

Kingston Whig Article

RELIGION NOT CAUSE OF ALL ILLS AFFECTING WOMEN.

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One of the most difficult misperceptions to correct is that Islam's teachings are oppressive for women. This negative impression is further exacerbated by some of the actions taken by some Muslims in the name of Islam.

Recently a person anonymously sent me a copy of an email which is full of vituperative comments on Islam. The sender's note to me was "Is this what you want for your daughters?" No, I do not want any woman to be married off without her consent; no I don't want any woman to be beaten and nor do I want child marriages. Does anyone?

I state my position as a believing Muslim, so that I feel comfortable raising difficult and controversial issues within Islam and with Muslims. However, don't berate me and don't feel superior, as if my religion or my culture is the cause of all the ills affecting women everywhere.

Why is it that most people can understand that other religious texts have violence, killing of enemies and misogynist statements, and somehow don't judge the whole text negatively, nor the believers as misguided. Consider why it is that they cannot extend the same level of understanding to Islam and Muslims?

Did you know that Islam granted women many rights in 7th century Arabia, while Europe suffered under the Dark Ages? A woman was seen as an independent, thinking woman capable of making her own decisions. For example, if a woman wanted to become a Muslim, the Prophet would speak to her directly and take her oath of allegiance, quite separate from any of her male relatives. A woman could inherit, own her own property and keep her own name. There are other instances when women spoke out and corrected the companions of the Prophet and demanded their rights.

Certainly this high standing of Muslim women has suffered in the last few hundred years. However, the poor treatment of women cannot be blamed on religious teachings; there are other factors such as cultures, patriarchy, colonialism and the stagnation resulting from poverty, tyranny and corruption which has culminated in the present state of affairs.

This story of creation exemplifies the equality inherent in the Quran:

"O people, be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women.

An Nisa [Women] 4:1

The verse states that the female and the male are created from the same essence, or *nafs*, and therefore are not different. This does not allow for stories such as Eve's creation from Adam's rib!

Recent scholars have analyzed this verse, and conclude that it cannot be unequivocally stated as to who was created first – the man or the woman.

Familiar to you is another story of creation, similar to the Biblical one. However the Quranic story has significant differences, which should result in a different perspective regarding women.

“We said “O Adam, dwell you and your wife in this garden,
and eat freely from it, both of you, whatever you wish;
but do not approach this one tree, lest you become wrongdoers.
But Satan caused them both to stumble and thus brought
about the loss of their state.”

2:35

Please note that the woman is not blamed for this transgression, both are.

Along with the message of equality, there are some controversial Quranic verses regarding women, which have been interpreted by male scholars and have been detrimental for women. These male scholars have certainly allowed their cultures and prejudices to influence our understanding and practices as Muslims.

For Muslims in the last 40 years the interpretations of male scholars have gained greater credibility and have become the underpinnings of the strong conservative movement. Obviously not all individual conservatives are problematic, but there are worrying aspects of the movement such as intolerance of diversity, the insistence on only one perspective and their practices on gender and equality.

These concerns also relate to the rise of fundamentalist, conservative Christians, esp. the recent examples in the States. As one scholar found in his study of fundamentalist movements that there are common traits, and one of them is the defence and consolidation of patriarchy as the divine plan for the moral ordering of society.

There has been excessive attention paid to the radical fringe and not enough to the rise of conservatism within all religious communities. To me this harkening to the past inhibits any critical thinking and any progress in matters of faith and practice.

If anyone out there can help us dismantle some of the negative aspects of conservatism – role of women; intolerance of diversity, rigidness of teachings, do please let us know.

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