

## **Status of Women in Islam**

Islam is probably Canada's fastest growing religion. Much of that growth comes from Muslims' high birth rate, says Edmonton sociologist Abu Baha Laban. Immigration statistics also show that more than one in 10 Canadian immigrants come from traditionally Muslim countries. In our neighbourhood in Ontario, I often see Muslim women walking down the street in their traditional garb. They don't seem to assimilate in our Western society.

What is women's status in Islam and how can we approach them with the Gospel? When the Jesuit priest, scientist and world traveler, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin visited Rawalpindi, India, in 1935, he wrote to a friend: "The population is entirely Muslim. I should like you to see the women here so that you could appreciate what our western civilization has succeeded in winning for their sisters in Europe. The poor creatures are prematurely lined, buried in their veils and permanently cowed. All this has got to be swept away, and before long, too." But Teilhard de Chardin's wish to have the status of women in Islam quickly changed showed his lack of understanding of Islam. Throughout the Muslim world women are unable to make their own life choices and are not on an equal footing with men. Their inferior status is integrally bound up with tradition and religion. Any change in status cannot come through either political pressure nor request. For example, in 1979 a party of Western feminists flew to Ayatollah Khomeini's Teheran to demand women's rights as they understood them. Their well-intentioned intervention was ill advised as it involved the risk of death for any Iranian woman who might have joined in the demonstration for Western values.

On the moral plane the western world has no reason for smugness. In the light of the disintegration of the family in our society, the paganization of our culture, the increasing frequency of child and wife abuse and tolerance of sexual perversion, we have little to boast about. The Muslim world knows of the sexual laxity in western culture, being acquainted with it through the mass media. Their assumptions are that we are immodest, unchaste and inappropriate in our behavior toward women. B. Aisha Lemu, a convert to Islam, commented in her lecture *Woman in Islam* that in films, television and certain sections of the press there is every encouragement to consider pre-marital sexual experience desirable and extra marital affairs quite normal. Contraception or abortion is expected to conveniently get rid of any undesirable side effects. In contrast, Islam advocates a number of specific measures to reduce the temptations toward sex outside of marriage.

### **Muhammad and Polygamy**

After the death of his first wife Khadijah, Muhammad took ten wives. Some were widows of key followers who had fallen in battle; the others were daughters of Arab leaders, whom he married for political reasons. By marrying many wives, he followed ancient Arab customs. He limited his followers to four legal wives, but

allowed them as many concubines or domestic slaves as they wanted. The Qur'an states: "Marry what seems good to you of women, by twos, or threes or fours, or what your right hand possesses" (lv.3). One commanding reason for multiple wives is the inability of the first or even the second wife to bear sons. But economic or social considerations may dictate further marriages even when there are already male heirs. A wife cannot legally object to being one of four wives. Fatima Heeren, a convert to Islam, said in her lecture *Family Life in Islam* that Islam shows wisdom in allowing polygamy. "If a Muslim man for this or that reason simply cannot help desiring more than one wife, he is not forced by this urge to resort to any sinful act but may quite lawfully enjoy its fulfillment along with shouldering the consequent responsibilities."

Madine Diallo, who was born in Mali and now lives in France calls it a myth that African women like polygamy. In France the widespread practice of polygamy has come to light because African women are fighting the tradition. In Paris alone, it is estimated that 200,000 people live in polygamous families. The Socialist government in the 1980s quietly admitted more than one wife as part of family-reunification policy. But many immigrants, when their incomes improved, went back to Africa to buy new brides, who were often still teen-agers. One African woman commented that polygamy is unbearable because there is no room for two or three wives and 15 children in one place. "The women are rivals. The husband is never fair. He has a favourite, so there are horrible fights."

### **Equality, But Not In This Life**

According to Qur'an men and women are equal in spiritual worth. Both men and women can receive the reward of paradise. However, on earth there is no equality. A man can be killed if he kills a man, but not if he kills a woman. A Muslim man can marry a Jew Christian or any other non Muslim, but a Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim. The Muslim woman is in total subjection to man. The husband has absolute power over his wife as she is his possession. Women are for the pure enjoyment of the present physical life. The testimony of a woman is worth half that of a male witness in the courts. She cannot give evidence in a court of law against her husband. Her husband can demand her seclusion from public. When the husband is on a journey, his wives can make no claim to accompany him, and it is entirely his option to take along whomsoever he pleases. In the home she is subject to corporal punishment. Other than being a wife, the Qur'an doesn't mention any provision for women. It says:

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the others, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them (4:34).

## Women in Islamic Tradition

The heart of the Islamic faith is the Qur'an, which is believed to be the very word of Allah. The Hadith contains the collection of traditions of Muhammad and his followers. It serves to interpret and amplify the meaning of the Qur'an. Together, the Qur'an and the Hadith constitute the sources of Shari'a, which provides ethical instruction and guidance for Muslim communities and individuals. The Shari'a regulates all spheres of life without differentiating between civil, criminal, personal status law, etc. Islam does not make a distinction between private and public faith. All of life is religion. For women, Islamic law is a restrictive factor, particularly if compared with the secular contemporary western world. The majority of Muslim women are convinced that they cannot take a step without permission from a man. The Hadith is regarded with great reverence, next to the Qur'an itself. It expands on the theme of a woman's inferiority beyond the limitation of her legal rights. Muslim women are seen first of all not in the context of their relation to Allah, but in their role as wives and mothers, and it is by virtue of their faithfulness in these roles that they have the chance to gain paradise. The capacity of women to do good seems limited. There are several accounts in the Hadith of Muhammad's view of hellfire, in which the majority of the tormented are women:

I saw the Fire and I have not seen to this day a more terrible sight. Most of the inhabitants are women. They (those to whom Muhammad was talking) said, O Messenger of God, why? He said, Because of their ingratitude. They said, Are they ungrateful to the companion (i.e., husband) and ungrateful to the charity (shown by their husbands to them)? Even if you men continue to do good things for them, and a woman sees one thing (bad) from you, she will say, I never saw anything at all good from you.

## Dress Code

Islamic groups in numerous Muslims countries seek to implement the Shari'a with a view of creating a pure Islamic state. One of their features includes the enforcement of a rigid dress code for women, especially the wearing of the veil. The Qur'an commands women to protect themselves with long veils when in public so as not to attract men. Only those parts of the body like hands and feet that reveal themselves in walking are allowed to remain uncovered. This seclusion by the veil must be understood in the light of the dual notion that the woman is considered both vulnerable and sexually aggressive. Hajji Shaykh Yusuf of Iran argued for the veiling of women on the basis of their stronger animality and their lesser capacity for vigilance, faithfulness and intelligence.

Richard Antoun wrote in his essay *On the Modesty of Women in Arab Muslim Villages*: "Only the full observance of the modesty code can, at once, protect the fragile woman, for she is a mirror that a breath will cloud, and contain the lust that dwells within her." But not all Muslim women dislike the Muslim dress code. Mai Yamami, daughter of Sheik Yamani, educated in Europe, explained in an interview

in 1986 how she continued to value Saudi Arabian customs. She believes that wearing a veil gives her identity. "I think it is a form of social distance, like a barrier I have between me and men. I like my veil. I like to be a Saudi Arabian woman."

### **Marriage, Family, Divorce and Adultery**

Muhammad advised all people to get married if they could so that their natural desires could have a legitimate and legal fulfillment. He has said, "whoever runs away from marriage is not from amongst us." And men are told, "They [your wives] are your garments, and you are their garments.... So now associate with them"(2: 187). The purpose of marriage is to have children and to provide for the weakness of the male. Marriage in Arab countries is by the arrangement and consent of the parents of the prospective bride and bridegroom. The heads of the families concerned seek mutual advantage by means of bringing their children together. Hence, on average 45% of all Muslim girls aged fifteen to nineteen are already married. Fatima Heeren comments that during her stay in a Muslim country with Muslim friends whom she has known for more than 15 years, she could always observe that family life in arranged marriages is far more lasting and stable than in the average Western family. But European Muslim converts seem to look at their newly found faith through rose colored glasses. For example, in 1969, according to Algerian Fadela M'Rabet, the records of one single hospital in Algiers contained the names of 175 girls who had preferred to commit or attempt suicide rather than accept the marriages arranged for them. The power of parents, uncles and brothers in arranging marriages without any consideration for the welfare of the girl is especially a threat to the unmarried Muslim girl who would show any interest in the Gospel.

Child marriages also occur. When a Westerner took a survey on child marriages in an Arab country, she was told by a cynical sheik, "British and American influence has at last managed to get through a law, which makes it necessary for a medical certificate to be produced at marriage, stating that the girl is 18 years old. How our doctors have blessed you for that law for if you pay them enough, they will take a baby from its mother's arms, look at it, say it is 18 years at the very least, but somewhat stunted in development, and sign the certificate." David Price-Jones observed in his book *The Closed Circle-An Interpretation of the Arabs*, some of the lasting themes in Western literature - courtship, the gradual realization of mutual love, the development of intimate feelings, their trials and fulfillments - are excluded from Arab literature, as from Arab society.

Islam considers the family as a whole the cradle for human society, but its view of the family is different from our contemporary western view. The individualism of our western culture makes it difficult for us to understand the Muslim concept of the extended family. This "family system" consists of the parents and the families of the sons, extended to include at times one or both of the paternal grandparents, uncles, possibly a widowed sister, orphaned grandchildren or nephews. In the extended family the individual is submerged in a way westerners find hard to grasp. This close

quarter living doesn't allow for much privacy. One writer of a booklet on Islam observes, "It is a significant fact that there is no word in the Arabic language for 'home'. The Muslim has a house, but home life as we understand it, is almost unknown."

The joint family unit provides a sense of security for those who favor it, but it can also be a burden. It can become really complicated when the father or the sons have more than one wife. For example, a favorite wife may supersede the other wives in esteem and influence. For a Muslim interested in the Gospel the joint family structure causes untold hardships as the concerned and close members of the family watch with alarm this interest and seek to persuade or pressure him or her from making a commitment to the Lord. When a Muslim converts to Christ, he or she is cut off from the joint family, which is a precarious situation that may sometimes be perilous to his or her life. It certainly causes tremendous problems for marriage, employment, or care in case of illness or disablement.

Divorce is exclusively the prerogative of the husband. A Muslim man can divorce his wife, at any time for any reason, by repeating three times, "I divorce you." Women, on the other hand, cannot divorce their husbands at will. No mention is made in the Qur'an of women divorcing their husbands should they become unsuitable partners. Fatima Heeren observes that if a husband thinks he cannot put up any longer with some bad habits or other things in his wife, there is no need for him to torture her by ill treatment - he simply separates from her. An educated Muslim in India wrote, "The Eastern wife may at any moment be dislodged by another, and relegated to everlasting sorrow and perpetual gloom. This idea colors the whole life of our women." Divorcing a wife who converts to another religion is permitted. Yet Muhammad has said: "Of all things permitted by law, divorce is the most hateful in the sight of God." This exhortation is perhaps one reason for the low divorce rate in Muslim families. In case of divorce, the property rights of the wife are recognized; but a woman's right to her own children is limited.

Adultery is severely punished. It is lawful for a husband to slay his wife and her lover, if he catches them in the act. The most extreme form of punishment is stoning. When an adulterer is to be stoned to death, he must be taken to some barren place, and the witnesses of the act throw the first stones, followed by the religious judges, and afterwards by the bystanders.

### **Folk-Islam**

Muslim nations are influenced by centuries of traditions that have, in some cases, remained relatively untouched by modernization. Participation by women in the official duties of Islam is minimal. The majority of Muslim women seem to believe that Allah does not speak to them. Most women practice folk-Islam. There is a constant underlying superstitious awe of the unseen spiritual world, a respect for the religious leaders of Islam, and usually a deep fear of God. What colours and controls so much of Muslim home life is the belief in evil spirits with all the fears and remedies that go hand in hand with it. They turn to "saints," talismans, superstitions

and magic. For example in every village in West Madura, Indonesia, one can find graves of "saints." The stories about these legendary people point, without exception, to their supernatural gifts. One recurring theme is that these "saints" built the first mosque in the village in one night. "On the whole," wrote Hilma Granquicts, "it seems that both the men and the women think that the Koran is something which does not concern the women and this may account for their holding fast to the ancient customs."

## **Variations**

The status of women is not universal throughout the Muslim world and one cannot deny that the influence of the west and the desegregation of the sexes led to changes in the legal status of women and their relationship with men in certain segments of Muslim society. A movement to improve the condition of women began emerging in the Ottoman Empire, including its Arab areas, late in the 19th century. First it was concerned principally with education. Gradually, the movement began to concern itself also with the social situation of women. The first and main targets of reform were polygamy and the ease of divorce for men. In 1926 Turkey adopted the Swiss law code which made polygamy illegal and gave equal divorce rights to women. In Jordan and Iraq, polygamy is restricted. In 1935 Reza Shah abolished the compulsory veiling of women in Iran. This new law marked the dateline of social change for Persian women. However, when Ayatollah Khomeini's regime came to power women were veiling themselves once again to demonstrate their loyalty to traditional Islam. They are still very much second-class citizens.

Considering the low status of women in Islam, it is curious that there is no distinct prohibition against a woman assuming the government of a state. In Kuwait, the all-male National Assembly has persisted so far in rejecting all proposals in favour of women's voting rights. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms have no women's vote - but most of them have no elected institutions. Other Arab states granted either limited or total suffrage to women by the late 1960s. However, this does not necessarily mean a free choice among competing candidates as in most of these nations only single candidates can be endorsed. The first women took their seats as members of National Assemblies in Egypt in 1957, and the first women were named as Ministers in Iraq in 1959, and Egypt in 1962. In Pakistan, women have been able to reach the highest offices in the land since the 1949 constitution, and in the early 1960s, there was a Pakistani woman ambassador to Italy. Yet relatively few women in Arab countries are employed outside the home, and an average of only 1 percent of all married Arab women work in the nonagricultural sectors of their economies. However, the resurgence of traditional Islam in recent years and the repulsion of westernization do not offer much hope for future emancipation. In 1973, Afghanistan women were given "equal rights and obligations before the law." The Taliban militia turned back the clock. Their traditionalist manifesto demands a return to the severest form of the segregation of the sexes.

## **Reaching Women with the Gospel**

How do we reach Muslim women with the Gospel? It seems that the hyper individualism of our culture may cause our evangelistic methods to be ill suited to the Muslim culture. We must respect the code of modesty and sexual segregation in classes and countries where this prevails. The reality of the authority of the man must be taken into consideration. The circumvention of his authority could reduce our effectiveness and have harmful repercussions for the women. I believe that we must respect the family unit and the integrity of the home. This was the approach of the apostles Peter and Paul, who preached to whole households at a time. Yet each one within the household must open their heart to the Lord on their own. And we must show the love of Christ in word and deed. It is the love of Christ that will speak most persuasively to the Muslim woman. 'All I learn here,' said a Mohammedan woman in a missionary hospital, "is of love. We hear no mention of love in our religion."

## **Conclusion**

Both men and women need the Gospel as "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3: 23). The unnamed woman whom Jesus met in Samaria in the vicinity of Sychar's well illustrates this fact. She was a woman with a questionable reputation, snubbed even by her neighbours. And this ordinary, sinful, spiritually lost woman was offered the water of life. (John 4: 1-26) She left the well, returned to her town and invited the people to come and see the man "who told me everything I ever did" (John 4:29). Many of the Samaritans from that town did come and believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony (John 4: 39). In contrast to Muhammad, Jesus Christ offers women dignity, forgiveness and a full membership in the priesthood of all believers. He offers them wholeness and hope.

Johan D. Tangelder  
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