

The Veil Unveiled: The True Status of Women in Islam (part 2 of 3)

Description: The veil and its meaning in Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as a brief look at the Islamic stance towards women. Part 2: Women in relation to sex, education, and the original sin in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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"And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves; that you may dwell with them in serenity and tranquility. And He has put love and compassion between your hearts. Truly in that are signs for those who reflect." (Quran 30:21)

'Islam's appeal, wherever it has triumphed, has been in its simplicity. It requires submission to some basic, straightforward rules which are easily kept, and in return it offers that most wonderful and rare commodity, peace of mind ... its discipline, safety and certainties have an appeal for girls lost in the churning seas of permissiveness, whose own families have been weakened by the crumbling of the two-parent family, the absence of fathers and the impermanence of husbands, if there are husbands in the first place rather than boyfriends and "baby-fathers". And in most societies it is the women who sustain religions in the home and among children.' (Peter Hitchens, Will Britain Convert to Islam? Mail on Sunday, 2/11/03)

"...They (your wives, O men) are a garment for you and you (men) are a garment for them..." (Quran 2:187)

Sex itself is not taboo in Islam. On the contrary, lawful sexual relations are regarded as deeds of charity! Renowned scholar and former nun, Karen Armstrong, writes:

'Mohammed certainly did not think that women were sexually disgusting. When his wife had her period he used to make a point of reclining in her lap, of taking his prayer mat from her hand, saying for the benefit of his disciples, "Your menstruation is not in your hand." He would drink from the same cup, saying, "Your menstruation is not on your lips" ... The harsh sexual punishments meted out to sexual offenders in some Islamic countries is because sexuality is valued and the ideal has been debased, not, as in the past in the West, because sexuality is abhorrent.' (The Gospel According to Woman, 1986:2)

The Church's traditional justification for man's authority is one it inherited from Judaism: the inherent evil of woman! According to the bible, Satan seduced Eve to disobey God by eating from a forbidden tree and Eve, in turn, seduced Adam to eat with her. When God rebuked Adam for his disobedience, Adam blamed Eve, and so God condemned her:

"I (God) will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will bear children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

It was this image of Eve as a deceiving temptress that left a negative legacy for women throughout both Judaism and Christendom. Paul, himself a once vehemently anti-Christian Jew, wrote in the bible: '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 shall be saved through childbearing.' (I Tim. 2:11-5)[1]

Again, the Islamic conception of woman is radically different. The Quran clarifies that Satan was the only deceiver in the story of the Garden, while Adam and Eve receive equal blame for their disobedience. There is not the slightest hint that Eve was the first to eat the forbidden fruit or that she tempted Adam to do so. Both Adam and Eve committed a sin, asked God for His Forgiveness, and He duly bestowed it:

"They said: 'Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls and if You forgive us not and do not bestow upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost." (Quran 7:22-23)

Linguistically, the Quranic terms for 'womb' and 'mercy' are synonymous. This is because, rather than God's punishment, childbirth in Islam is seen as one of His countless blessings. Besides, the notion that God condemns the innocent is quite blasphemous!

And, while Christianity holds every newborn baby to be a sinner - the fruits of its mother's punishment, Islam teaches that all children are born innocent and sinless upon the *fitra*: a natural monotheistic and righteous disposition. Hence, one who embraces Islam is said to revert back to their natural religion. It is only the child's immoral upbringing that converts it into a rebellious sinner.

"Whosoever works evil will not be requited except with its like; and whosoever works righteousness, whether male or female, and is a true Believer, such will enter Paradise, wherein they will have provision without limit." (Quran 40:40)

Paul's words, earlier, also show how Eve's sin was used to justify limiting women's educational aspirations. In Islam, however, women are equal to men in the pursuit of knowledge. The Prophet said:

"The seeking of knowledge is compulsory upon every (male or female) Muslim." (*Ibn Maja*)

Furthermore, the most honored position one can reach in Muslim society is that of a scholar [Islam has no Priesthood]. The Prophet's wife, Aa'isha, from whom leading Companions acquired knowledge, is but one example of learned women who continue to greatly influence Islamic society. As were several female teachers of the celebrated sage, warrior and master of the Islamic sciences, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).

"...Are those who know equal to those who know not? It is only

those with understanding who will remember." (Quran 39:9)

Endnotes:

[1] The Church's founding fathers, men who formulated Christian belief and canonized the Bible, supported this view: 'Don't you know that you are each an Eve?' God's sentence 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. Tertullian)

"Woman is a daughter of falsehood, a sentinel of Hell, the enemy of peace; through her Adam lost paradise." (St. John Damascene)

'God created Adam Lord of all living creatures, but Eve spoiled it all. Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house and bear children. And if they (women) grow tired or, even, die (from giving birth), it does not matter. Let her die from in childbirth; that's why they are there.' (Martin Luther).

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