

## Islam, women, and equality (part I)

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(On March 19, I was invited to give a keynote address at Ithaca College on my book, *“Believing Women” in Islam, Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* [University of Texas Press, 2002] dealing with the Qur’an’s position on sexual equality; the following is an amended and edited version of that talk and will be published in three parts; each is self-contained.)

My talk is divided into four parts. In the first, I discuss why I wrote the book and what it’s about; in the next, I speak about some of the experiences that shaped my perspectives on Islam, in the third, I offer my reading of the Qur’an’s position on sexual equality and patriarchy, and in the last, I discuss the issue of interpretation itself.

I started work on this book seven years ago, when not many people in the US were interested in Islam, but for me this was a crucial project because of the pervasiveness of the view that Islam is a religious patriarchy that “professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality... [and puts] a sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience,” as many Muslims and feminists claim. (This, by the way, is the characterization of the Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.)

My own experiences of Islam, however, have shown me that Muslims don’t always practice what the Qur’an teaches and that we can and do read the Qur’an in more than one way. Indeed, what we read the Qur’an to be saying depends on who reads it, how, and in what specific circumstances since there is a relationship between authority and knowledge, texts and the extratextual contexts of their reading, as well as between meaning, method, and gender (though I don’t believe that there’s a fixed relationship between gender and reading).

Basically, the aim of my book is to recover the scriptural basis of sexual equality in Islam and thus, hopefully, to provide a compelling argument about why Islam is not a patriarchy and why Muslim women and men can struggle for equality from within an Islamic framework.

The book is organized around two sets of questions that I believe have “both theoretical significance and real-life consequences for Muslims, especially women: First, does ... the Qur’an, teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression? Is it, as critics allege, a patriarchal and even sexist and misogynistic text? Intimately related to that question is the second: Does the Qur’an permit and encourage liberation for women?” (*Believing Women” in Islam*, 2002:1).

Before I clarify what I mean by these questions and how I answer them I would like to speak about some of my own experiences that allowed me to engage Islam in this way.

My interest in studying Islam grew out of experiences in Pakistan, which is my home country and where I lived until 1983, and in the US where I’ve spent the last twenty years of my life. It is easy to assume that the prevailing culture in Pakistan is Islamic because 98% of the people are Muslims and it wasn’t until I no longer was embedded in that culture that I came to realize how much of what passes as Islam actually ignores or violates the Qur’an’s teachings. (The reason I

use the Qur'an as a yardstick to evaluate Muslim practices is because I believe that a scripture offers the most authoritative and compelling exposition of a religion.)

A case in point was the introduction of segments of Muslim law, the Sharia, into the country by its previous military ruler, Zia ul Haq. The Sharia, unfortunately, legalizes sexual inequality by equating the testimony of two women to that of one man and it also fails to distinguish between rape, adultery, and extramarital sex, for all of which it prescribes stoning to death, something that the Qur'an itself does not sanction for any crime in any context.

Such laws naturally had devastating consequences for women. One particularly notorious case involved the rape of a blind woman who became pregnant. The court took this as evidence that she was guilty of extramarital sex and sentenced her to be stoned, though the sentence was later stayed. Meanwhile, the rapist went free because, being blind, she couldn't identify him. However, even if she had been able to see him, the court would still have discounted her testimony because it wasn't corroborated by another woman. This, however, is a gross misreading of the Qur'an since in only one out of several instances of evidence-giving does the Qur'an say that two women can serve as witnesses to a financial transaction if a man is not available.

In the other cases, it does not distinguish between women's and men's testimonies and in the case of adultery, it privileges the woman's testimony. If a man accuses his wife of adultery and cannot produce four male witnesses to corroborate his testimony, the Qur'an allows the wife to be her own witness; if she swears her innocence, it gives her husband no further legal recourse against her.

But the Sharia clearly does not see the Qur'anic privilege given to women in this instance as proof that women's evidence isn't automatically half that of a man's. So, even before I left Pakistan, I had become aware of the "striking difference between what can be safely inferred from the Qur'an itself and what has frequently been read into it" (Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Quran*, London: SCM Press, 1996: 29).

This realization grew in the US where people ascribe all sorts of stuff to Islam that either has nothing to do with it or isn't Islamic in its particular manifestations, such as the harem, the veil, and female circumcision, and after 9/11, the concept of holy war. There is, however, no concept of holy war or of female circumcision in the Qur'an, and the forms of polygyny most Muslims practice violate the Qur'anic provisions on marriage, as do many forms of veiling.

And, yet, this sense of Islam as bizarre and deviant is so pervasive that it's hard to make much of a dent in people's perceptions. And, of course, after 9/11 this sense has grown exponentially. As I told another audience recently, Muslims now are permanently positioned between being the anti-Christ and anti-Semites, and the onus is on us to prove otherwise.

As you can imagine, it is difficult to exist "normally" in such circumstances even if I have more legal rights and personal freedoms here than I did in Pakistan. In fact, with the two Patriot Acts rolling back the legal rights and civil liberties of Muslims, I'm not sure what "freedom" for Muslims in the US really means today. (To be continued.)