

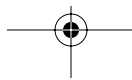


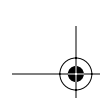
Women in Islam



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 in-





CROSS AND CRESCENT

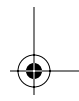
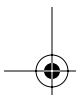
dividual Muslims without recognizing that Christians have often been guilty of exactly the same things; and judging Muslims in the past by contemporary moral standards, which for many of us are simply those of the Western world in the late twentieth century.

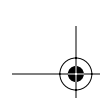
The material in this chapter, therefore, is not intended to be used as ammunition for scoring points against an adversary. Our task is to try to *understand* rather than to be judgmental, and to enter with as much sympathy or empathy as possible a culture which is very different from our own.

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





Women in Islam

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).



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.

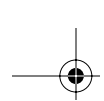
The best among you is the one who is the best towards his wife.

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:

- At the age of twenty-five, Muhammad married Khadija, who was forty





CROSS AND CRESCENT

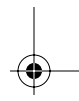
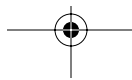
years old at the time and had been widowed twice. She was his only wife for twenty-five years and bore all Muhammad's children except one. She died at the age of sixty-five.

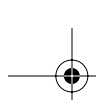
- At the age of fifty, Muhammad married Sawda, whose husband had immigrated to Abyssinia to escape persecution and then died there.
- In the same year there was a proposal of marriage to 'Aisha, who was seven years old, the daughter of his companion Abu Bakr. The marriage was not consummated until after the Hijra in 622, 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 'Aisha.
- 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.



If these are the basic facts, how are they to be interpreted? The orientalist Alfred Guillaume, in his book *Islam*, echoes views often expressed by Western orientalists:

The Qur'an has more to say on the position of women than on any other social question. The guiding note is sounded in the words, "Women are your tillage," and the word for marriage is that used for the sexual act. The primary object of marriage is the propagation of children, and partly for this and partly for other reasons a man is allowed four wives at a time and an unlimited number of concubines. However, it is laid down that wives are to be treated with kindness and strict impartiality; if a man cannot treat all alike he should keep to one. The husband pays the woman a dowry at the time of marriage, and the money or property so allotted remains her own. The husband may divorce his wife at any time, but he cannot take her back until she has





Women in Islam

remarried and been divorced by a second husband. A woman cannot sue for divorce on any grounds, and her husband may beat her. In this matter of the status of women lies the greatest difference between the Muslim and the Christian world. . . . To a Muslim who takes his stand on the law of Islam, the gulf is unbridgeable, but in actual practice in the civilized communities of the Muslim world a more liberal view of women's place in society is gradually coming to the fore.¹

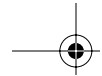
W. Montgomery Watt, another orientalist, writes about the accusation that Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh was to satisfy his own lust, and that it was an incestuous marriage because she had been married to Muhammad's adopted son:

The marriage with Zaynab seemed incestuous, but this conception of incest was bound up with the old practices belonging to a lower, communalistic level of familial institutions where a child's paternity was not definitely known; and this lower level was in process of being eliminated by Islam.

From the standpoint of Muhammad's time, then, the allegations of treachery and sensuality cannot be maintained. His contemporaries did not find him morally defective in any way. On the contrary, some of the acts criticized by the modern Westerner show that Muhammad's standards were higher than those of his time. In his day and generation he was a social reformer, even a reformer in the sphere of morals. He created a new system of social security and a new family structure, both of which were a vast improvement on what went before. By taking what was best in the morality of the nomad and adapting it for settled communities, he established a religious and social framework for the life of many races of men. That is not the work of a traitor or "an old lecher."²

The contemporary Christian apologist John Gilchrist comments on the fact that 'Aisha, Muhammad's favorite wife, is known from authoritative traditions to have been jealous of Muhammad's other wives:





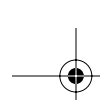
CROSS AND CRESCENT

Ayishah's frustrations and jealousies are the best proof that Muhammad could not treat his wives equally—if for no other reason than that he did not regard her with the same total, undivided affection that she regarded him. She may have been his favorite wife but her grievances clearly were motivated, perhaps only subconsciously, by the fact that she was not his *only* wife. Paradoxically, the fact that Muhammad singled her out as his favorite wife is further proof that he did not treat his wives equally. There is more than enough evidence in Muhammad's own marital affairs to prove that polygamy cannot ultimately be reconciled with God's perfect purpose for human marriage. It is no wonder that the perfect revelation of his will through the Gospel of his Son simultaneously outlawed polygamy. Muhammad enjoyed a twenty-five-year marriage with Khadijah which was, in all respects, unimpeachable. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for his many marriages at Medina and one can only sympathize with the young Ayishah who obviously regretted that she could not enjoy the same undivided devotion from her husband that she willingly offered to him.³

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 'Aisha 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.





Women in Islam

“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 ‘Aisha.” 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.⁴

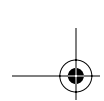
ISLAMIC LAW

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





CROSS AND CRESCENT

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.

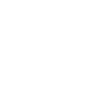
- Women can own property. Wives have a right to their own earnings, and they can give away their property and earnings as they wish. A woman has a right to a proportion of the inheritance of her dead father, husband or childless brother, but only half of the share of other male relatives, since men have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

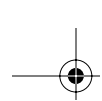


THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

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."





Women in Islam

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.

MUSLIM EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

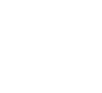
Some expectations of women are clearly linked with Islamic teaching, while others have more to do with the cultural context of particular countries, and still others arise out of developments in the modern world.

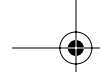
Expectations which are influenced largely by Islamic beliefs. Muslims place a strong emphasis on the role of women in the home, and especially in caring for children. Women are very much involved in all the festivals, for example, in preparing special meals to be eaten during the night in Ramadan, cooking special dishes for 'Idul Fitr, buying new clothes and gifts, and so on.

There is a strong feeling among Muslims that men are expected to get married. There is a popular saying that "marriage is half of religion." Muslim men find it hard to understand the idea of lifelong celibacy. Marriages are generally arranged by the parents. It is becoming more and more common, however, for young people to accept or reject their parents' choice.

Muslims, even those living in the West, tend to disapprove of the mixing of the sexes after puberty. They prefer their children to go to single-sex schools and disapprove of them having boyfriends or girlfriends.

If Muslim women go to the mosque to say their prayers, they must pray in the special room or gallery provided for them, since their voice must not





CROSS AND CRESCENT

be heard above men's voices. In many cases, however, women are encouraged to pray at home. Friday prayers are optional for women. Since it is thought that menstruation makes women unclean, they are not allowed to go to the mosque during their monthly period.

The concept of *izzat*, meaning "honor" (from the Arabic word *izza*, meaning honor, self-respect or reputation), is very strong, particularly in India and Pakistan. This means, for example, that if a girl is known to have had any sexual relationships before marriage, the family is bound to punish her severely in order to maintain the honor of the family. Every member of the family is obliged to defend the honor and reputation of the whole family.

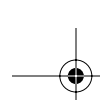
Many Muslim women wear the veil. In Arabic it is known as *hijab*; in Iran as *chador* (a veil which covers the head, but not the face); and in India and Pakistan as *burqa* (a garment which covers the whole body). Since the Qur'an does not demand that women should be completely covered in public, it seems that the complete veiling of women practiced in many countries reflects traditions in very conservative societies rather than the teaching of Islam. Some Muslim women today may therefore be more restricted than Muslim women were at the time of Muhammad.

Purdah (a Persian word meaning curtain or veil) is the word used (mainly on the Indian subcontinent) to refer to the seclusion of women. When Muslim women observe the custom, it means that from the age of puberty they mix only with near relatives and women friends, and must wear the veil or the *burqa* in public.

Expectations concerning women which are influenced more by local cultural factors and by folk Islam or village Islam. In some Muslim communities there may be a low view of women which has more to do with local culture and tradition than with Islam. In Pakistan, for example, there is a popular saying among women, "Whereas out of every thousand men only one will go to hell, yet out of every thousand women, only one will be found in heaven." It should be recognized, however, that this kind of sentiment is not based on the Qur'an or on genuine Muslim tradition.

Although family planning has been supported by the governments of a number of Muslim countries, there is still considerable resistance to the





Women in Islam

practice. Many feel children are a gift from God; therefore God must be able and willing to provide for them. Vivienne Stacey explains popular thinking in countries such as Pakistan:

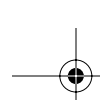
Ignorance and fear make some slow to adopt family planning techniques. Sometimes one spouse is willing and the other is not. Religious advisors—*pirs* and *marabouts*—are often against such devices which would reduce the number of Muslims. . . . Reinforcing these hindrances to family planning is the great fear of Muslim parents that they will not have enough sons. How often a wife is in distress because she has not produced a child! The wife who produces only girls will also seek religious help as well as perhaps medical help. If she has a son she will want more sons in case the child dies as it may easily do. So a woman's importance in society in general is estimated by her ability to produce sons. This is an inequality between the sexes which the laws of a country and the efforts of family planning associations can do little about.⁵



On the expectations of a young bride, Vivienne Stacey quotes the following account written by a midwife working in a rural area in Afghanistan. Although some aspects of this description do not apply outside this situation, some of them do apply in similar situations in other parts of the Muslim world.

As the bride settles to life with her husband's family, she will be guarded from evil influences from the day of her marriage—by charms on her person or pinned up in the house. The Qur'an, wrapped carefully and put on a special shelf just above the door, is a guard against any evil influence entering their new home. . . . If as the months pass no sign of pregnancy appears, she will be taken to the local "midwife" who may give advice on special herbal potions to drink. If this is not effective, she will visit the local "holy man." Some verses of the Qur'an will be chanted and blown on her, or a charm given her to be worn on her person—a small metal box sewn to cloth, holding pieces of paper on which verses from the Qur'an have been written. As a last resort she will visit a local shrine, walking round it a certain number of





CROSS AND CRESCENT

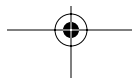
times, picking up stones and putting them on her forehead, or even kissing the shrine. Afterwards a piece of cloth is tied near the shrine or a nail hammered to a nearby tree. . . . The childless wife is a sad person who constantly fears the threat of another wife coming to the home. The stigma of having no children is strong. Other women may feel she is judged of God, or has the “evil eye.” . . . Fear surrounds her; she is thought to be more vulnerable to evil influences and therefore is protected from certain situations—meeting strangers, walking near graveyards, and having contact with anyone who might have the “evil eye.” Because they believe that *jinn* (evil spirits) can listen to conversations, very little is said about the pregnancy, and very little preparation is made for the baby; a small bundle of clothes may be laid ready for the delivery, but that is all.

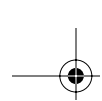
Very soon after the birth the *mullah* [local religious leader from the mosque] will come to the house to shout the creed of Islam in the baby’s ear. The baby’s name is chosen either by the male members of the household, or by the *mullah*. Nobody compliments the baby in case evil spirits are listening, and if someone does say anything positive it is prefixed by “in the name of God” (*bismillah*) as a protection. . . . At the end of forty days the new mother may celebrate with her women friends.⁶

Expectations which are influenced by life in the modern world, including urbanization and the media. Tunisia is an example of a country that has for some years had a vigorous program of public teaching on the value of family planning. As a result, the practice has become more widely accepted. In many Muslim countries, especially in North Africa, more women have been going out to work than formerly. They therefore acquire greater independence and come less under the control of their mothers-in-law.

LAW REFORM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Modern law codes. Vivienne Stacey describes the problems Muslims have had to face in making the traditional shari’a law relevant and applicable in different situations in modern times:





Women in Islam

Traditionalists and modernists in Islam are never so divided as on the question of the position and rights of women. New laws relating to the position of women have been introduced in many Muslim lands. Reform laws have often been linked to a new way of interpreting the Qur'an. How can a divine law be amended? In adapting and interpreting Qur'anic teaching for the modern world four principles can be observed. First, a procedural device by which the reformers did not change the divine law but gave orders that it was not to be applied. The courts in certain circumstances were not to hear a case. Secondly, laws were formulated partly from one school of law and partly from another or from several. Thirdly, a new use of consensus (*ijma'*) has developed which involves a going back to the original sources and making fresh deductions. . . . Finally, administrative orders based on one of the three principles described above, sometimes with something added which is not contrary or repugnant to Islam, has made possible the adoption of reforms even in Islamic states.⁷



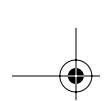
Turkey was the first Muslim country to bring in a family law in 1917. In Egypt a series of laws was passed between 1920 and 1929, and in 1943 a new law of inheritance was passed. Similar laws were passed in Jordan in 1951, and in Syria in 1953. In 1979 amendments to the 1929 personal status law were 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.⁸

The feminist movement in Islam. Abdur Rahman I. Doi, an Indian Muslim teaching in Malaysia after many years' experience in Nigeria, traces the fem-





CROSS AND CRESCENT

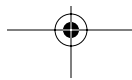
inist movement in the Muslim world back to the nineteenth century, when “the Christian West had almost dominated the Muslim world.”⁹ Reforms initiated by such rulers as Muhammad ‘Ali and Isma‘il Pasha were intended to enable Egyptians to attain the same cultural level as Europeans, and therefore forced Egyptians to abandon 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.

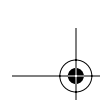
In 1919 the leadership of the movement passed to Huda Sha‘rawi (1879-1947), the chairperson of the Women’s Executive of a major political party in Egypt. In that year she led a demonstration of veiled women to support Egyptian nationalism. In 1923, after leading an Egyptian delegation to the meeting 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, however, 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. Fatna 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-a-vis* 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.¹⁰





Women in Islam

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:

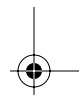
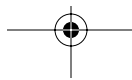
What happens when a woman disobeys her husband, who is the representative and embodiment of sacred authority, and of the Islamic hierarchy? A danger bell rings in the mind, for when one element of the whole structure of polarities is threatened, the entire system is threatened. A woman who rebels against 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.¹¹

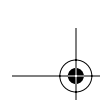
This is how she explains the dilemma facing many Muslim women in the modern world:

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.¹²

Christian readers will recognize the uncanny parallel with the tensions among Christians over traditional responses to feminism.

Islamization and the demand for a return to the shari'a. 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





CROSS AND CRESCENT

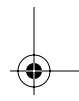
Rahman I. Doi expresses the feeling of many that Muslims have absorbed too much from the West in their attitudes toward women and need to recover a more traditionally Islamic approach:

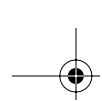
During the days of European colonialism and the scramble to take over the Muslim world, the influence of feminism spread to Muslim countries. The first victims of the glittering Western way of life were the Muslim rulers of various Muslim countries. In the days of the political decline of Islam, they 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

It must not be thought, however, that a return to the requirements of shari’a necessarily means putting the clock back and keeping women isolated in the modern world. 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*





Women in Islam

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:

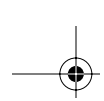
- It can liberate women by helping them to escape from masculine aggression in public and encouraging men to respect them. The veil will not necessarily destroy the emancipation of Muslim women.
- It is a sign of total commitment to Islam, and provides the security and stability of a familiar code in 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.

Throughout this chapter Christian readers will inevitably have been making comparisons with the place of women in Christianity. Are there any firm conclusions that can be drawn from such comparisons?

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 dif-





CROSS AND CRESCENT

ferences 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.

Does this seem a strangely inconclusive point at which to end a chapter on women in Islam and a whole section dealing with understanding Islam? If so, at the very least we should have realized the complexity of the subject we are dealing with.

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."

