Elm Tree Books, 1986) pp. 52-62. See also Nancy van Vuuren, The Subversion of Women as Practiced by Churches, Witch-Hunters, and Other Sexists (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) pp.28-30.
9. Leonard J. Swidler, Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1976) pp. 83-93.

10. Jeffrey H. Togay, "Adultery," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. II, col. 313. Also, see Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990) pp. 170-177.
11. Lesley Hazleton, *Israeli Women The Reality Behind the Myths* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977) pp. 41-42.
12. Swidler, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
13. Hazleton, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
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17. Swidler, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-148.
18. Hazleton, *op. cit.*, pp 44-45.
19. Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches* (New York: Orbis Books, 1975) p. 140.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-93.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-97.
23. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A history of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988) p. 87.
24. Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: from Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1988) pp. 263-264.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.
26. Hillman, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
27. Menachem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychosocial Perspective* (Hoboken, N.J: Ktav Publishing House, 1986)
28. 239.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317. Also see Swidler, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-123.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
31. Clara M. Henning, " Cannon Law and the Battle of the Sexes" in Rosemary
32. Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) p. 272.
33. Donald B. Kraybill, *The riddle of the Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) p. 56.
34. *The Times*, Nov. 18, 1993.