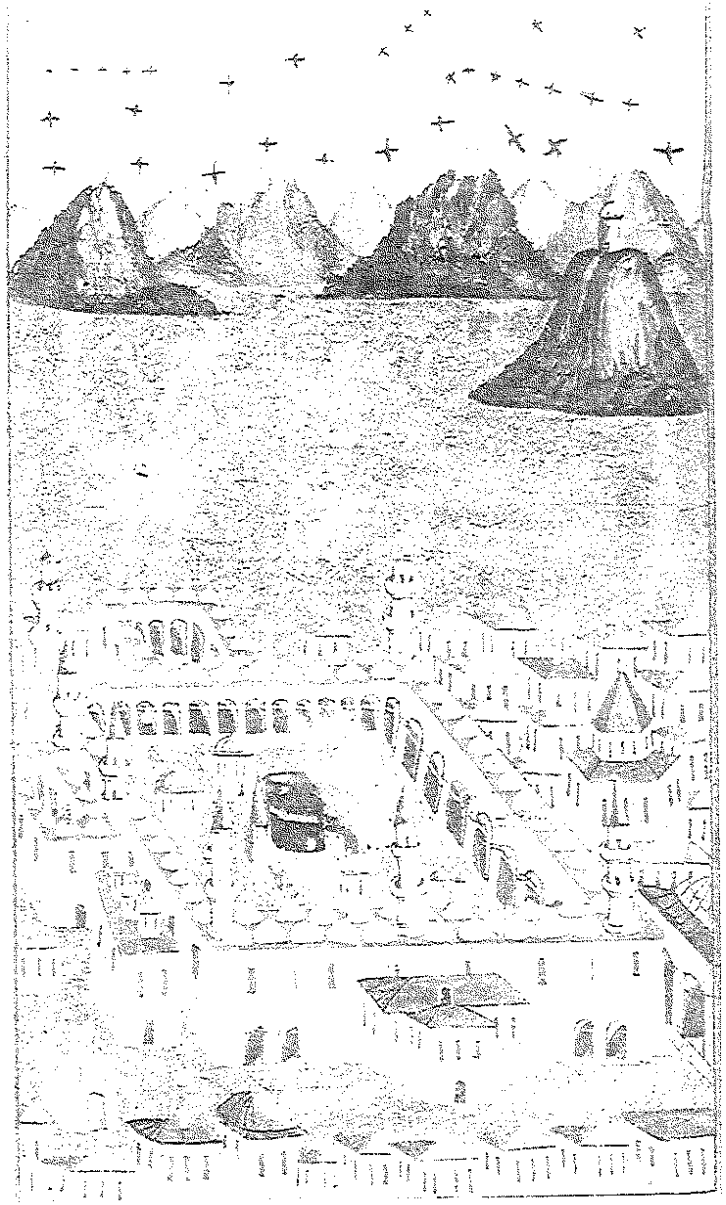

MUHAMMAD

Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World

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Gender and the Question of Veiling

According to the traditions of Shi'i Muslims, the revolt of Imam Husayn against the tyrannical Caliph Yazid in 680 C.E. ended in the greatest tragedy in the history of Islam. Not only was the Prophet's grandson killed along with his male followers, but the women of his family were stripped of their veils and paraded publicly in disgrace. Brought to the presence of the caliph in Damascus, Husayn's sister Zaynab remained defiant, openly challenging Yazid's authority and lamenting the death of her brother, who was the rightful inheritor of the authority of the Prophet. So striking was her indignation that the caliph was shamed and let her and the others depart in peace.[16]

This dramatic picture, which has been evoked by many poems of lamentation, presents a powerful reminder of the important roles played by women in the early Muslim community. Women have never been ciphers or nonentities in Islamic history. The wives of the Prophet Muhammad were his partners and supporters in the creation of the new society, and they continued to have eminence after his death. 'A'isha is noteworthy for transmitting more than 2,000 hadith reports from the Prophet (although only about 300 of these were retained in the principal collections), and she was the principal leader of an unsuccessful revolt against 'Ali. The prominence of women in early Muslim society stands in contrast with the image of Muslim women today, at least as they are perceived in Europe and America. The standard picture of the Muslim woman shows someone who is oppressed by men, restricted to home, and veiled in public, although this image is admittedly anonymous and not related to

any particular location. The extraordinary recent behavior of the Taliban in Afghanistan, who denied women education and even the most basic rights, has encouraged the impression that Islam is dedicated to the oppression of women. How can we reconcile these conflicting depictions of Muslim women?

As mentioned earlier, Islamic law in theory provides resources for women, such as property rights, which were not available to European women until very recent times. Yet in practice the complex application of Islamic law was filtered through multiple levels of custom and tradition, so that ethical principles of equality between the sexes all too frequently were sacrificed for the benefit of male privilege. The imposition of patriarchal authority over women is hardly unique to Islamic civilization. Aristotle, it must be remembered, regarded women as natural slaves. Despite statements about gender equality in the New Testament, there are also strong traditions that for centuries have excluded women from positions of authority in Christian churches. Misogyny and the assertion of men's authority over women is, in fact, characteristic of the history of much of the world, including China and India. Disentangling the roles of the ethics of gender and patriarchal history is a task that now is being undertaken in every culture, even when it does not bear the name of feminism.

What makes the discussion of gender relations in Islamic cultures especially tricky is, once again, the effects of European colonialism.[17] By the late nineteenth century, Europeans had developed a number of arguments to demonstrate the cultural inferiority of the nations of the Orient, principally Muslim countries. As mentioned previously, the scientific language of racial categories and the alleged evolutionary superiority of Europeans were key elements in the ideology of colonial ascendancy. A new and surprising weapon in the colonialists' arsenal was the language of European feminism. However uncomfortable Vic-

torian officials may have been with feminist agitation for equal rights at home, they eagerly and hypocritically criticized Asian and especially Muslim men for their bad treatment of women (although some colonial administrators, such as Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon, were active opponents of the British suffragette movement). By maintaining that Islam was essentially oppressive to women and by linking Muslim backwardness to the practice of veiling women, colonial administrators could justify their rule over Asia and Africa, since they were the bearers of enlightened modernity. At the same time, they maintained that Muslims could only become civilized if they abandoned veiling—that is, if they abandoned what were believed to be essential practices of Islam. The same rhetoric of condescending shock about the veiling of Muslim women continues to be applied today, despite less than perfect gender equity in Europe and America.

When we look, however, at the authoritative Islamic scriptures, we can see prominent resources for an ethic of gender equality. In Christian and Jewish circles, it is only in relatively recent years that the gendered language of the Bible has become an issue, leading to new translations that do not automatically assume the male gender as normal. Yet gender-specific language had clearly become a concern in the early Muslim community. A number of women approached the Prophet Muhammad to ask him about the prevalence of male pronouns in the Qur'an, wanting to know if women were included in these statements. The next revelations of the Qur'an responded directly to these concerns, with an extended series of balanced phrases that make it clear that men and women share equally in the religious life:

> For the submitting men and submitting women,
> for the believing men and the believing women,
> for the devout men and the devout women,

> for the sincere men and the sincere women,
> for the patient men and the patient women,
> for the humble men and the humble women,
> for the men and the women who give alms,
> for the men and the women who fast,
> for the men and the women who guard their chastity,
> and for the men and the women who remember God much—
> for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. (33:35)

It would be hard to find another example of a major scripture that addresses the issue of gender language so specifically. In another section of the Qur'an, God specifically regards the acts of men and women as of equal worth: "I do not neglect the deeds done by any of you, whether man or woman; the one of you comes from the other" (3:195).

Nonetheless, the Qur'an also contains general injunctions about modesty for both men and women as well as specific observations aimed at the wives of the Prophet. Hadith reports contain more extensive accounts of the situations that led up to the revelation of certain verses.[18] The precise extent to which these verses are authoritative for later situations is unclear. For instance, when Muhammad celebrated his wedding to Zaynab, some male guests stayed late, annoying the Prophet by intruding too long in the women's quarters. This led to the proclamation of a Qur'anic verse stating, "When you ask them [the Prophet's wives] for something, ask them from behind a curtain" (33:53). This "curtain" (*hijab*) is the beginning point for the concept of veiling, but at this time it applied to the wives of the Prophet in a very special sense. They were singled out in the Qur'an, as in the verse cited above, and they were specifically described as being unlike other women—including the special

requirement that they could not remarry after the Prophet's death. There was, however, no distinctive female garb dictated by the Qur'an, only a general instruction that women should dress modestly and cover their breasts (24:31).

Major changes took place in Muslim society, however, after the imperial conquests of the next generation. It was especially when Arab armies overran the territories of the eastern Roman Empire and Persia that they were exposed to sophisticated civilizations that had elaborate customs of seclusion of women and large harems with concubines for the emperor. This was a far cry from the simple society of Arabia in the time of the Prophet. Muhammad, after all, had had a single concubine but no servants, and he was used to repairing his own clothes. The empire of the caliphate was exposed to wealth on an enormous scale, and individual male Arabs were able to own numerous female slaves. Increasingly, religious behavior for Muslim women was modeled on the customs of upper-class Persian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish women, who wore veils so they would be spared the ogling of men in the street. This is a case in which religious behavior imitated social status. The veil that initially was a curtain separating the wives of the Prophet gradually became identified with the concealing clothing worn by all respectable women, particularly in the cities.

In practice there is no single thing that is identifiable as "the veil" in Muslim societies today, nor is veiling synonymous with covering the face. Before the beginning of the colonial period, the clothing that Christian and Jewish women wore in countries such as Egypt was no different from the clothing of Muslim women; only later in the nineteenth century did women from religious minorities in Muslim countries begin to dress in European fashions. If one visits different countries with Muslim majority populations today, it is immediately apparent that women wear different types of clothing in all of these nations. Economic

class, urban or rural location, education, and custom lead to a wide range of women's clothing, which may or may not have any religious meaning. The Iranian chador, an all-encompassing black garment without fastenings, can now be replaced by a raincoat and a headscarf called a manteau (the name is actually French). Women in Iran are required to wear one of these options in public, and they are forbidden to apply facial makeup. The chador is not the same as the black *abaya* worn by women of Arabia, and there are many particular tribal variations on nomadic Arab dress. What counts as respectable fashion for Muslim women in West Africa may include colorful wraps and a bare midriff, while observant Southeast Asian Muslim women prefer white headscarves and long dresses. Clothing styles for women in Turkey range from totally European fashion in Istanbul to conservative tribal costumes in rural provinces, although official secularism forbids Islamic headscarves in universities and government offices. Pushtun women in Afghanistan, following local tribal code, wear all-enveloping *burqas*, and their husbands boast that their women observe "the veil and four walls," that is, total seclusion. Yet none of these can be described as a norm that defines Muslim women anywhere else.

Sometimes official attempts to define Islamic dress for women result in strange incongruities. When the Pakistani ruler Gen. Zia ul-Haqq attempted to enforce a program of Islamization in the 1980s, he declared that the Indian sari was not acceptable in government offices and that Islamic dress for women should be the *shalwar kamis* (a long shirt worn over drawstring pants) with a *dupatta* scarf over the head. This is, of course, a typical regional clothing style of northern India and Pakistan worn by men and women without regard to religion. Yet by decree of the state, it was defined as Islamic clothing. Such was the weight attached to these clothing styles that astute observers of the Pakistani political scene swore they could cor-

relate conservative and liberal trends in government by interpreting the position of the female newscaster's headscarf on Pakistan television (full coverage of hair by the scarf indicated conservatism, but loose pulling back of the scarf or allowing it to drop to the shoulders were clear signs of relaxation in the regime).

The definition of particular women's clothing as Islamic owes much to anticolonial sentiments; before the arrival of European conquerors, it was just seen as what women normally wore. While European colonial administrators saw the veil as a sign of Islamic backwardness, in recent years this interpretation has been challenged; there has been a new ideological emphasis on veiling among Muslim women in countries such as Egypt and Turkey. While their mothers and grandmothers had cheerfully adopted European-style dress and cast aside head coverings, women in the 1980s began to adopt the veil to demonstrate their anti-Western nationalism. Covering also became a sign of their resistance to the immoral use of women's bodies in advertising by multinational companies. It is striking that the two pieces of plain seamless cloth that constitute the official garment for women performing the hajj to Mecca leave the face unveiled. Evidently the egalitarian spirit of this enormous meeting of believers would be in conflict with the aristocratic attitude that calls for veiling the face.

These variations in women's dress raise the question of Muslim women's perspectives and how Muslim women express themselves to reclaim their own tradition. What is at first surprising to many Americans and Europeans is that Muslim women have voices at all. Here, too, there are many examples with which to counter this amnesia and inattention, and the record goes back many years. Early-twentieth-century Muslim feminists, including a number of male authors, resembled early European and American feminists in their emphasis on domes-

ticity, education, and hygiene, stressing the important role of women in rearing the next generation. In many countries Muslim women of the upper class established a tradition of founding schools devoted to the education of girls. By the 1920s, feminist authors in Syria and Egypt had created organizations, led public demonstrations, and written books criticizing patriarchal interpretations of Islam. In 1928 Lebanese feminist Nazira Zayn al-Din wrote *Unveiling and Veiling*, a book that caused an immense sensation due to her insistence that men had misinterpreted veiling as a religious requirement.[19] The strategy of Islamic feminists is quite similar to the approach of Christian and Jewish feminists, although many Muslim women prefer to avoid the label of "feminist," since it is often associated with European colonialism and anti-Islamic attitudes. The original scriptural sources can be scrutinized critically by women as well as by men, and it is particularly important to reexamine the ways in which male scholars have interpreted them. Thus Moroccan feminist author Fatima Mernissi decided to reexamine hadith in which the Prophet had allegedly declared that women were unfit to govern. She could not believe that a man who was so respectful and considerate of women during his life could have made such a negative remark. Using techniques of traditional Islamic scholarship on hadith, she found reasons to question the credibility of the chief transmitter of this report, who seems to have been biased against the Prophet's wife 'A'isha.[20] This is a way in which Muslim feminist scholars have questioned male-dominated interpretation by engaging directly with authoritative scriptural texts.

This is not to say that Muslim majority societies do not have problems in the modern implementation of family law.[21] There are fierce debates taking place on these issues in every country, and those debates are extraordinarily important not only for the actual welfare of women but also for the changing interpreta-

tions of Islamic law. There are also serious controversies today among Muslims over homosexuality, just as in Europe and America among Christians. Regarding women's rights, among the mullahs who have run the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979, there are feminist thinkers who argue for the equality of men and women before the law, using the resources of Islamic jurisprudence as a basis.[22] Iranian authorities in recent years have implemented a remarkably thorough family planning policy based on contraception and vasectomies that has been very effective in reducing the birthrate. Much-debated issues in Muslim countries include the (still infrequent) practice of multiple wives, divorce procedures, abortion, and laws governing rape and adultery. Postcolonial governments have struggled with the reconciliation of Muslim personal law with the broader notion of a uniform civil code for all citizens, regardless of religion. One of the most highly contested recent cases in India revolved around the issue of maintenance for a divorced Muslim woman named Shahbano. Non-Muslim judges settled her case with a narrow ruling that awarded her a pittance, based on the complex colonial code of Anglo-Mohammedan law. The case aroused the ire of secularists and Hindus who objected to the state paying such deference to Islamic law, and it also drew massive protests from Muslims who feared that the Indian state would interfere with Islam. There are, in addition, problems arising from tribal customs such as "honor killings," which are the result of murderous vengeance directed at women who are considered to have shamed their families by inappropriate behavior. Another issue is clitoridectomy, or female genital mutilation, an ancient practice found mainly in certain regions of Africa. In the Nile Valley about 70 percent of Muslims and nearly 100 percent of Christians follow this practice, and it is also widespread in Sudan and Western Africa among followers of traditional religions. These practices do not derive from Islamic law but are instances of conflict between Islamic *shari'a* and local custom.

Despite the challenges that women face in different Muslim societies, it is important for Europeans and Americans to avoid treating them with condescension, with the assumption that Islam is a prison from which Muslim women seek to be liberated. As mentioned previously, this kind of critique of Muslim attitudes toward women has been a significant element in the justification of colonialism, and it ignores the serious gender issues that exist in Euro-American societies. This condescension is deeply resented by the millions of Muslim women who insist on their Muslim identity, even as they struggle with the same issues that women face around the world: maintaining family life alongside increasing economic demands on women, dealing with control of fertility, and seeking an authentic understanding of their rights as women. Moreover, it is worth noting that women in Muslim societies frequently have access to women's social networks based on but going beyond extended family, which can be hard to find in the more atomized societies of Europe and America. There are, in addition, local traditions of women's religious practice, such as the women's mosques of China, that offer opportunities for Muslim women that would never be expected on the basis of stereotypes and generalities.[23] As the example of Zaynab shows, Muslim women should not be underestimated.

Islam and Science

As indicated previously, Islamic civilization was home to a complex of traditions that included not only divine revelation but also human reasoning, particularly through the disciplines as-