

# Women

## Women in Islam

Dr. Liyakat Takim

Against the background of a tribal society in seventh century Arabia, the Qur'an ameliorated the situation of women considerably. It put a stop to female infanticide and prohibited men from inheriting the wives of their fathers (4:19). It also granted women rights of inheritance and permitted them to possess property. Reflecting the patriarchal society of seventh century Arabia, the Qur'an also required that men be responsible for the maintenance of women. The Prophet Muhammad was asked to accept the pledge of allegiance from women and they were not prevented from participating in public activities. They also tended the wounded in battles.

Many female figures are praised in the Qur'an. Mary is lauded for her piety and is seen as an example for all righteous people (66:12). Angels visited her and God cast His spirit into Mary. Similarly, the Qur'an has words of praise for the wife of the Pharaoh for protecting and rearing Moses and commends the Queen of Sheba for her wisdom in accepting Solomon's invitation to submit to God (27:43).

The Qur'an places no inherent value placed on male or female gender. Commentators agree that the Quran's intent is to demonstrate that both men and women share an equal partnership in what God has promised and repeatedly affirms the equality of their human essence and faith.

The pro-female tone of the Qur'an is not replicated in later sacred literature. Women's issues in Islamic jurisprudence were explored, interpreted, and articulated by male jurists. The juridical manuals were composed in the male-dominated centers that excluded female voices in Islamic legal discourse. Women had little say in relation to the laws on marriage, divorce, inheritance, female testimony etc. Consequently women's issues depended on 'representational discourse' conducted by male jurists who interpreted and articulated the rulings related to women. Moreover, patriarchal structures of Arab culture that prevailed in the eighth and ninth centuries were often incorporated in the emerging juridical literature. These were significant factors that influenced how women were treated in the juridical discourse.

Many traditions incorporated in *hadith* literature (statements of the Prophet) that was compiled in the ninth and tenth centuries denigrated the position of women. Some traditions maintain that women have been created from a crooked rib whereas others claim that a woman passing in front of a man who is praying invalidates his prayer. The derogatory tone on women in the *hadith* literature is also evident in traditions that indicate that most of the inhabitants of hell are women, that women are deficient in intellect and that a wife's salvation is contingent on keeping her husband happy.'

However, women have always played significant roles in Islamic history. Khadija, the wife of the Prophet, was instrumental in his early success and many traditions in Sunni *hadith* literature have been reported from 'A'isha, another wife of the Prophet Muhammad. 'A'isha also led a battle against 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet when 'Ali became the fourth caliph in 656. One of the foremost mystics in the eighth century was a woman. Rabi'a al-Adawiyya introduced notions of passionate, intense desire and love for the divine in early Islamic mysticism.

Islamic history has also seen some female heads of state. Some of them were sultanas or queens who had their names pronounced in the *khutba* (Friday sermon) and insignia minted on coins. These include Sultana Radiyya in Delhi in 1236 and Shajarat al-Durr who mounted the throne in Cairo in 1250.

In the middle ages, elite women were well educated in Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, Isfahan, or Delhi. This may have been because of their need to compete with palace concubines who were often highly educated. Women also owned much property primarily through inheritance and endowments they received from male relatives.

The names of women saints are found throughout the world of Islam. Anatolia can boast a large number of small shrines where more or less historical women are buried – simple village girls, or noble virgins whose very names often suggest sad or romantic stories. There were important women mystics and poets in Islamic Spain who taught and trained other mystics.

#### Women in Shi'i literature

Generally speaking, due to the pivotal roles played by Shi'i women like Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, and Zaynab, his grand-daughter, women have received better treatment in Shi'i *hadith* and legal literature. Both Fatima and Zaynab are portrayed as role models and revered in Shi'i circles because they resisted injustice and oppression. After the establishment of Shi'ism in Iran in the sixteenth century, women received higher religious education and were even certified to exercise *ijtihad*, (independent legal judgment) although, until recently, most Shi'i jurists have barred women from occupying the position of judges. In places like Iran and Iraq, women religious leaders have held a position closer to that of male religious leaders than in most Sunni countries. In recent times, special religious seminaries have been established and female religious scholars preside over women's religious ceremonies.

More recently, Muslim women have challenged the dominant role that men have enjoyed. They have challenged the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an and formulation of Islamic law in the classical period of Islam. In 2005, a woman led Friday prayers for the first time in New York. Women have now occupied important positions in some Islamic centers especially in America.

#### Women in Christianity

By Dr. Sherry Jordon

Christianity's view of women has been shaped by the cultures in which it developed and it in turn has helped to define the nature and roles of women in a variety of cultures and historical periods. Given this variety, there is no single Christian view of women. There is also no consensus on Christianity's effect on women's lives. Women have played important roles throughout the history of Christianity but the ways in which Christianity has served to oppress women, liberate women, or both, is still hotly debated.

One reason for this ongoing debate is the lack of sources, particularly for the early years of Christianity, as well as disagreement over how to interpret them. For the first decades of the early Christian movement, our major source is the New Testament. Paul's letters are the earliest texts and they reveal an ambiguous attitude toward women. He assumes a patriarchal attitude when he tells the Corinthians that "the husband is the head of his wife" but in this same passage he emphasizes their mutual relationship when he declares that "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man *or man independent of woman*" (I Cor. 11:3 and 11:11; emphasis added). In his letter to the Romans, he mentions several women involved in the early Christian community, including several in leadership roles: Phoebe who is identified as a "deacon" or "minister" and Junia who is "prominent among the apostles" (Romans 16:1 and 16:7).

The gospels also portray a complicated and diverse picture of women in early Christianity, particularly since each gospel has its own distinctive character. While men appear much more often in these texts, women are also represented as followers of Jesus. For example, in Luke's gospel, Jesus approves of Mary sitting at his feet as a disciple (Luke 10:38-42). In John's gospel, Jesus has an extended theological discussion with a most unlikely individual, a Samaritan woman, who then goes out to evangelize her village (John 4:1-42). Throughout the gospels, women, many of whom are unnamed, are presented as exemplars of faith: the hemorrhaging woman who was healed by Jesus (Mark 5:25-34), the penitent woman (Luke 7: 36-50), and the Syrophenician woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). The descriptions of the resurrection vary but in all four gospels Mary Magdalene is named as one of the women who discovered the empty tomb. In the gospel of John, Jesus himself tells her to witness to his resurrection, thus earning her the title of "apostle to the apostles" in the early church (John 20:1-18).

In the later texts of the New Testament, there are more restrictions on women. For example, wives are told that they must be subject to their husbands in Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18. Women are told that they may not teach or have authority over a man and are enjoined to be silent and submissive in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. In her classic study [In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins](#), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes these texts as the "patriarchalization" of the Church and interprets them as the result of its efforts to conform to the larger Greco-Roman society by adopting more restrictive gender roles for women.

One of these later New Testament texts defends the subordination of women by describing Eve as the one who “was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:14). Many of the early Church Fathers (theologians of the first six centuries of the Church) continued to identify women with Eve, and to interpret Eve as the source of sin. Women were defined as weaker and more susceptible to temptation, in part because men were identified with reason and the spirit while women were identified with emotion and the body. Just as reason should control emotion and spirit should rule over the body, so men were called to control women. The ideal Christian woman therefore was defined as silent, obedient, and submissive. Individual women were seen as models of holiness and virtue, however, particularly martyrs who died as witnesses to the faith or ascetics who disciplined their bodies for the sake of their souls. Some women, particularly virgins or widows, held the office of deaconess. They ministered to other women by distributing charity, visiting the sick, and anointing them during baptism. These women were engaged in ministry and they were ordained. Chalcedon gives instructions for the ordination of women and the Apostolic Constitutions include an ordination rite of women.

By the medieval period, the office of deaconess no longer existed, at least in the west, and the ascetic life was most often lived out in monastic communities. Most of the writings by medieval women that have survived were written by nuns. This reflects the fact that the convent provided a place for women to receive an education and exercise leadership, at least within their religious order, but sometimes also within the larger church community. Some of these women were also mystics who experienced direct union with God. This experience gave them a spiritual authority that they could not exercise in other roles such as the priesthood. The writings of women like Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, and Catherine of Siena reveal both great devotion and deep theological insight.

During the reformations of the sixteenth century, both Protestant and Catholic leaders continued to affirm the role of women as silent, obedient, and submissive. However, some women involved in the Protestant reform movements saw new opportunities for their sex in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, the call for the reading of scripture by all Christians, and the affirmation of wife and mother as holy vocations ordained by God. On the other hand, the rejection of religious orders by Protestants removed opportunities for education and leadership for women and served to restrict them more firmly to the domestic roles of mother and wife. Women also participated in the Catholic Reformation by forming or renewing religious orders, most notably Teresa of Avila who established the Discalced Carmelites and wrote several important works on prayer and the spiritual life.

A significant change in the understanding of women’s natures and roles occurred in nineteenth century America with the development of the “cult of true womanhood”. This term describes cultural expectations of women which defined them as the weaker and subordinate sex and confined them to the domestic sphere as wives and mothers. However, it reversed the traditional identification of women with sin and lust by arguing that they were more inclined toward virtue and religious sentiments than men. This emphasis on their moral superiority encouraged some women to become involved in social movements such as the abolition of slavery. This in turn led some female

abolitionists to assert the rights of women and attempt to respond to religious arguments that called for their subordination and submission to men. For example, in her Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman, Sarah Grimké argued that the gospel called for the equality of women and men. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who fought for women's right to vote, formed a committee to write The Woman's Bible. It sought to address religious arguments against women's rights by demonstrating the patriarchal nature of the bible and offering alternative interpretations of the text.

During the twentieth century, the ordination of women became a major issue. Protestant debates about the ordination of women are tied to different understandings of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Conservative Protestant denominations have a fundamentalist view of scripture which contends that God directly inspired every word of the bible. These denominations continue to deny ordination to women on the basis of a literal reading of biblical passages which support the subordination and silencing of women. Most Protestant denominations, however, have a view of biblical inspiration which affirms God's role in inspiring the text but assumes that humans were also involved in the process. The Bible thus reflects the cultures and times in which it was written. These denominations ordain women by interpreting passages which advocate their silence and subordination as reflective of the patriarchal cultures of the Bible. For the Catholic Church, tradition as well as scripture is authoritative and revealed by God. Although it agrees with the view of biblical inspiration which acknowledges human participation in the writing of the Bible, it denies ordination to women on the basis of tradition. The Catholic Church states that it is bound by the example of Jesus who entrusted the foundation and leadership of the church to twelve male apostles. It also declares that the priest must be male because he represents Jesus in the exercise of his ministry and this representation requires a "natural resemblance" between Jesus and the priest (*Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*).

Pope John Paul II directly addressed the nature and role of women in his 1998 apostolic letter On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (*Mulieris Dignitatem*). This letter interprets Eve and Mary as the revelation of what God intends for women. The dignity of women is established by the creation accounts which attest to "the essential equality of man and woman from the point of view of their humanity" (III.6). One of the consequences of original sin is the threat to this essential equality by the domination of women by men (IV.10). As the "new Eve" or the "new creation", "Mary is 'the new beginning' of the *dignity and vocation of women*, of each and every woman" (IV. 11). This vocation is defined in terms of two dimensions: virginity and motherhood (VI.17). Equality of men and women is thus defined in terms of complementarity and the claim that women have a different "psycho-physical structure" (VI.18) and therefore a different vocation than men.

In recent years, Christianity has seen the development of feminist theology. This theology recognizes that normative and authoritative theology has been done, primarily if not exclusively, by men. It responds to this history of exclusion by asserting that the experience and ideas of women are equally valuable and authoritative. Given the diversity of women's experiences, feminist theology is rich and multi-faceted; indeed, it would be more accurate to speak of feminist theologies. These theologies include the insights and

concerns of women from many racial and ethnic identities. Thus, for example, African-American women have developed Womanist theologies and Latina women have developed *mujerista* theologies.

These varied feminist theologies have some commitments and contributions in common, however. Many feminist theologians build on the insights of liberation theology, particularly its identification of oppression as structural sin, to analyze the structural sin of sexism. While not denying individual sin, these feminist theologians explore the ways in which sin is built into the very structures and institutions of society, including the church. They seek to counter the sin of sexism by articulating positive images of women, proposing more inclusive models for community, and avoiding exclusively masculine language for God and humans.

One of the tools feminist theology uses to expose the structural sin of sexism is a “hermeneutics of suspicion”. Hermeneutics refers to principles of interpretation. It seeks to identify the values, convictions, and biases people bring to a text and to articulate the principles they should use to best interpret it. Recognizing that the Bible and other texts central to the Church’s tradition have been produced by and for men in a time when patriarchal models of family and society were dominant, feminist theologians approach those texts with suspicion. While not denying that they have been inspired by God, feminists argue that they also reflect the culture, experiences, and biases of the humans who produced them. In doing so, feminist theologians are reflecting a view of inspiration consistent with Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and mainline Protestant traditions. Feminists, however, emphasize the patriarchal nature of these societies and the ways in which sexism is embedded in these texts. The goal of interpretation is, whenever possible, to free these texts from their sexist bias and to find the liberating possibilities within them. A hermeneutic of suspicion is thus used in the service of another principle, namely, that the best interpretation is one that leads to greater justice and compassion.

This concern for justice and compassion is rooted in feminist theology’s understanding of salvation. While defined in a variety of ways, it is often understood in terms of liberation or healing. Just as sin is not understood exclusively in individual terms, neither is salvation. If salvation is defined as liberation or healing, it must be inclusive and communal. Salvation is therefore inherently relational; it involves a loving and just relationship with God, with other people, and with all of creation.

## Bibliography

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### Points of Agreement:

Both of the authors above argue that the role of women in Islam and Christianity was constrained by the patriarchal tendencies of the cultures into which these religions were born, Greco-Roman culture for Christianity, and Arab culture for Islam. They also argue that the Bible and the Qur'an present women positively, but that the role of women was restricted as a result of the later development of the traditions in both Islam and Christianity. This one route to the emancipation of women from their traditional roles as silent obedient and submissive is a return to the scriptures themselves. This is not enough however, for, as Dr. Jordon points out, in some passages the scriptures themselves endorse negative stereotypes of women. Thus the role of women needs to be re-thought in the light of contemporary experience and education as well.

### Points of Disagreement:

There are deep disagreements with each tradition as to the role of women. Traditionalists both in Islam and in Christianity oppose giving women the same religious authority as men.

### Points for Further Discussion:

An important point for discussion: what authority should women have Christianity and in Islam? Should women be ordained as priests and/or ministers in Christianity? Should they be ordained as bishops? Or, in Islam, should they be allowed to lead prayers, serve as Imams, or issue legal rulings, either as judges or as religious scholars (*ulama*)?